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The Flexible Family?
Recent Immigration and 'Astronaut' Households in Vancouver,
British Columbia

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ABSTRACT

Based on fieldwork conducted in Vancouver, British Columbia between June 1999 and February 2000, this paper examines the recent emergence of a particular transnational household arrangement. Known as the Astronaut family, this situation is intimately connected to the substantial movement of skilled and wealthy migrant families, from Hong Kong and Taiwan to Canada, during the 1980s and first half of the1990s. It involves the geographical distribution of family members between Vancouver and the country of origin, indicating the return of the principal wage earner to Hong Kong or Taiwan to pursue a professional career or business. Through in-depth interviews with the spouse who remains behind, I examine the experiences of this arrangement, questioning, firstly, the prevalent portrayal of the powerful Chinese immigrant family and, secondly, the notion that the unit of the family works for the benefit of all family members. The Astronaut family is found to be largely strategic - planned before emigration - and not a response to employment failure in Canada. The migration experience of the lone spouse however, suggests profoundly gendered implications. Overwhelmingly experienced by the woman, her life is in every case transformed by migration and the Astronaut situation. In some instances, this transformation implies her oppression in the home. In others, she experiences significant liberation and demonstrates significant agency in the construction of a stable and familiar life world in the new setting of Vancouver. This research emphasises the important and enduring relationship between spatial distance and social relations within a profoundly transnational human context.

Key Words: Astronaut family; transnationalism; immigration; gender relations; immigrant households; Vancouver.

INTRODUCTION

There is…a curious new form of spatially extended family that is evolving which is a product of the Asian migration in the context of modern communications (Skeldon 1995, 533). "It is a cultural logic of many ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia to organize their families according to strategies of time and space so that over time, the family is distributed over a longer distance or a wider expanse of space" (Ong 1999, 93–94).

At Douglas Park community centre on the west side of Vancouver, British Columbia, a group of women meet twice-weekly to discuss common problems faced by the newly immigrated family. They share stories and experiences, providing each other with both practical and emotional support. These women are themselves new immigrants, and are participating in a programme[1] that aims, among other things, to improve English-speaking, to facilitate the making of friends, to boost self-confidence, and to encourage involvement in the local community. A significant number of the women in this group came to Vancouver with their families from Hong Kong or Taiwan, as dependants of their spouse under immigration criteria. They no longer have careers now they are in Canada, and instead devote their time to caring for their children, running the family home, learning English, and adjusting to a new and unfamiliar environment. They face all the usual difficulties of immigrant settlement, but with a significant, additional challenge. They must adjust, also, to the abrupt absence of their husband from their daily life.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest this picture to be repeated throughout Vancouver – at community centres and in church halls, women with absent husbands are drawn together by a similar migration experience. These women are part of a wider phenomenon of Astronaut families – what Ronald Skeldon (1995) has suggestively called the Astronaut "syndrome" – that has appeared in certain Pacific Rim cities within New Zealand (Ho et al. 1997), Australia (Pe-pua et al. 1998), and Canada (Man 1993) during the last decade.

This household arrangement is in some ways similar to more traditional and widespread migration patterns in search of work. The male head (and principal wage earner)

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[1] This is the LEAD programme, provided by the Pacific Immigrant Resources Society (PIRS) – a community-based agency of and for women. It receives funding from federal, provincial and municipal levels of government, and from the United Way.

may be separated from his spouse and children for substantial periods of time. Working overseas, he will send a regular supply of money to support his family.[2] Meanwhile, the responsibility for caring for the children and running the household in his absence falls to the female. There are, however, several crucial differences attesting to the novelty of the Astronaut arrangement. For one, it is not the husband/father who migrates but *his family*. He will return to the country of origin, where he will continue with his business or professional career. Unlike the traditional arrangement, this contemporary pattern is associated with a privileged class of migration. These migrants commonly enter Canada under a 'point system,' requiring the demonstration of sufficient professional qualifications or entrepreneurial skills and, frequently, possession of substantial financial assets. A further distinguishing feature can be observed in the transnational nature of this migration. In contrast to older patterns, the links between places on both sides of the Pacific are intricate and intense. Social and emotional contacts are usually extremely frequent – daily telephone calls, faxes and emails, the sending of letters, photographs and money. Developments in telecommunications and transportation have profoundly altered the possibilities for maintaining strong ties with more than one place at a time. Physical and material links are sustained in the sending of goods and the trans-Pacific movement of the spouse. It is usual for members of the family in Canada to return every year to the country of origin to visit extended family and friends. The Astronaut family would seem to exemplify Vertovec's (1999) description of a transnational "social morphology."[3] This paper examines the emergence of the Astronaut family in Vancouver, asking firstly, why it has occurred and secondly, what are the implications of this arrangement for the experience of the lone spouse.

Within Vancouver, the cases of Astronaut families (widely known within the local Chinese community) have, rather surprisingly, received very little commentary in the English-language press. In October 1992, the *Vancouver Sun* published a small article, which

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[2] See Peter S. Li (1998) for an historical examination of this pattern amongst Chinese immigrants within Canada.

[3] The concept of transnationalism has, in the last decade, offered a new way of conceiving contemporary migration practices that are inadequately captured by more traditional social scientific tools. A helpful and widely endorsed definition is provided by Basch et al. (1994) who suggest that transnationalism represents: "the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement…" (p. 7).

suggested that most families in this situation are from Hong Kong, and emigrate to obtain a "more secure future" in anticipation of the 1997 'hand-over' to China. On arriving in Canada, however, they find themselves "faced with an economic recession," necessitating the return of the principal wage earner to secure "as much money as possible before 1997."[4] The article was sympathetic to the associated problems of loneliness and alienation for the separated spouses, presenting these families as the hapless victims of unforeseen financial (and political) circumstances.[5] In September 1994 two further articles appeared with a very different point to make. The first queried: "Do the 'astronaut' families pay their fair share of taxes?" soon followed by the second, which concluded in response that: "Most 'astronaut' families cheat on their taxes…"[6] In these latter accounts, it was asserted that the (often substantial) world-wide earnings of these households are not being declared to Revenue Canada, at the same time as the benefits of English language training, the children's education, health care and so on, are enjoyed in the new country. Families who choose the Astronaut arrangement, it is implied, do so strategically, exercising a 'flexible' notion of citizenship (Ong 1999), through the active manipulation of Canadian immigration policy.

Here, in these two sets of newspaper reports, we have two contrasting images of the Astronaut family. These images are, I hope to show, quite significant; indicative not just of wider debates around recent Chinese immigration to Canada, but reflecting a burgeoning academic literature stressing the global mobility, flexibility and economic power of contemporary middle-class Chinese families (Mitchell 1995; Skeldon 1997; Ong and Nonini 1997; Olds 1998; Ong 1999). Through an empirical examination of the Astronaut family in Vancouver, I will contribute directly to these wider debates in two main ways. Firstly, this examination will enable an interrogation of prevalent portrayals depicting the powerful and flexible Chinese migrant household – what David Ley (1999) has termed the myth of an "immigrant overclass" (and to which the latter newspaper reports were aligned). Secondly, I will interrogate the notion of the "family unit" itself, by examining the different experiences of family members within. There are (as hinted in the opening description) potentially

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[4] Dawn Hanna (1992).

[5] Several recent academic reports have highlighted the reality of financial vulnerability amongst recent skilled and assumed wealthy immigrant households from Taiwan and Hong Kong in Canada (Smart 1994; Lam 1994; Ley 1999, 2000; Salaff et al., 2000).

[6] Barbara Yaffe (1994).

significant power differentials underlying this migration of middle-class families. There is a notable lack of both detailed research and more general data on the Astronaut circumstance, and I hope to contribute to knowledge about this particular form of transnational migration. [7] Before examining my findings, however, I will first suggest the empirical and theoretical bases for depictions of the powerful migrant family, then turning to the contributions to migration research that insist upon an examination of *intra*-household power dynamics.

The Image of the Powerful Immigrant Family:

a) Chinese Migration and Capital Accumulation

> Chinese legal migrants…are a highly educated and dynamic group of people who are laying demographic foundations which will play an important role in any new world order in the twenty-first century (Skeldon 1999, 232).

With the emergence of new middle-class populations in several Asian countries from the 1970s onwards, the volume and intensity of trans-Pacific migration has increased significantly (Castles and Miller 1993; Skeldon 1995). Described as "the economic dynamisers of the twenty-first century" (Robison and Goodman 1996, 1), the 'new rich' are frequently in possession of substantial financial capital and technical or scientific expertise (Robison and Goodman 1996; Chu 1996). On the other side of the Pacific, changes in immigration policy, including the implementation of 'business migration programmes', have sought explicitly to attract these same wealthy and skilled entrepreneurs and professionals from East Asia. The result has been a significant migration, during the 1980s and 1990s, to Canada, Australia and New Zealand from Hong Kong, Taiwan and more recently from Mainland China. Attracting a great deal of attention within 'receiving' countries, the image of a 'hypermobile' Chinese elite was thereby fashioned, appearing widely within both academic and popular media accounts (Skeldon 1995; Cohen 1997; Ong and Nonini 1997; Ong 1999).

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[7] Data documenting Astronaut families within Canada in general are extremely limited – departures from the country of the 'astronauts' are not officially recorded, and for Vancouver there are no statistics available denoting the numbers of families in this situation. Skeldon (1997) has attempted to infer numbers from census data, using 1991 figures for Hong Kong immigrants to Vancouver and Toronto. Examining age structures of ethnic Chinese born in Hong Kong and the non-Chinese born in places other than Toronto and Vancouver, he observes a notable female bias for both cities in Hong Kong-born populations over twenty-five years old.

In a particularly perceptive theoretical analysis of these more general processes, anthropologist Aihwa Ong suggests the ways in which contemporary migration amongst a privileged Chinese cohort is transnational, reflecting a deliberate strategy of capital accumulation. She writes:

> Among transnational Chinese subjects, those most able to benefit from their participation in global capitalism celebrate flexibility and mobility, which give rise to such figures as the multiple-passport holder; the multicultural manager with "flexible capital"; the "astronaut", shuttling across borders on business; "parachute kids," who can be dropped off in another country by parents on the trans-Pacific business commute; and so on. Thus, while mobility and flexibility have long been part of the repertoire of human behaviour, under transnationality the new links between flexibility and the logics of displacement, on the one hand, and capital accumulation, on the other, have given new valence to such strategies of manoeuvring and positioning. Flexibility, migration, and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for rather than stability (1999, p. 19).

In the contemporary era of global capitalism, securing the correct symbolic/cultural markers can be as important in the decision to migrate as the immediate accumulation of wealth:[8] "New strategies of flexible accumulation have promoted a flexible attitude towards citizenship…Chinese entrepreneurs are not merely engaged in profit making; they are also acquiring a range of symbolic capitals that will facilitate their positioning, economic negotiation, and cultural acceptance in different geographical sites" (Ong 1999,1–18).

