

Where Do They Belong?

The "Fate" of

BY JOSEPHINE FONG

L'auteure avance que les immigrantes confinées dans leur relation hétérosexuelle et les exigences de la maternité ont des besoins particuliers qui demandent une révision des politiques gouvernementales existantes sur l'immigration et les services sociaux.

The history of Chinese immigrants in North America dates back to the eighteenth century. Yet, in the literature regarding the experiences of Chinese immigrants, very often Chinese women are made invisible (see Wickberg; Li; Wright; Dawson; Lai). When the roles and/or lives of Chinese women are discussed, it is often simply paying lip service (see Lee; Tsai; Kinkead). As a result, there are only a handful of studies specifically depicting the general experiences of Chinese immigrant women. When it comes to understanding how these women experience male violence in the home and the workplace, even less can be found. Very often, researchers have to rely on ethnic-specific organizations for information (for example, oral interviews or project reports).

Based on my direct involvement in various community services and projects (volunteered and paid, service-oriented and research-based), I have noticed that many Chinese immigrant women have great difficulty finding their place in Canada and developing a sense of belonging to this new society. In this article, I discuss the barriers they face and argue that as landed immigrants, much stress or pressure is put on the shoulders of Chinese women, especially those who are confined in heterosexual relationships and by the demands of motherhood. Their

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physical and psychological well-being calls for the government's review of existing immigration and social service policies.

The Chinese, as an ethnic group, has become the largest minority in Canada (Statistics Canada qtd. in *Sing Tao Daily*). There are 860,150 Chinese people living in Canada, including both those who are newly immigrated and those who have been here for generations. The provinces with the highest concentration of Chinese-Canadians are Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia. About 45.5 per cent live in Ontario and 86 per cent reside in the Greater Toronto Area.

Generally speaking, most Chinese immigrant families come from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; others come from the adjacent countries of South East Asia such as Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. Regardless of where they originated and how they become landed immigrants or Canadian citizens,

most of them left their countries of origin to escape social, political, and/or economic turmoil. These families often long for peaceful environments, improved living conditions, better education for their children, and more prosperous work opportunities for the adults. However, once they arrive in Canada, they have to go through a process of acculturation. Some of them may find themselves lost and feeling powerless. If these new immigrants continue to experience stress in the new environment without adequate support from their significant family members and from the new country, their mental health may be jeopardized (The Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees).

For those immigrants who have more resources, including financial stability, support networks, English skills, marketable trades, and/or professional skills, the adjustment period may be shorter and they are often able to integrate into mainstream Canadian society with relative ease (Lau). However, the immigrants with fewer resources and minimum skills generally have a harder time coping and adjusting, let alone integrating and developing a sense of belonging. While there are many examples of "successfully integrated" Chinese immigrant families, there are still many others trying to find a place for themselves in the Canadian society and struggling to survive in isolation.

Whether the Chinese immigrant families are successfully integrated or not, their ethnic identities and cultural values continue to play a significant role in their lives and in the

Chinese Immigrant Women

ways in which they interact with each other in the family. It is within the parameter of these cultural beliefs and values, familial practices, and/or expectations, that many Chinese immigrant women strive to define their own space for personal growth and advancement in a new environment where eastern and western cultures converge.

Clearly, the majority of Chinese immigrant women who come to Canada are sponsored under the family class category. Others arrive as domestic workers, refugees, or independent immigrants. Many of these women are thus considered dependent, or made dependant, on men in the present immigration system which is historically sexist (and racist). As dependants or sponsored spouses, these women have unequal access to education and many other community resources (Chin; Fong). This may be considered by many immigrants as an indication of the Canadian government's approval of male authority over women. Both MacKinnon and Rich argue that the North American culture is one that subordinates women to men through preorchestrated social relations. Furthermore, the institution of marriage has been supporting the domination of men by continuously giving men more social and political power over women (Backhouse).

Not only do I agree with the argument proposed by the above authors, but also I assert that such ideologies and social practices are indeed shared by the Chinese culture. Therefore, it is very disheartening when Chinese immigrant women get the impression that the

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Canadian government supports male dominance.

In order to discern the situation of Chinese immigrant women, it is imperative to understand the cultural beliefs and values that these women bring with them from their country of origin. China, as a nation, has been patriarchal and sexist. Although China has been trying to develop a more egalitarian gender system, its social and familial structures are still hierarchical. For example, traditional beliefs and values give men more power than women. As a father, husband, and/or an adult child, men often have the most authority over their daughters, wives, sisters, and aging mothers. As such, women in Chinese families that embrace traditional values are expected to submit to male authority; and, the youth are expected to submit to the elderly, especially when the elders are male. Therefore, younger women in traditional Chinese families are relatively vulnerable to male domi-

nation and abuse. They are raised to assume that their designated position and duties in the family are those that involve "house-sitting" and "care-giving."

In China, under the governance of Mao, the talents and competence of women were gradually recognized, especially those who were educated. Women were encouraged to take up paid employment and other prominent roles in the public domains. "Women make up half of the sky" was a slogan developed by Mao to signify his recognition of women's abilities and competence in the '60s. After Deng Xia Ping's take over, Chinese women continued to be given more opportunities to compete with their male counterparts in various jobs and professions, especially those who live in designated free cities. Thus, in recent decades, there are more mainland-China Chinese immigrant women who are relatively highly educated and very much career-oriented. However, no matter how successful they are in their jobs or careers, because of deeply-rooted cultural beliefs, many women still believe their destiny, or "fate," is closely tied to their families and marriages, even though they are able to make a living on their own. Of course, those who come from small towns and remote villages in China are more inclined to comply with traditional Chinese beliefs and values which assume that a woman's primary role is in the family, even though everyone in the community has a job (farming or otherwise).

Up until July 1997, Hong Kong had been British colony for some 150 years. It is a unique city where, although the majority of residents

are of Chinese origin and many of the Chinese customs have been preserved, it has nevertheless been greatly influenced by the British system and western culture. Also, because of the on-going influx of immigrants from mainland China, the adopted "western" beliefs and practices are constantly tested by the long-established and deeply-rooted Chinese culture. On the surface, Chinese women's social position in Hong Kong seems to be well-established and there are many prominent public female figures. However, the abilities, talents, and successes of these "powerful" women do not guarantee gender equality in the lives of average Chinese women in Hong Kong. Issues of violence against women, rape, wife abuse, sexual assault, and sexual harassment are commonplace. Also, although most women in Hong Kong work in the labour force, they are still expected to take care of the home and meet the physical and emotional needs of all family members. Working a "double-day" is a general phenomenon for most women and no matter how successful they are in their jobs, they are often judged by their performance in the home.

Although they are farther away from mainland China, Chinese women in Taiwan as well as in other South East Asian countries do not necessarily enjoy a better social status than their "sisters" in China and Hong Kong. Indeed, it is observed that the further away they are from China, the more conservative the local Chinese immigrant community is and the more determined it is to preserve the traditional hierarchy within Chinese culture. This may be a combined result of nostalgia and resistance to the cultural values that are imposed by any new country.

Immigration, for most, is about pursuing a better life elsewhere or starting fresh with the hopes of a better future. However, when a family decides to emigrate, the decision is often not made by the woman. Usually, it is the "head" of the family (the husband and/or father) who

contemplates the idea and arranges for the immigration. In fact, the immigration system in Canada (and perhaps in most parts of the world) assumes that the principle applicant will be the husband; the wife is usually considered the dependant, along with the couple's children. Sometimes even if the wife has some say

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over the matter, without the support of her husband, she may not be able to do much. This is particularly true in many Chinese immigrant families. Therefore, after the family arrives in Canada, the woman often finds herself stuck in the same trap and learns that there is no "better" future awaiting her!

Having worked directly with Chinese immigrant women for many years and conducted research studies of various scales, I have seen many cases in which heterosexual women with small children were more likely to experience difficulties with resettlement and developing a sense of belonging in Canada. There are at least four different groups of Chinese immigrant women whose resettlement issues are more complicated than others.

First of all, the "astronauts' wives" in middle-class Chinese immigrant families call for our attention. These women's husbands are not really astronauts working in spaceships; in-

stead, they immigrated to Canada with their wives and children but then left them behind in the new country to continue their career or business in their country of origin. As a result, the women in these families are forced to take up the sole responsibility of caring for the children and establishing a new home in a strange place (SUCCESS Women's Committee Research Group). While this might be considered a form of desertion, there are still emotional and financial ties between the wives and their husbands. Every now and then, depending on the nature of their husbands' career and the relationship between them as a couple, the husbands might come to Canada for a vacation and are treated as a guest of honour because of their rare presence. When these men are "vacationing" at home, their wives' daily activities have to be re-arranged so that they can "entertain" their visiting husbands. In addition, while the sexual needs of these women are constantly ignored and they are expected to be loyal to their husbands, the sexual needs of these men must be gratified. Having extra-marital affairs is deemed to be their natural right when their wives are not present.