The acquisition of particular symbolic capitals requires both an understanding of the possibility of strategic "self-fashioning" (Mitchell 1997a; see also Ang 1994) and knowledge of the global geographical distribution of cultural wealth – a "cultural competence," as defined by Hannerz (1996, 103), and captured in his discussion of the 'cosmopolitan.' Allusion to the 'cosmopolitan' has been frequently made in reference to the apparently peculiar outlook of contemporary Chinese business elite (Li et al. 1995; Mitchell 1997a; Cohen 1997; Olds 1998; Hamilton 1999; Friedman 1999).[9] The English language and a 'Western education' are assumed to represent "the ultimate symbolic capital necessary for

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[8] Ong is here drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1994).

[9] Writes King: "The ease with which Hong Kong Chinese move in and out of different cultural traditions is due to pragmatic-empirical considerations and, more often than not, is based on cost-benefit calculations" (1996, p. 274).

global mobility" (Ong 1999, 90). I will shortly suggest the prevalence of these ideas in explicating the motivations behind the emergence of the Astronaut family.

b) *The Chinese Family*

> …the family is the basic social grouping uniting individuals. Family ties are permanent, and individuals owe their loyalty to the family throughout their lives…The Chinese consider the family as the primary focus of their loyalty (Wong 1985, 16).

Within recent analyses of financial achievements, the prevalence and conceptual power of the Chinese family unit is striking. In both accounts with an historical focus[10] and those concerned with more contemporary business practices, "the family" is conceived to be the key to understanding economic success. It is the basic unit through which capital accumulation takes place, at the same time as it directly enables this accumulation. I will outline briefly some of the main ways in which this important concept has contributed to a picture of the powerful and flexible immigrant household.

In the recent explication of certain economic processes, geographers have stressed the importance of 'social embeddedness' (Mitchell 1995; Olds 1998). Chinese business activities involve social and cultural practices that draw upon peculiar socio-cultural resources (Smart 1993). Frequent mention has been made to some notion of "Chinese traditions," and various cultural referents (of which the family is paramount) form the basis of a great deal of commentary regarding the economic success of the Asian Tigers.[11] In particular, Confucianism, familism, and *guanxi* have been identified as bestowing especial cultural advantages upon Chinese business endeavours (Berger 1990; Wong 1990; Tai 1989; Cohen 1995; Hsing 1997; Ong and Nonini 1997; Ong 1999; Olds and Yeung 1999). As observed by Susan Greenhalgh (1994):

> Since the early 1980s, both Chinese and Western China specialists have celebrated the economic efficiency of the Chinese family firm and its roots in traditional, familistic, Confucian culture…Accordingly, family firms are

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[10] For example, Cohen's (1997) analysis stressed the importance of familial relations in the success of early Chinese trading diasporas.

[11] The importance of familism and the family unit, for example, underpins the "affective model" of capitalism described by Tai (1989). Distinguished from a Western model of capitalism that emphasises individualism, the affective model in contrast extols group orientation and familial "emotional bonds."

depicted as single actors whose members work in concert for the benefit of all (p. 748–49).

Indicated in Tai's (1989) "affective model", group orientation and familial "emotional bonds" are conceived to exercise significant authority over individual behaviour and personal objectives, ensuring that the 'good of the family' is at all times prioritised. Write Ong and Nonini (1997):

> …the contemporary regime of flexible accumulation has called forth new deployments of "family"…from within the accumulation strategies of transnational Chinese… represent[ing] a long-standing habitus whose very flexibilities have now been placed in the service of accumulation strategies under the novel conditions of late capitalism… (1997, 21).

Whilst the contemporary middle-classes of East Asia remain "loyal adherents to Chinese familism" (Chu 1996, 213), the imperative towards capital accumulation demands "a rationalistic, instrumental attitude toward familistic values" (King 1996, 270). The family unit, through the cultural values binding its members, is the means by which such accumulation can be most successfully sought.

c) Flexible Families and the Astronaut Arrangement

The 'flexibility' of the family, indicated above by Ong and Nonini (1997), refers in particular to the ability of the Chinese household to operate effectively over substantial geographical distances. The assumption that distance has a negative impact upon social relationships would seem, in the case of the Chinese family, not to apply:

> With new modes of travel and communication, familial regimes have become more flexible in both dispersing and localizing members in different parts of the world. (Ong 1999, 127).

> Parents and children travel and communicate easily and on a frequent basis. The *power* involved in the ability to control the experience of travel, trans-cultural communication, habitation, education and business thus produces a completely different experience of late capitalism. . . (Mitchell 1993, 269).

Turning now to the Astronaut family, I want to suggest that this particular household arrangement epitomises such flexibility, "dispersing and localizing members in different parts of the world" (Ong 1999, 127). There is an important geographical disjunction between

the sites of different types of capital, necessitating the migration of different family members to different places. The English language, a Western education, an alternative passport — these cultural commodities can be secured through the settlement of the children in Canada. At the same time, financial capital will be maximised in Hong Kong and Taiwan, where the business climate is far more favourable and professional qualifications are recognised. In the Astronaut arrangement, the children will benefit from schooling in Vancouver, whilst the principal wage earner returns to the country of origin to work. Their spouse will run the home and care for the children. Different family members work together, to achieve success at the level of the household unit. Migration is conceived as a strategy of both economic and cultural accumulation and the Astronaut family would seem to conform *par excellence* to the image of the powerful immigrant household.

> *Within* the Family Unit:
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> Differential Experiences and the Limits to Flexibility
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> Diasporic experiences are always gendered. But there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas and diaspora cultures to hide this fact, to talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalizing male experiences (Clifford 1994, 313).

So far, I have presented a privileged face of transnational mobility through an examination of some of the ways in which recent academic accounts have conceived contemporary Chinese migrant families. Drawing upon a different body of theoretical literature I now turn to consider an alternative perspective on the power and mobility of this Chinese cohort. In particular, I want to suggest the salience of the notion of *differentiated mobility* – and differentiated power - *within* the unit of the Chinese family. In a discussion of globalisation and the associated process of 'time-space compression,' Doreen Massey makes reference to its "power-geometry." She writes:

> …different social groups and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway-differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it (1993, p. 61).

Massey insists that a distinction must be drawn between those who control transnational movement and those who are *controlled by it*. This notion of differentiated

mobility has significant utility, I suggest, in an examination of Astronaut families and the experiences of different family members. In contrast to the vast majority of literature on recent Hong Kong and Taiwanese migration, which invariably treats the family unit as impenetrable (and thus uniformly powerful and successful), I want to turn attention to individuals and their position within the family. Specifically, I will examine the experiences of the so-called Astronaut wives, who find themselves in a new country, in charge of the household, and without the daily practical and emotional support of their spouse.

It is only relatively recently that a traditional geographical concern with migration has begun to encompass feminist perspectives and, reciprocally, feminist geographers have been awakened to the significant gendered aspects of the migration process (see Fincher 1993, for this general observation; see also Halfacree and Boyle 1999; Willis and Yeoh 2000). There are two intersecting perspectives on gender and migration that I will briefly consider. A first relevant body of literature emanates less from feminist geographers *per se,* than from researchers primarily interested in the economic and labour market-related processes of migration.[12] In these accounts, economic considerations predominate analyses of family migration, and experiences of migration are conceived in terms of the effects of impact on wage labour. In the most recent analyses incorporating a 'gender' perspective, the woman is commonly conceptualised as the "trailing wife," prioritizing the economic role of the husband:

> Male employment leads as the major migration motive for a couple with females adapting their social and economic roles…around the economic roles of their male partners (Bonney and Love 1991, 347).

> Migration often acts to frustrate the development of a woman's career and thus should be associated more with economic disadvantage than advantage (Halfacree 1995, 159).

In a second approach to gender and migration, a more recent perspective has derived from the examination of social power relations, by feminist geographers in particular. From this perspective comes the insistence that the woman's experience of mobility is often

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[12] The dearth in analyses of the experiences of *women* within these studies has been recently recognised (see Halfacree and Boyle 1999; Bonney and Love 1991; Li and Findlay 1999).

inextricably linked to her subordinate (and gendered) status within the household. Rachel Silvey and Victoria Lawson make this point in a recent review of research on migration:

> In this feminist research, mobility is shaped by gendered power relations that allow certain household members to make meaning about who migrates and why (Lawson 1998). Domestic control is enacted in ideological terms that invoke gender roles and responsibilities for various household members. Notions of "tradition" – which include dominant representations of family, morality, sexuality, and domestic harmony – are invoked as a basis for patriarchal control of household members (1999, 127).[13]

In the analyses of Chinese success presented above, "tradition" has connotations of empowerment, enhancing the proficiency of the unit of the Chinese family through various means of "control" in the quest for capital. Yet, as is implied here, traditional conceptions of the family may contribute to the oppression of women. In her examination of transnational strategies of accumulation Ong (1999) is also highly critical of the way in which the Chinese family has been "thoroughly fetishized" within scholarly accounts (Nonini and Ong 1997, 21). She argues that "the family" should instead be conceived as one amongst several "discursive tropes," which operate to limit female agency (see also Greenhalgh 1994).[14] It is imperative, therefore, that detailed empirical analyses of experiences within the household focus on the power of the family from the perspective of individual members,[15] interrogating the notion of 'the good of the family,' in addition to the way in which migration to a new location "provides a space in which gender relations can be renegotiated" (Willis and Yeoh 2000, xv). This is the second objective of this paper.

Existing research on the 'astronaut' family points to the significant mobility of men vis-à-vis women and children, in addition to a notably gendered division of family labour (Man 1995; Pe-Pua et al. 1998). It is almost invariably the man who travels back and forth,

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[13] The 'household strategies approach,' proposed by Radcliffe (1991), would seem to offer a useful perspective. Discussed by Chant (1991), she writes "women's mobility must be conceived within the context of *household* decisions about who will migrate and who will stay. Integral to the household strategies framework are the ways in which social and economic factors associated with gender ideologies and divisions of labour influence the distribution of men and women in different activities across space and through time," (p. 249).

[14] Suggesting that tactics of domination, violence, and exploitation may occur within the privileged Chinese family, Ong invokes the concept of "regime" to emphasise the existence of female oppression (see also Ong and Nonini 1997). I will consider the possibility that the Astronaut family represents such a regime.

[15] Ellis et al. (1996) write: "theories which focus on the household as the decision-making unit falsely equate individual and household behaviour and ignore gender relations" (p. 32).

between a moneyed and high-status lifestyle in Hong Kong or Taiwan and the relaxation of 'home life' in Vancouver. In contrast, it is the woman and children who find themselves literally placed ("localized") in a new country (Ong 1999). She will usually not be in paid employment but will work in the home, caring for her children. She is without the aid of friends and the extended family experienced hitherto. The women in the Astronaut family are relatively *immobile,* and yet continue to be conceived in the majority of literature around middle-class Chinese migration as part of the 'transnational' unit of the flexible family. Understanding their migration experience, however, requires a sense of the social context at the place of origin.[16] Although an adequate review is impossible here, I will briefly sketch the outcome of contemporary research within East Asia into female roles and the Chinese middle-class family.[17]

Early studies are highly empirical, and in the words of Cheung et al. (1997), there has been: "little co-ordinated effort to answer some of the broader research questions about gender roles. For example, how do we define traditional gender roles? To what extent have these roles changed in modern…society?" (p. 202). Definitions of male and female roles in contemporary Chinese culture are therefore unclear; representations are often overly reliant, they caution, on "Confucian classics" and "folklore" (Cheung et al. 1997). Traditional conceptions of female roles within the family suggest that women primarily serve a supportive role in managing the home (ibid.). A typical Chinese "ideal wife," depicting a severe sense of gender inequality, is presented in a case study by Lo (1989):

> …she was very nice to his parents, liked by his mother, did not talk much, agreed to everything, and always did the things he liked her to do. She seldom went out and hardly had any friends. A wife should stay at home and be a good mother, a good wife, and a good daughter-in-law. She should not have her own opinions. (p. 209)

However, it is clear that in Taiwan and Hong Kong, patriarchy and tradition have to be reconciled with a new, highly modernised societal outlook (Chiang and Ku 1986; Li and

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[16] Ruth Fincher (2000) perceptively defines the immigrant woman's experience of 'settlement' as "the bearing of a past in a different location."