The second group of women consists of those who were left behind in their country of origin with their children when their husbands decided to explore new opportunities in Canada. This is unique to Chinese families coming from mainland China. Several years later, when their husbands are settled, these women and their children are sponsored and come to Canada for a family reunion. Unfortunately, many women find their husbands with another woman. Sometimes they might even have had a child together. No matter how devastated they are, because of their immigration status, their economic reliance on their husbands, their emotional needs, and the traditional values of family, many of these Chinese immigrant women feel obliged to comply with their husbands and accept the triangular rela-

tionships. Very often, because these women have been living away from their husbands for a long period of time, they are no longer regarded as the preferred partner in the relationship. Feelings of shame, worthlessness, helplessness, and hopelessness usually leave these women in social isolation and deep depression. In many cases, objection to the current marital terms or fighting to reinstate their position as "the wife" results in a combination of verbal, physical, psychological, and/or economic abuses. (Chinese Information and Community Services, 1998).

The third group of women consists of overseas brides who gained their status in Canada through marriage. Most of these women have not met their spouses, or only met with them briefly, prior to marrying to Canada. Usually, they do not have close family members in Canada. When a crisis happens they are unlikely to have someone else to talk to. While there are overseas brides who have found their relationship with their spouses satisfying and meaningful, there are others who have experienced problems and feel trapped. Wife abuse is not uncommon in these families (Chin; Chinese Information and Community Services; Ho; Ong). Many of these women think that by marrying overseas they can provide some hope for a better future for themselves and their families, however, the cruel reality is that they are often left to struggle alone in a strange land with issues of personal safety, family expectations, loyalty to the sponsoring husbands, devotion to the new family, and immigration status.

The fourth group of women consists of those who are struggling to settle in a new country with ruthless husbands. These women usually come to Canada at the same time as their spouses. Their relationship might not be good even prior to the immigration and the ensuing process of acculturation often further escalates their problems (Chan; Ng and Ramirez). When the husband is frus-

trated or in distress, he often takes his anger out on his wife. As these women are confined in the home taking care of small children and have nowhere to go and no one to talk to about their own frustrations and misery, their psychological health is endangered (The Health and Family Services Sub-committee, Chinese

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Interagency Network). When they find that existing policies and services place the interests and needs of men before those of women, they are likely to internalize the sexism and accept male dominance in their lives. They feel compelled to put their husbands' needs and self-esteem before their own and to keep the family together even in adversity. When there is dispute or disagreement, they are more likely to give in; when there is physical assault, they are more likely to endure it (South East Asian Services Centre).

Many of these women regret coming to Canada and want to return to their country of origin, a place of familiarity where they feel they belong. However, because of the complexities behind the reasons for emigration, the desire for a good education for their children, the family's expectations of a better life, as well as cultural beliefs and values with respect to gendered roles in the family, many of these women can not return

as easily as they may wish. They are left at the crossroad, puzzling about their options.

A recent study, conducted by the Chinese Information and Community Services, shows that many Chinese immigrant women try to upgrade their skills and increase their employability in order to become self-sufficient, financially and socially. If Canadian society takes multiculturalism seriously and cares about the well-being of its citizens, new policies and services must be developed to help these women deal with their predicaments.

In Ontario, since 1994, many ethnic-specific organizations and mainstream social services which serve various immigrant populations have been seriously affected sharply by budget cuts. This, in turn, affects the model of service delivery and settlement services. Ultimately, less help is available for those who are unfamiliar with community resources and have difficulty accessing or reaching out for help. In fact, many women complained about limited English-as-a-Second-Language courses with child care and the paucity of job training programs that would enable them to acquire marketable skills (Chinese Information and Community Services). It would seem that the government continues to uphold the ideology that women are "dependants" of men and thus their specific needs are secondary.

In conclusion, it is marvelous that we live in a multicultural society where ethnic diversity is acknowledged and recognized. However, while many of the challenges women face in society are changing, it is imperative that the government review its ideologies and revise its policies to accommodate the needs of immigrant women and ensure the quality of life for all its citizens. The "fate" of Chinese immigrant women is greatly determined by the policies of the state.

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A Few Good Women

Military women enjoy protection afforded zero-tolerance policy on harassment and abuse

by Jennifer Pender

This summer, 21-year-old Officer Cabot Kartin, Toronto's youngest...

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Thought in 1970 women who are one of the 2,100 women who are 100 per cent of Canada's regular military force (in the Canadian Forces reserve, about 18 per cent are women). This fall she can be her...

...military, in fact, she would have been recruited from those categories in the Canadian Forces in 1971, following recommendations...

...the last time... continued on page 11.

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