[17] Gender research within these territories, as a coherent field of study, dates only from the middle of the 1980s, when three gender-studies centres were set up independently in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Cheung et al. 1997). The majority of available studies on gender relations in contemporary Chinese society have focussed on Hong Kong.

Findlay 1999). In Hong Kong, there have been a number of quantitative changes that suggest the emergence of a degree of gender equality within society as a whole (Mak and Yue-ping 1997). Examples are found in educational attainment, in the number of women in paid employment, and in fertility rates and family sizes.[18] Another important change with regards to women's liberation has been the extent to which those families with sufficient financial resources choose to hire domestic help.[19] Amongst middle-class women in Hong Kong (and Taiwan), therefore, financial independence and freedom from most domestic and childcare responsibilities is common. As I have suggested, in the post-migration setting of Vancouver these arrangements were for many women dramatically transformed.

Research Methods and Sample

In the remainder of the paper I will use the empirical material gathered through interviews to approach, firstly, the general question of why the Astronaut family has emerged in Vancouver. Reflecting upon the contradictory media reports (presented above) I ask (in the words of Ronald Skeldon 1994): are these "reluctant exiles or bold pioneers"? Is this really an example of the flexible, strategising and powerful family that I have profiled, or do they represent something far more fragile? The data derive from in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted between June 1999 and February 2000, with adult members of twenty-eight immigrant families, fourteen from Hong Kong and fourteen from Taiwan. All reside within the G.V.R.D.[20] and are currently part of an Astronaut family, or have recently been so (i.e. their partner has recently joined them). Interviews lasted an average of one hour, and some participants were interviewed on more that one occasion. Six interviews were conducted wholly or partly in Cantonese or Mandarin, with the assistance of a translator; the

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[18] In 1961, Cheung (1997) reports, only 2 percent of women had received a post-secondary or university education, compared with 5.3 percent of males. By 1991, the number of females in this category had risen to 9.4 percent. Increasing educational opportunities have had a clear impact on patterns of employment (Mak and Yue-ping 1997). The absolute number of women earning a wage increased dramatically from 1961 (Cheung 1997). By 1991 the "unextended nuclear family" was the dominant household composition (ibid.).

[19] Feminist scholars have argued that domestic work is an important potential area of female oppression. Cheung (1997) reports that twenty-one percent of the "professional group" of women surveyed in her study made use of paid helpers to take care of their children, enabling both partners to pursue a career independent of household and childcare needs.

[20] Greater Vancouver Regional District

rest were carried out in English. Individuals were identified using a snowball sampling technique.[21] The migrant families were considered recent immigrants: twenty-one participants have been in Canada five years or less, and twenty-six for less than ten years. Twenty-four of the twenty-eight were women, reflecting a general observation that the majority of Astronauts are males (see Ho et al. 1997). Twenty-seven out of twenty-eight were classed as 'economic' migrants.[22] Interviews were conducted with the lone spouse of the migrant couple and all participants had children under the age of fifteen living with them. Names used here have been changed to maintain the anonymity of participants.

Recent Immigration to Vancouver

The emergence of the Astronaut family in the last decade, amongst immigrant families from Hong Kong and Taiwan, is part of a wider picture of migration to Canada and British Columbia during the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. A crucial change occurred in Canadian immigrant selection in 1967, with the introduction of a 'point system.' Migrants were assessed on a range of criteria, such as age, educational qualifications, occupation, language ability, and family members present in Canada (Smart 1994), and Chinese populations were no longer excluded on the basis of place of origin. In 1978, provisions for the entrepreneur were explicitly introduced under the Business Immigration Programme, and subsequently modified in 1986, thereby making the wealth of migrants a more expressly worthy asset. Skilled and business applicants ('economic' migrants[23]) consequently increased dramatically.[24] In 1995, Hong Kong and Taiwan accounted for over 71 per cent of all

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[21] Several different starting points for this technique were used, including different ESL classes, the LEAD programme (for immigrant women in Vancouver), and the Taiwanese Canadian Cultural Society.

[22] The immigration class of participants was as follows: 13 'independent', 5 'entrepreneur', 7 'investor' 1 'self-employed' and 1 'assisted relative'. One participant entered Canada under the 'social and humanitarian' category as a 'family reunification'. This gives important indication of the socio-economic status of participant families. The present requirements for investors in British Columbia, for example (implemented in April 1999), include CA$400 000 payment made to C.I.C., which is then 'locked in' for 5 years without interest. Investor minimum net worth is CA$800 000. Entrepreneurs "require enough money, transferable to Canada, to start a business in Canada…[bringing] significant economic benefits to Canada," and "a person with specific occupational skills and experience may qualify as an independent immigrant." (http://cicnet.ci.gc.ca).

[23] The 'economic' class of immigration under current Canadian policy constitutes the sub-classes of: 'assisted relatives', 'other independents', 'entrepreneurs', 'self-employed' and investor categories. The latter three fall under the Business Migration Programme.

[24] This information was provided by Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

economic-class migrants to Vancouver. In the same year, of the total number of immigrants to Vancouver (38, 864), Hong Kong and Taiwan accounted for 29.9 per cent and 13.6 per cent respectively (the two highest source areas by number). Vancouver was overwhelmingly the primary destination within British Columbia, receiving around 98 per cent of Hong Kong and Taiwanese migrants. What these figures are intended to indicate is the numerical importance of immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan to Vancouver in the 1990s, and the class of these migrants. A substantial influx of relatively wealthy and highly skilled Chinese migrants landed in Vancouver, coinciding with the first noted emergence of the Astronaut phenomenon.

The Astronaut Family in Vancouver: 'Strategy' or 'Syndrome'?

Firstly, I want to explain the emergence of the Astronaut family in Vancouver. Skeldon (1995) describes the Astronaut family as a "syndrome", and indeed there are widespread observations that recent economic-class immigrants face significant barriers to employment in Canada (Smart 1994; Lam 1994; Ley 1999, 2000; Salaff et al. 2000; see also Mak 1997, for similar observations on Australia). It is thus the failure to find work, this argument suggests, which compels one family member to return to the country of origin. The separation of the household was unplanned, endured reluctantly, with many accompanying practical and emotional difficulties; the image of the powerful immigrant family is significantly challenged by this observation (see Ley 1999). In a second, very different interpretation, the Astronaut arrangement is perceived to be the work of "unscrupulous immigrants…bent on taking advantage of the Canadian immigration program," (Smart 1994, 117). A view reflected in the media reports concerned with tax evasion amongst Astronaut households,[25] this interpretation is closely aligned with the image of the flexible, transnational-strategizing of a Chinese elite.[26] In light of my empirical findings, I will consider briefly these opposing arguments. Does the Astronaut arrangement arise from employment failure in Vancouver?

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[25] Barbara Yaffe (1994). See above.

[26] In media and academic writing in the early to mid-1990s, recent Chinese migration to Vancouver (Hong Kong migration in particular) has been connected unequivocally with images of family wealth and power. The so-called 'monster house' issue, for example, revolved around exactly such representations and brought them firmly into public awareness (see Ley 1995).

In his most recent work, David Ley (1999, 2000) challenges what he calls "the myth of the immigrant overclass." He observes the negative experiences of recent business immigrants to Vancouver, who have suffered significant loss of self-esteem and depression as a result of widespread business failure (see also Smart 1994). Writes Ley:

> The modest economic achievement of business class immigrants in the 1995 tax year is striking. Among none of the annual cohorts landing between 1980 and 1995 did more than 50 per cent of the Principal Applicants in the business class report *any* employment earnings whatever in 1995, the lowest proportion of all immigration classes. (p. 16)

Boyer (1996) has observed very similar trends in underemployment among Taiwanese immigrants to Auckland, New Zealand, noting:

> . . . few immigrants were prepared for the magnitude of the drop in income, the hardship it would bring and the heavy reliance this would place on their remaining investments in Taiwan. Despite being based on a point system which rewarded education, few migrants were aware that gaining points and gaining recognition of qualifications by professional bodies were two quite different things. As a result, many immigrants have been denied access to employment opportunities commensurate with their qualifications. (p. 60)

"The biggest single culprit," she argues, "appears to be the immigration policy…" (Boyer 1996, 76). Considering these observations, Lam (1994) has drawn explicit, *causal* links to the emergence of the Astronaut family amongst Hong Kong immigrants in Toronto. Based on his own interviews with business-class migrants, he is led to conclude:

> A far more intractable dilemma impacting on these immigrants' settlement is related to the receiving society's institutional barriers and practices. The well-paid jobs and profitable business ventures in Hong Kong compared with Canada enticed some of the immigrants to become "astronauts." However, the interview data revealed that, if the previously acquired qualifications, training, skills, and experience of the respondents had received appropriate means of accreditation and they had correspondingly obtained comparable jobs with equivalent remuneration, some of these families (at least seven in the study) would not have become "astronaut" households…Clearly then, the institutional barriers and practices in the receiving society have resulted in forcing these immigrants to jet back and forth as the only viable alternative in their struggle to secure a safe haven in Canada and to maintain a comfortable living standard by continuing to work in Hong Kong. (p. 177 –78)

In spite of these powerful arguments, I found evidence for this explanation in *only* *three* of the twenty-eight families interviewed, and I will briefly review these cases. In one

example, Claire and her husband entered Canada as a business-class family - for "the education," and also because the daughter of the family suffers from asthma and they perceived the clean air of Vancouver to be potentially beneficial. Claire's husband stayed in Vancouver for three years, trying to start a business, but he failed, finding that "the system is different, the rules are different, and especially the connections." She said: "It was really hard and difficult…to find a job here. So we had to really, you know, separate." His failure to succeed in his business venture left them with no option other than to become an Astronaut family. In a second case, Fiona and her husband landed in Vancouver four years ago with the intention that they would open a business; making a fresh start in their own lives and, like Claire, hoping to provide better educational opportunities for their children. After several months of inquiries, however, they found that they were unable to open the type of business they desired. They heard repeated warnings about the danger of attempting to open a business in Vancouver:

> A lot of friends told us, 'put your money in a bank. They give you interest. If you put it in a business you lose the lot'…A lot of people told us, and they were businessmen here…and they'd lost their money…So after a long talk we just decided that he would go back.

Her husband subsequently returned to Taiwan, where he was able to continue with his profession as a doctor. She explained why her family, and many families from Taiwan, chose the Astronaut situation after immigration:

> I think…probably we can make a survival – we can survive here. But it won't be enough for us…People in Taiwan have a lot of savings. We feel comfortable if one of the…spouses can have a better job, so we can make more choices. We can choose to go back or we can stay here…That's my thought in the beginning, but after two years I don't think it's right.

The belief that the Astronaut situation would bring more choices evokes the image of the flexible family. Fiona's experience of this arrangement, however, has not been a good one. She feels the decision to part from her husband to have been a mistake.

Elizabeth, in her account of her husband's attempts to find work in Vancouver, paints a picture of significant emotional strain. He was hindered in his efforts by the lack of contacts previously available to him in Hong Kong. Fortunately, he had kept some business in Hong Kong after emigrating:

> Sometimes, when he's out of a job, he went to McDonald's restaurant on Main Street near Chinatown, hoping to meet other tradesmen looking for a job...He was new and he didn't know English – the jobs he could get were very small ones…or ones that were a great distance…Like North Vancouver, West Vancouver…

> There was not much I could do. I prepared dinner and when he couldn't make it I was waiting and waiting, longing for his return. Many times it was very late…he is working so hard outside, he sometimes found it depressing….He could not stay here any longer…working hard for nothing…He started staying in Hong Kong for a longer period of time…I find our relationship better during his absence…

These three cases indicate the barriers to employment often faced by the "new rich" of the Asian tigers – migration to Vancouver can put them in a much more vulnerable position (financially and emotionally) than is frequently depicted in media and academic accounts (see Ley 1999). Significantly, however, my interviews revealed that failure to find work in Vancouver was *not* the main reason why the Astronaut option had been sought. Rather than being a response to unemployment, for twenty-five of the twenty-eight participants the Astronaut situation had been *planned before* emigration, indicating a much more strategising role for the families in question. As one participant explained:

> The main reason why both stay here [Vancouver] is that they can't find any profits and job or any future in Hong Kong. Then they have to stay – both stay here. If they can find a job or make money in somewhere else or in Hong Kong, no one would like to stay here, for a man. (Emma)

Emma suggests that money is the main motivator behind continuing ties with Hong Kong, and the migration of the family to another continent does not affect this financial arrangement. In Astronaut households, family income in Canada may be very low indeed, in contrast to significant financial earnings abroad.[27]

Is this, therefore, an example of transnational family strategising *par excellence*? Does the migrant family, in this situation, maintain much greater control over their situation

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[27] This observation is important because it may shed some light on Ley's (1999, 2000) discovery that many business-class migrants are economically underachieving in Canada, according to taxation statistics. The low earnings reflect earnings in Canada. Yet one participant admitted to me (off record) that what is earned abroad (i.e. the household's principal income in the case of the Astronaut family) is frequently not declared to Revenue Canada, drawing on his own actions and those of his friends to support his claim. Such tax evasion was the concern of the 1994 *Vancouver Sun* article outlined earlier. One declaration does of course not validate a

than does the Canadian state?[28] The planned nature of this arrangement suggests the saliency of the second interpretation of the Astronaut situation, emphasising a calculated migration strategy. Lisa, for example, was fully aware that her husband would not be joining her and her son in Vancouver. He stayed only one week, before returning to Taiwan to work. They knew that he would be unable to find a suitable job in Canada – "he couldn't find a better job than Taiwan" - so they did not consider that he should give up his work:

> *JW: Did he look for one when he came over [to Vancouver]?*

> No. Before we came to Vancouver we had travelled a lot of times and we got information. It is difficult for him…so he has to go back to Taiwan.

Cheryl came to Canada with two young sons, in the full knowledge that her husband would continue to work for his parents' company in Taiwan. They were aware of the difficulties of finding work in Vancouver. Claire and her husband had worked hard to establish their business in Taiwan, and had thought about giving it up so that the whole family could move to Canada:

> Of course we want to give it up and then the whole family reunited. But the reality, if you do this and then it's so difficult to find a job here…What can my husband do? So my husband and I think, okay…maybe when the kids are grown up, maybe after one or two years, you will come back…

The Astronaut option does not simply reflect, however, a perception of likely unemployment in Vancouver. Salary and status were also significant considerations:

> I think…if we do want to find a job here, I think most of the people can, but probably just a very low-end job. Probably they'll get seven or eight dollars an hour, but in comparison to the salary in Taiwan, it's…very low. (Fiona)

Jill's husband is a marketing manager in Hong Kong, with "good pay." She has been in Vancouver, with her son, for two years and nine months. She explained why her husband would not consider looking for a job in Canada:

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generalised statement regarding the practices of Astronaut families. However, it offers an interesting possible explanation for very low income figures tied to relatively expensive properties within the G.V.R.D.

[28] Much of the current writing on 'transnationalism' has focussed on the weakening of state boundaries in the face of footloose capital and people.

He knows he can't get…couldn't easy to find a good job from here [with] better salary….

JW: Did any of his friends try and get jobs in Canada?

Yes, they could get jobs, but the salary is not good.

In several cases, couples demonstrated an exemplary transnational business strategy, maintaining a business in Canada and the country of origin simultaneously. Barbara's husband would spend roughly three weeks in Hong Kong and three weeks in Canada taking care of a business in both countries. His Canadian venture, however, was eventually closed down - a situation she blamed on high provincial taxes in British Columbia. In a similar situation, Den, who entered Canada as an 'investor,' kept a business in Hong Kong while becoming a shareholder in a cardboard box business in Vancouver. Over a year ago he decided to end his involvement with the Canadian company – he had lost a significant amount of money, and the time demands of the Hong Kong business were too great to allow the arrangement to continue. As this example illustrates, the overseas business was frequently a priority even after migration to Canada.[29]

Reasons for Immigration to Canada

Although we now understand why participant families did not seek work in Canada, this does not explain why migration was pursued in the first place. It is apparent that migration to Vancouver from Hong Kong and Taiwan does not reflect the traditional conception of migration for economic betterment. This family migration has motivating factors other than financial ones, and it is these factors that I shall briefly consider.

Firstly, and most obviously perhaps, the political instability of the home region has been a major factor motivating emigration from Hong Kong and, more recently, Taiwan, and this has been highlighted in existing empirical studies of the Hong Kong Astronaut family (see Man 1993; Lam 1994; Pe-pua et al. 1998). The subsequent adoption of the Astronaut arrangement was linked to a desire to accumulate as much wealth as possible in the form of

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[29] It was not just businessmen who displayed prior knowledge of employment opportunities in Canada - planning the Astronaut arrangement before emigration. Professionals were aware that they may have to "start at the beginning" (Maria) if they attempted to transfer their skills to Canada (see Boyer 1996 for the general observation that professional immigrants face barriers to employment in Canada).

savings before 1997. The assumption has been that after this date the family would settle permanently in the new country. Such political concerns were certainly important in participant responses. Sylvie, from Hong Kong, here expresses a widely articulated sentiment:

> I'm not really confident in…the leadership of the Chinese government, because they change, on and off. They often change their mind…They don't have the definite laws or rules to govern the place…Not democratic and not systematic…If I immigrate then they [the children] have choices to stay in Hong Kong later, or in Canada. But if I didn't do that they've got no choice.

Rose has two children, five and seven years old. She has been in Vancouver for just over three years:

> *JW: When you came to Canada you knew that you'd be living apart from your husband?*
>
> Yes.
>
> *JW: So why, then, come to Canada? Why not stay together?*
>
> I think a lot of Taiwanese, they want to come because [of the] passport…Because we worry about China…So my husband say, 'first you want to get a second passport, and then maybe we can go back to Taiwan.'

Undoubtedly, the security offered by the passport underlay almost every response. Yet there were also other beneficial aspects to Canada, indicating the accumulation of rather different sorts of capital (Ong 1999).

Vancouver's "environment" was extremely desirable for a number of participants – the "beautiful scenery," the perception of "safety," and a "lifestyle" unobtainable in the country of origin. Limited by space, however, I want to focus on the most prominent of all articulated motivating factors. Clearly epitomising migration for the sake of 'cultural capital', some notion of "education," in particular the children's education, was paramount in explaining the decision to emigrate to Canada.[30] It is notable that this factor has been mentioned, but never prioritised in most previous academic accounts of the Astronaut

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[30] Sixteen participants made explicit reference to the children's education. It was mentioned frequently and significant emphasis was placed upon it.

family.[31] To give just one example, Frank is a lone-husband who has been in Canada for two years. His wife works in Taiwan. He explained why he thought it necessary for his family to migrate to Canada:

> Because my kids' education…I want my children to have another good educational system. They want to go abroad.

He is unable to say whether his children will return to Taiwan to find work: "the world changes so fast and we must keep our flexible attitude…We must do something to prepare for the future." He is aware, however, that a North American education will improve the chances of his children to secure a good job:

> I think…the USA and Canada has a more…acceptable to another opinion and they can set a new idea or innovation…and English is more important in the future, because national boundaries are…English maybe get around the world. If you have good English communication it is better for you in the job.

The theoretical ideas of Aihwa Ong (1999) and her claims about cultural capital seem particularly salient in explaining this widely given response. The reasons motivating the emergence of the Astronaut family point to the conclusion that this indeed represents a planned and strategic geographical placement of family members. Aware that there may be other sides to this story, however, my attention will now turn to the experiences of members *within* this unit. Specifically, I consider the experiences of the lone woman.

The Lone-Woman's Experience of Transnationalism: Localisation in the Home

In existing studies of transnational families, the Astronaut status has almost invariably been attributed to the male head of the family and, within my sample, a similar gender distribution was apparent.[32] Although no statistics are available to assert the degree to which

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[31] An exception to this is found in a study by Ho et al. (1997) who found that, in the reasons given by Astronaut families in New Zealand, "education" was the response given by the majority of Taiwanese participants. Hong Kong participants prioritised political considerations. I suggest that the recent influx of migrants from Taiwan is much more strongly motivated by a desire for cultural capital than has been the political concerns of families from Hong Kong in the recent past.

[32] I am aware of approximately twelve Astronaut husbands, all of whom have wives who work in Taiwan. I was able to interview four of these men. All twelve men are members of a special group, established by the Taiwanese Canadian Cultural Society in Vancouver with the specific purpose to give practical and emotional support to such lone husbands. They have, I found, a particularly difficult time adjusting to sole responsibility of parenting and household tasks, not to mention the fact that all have given up paid employment, accepting their wives as the family 'bread-winners.'

my sample could be considered representative of the wider population, discussions within the Hong Kong and Taiwanese communities of Vancouver lead me to believe that the cases of travelling women and resident husbands are exceptional. The relative mobility of the husband vis-à-vis the wife is highly conspicuous in Astronaut practice, with important theoretical implications for literature concerned with migration and the female experience.

Aihwa Ong (1999) suggests how a particular "family regime" – enacted by the contemporary middle-class Chinese family – serves in the process of migration to "valorise mobile masculinity" at the same time as it 'localises' femininity and the female subject. She argues:

> Familial regimes of dispersal and localization…discipline family members to make do with very little emotional support; disrupted parental responsibility, strained marital relations, and abandoned children are such common circumstances that they have special terms. When the flexible imperative in family life and citizenship requires a form of isolation and disciplining of women and children that is both critiqued and resisted, claims that the 'Confucian affective model' is at the heart of Chinese economic success are challenged (Ong 1999, 128).

The issue of "abandoned children" will be pursued elsewhere. Here I consider the proposition that the Astronaut family reflects the particular family "regime" to which Ong alludes. It certainly involves the geographical dispersal of family members. In the remainder of this paper, and drawing upon additional theoretical and empirical literature, I will attempt to establish the extent to which the women in Vancouver are 'localised' in "a form of isolation and disciplining" as a result of the Astronaut arrangement.

As has been suggested above, the primary reasons given for migration seldom reflected the personal needs or desires of the woman herself:

> [I thought] I was so dumb, you know? In Hong Kong I have a job, with my family, my brother and sister around me…And then all my best friends…I don't have any friends here. Even though I want to buy something, I don't know where to go…I want to do so many things in the first year, but I can't make it because of my language. Why I come here? Because my husband, Micky, he really likes it here. We think this is a good place for the children. Not for me. (Barbara)

The influence of female social roles, and attendant obligations to the family, were implied on many occasions. It was taken for granted, for example, that the husband would be

the one to pursue his career. As Sylvie explained: "The only problem is whether my husband came also" – her obligation to migrate for her children was not in question.

The most studied aspect of gender and migration involves the woman's employment status and how, as a result of migration, her career frequently suffers (Halfacree 1995). The woman assumes the status of the 'trailing wife' (Bonney and Love 1991; Li and Findlay 1999), whilst the feminist critique suggests household migration to be frequently patriarchal and oppressive (Lawson 1998; Silvey and Lawson 1999). Guida Man (1995, 1997) has examined the "work" experiences of specifically middle-class Hong Kong Chinese immigrant women – mainly in Toronto, with some focus on Vancouver. She attempts, in her own words:

> . . . to explicate how macrostructural processes in the form of the difference in the social organization of household work and paid work in Hong Kong society and in Canadian society has impacted on middle-class Chinese immigrant women, transforming their everyday lives (1997, 187).

With regards to paid work, Man notes that after migration women found it difficult to obtain employment commensurate with their qualifications.[33] Many of the women interviewed for this research claimed to have had "good jobs" before emigrating: four participants were accountants, for example, two were nurses and one worked in a bank. Jill described herself as a "business woman." Several of the women ran businesses jointly with their husbands, dealing with different aspects of the administration. Lisa described her changed job status since coming to Vancouver:

> I had a good job in Taiwan. I had a high pay, you know? The salary…I was the store manager in Taiwan…But here I can't find a good job because my English is not good and I don't have the…like certificates…So I just find waitress work here, in the restaurant.

> *JW: How long did you do that for?*

> About one year.

> *JW: And you gave it up?*

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[33] They experienced similar difficulties to those noted by Ley (1999). There was a frequent demand for "Canadian experience," and a lack of recognition and calibration of previously held positions and qualifications.

> Yes…I felt upset, you know? Because I am a store manager, I manage many people. But when I stay here I am just a waitress, you know? I don't feel good. Yeah, so I want to go back to Taiwan. I think that if I go back to Taiwan I can find a good job.

Women clearly suffered a loss of esteem associated with the loss of their careers. Fiona arrived in Vancouver, four years ago, optimistic of her own work prospects:

> People always told me that it's very hard to find a job in Vancouver, as an immigrant. And I really didn't think that way, because I got a Master's degree from the States…It probably just takes time for me to find a job.

Her experience, however, was somewhat different from what she expected. Since the return of her husband to Taiwan she has applied for many jobs, and until last year without any success. She refused to consider jobs she regarded as below her qualifications. In 1999, she got offered and accepted her first job. She told me:

> This year, I was a government employee…It's the Ministry for Children and Families. But after two weeks I quit, because I just couldn't manage my whole family and I feel guilty that I couldn't take care of my kids, because my husband wasn't here…

The reality of her perceived obligations to, and responsibilities for, her children (exacerbated by the absence of her husband), apparently prevented Fiona from pursuing her own career in Vancouver. Several women illustrated the difficulties associated with the dual demands of lone-parenting and maintaining a career.[34]

In addition to the employment situations of middle-class immigrant women, Man has also considered the effects of immigration on domestic workload, concluding it to be significantly "escalated…making their everyday lives more difficult in Canada than in Hong Kong" (Man 1997, 203). They lose the "support system in the home" provided by extended family members and the use of hired help (see Po-king and Ching-kwan 1997). For the large majority of participants, domestic workload undertaken personally after migration increased significantly. Here Jen describes her typical day when she was in Hong Kong:

> At the time, when I was working, we have a domestic helper and we don't need to do anything. *Laughs…*Just come back and sit down to eat.

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[34] This was especially true for the women with very young children. Several women expressed the intention to "consider" paid employment when their children were older. Interestingly, none considered hiring a nanny in the meantime.

I asked if she had a nanny for the children. She replied:

> Yes. That's what the domestic helper does. Clean the house and take care of the babies. Everything, so it's perfect.

Sylvie's housekeeper "did everything" for her in Hong Kong, which included cooking meals for the family. She found cooking extremely difficult when she was first alone. In a similar situation, Joan admitted that she and her children had lived off fast food ("McDonalds") for the first eighteen months in Canada. Eventually, a friend taught her how to cook. It was common for participants to lack even basic domestic and childcare skills on arrival. Minor household jobs and repairs suddenly became a significant problem:[35]

> Umm…At first it's very hard for me because in Hong Kong I have a husband that help me. But the first years I come here I do everything. I do the mother job and the father job. Yeah, also, only me. So…such as, in Hong Kong I never change, how do you say this?
>
> *JW: The light bulb.*
>
> Yeah, the light bulb. I never change it. (Sarah)

Emma's lack of previous experience with managing finances was common:

> I don't like to do…the financial…planning or calculations, because I don't want to take care of the money…[Before migrating] he did…everything! *Laughs.* When I need money I just ask and he give me some…Before he left he had to tell me of the accounts, the money, the bills and everything. So I have to take care of all of this, besides of taking care of the children.

Lisa explained that she had rarely spent time with her son before emigrating. In Taiwan, the demanding nature of her employment had forced her to send her son to stay with a nanny for the whole week. He was only two-and-a-half years old when she migrated, and the initial period was extremely stressful for her, she explained, as she was unable to respond adequately to his needs. Fiona felt it necessary to make up for the absence of her children's father with her own time:

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[35] In Hong Kong, Sylvie told me, it is usual to pay someone to fix small problems around the house; the service takes a short time and is inexpensive. In contrast, equivalent repairs in Vancouver are very expensive and the waiting time is significant. Women often do not know whom to contact in order to get minor repairs seen to. The woman has therefore either to do the job herself, or rely on a friend's husband to do it for her.

I have to play with them all the time, right? Because I just don't want to let them...let the kids feel that we are lonely or nobody cares about us since Daddy left…I just feel I have more responsibilities to the kids.

Several women expressed the sense that the children needed them more after migration. As a result, many were reluctant to look for paid employment.

Before emigration, an important source of practical support was found in both the extended family and friends. The mother-in-law played an especially significant role, often working as babysitter, cleaner and family-cook, in one case even shopping for all the family's groceries. I asked Barbara if she had had a cleaner in Hong Kong and she reflected: "umm…in Hong Kong I have a mother-in-law". In contrast, some women found they knew very few people in the new setting of Vancouver. In two cases, women confessed to having absolutely nobody to whom they could turn for help. Claire said of her arrival:

I had no friends, I had no relatives…Nothing, no. Only one car and two kids. I start everything; it's really difficult.

The supporting role of family and friends back home was often much more encompassing, however, than simply alleviating the burdens of practical household tasks. When Lisa arrived in Vancouver with her husband and two-and-a-half year old son, she knew no one. Her husband stayed about a week, before returning to Taiwan to work. Her experience, and subsequent realisation, underlines the possible implications of losing a taken-for-granted source of support in new surroundings. She told me:

I don't have any friends. I remember one time I fall…I fall down the stairs and I strained my…ankle. Yes, and I sit on the ground and cried. And my son…I cried. I can't walk, you know. Yes, and I don't have a friend, so I told my son, you pick up the telephone….

JW: Who did he call?

My husband had a friend here. But we never met! And I don't know him! Yes, just my husband gave me a telephone number…I think, I don't have anybody I can call. Nobody can help me, but I need help!… I called him and I say, 'I hurt my feet and I need help. My husband is in the same trade. Could you help me?'… So he came to my house and take me to the hospital. You know, I can't drive car….

JW: So how long did you go without driving? How long before you were okay?

About two weeks. You know, I stayed home with my son about two weeks! And my husband's friend buy some food and gave me.

She did not tell her husband until after she had recovered.

I feel very upset. I don't want to tell my husband. I don't want him to worry about it…I didn't tell him. I say, 'Ah, it's very good. Everything is good'.

Having to rely on a stranger clearly evoked feelings of isolation, helplessness, and vulnerability. It is striking that she felt unable to admit her situation to her husband. When Elizabeth became ill, she was fortunate enough to have a friend on whom she could call. There were still times, however, when she had to leave her three-year-old child unattended as she lay in bed. When there is only one parent, small children and no relatives, a relatively benign illness can become a problem of significant proportions.

Unforeseen emotional consequences of absent family and friends included boredom, loneliness, and even fear. Women with very young children experienced isolation most acutely, often finding little reason to leave the home. As one woman articulated: "I have nothing to do in Vancouver except look after my children." Boredom, which was frequently mentioned, reflected a comparison with a pre-migration lifestyle dominated by constant activity, including a demanding career, a demanding social life, and continuous shopping and consumption. In Taiwan, Cheryl described herself as "very busy, every day very busy." Vancouver provided a surprising contrast:

When I first came to Canada I'm really sad. Everyday I sit in that chair and look outside. I think, why in Canada nobody walk? Nobody, nobody…You don't see any people…In Taiwan, many, many people…Here, nobody. Like just me in the world. Just me. Nobody. Very sad.

As Cheryl's statement intimates, boredom can be accompanied by a deeper sense of loneliness. As Jill described: "My feelings was like a little lonely and like the body lose one leg." For Barbara: "the difference is at night…Feel lonely, yeah, quite lonely." Sylvie missed the large family gatherings that occurred once a month in Hong Kong: "so when I am here [it] seems to be entirely different, because even though in the festival or something like that, only four of us." Contrasting her first year in Vancouver with her former life in Taiwan, Fiona missed the sense of stability provided by close friends. Loneliness and depression drove her to isolate herself in her home. She said:

> I was very active and socialised in Taiwan. I have a lot of good friends, really good friends. But here, I mean, especially in the first year, I kind of locked myself up…I just wouldn't…I just wouldn't contact people here.

Talking to women about their own experiences and the experiences of friends left no doubt that profound loneliness can be one extremely isolating ramification of migration and the Astronaut situation. Feelings of fear were associated with being left alone, often in a relatively big house.[36] Several women felt unable to provide their children with adequate protection. Emma recalled her feelings when her husband left Vancouver for the first time:

> I feel very lonely and I don't have security to live here with two small children – only eleven and eight – in a new place for me…I have some fear…In Hong Kong we live together all the time, all the day…It's the place where I was born. I've lived there for a very long time and the language and the culture and the relatives all around…Maybe I seldom bother them [the relatives], but I still feel more safe. Whenever need help they can help me…When my husband went back to Hong Kong I was sort of scared…anxious…until he come back, when I feel more relaxed.

Elizabeth explained: "everything seemed so unfamiliar…I was scared. During the night time there seemed to be a lot of noises that frightened me. I could hardly sleep well." Lisa was afraid to pick up the telephone for fear that the person on the other end may try to communicate in English.[37]

Transnational Marital Relationships

> I don't want to leave my husband for a long time. I want to stay with my husband. I want the whole family together. (Lisa)

> Try not to do long distance relationship. It's very dangerous. Very, very dangerous. Even though you have a ring on your finger, that doesn't protect you at all. (Rod)

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[36] Many women compared the size of their house in Vancouver to the small apartment they inhabited in Hong Kong or Taiwan. The relative size of the house seemed to accentuate the lack of extended family within the living area, intensifying loneliness.

[37] Since the majority of interviews I conducted were in English, it is likely that the isolation imposed by an inability to speak English was underrepresented in my sample. Language, however, was still conceived as a barrier by even the most articulate of participants. Women were concerned about communicating with schoolteachers in English. Given the importance placed upon their child's education, they expressed concern that English inability may prevent them from adequately helping their children with schoolwork. A second concern articulated involved the way in which a 'language barrier' was perceived to prevent total integration into a 'Canadian society'.

When focussing on the strategic nature of the Chinese immigrant family, the importance of interpersonal relationships, and the emotional effects of a dispersed family unit are easily overlooked:

> Personal problems, personal trials and crises, personal relationships: what can these tell us about the social landscape of modernity? Not much, some would be inclined to argue…The world of high modernity certainly stretches out well beyond the milieux of individual activities and personal engagements. It is more replete with risks and dangers…as a more or less continuous state of affairs…Yet it also intrudes deeply into the heart of self-identity and personal feelings (Giddens 1991, 12).

Repercussions for the marital relationship have been suggested by both Pe-Pua et al. (1998) in their study of the Astronaut family in Australia, and Man (1995) who considered the situation in Canada, yet their findings are inconclusive.[38] From my own data, in most cases it is not possible to draw normative conclusions with regards to the 'improving' or 'weakening' of marital relationships, although it is clear that often some dramatic change has occurred. I want to briefly consider the cases that demonstrate an obviously negative impact on the personal relationship between husband and wife, indicated by acute emotional trauma.[39]

Interviews touched on the problems of communication between spouses when they are apart for extended periods. Several couples noticed an emotional distance was growing between them – Mary described the feeling of being "strangers" when they met again after the first three months apart. The telephone is often inadequate for sharing intimate concerns, especially when children are around. Barbara described the change she perceived in the relationship with her absent husband:

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[38] For example, Pe-Pua et al (1998) argue: "…overall, the Astronaut phenomenon arrangement can have one of the following consequences: the separation could have no effect on the husband-wife relationship; or the separation can actually improve the relationship ('less arguments'); or the separation can weaken it ('no common interests')" (p. 292).

[39] Understanding the emotive nature of a strained marital relationship between spouses requires an appreciation of the extent to which 'significant others' help define self-identity in what Anthony Giddens calls 'late modernity' (1991): "In a long term marriage," he claims, "each individual's sense of self-identity becomes tied to the other person, and indeed to the marriage itself" (p. 11). The social conditions of modernity enforce upon us all, Giddens argues, a process of 'finding oneself' that is no longer based in the externally stable referents provided by pre-modern social communities and kinship ties. Rather, in marriage, our reality is sustained through conversation with our spouse, in building a life-world together (Berger and Kellner 1964). Berger and Kellner argue: "The reality-bestowing force of social relationships depends on the degree of nearness, that is, on the degree to which social relationships occur in face-to-face situations…" (p. 2).

> At that time, I feel we can't communicate…because he always come back here and then go back to Hong Kong…I build up my own friends, and then he don't know them and…the same to him. Maybe there's something happen to him, but he don't have time to tell me then… I really want to tell him, 'Oh! What happen to me…' Unfortunately he don't know any of my friends. So it's less talking. The only topic we talked was the children.

As she here suggests, after migration women begin to establish their own stable social world, of which their husband is not a part. Consequently, everyday events become very difficult to share. Several women felt that the costs of continuing with the Astronaut situation long-term are just too high – prompting a reassessment of their initial decision. Fiona's husband wants to continue with the arrangement until he retires (another twenty years, she told me), for the children's education and a better living environment. Yet she has decided: "we have to go back, for the family's sake…"…"Actually everything is fine in my family; he is working steadily…in Taiwan, I am…fine and the kids are fine…I just don't think it's good for the family." Heeding the reports and experiences of her friends, she is concerned that the children may "lose intimacy" with their father. As for the relationship between spouses, "they don't really know each other that well any more." She went on to admit of her own relationship that "it's not as easy as before for us to communicate that well…" As soon as she has obtained citizenship she will take her children back to Taiwan.

Extramarital affairs are one commonly noted and tragic consequence of the Astronaut family circumstance (Man 1995; Pe-Pua et al; 1998; Yeoh and Willis, 2000). Attempting to give this observation some theoretical framework, Ong (1999) talks of the "new regimes of sexual exploitation" (p. 20), which are emerging as a result of globalisation and consequent transnational social forms. Yeoh and Willis (2000) observed this pattern amongst Singaporean businessmen working in China, leaving their wives and families in Singapore. In a similar pattern of geographical separation, the Astronaut family would seem to facilitate the keeping of a mistress by a man.[40]

Claire came to Canada from Taiwan in 1992. Her children suffer from asthma, and she hoped that Vancouver's clean air would improve their condition, in addition to providing

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[40] Although only two women in my sample admitted discovery of a husband's extramarital affair, I was told of numerous stories of close friends who have experienced marital problems as a result of this. In one case I interviewed a young adult whose parents had separated after the father was found to be keeping a "second family" in Taiwan.

educational opportunities not available in Taiwan. After three years of trying to start a business in Vancouver, her husband returned to Taiwan as an Astronaut. Now, four years on, she is unable to talk about her experiences without obvious pain:

> Actually…something happened here, you know, that almost made me fall down. And I didn't tell anybody because, you know, I know myself very well. Once I tell someone…I will just totally collapse, so I keep it to myself, secret. I don't tell anybody…My husband has a mistress…And it really hurts me, as I already heard stories; you know, the family separate, the situation like my husband, it happens a lot…So many friends warned me, 'you have to be very careful…that always happens'.

She suffered a "very deep hurt" as a result of his betrayal, and described a long period of depression:

> You know, I pushed myself into the home…I found everything around me – people around me, things around me – are sort of like bad. Life becomes very dark…For quite a long time, for almost two years…Nobody's helping me, nobody knows this.

Her children were the only people she felt that she could confide in: "Because I needed someone to…to talk to."

"Chinese culture," along with specific gendered behaviour were invoked on several occasions, sometimes to justify the husband's affair, sometimes to justify the woman's own response to the situation. Claire referred to her husband's "physical needs" vis-à-vis the cultural demands on herself, dictating that she always must think about her children before herself. Male interviewees provided an interesting, similar perspective: "You know, in Taiwan it is human nature that the man is looking for adultery if he has no wife at home" (Simon). Rod's father was found to be supporting a "second family" in Taiwan whilst he, his mother and sister lived in Vancouver. He reflected:

> Men are stupid animals. What I say is from the heart because, if there's a woman taking care of you it doesn't matter. It's very easy to have an affair. And then the wife the same thing, but the girl is different from men. They are not that emotional. The female will think more before they do, but men…they don't think that. They just think, at this time I'm not lonely and I will be fine…So, 'cause I know…my friends. Their father is having an affair and their wife is holding their temper, trying not to explode.

Clearly, extramarital affairs, broken relationships and divorce not only result from the Astronaut situation. Yet these examples suggest possible implications of transnational personal relationships,[41] demanding a re-evaluation of the 'flexibility' of the Chinese family unit in successfully overcoming geographic distance. Cultural and financial accumulation are achieved at some cost. Claire reflected deeply on the strategy that she and her husband had chosen to adopt:

> So I understand, you know, this has actually happened a lot. The situation like…my situation…Some sad stories happen, they separate. But you know, maybe for Chinese people that want to come to a country like this, you have to pay a price. So I always tell myself, this is the price I have to pay. And it makes me feel more comfort…I don't mind to take on serious challenge to myself. I think I don't regret. But I just don't want people really suffer like I suffer because only myself knows that how bitter it is…I hope this can really help you to write something.

Profound emotional suffering, it would seem, is perhaps the biggest "price" paid by middle-class Chinese families for the flexibility afforded by the Astronaut migration strategy.

Absent Husbands and Patriarchal Relations: Migration and Freedom in the Astronaut Family

Writing on the experience of middle-class Hong Kong women in Canada, Guida Man concludes the following:

> Many of these highly educated, urbanized women do not necessarily enjoy a "liberating" or "less oppressive" experience when they settle in Canada; rather they experience an escalation of traditional roles, unequal distribution of household labor, gender and sexual oppression both at work and in the home…For many women, their power and status inside and outside the home actually deteriorated when they emigrated to Canada. Moreover, those who have had professional careers in their home country experience a loss of economic power through unemployment or underemployment…They also experience a diminished buying power, and a general lack of opportunity (1995, p. 320).

In this final section, I argue that the Astronaut family presents a more ambivalent relationship between migration, patriarchy and gender relations than implied by Man. In addition to the obviously negative effects of localisation that I discussed above, a different

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[41] Interviewees attributed relationship strain and breakdown to the separation of husband and wife through the Astronaut arrangement.

and more common side to this migration experience emerged through interviews with lone women. For the Astronaut wife in Vancouver, her "localisation" in the domestic sphere does not necessarily imply that patriarchal gender relations within the home are oppressive, nor that the woman's "power and status inside and outside the home" deteriorates. In fact, the 'rooted' female experience of the Astronaut family, and the crucial absence of the husband, allows her to exercise significant agency in the creation, over time, of a stable and familiar social environment. Frequently the consequent experience is of independence and an unexpected sense of freedom.

This would seem to contradict the above empirical evidence, where the female experience appears to support claims that migration reinforces structures of oppression (Fincher 1993; Man 1997; Li and Findlay 1999; Silvey and Lawson 1999). In most cases, migration and the Astronaut situation *have* imposed a degree of suffering, whether from the removal of support networks of friends and close family members, from the loss of their employment, from loneliness and sometimes isolation in the home, or from the added burdens of housework and childcare. In the examples of what Ong (1999) has termed 'new regimes of sexual exploitation,' the negative effects of the arrangement are indisputable. Yet I argue that in many cases women are liberated through the Astronaut circumstance. In this final section, I will consider some of the ways in which this experience becomes apparent.

It is significant that the various facts regarding the qualitative transformation of the woman's life through migration do not always predictably reflect her *experience* of this transformation. Her interpretation of the facts is crucial. A sense of freedom from various constraints was, unexpectedly, much more commonly articulated than that of oppression and constraint. For Cheryl and others, the presence of the husband in Canada clarified the meaning of his absence:

> My husband, when he stays in Canada he is always at home. Everything he don't like. He argues to me. If he stays in Taiwan I am free. My heart is free, you know? When my husband is here I don't have my freedom.

The majority of negative experiences of migration outlined above occurred in the *first year* of separation. During interviews, one year emerged again and again as the critical juncture at which an unsettling and difficult experience transformed into a sense of

independence, freedom and a perception that personal quality of life has increased since migration to Canada. Consider Barbara's reflection upon her life in Vancouver:

> We think this place is good for the children. Not for me. The first year, I don't know why…not to live, not for me…I struggle for the first year. Only one year.
>
> *JW: But now…?*
>
> Oh, yeah, lovely place! *Laughs.* I'm used to it now and I have a lot of friends here…I really enjoy the life here…But it's tough for me for the first year.

Joan said: "the first year, I feel, was the most difficult time…After the first year, it got easier." Overcoming difficult experiences provides a sense of achievement; Barbara described her experience of migration as "good training." Cheryl told me:

> First time he go back to Taiwan I think that I miss him. I think, if he were here he can do many things; umm…you know, many fixing things or the car has some problems, he can do. But I can't do this, so sometimes I miss this. But now…anything I want to do, now it's okay, with anything. I don't need him.

It would seem that Appadurai's reflections on the contemporary period have particular salience. He writes: "where once improvisation was snatched out of the glacial undertow of habitus, habitus has now to be painstakingly reinforced in the face of life-worlds that are frequently in flux" (1996, p. 56). I will now consider some of the ways in which women are extremely successful in the creation around them of a new and stable habitus in Vancouver.[42]

It has already been noted that most female participants had not been in paid employment since migrating. As Man (1995) observed in her own research, unemployment and underemployment are a frequent condition of immigrant women, leaving them "economically dependent on their husbands" (p. 316). She continues: "Such dependency has put some Chinese women in a relatively powerless relationship with their husbands" (ibid). It is important to note, however, that the majority of participants did not indicate a desire to

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[42] This notion of stability needs to be juxtaposed along side the words of Aihwa Ong (1999), who writes: "under conditions of transnationality the new links between flexibility and the logics of displacement, on the one hand, and capital accumulation, on the other, have given new valence to such strategies of manoeuvring and positioning. Flexibility, migration, and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for *rather than stability*" (p. 19, emphasis added). The way in which participants clearly demonstrated

seek paid employment. As one interviewee reflected: "most of the wives…they have a good source of economics right? Because their husband will send them money, so they don't really worry about the money." Responses were limited in scope with regards to attitudes towards employment. In fact, most women expressed a desire to spend more time with their children. Claire had found herself forced to work in the family business prior to migration:

> You know, in Chinese culture…if the husband has to work or something like that the wife has to help him with the business or work. So, you know, parents-in-law naturally become the ones to look after the next generation…Until I realise that…I tell myself that I am ready to play the real role like mother. So this is what I decide…I really think about it and then make a decision myself.

Nancy reflected on her relationship with her children in Hong Kong. She hired a nanny to take care of them:

> We were having a very busy life in Hong Kong, particularly my husband. At that time he worked five days, but he had a lot of parties, meetings going on, and also he had to travel a lot during weekends, to South East Asia…The only thing I could wish was I have to put more attention onto my kids. And this life in Hong Kong would not allow me to do so.

Sylvie is now critical of the way in which she took care of her children in Hong Kong:

> Sometimes when I talk with my friends, they have the same idea that when we are in Hong Kong we really neglected our kids…We did not know what they are thinking, what they really want, or… But when here, because I have more time to be with them, they talk more… Because you give birth to your kids then you have the responsibility to bring them up. Talk and communication…really helps them to grow… In Hong Kong they have more luxurious life; many toys and whatever they want. But, maybe the concern is less. Actually I prefer this way, to look after them closely.

Some women experienced a stressful life before migration – the consequence of a demanding career. As Sarah explained: "In Hong Kong I have pressure. Everything has pressure…a lot of pressure for me…" Joan perceived migration as a way towards a more leisurely and fulfilling lifestyle: "When I decided to immigrate to Canada…I just wanted to

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the *need for stability* in their lives suggests another way in which theories invoking transnational flexibility may prove inadequate in explaining the experiences of members of the Astronaut family.

come here to study English by myself and I want to relax, because in Taiwan I work very hard."

There are several important theoretical points to be gleaned from these more general empirical observations. Firstly, women in the Astronaut situation do not experience the "dual work load of housework and paid work" that is assumed to beset middle-class immigrant women more generally (Man 1995, 314). Their work is focussed on the domestic sphere only – they do not have to attempt the "juggling act" that is, according to Guida Man, a source of stress and exhaustion. This is a result, of course, of the "good source of economics" provided by the husband's lucrative career in the country of origin. Secondly, Man suggests that a reduction in spending power curtails the ability of women to hire domestic help as they would have before migration. In my own interviews, 'financial constraints' were given on only one occasion to explain the woman's increased domestic undertakings – commonly women expressed a *desire* to spend more time with their children. Thirdly, I suggest that the Astronaut situation bestows an unusual picture of the role of female domestic work within the family. In his discussion of the reproduction of labour power in contemporary markets, Jamie Peck (1996) suggests that male waged work requires the supporting role of female work in the home. As Man (1997) observes, an important aspect of this is care for the husband's needs:

For the immigrant men the home is where the tensions generated by their paid work are released. The wife is expected not only to provide physical comforts and a calm and tension-free home, she also has to give emotional support to her husband and to heal him of the injuries inflicted on him by his occupation (p. 209).

The relationship between the woman's domestic work and the husband's career is complicated in the Astronaut situation. On the one hand, she is clearly fulfilling the gendered role of housewife and mother and, without her work, the family unit would not function. On the other, however, the physical absence of her husband from the home means that his daily needs are not a factor of this domestic work. She does not do his laundry and is not reproducing his labour power in the traditional sense, yet she is enjoying the fruits of his labour in the money he sends. As Appadurai has argued, conventional "links between labor and family life" have been broken under the conditions of globalisation (1996, 9–10).

The feminist literature outlined above emphasises important connections between migration, patriarchal relations in the home, and the oppression of women (e.g. Silvey and Lawson 1999). An important, commonly raised question concerns whether, after migration, a woman's experience of patriarchal oppression increases or decreases. We have seen how the Astronaut family involves a highly gendered division of household labour and how, after migration, the woman's household undertakings increase significantly. However, the picture of gender relations and gender oppression is more ambivalent because, crucially, the man is *absent* from the home for the majority of the time. Several women suggested that they often felt "watched" by their husband or parents-in-law in the pre-migratory setting. Away from this critical gaze in Vancouver, they clearly no longer feel the pressure to sustain the standards previously required of them. In Vancouver, there was a distinct *informality* around the execution of household tasks. Exemplifying a commonly revealed attitude, Sylvie said:

> I know how to cook…It may not be as good as others but I think it's okay. And then for the cleaning, I think it depends…It is how often you like to do …I think it's not a big problem. The only problem is if you want to do it or not.

Sarah echoed this statement almost exactly: "I have more freedom…I can do it by myself, whatever I like to do, because no-one asks me to do that. Yeah, I like to clean up now, and then I will clean up." Juxtaposed with her sister's experiences of immigrant family life *with* her husband, Jen, another participant, said: "no person pushes me to do that [domestic tasks]. That is the point. I can do things as I planned." The ability to plan her own time was a fundamental aspect of the woman's positive experience of settlement in Vancouver. It allows, for example, the integration of domestic chores with social life, and the allocation of more time to leisure activities. While Man (1997) concluded that middle-class immigrant women found themselves with "no time for social life or recreation" (p. 217), this was not the case for the participants in my study.

Although women admitted that migration was intended to improve the life-chances of their children, they frequently interpreted their experiences of migration as a positive life change *for themselves*. Sarah explained her motivations behind moving:

> *JW: Can you explain to me why you came [to Vancouver]?*

> You know, in Hong Kong I have pressure. Yes, everything has pressure.
> When ever I am walking, shopping…a lot of pressure for me…I always work
> very late…When I go home my kids are also working, doing their homework,
> until they sleep.

Her father had moved from China to Hong Kong when he was young and Sarah was shocked when she visited China herself for a holiday:

> The…dress colour is only blue – blue trousers and a white shirt and black
> shoes…At that moment I feel very sad…because I know we are both Chinese
> but why I learn more and they have no chance to see more? So when I had the
> chance to go to another country, for my kids I think it's better. I chose the
> other road for my kids…So now I thank my father for giving me the idea.[43]

Jill was concerned about human rights in Hong Kong under Chinese rule, but she also had more personal reasons for wanting to emigrate:

> The other reason is that I don't want to stay in a small place in the world…In the
> past years I have only used much time in my job, and no time to take care of other
> things.

Moving to Vancouver was sometimes perceived as an adventure – a chance to make a fresh start and explore a new way of life. Said Hannah: "When I was on the plane headed for Canada I had a kind of hope…Looking forward to having a new life here…Everything will be new here, you know?". Jen perceived the prospect of domestic work as a challenge that she wanted to master. A year before leaving Hong Kong she gave up her career as an accountant and dismissed her housekeeper. She wanted to prepare herself for her new life:

> Because we are planning to…to live here [Vancouver], so that's what I am
> thinking. I have to know how to do before I come so…It's good practice. So I
> take up everything, so nowadays I can handle easily. Especially the cleaning; I
> learn it from a part-time helper…So I know how to clean those glass
> windows, floors…

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[43] I am reminded, by Sarah's account, of theorist Appadurai's (1996) emphasis on the role of the imagination in contemporary migration decisions. He writes: "More people than ever before seem to imagine that they will live and work in places other than where they were born," (p. 6). Sarah highlights also another important aspect of the emigration of people from Hong Kong and Taiwan that is intimately bound up with the histories of the territories. In 1991, over one third of Hong Kong's population were first-generation immigrants (Skeldon 1994a). Writes Skeldon (1994a) "Hong Kong is very much the product of migration and may therefore have a substantial population that has only superficial roots in the territory" (p. 22). Similarly in Taiwan, many of its resident population fled from China after 1949. It is therefore conceivable why migration is, for those who can afford it, an easily imagined possibility.

I had a whole year practice! I practice everyday! *Laughs*...I learned how to cook…I have to go shopping…I learn kitchen work…Prepare, like, breakfast for the kids before they go to school, and then prepare lunch, dinner…

Interviews reflected a strong desire by participants to broaden their horizons and accumulate knowledge and skills *for themselves*. Their abilities in English were a potent testimony to their hard work and ambition. Claire arrived from Taiwan in 1992, and her desire to master English became a top priority. She was dissatisfied with her progress after having attended some classes and so began to swim at her local pool. In the changing-room, and in the sauna, she could speak with retired people who are "more willing to… help you." In the sauna men would "chat…and of course men like to talk about politicians, you know, current issues…And so that's the way. It takes me years, you know." She continued:

I chose to go back to school – back to Cap. College as a part time student. I learn my ceramic there and my stone sculpture, meet different people from different kind of field, and I was so happy. And suddenly I found…I can really improve my English. So I gained more confidence…it's been almost eight years, and I had to push myself…to give myself a chance. I had to push myself, but only myself knows that it's not easy – it's really difficult. So now…I go to LEAD group. I think maybe I can help a newcomer because I understand that feeling.

Claire also desired to learn more about Canadian culture:

I think one thing help me a lot is reading. Yeah, I read…basically every day. For the first two or three years I still read Chinese book, but after that I throw all the Chinese books aside and I think I should read some English books. So I start on the children's book and then getting more and more until I think, you know, I should learn more about Western history, so in that way I can understand more Western values…three or four hours when the kids go to school! I am just sitting here after the breakfast [studying]….

Most participants attended an English class and all expressed an active interest in learning the language. Attending classes is a major way in which women make friends with other women in their situation, gain confidence, and expand their social networks.

More generally, the hobbies in which the women engaged were diverse: quilting, pottery, dance, aerobics, computers, tennis, reading and sculpture were all mentioned. On Sundays and holidays Laura enjoys bus tours – she has travelled to the United States and as far as Toronto. Spending time with friends becomes a source of pleasure in itself; going to lunch with friends was an often-mentioned favourite activity. Laura explained: "In Hong

Kong you have not much time to meet your friends. Yeah, very busy…But here there's many time…". Before migrating, women's careers placed a considerable restriction on leisurely pursuits.

Reinstating Patriarchy: The Return of the Husband

'When my husband is here I don't have my freedom." (Cheryl)

As we have seen, migration and the Astronaut situation can significantly transform practical aspects of the woman's everyday life in ways that suggest the intensification of traditional, patriarchal gender-roles. Yet I have suggested the significance of the absence of the husband in affecting the consequent *experience* of this transformation. I will now draw on instances relayed by the women indicating the impact of the return of the husband to Vancouver (on vacation, and, in a couple of cases, for good). These moments bring into stark relief the changes that the woman herself has undergone in his absence.

Sylvie has been in Canada for four years. Her husband spends half the year in Hong Kong on business. She explained how much she missed him the first time they separated – they would talk on the telephone everyday, and she would "long for the time when he came back." She was unprepared, however, for her reaction when, after the first six months away, he returned to Vancouver. She said:

> And then when he came back, for the first week I found that there were many things I need to encounter. It's different, in that my emotions is not peaceful…Many things make me feel a bit frustrated or not feeling comfortable…I had a lot of quarrels with him.

I asked her if she could explain the types of problems.

> Because he had been away for six months…I became more independent actually. And then when he came back I had to do many adjustments to cope with him.

She painted a common picture, whereby the husband, on his return, demands a level of formality in family activities dismissed in his absence. Food and the formality of meals are an important aspect of this:

> When he [was] away I used to have two dishes and one soup for my two kids and me. And then when he came back he said it should be three dishes…I

> have to cook a bigger meal and more dishes…For me, I would prefer less meat and more vegetable, and then he insists that the kids, because they are growing up, need more meats…Actually this is minor, but it accumulates. (Sylvie)

> My husband comes back and I must cook four dishes maybe. But if I eat with my children and eat noodles, it's okay. (Rose)

Problems arose for Sylvie because in the absence of her husband she was forced to become more independent and, in so doing, had adopted her own routines to deal with family life. She went on to illustrate her sense of the more general problems:

> I used to be free when he's away – I'm in charge of everything – and then when he came back I seem to step back and he's in charge…I'm not really adjusted, so I feel rather frustrated.

The sense of an imbalance of power between husband and wife was explicit in the interviews. Penny said: "In Hong Kong my husband is my centre! But in Canada it is different…" When her husband returns to Vancouver "the boss is back! And then he controls the family." She said, "In Chinese tradition, man is more powerful than woman." Many of the women have found that they are unable to accept the dominance of their husband in Canada, often resulting in frequent arguments when he returns.

His visits to Canada result, nevertheless, in an often-dramatic change in the wife's routine. Her workload increases – "because we have to do everything…Do anything. Always the husband first" (Rose). Her social life, and any personal development activities, are significantly curtailed. Barbara exemplifies this common concern:

> When he's not here I used to go to school, after that lunch with my friends, and then maybe play tennis. When he's back I have to cancel my lunch appointment…because I have to keep him company…So the only thing I keep is to go to school. Other than that…all is cancelled until he left.

Emma's husband has joined her in Vancouver for good, after two years of the Astronaut arrangement. She explained that when her husband was in Hong Kong she was able to combine socialising with friends and childcare, organising small gatherings for mothers and children. When her husband returned, he perceived this as her neglect of the family. She feels that some separation from her husband is beneficial:

> Because [then] you can manage your own time. You can have your own social life. But when my husband settled down, all my attention had to go back to the family. I had to cut out some of the activities because of my husband. I have to consider his feelings.

For Anne, migration has meant freedom from the critical gaze of her extended family. In Taiwan, living with her husband and parents-in-law, "many eyes watch you."[44] Her subordination to her husband is required. Through the words of an interpreter, she described her experience of the return of her husband to Vancouver:

> If her husband is here then the husband is the master. So if he wants to do something then they will do it with him. And he likes to eat something then she will [prepare it]…Her husband likes to stay at home and her children like to go out and if her husband is here then they stay here, at home.

Cheryl has been in Vancouver for three and a half years. She has two daughters, aged six and four. She emigrated from Taiwan at the wishes of her parents-in-law, who feared for the family's safety with regards to the uncertain political relationship of Taiwan to China. Her husband works in Taiwan. When her husband returns, she told me, "he is always at home" and requires her to stay at home with him. He does not like her to go out with friends, and they frequently argue. When he is Taiwan, her everyday life and sense of well-being is transformed:

> If he stays in Taiwan, I am free. My heart is free, you know? (*Laughs*).

She loves to drive when he is away, and had planned a road trip to the United States. When she told him of this…

> He said 'Oh!' He so angry. He said 'why?'. I think he don't like I go anywhere, he like I stay at home. But I don't think so. I think, 'you not here, I'm free, I can go anywhere'.

As Cheryl here powerfully demonstrates, the physical absence of the husband – the physical distance migration has put between them – is a fundamental way in which women are able to subvert patriarchal control and disregard wider family expectations.

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[44] Interviews revealed that the "close knit support network" described by Man (1995), consisting of extended family in close proximity, was also a significant source of oppression to several interviewees. Mother-in-laws, especially, seemed to enforce the wife's subordinate status in the home.

I am unable to go into detail about some of the other ways in which spousal relations are effected through migration and the Astronaut situation. In brief, these include divergent attitudes on the best way to bring up and educate the children, different expectations of the children, a diminished desire by the wife to accumulate wealth and material possessions, and a different outlook on life more generally. All female participants perceived a change in themselves since migration.

CONCLUSIONS

In an examination of the Astronaut family in Vancouver, this paper proceeded with two broad, overlapping objectives. Drawing upon empirical data, the first was to examine the theoretical and popular portrayal of the "flexible" Chinese family. With its roots in the recent success of the Asian Tigers and the consequent emigration of many middle-class Chinese families, this depiction conceives of the household unit as a highly efficient means of capital accumulation, operating on a "global stage" (Skeldon 1997). In search of cultural capital as well as immediate financial wealth (Ong 1999; Mitchell 1997a), the contemporary Chinese family is able to successfully disperse members transnationally, drawing on traditional notions of Confucianism and familism to ensure an effective division of household labour and control over individual behaviour. The Astronaut arrangement appeared to exemplify such a strategic use of migration.

Yet this depiction of a flexible family unit obscures the circumstances of individual family members. Feminist literature in particular has highlighted the importance of gender relations in explicating household migration, as well as demonstrating the significance of qualitative experiences (Ellis et al. 1996; Lawson 1998; Silvey and Lawson 1999). Important recent contributions have suggested an array of negative impacts of migration upon female migrants, including increased patriarchal oppression, a loss of economic independence, increased domestic work load, and 'localisation' (Ong 1999) in the home (Bonney and Love 1991; Halfacree 1995; Man 1995 1997; Li and Findlay 1999). The Astronaut family, with its explicitly gendered division of labour, required an examination from the perspective of *intra*-household power relations. A particularly important question concerned the extent to which these negative outcomes affected the lone female in the unusual household circumstances initiated through the Astronaut arrangement.

Turning to the empirical data and the motivations behind the Astronaut arrangement amongst recent immigrant families to Vancouver; there has been an important recent literature highlighting the financial vulnerability of 'economic'-class migrants to Canada (Smart 1994; Ley 1999, 2000). Yet, interviews established quite emphatically that, for most households, the Astronaut arrangement had been *planned in advance of migration*, rather than reflecting a circumstance into which families had been forced after failed attempts to find work. Overwhelmingly, the education of the children was given as the primary reason for immigration, clearly implicating the strategy of cultural capital accumulation described by Ong (1999). The empirical data seemed, therefore, to point to a transnational, 'flexible' family arrangement *par excellence.* Yet how was this flexibility and mobility experienced by the lone woman in Vancouver?

Interviews revealed some important ways in which 'transnational' migration also involves settlement in a place, which may be significantly different from the place of origin. In every case, the woman's life had been transformed through migration and the Astronaut arrangement. There were many examples of the intensification of traditional gender roles, such as the loss of her economic independence and the increased personal undertaking of housework and childcare tasks. In some cases, the transformation indicated oppression, isolation, and a generally negative experience of settlement in Vancouver. Boredom, loneliness and fear were frequently mentioned. Marital relationships came under strain and in the worst cases, relationships broke down as a result of an extramarital affair. Thus whilst privileged migrant families, representing a new 'hypermobile' class of wealthy and highly skilled cosmopolitans, pursue objectives of transnational capital accumulation, at the same time this family arrangement served to reinstate traditional gender roles and sometimes resulted in acute emotional suffering on the part of the lone wife. Ignored by the majority of the literature on transnational Chinese families, the emotional costs of a geographically dispersed family unit can be significant.

Yet the reality of these circumstances is even more complex. This picture of apparent female oppression does not allow either for the significant agency of the migrant woman to transform her own circumstances, or the effect of migration to a different place (Vancouver) and the ability of this new environment to transform the immigrant woman. In the Astronaut arrangement, the geographical distance separating her from her husband and extended family

was an important way in which she was freed from patriarchal control and dominance. At first, this distance from her old life was unnerving. Over time, however (the crucial one year) women began to build around themselves a new, stable social world incorporating their new role as mothers and housekeepers yet allowing also for significant freedom to use their own time as they chose. 'Localisation', instead of implying an oppressive experience, should perhaps indicate the opportunities granted, by settlement in a place, to create a stable world of social networks and resources, and to cast essential daily routines (see Giddens 1984). Significant disruption of established patterns occurred when the husband returned to Vancouver, often attempting to reassert his control over family life. It was at times of his presence that the changes brought about in his absence – both in the practical aspects of the woman's life and in her attitudes - were starkly realised. The Astronaut family highlights well, I suggest, an important and enduring relationship between spatial distance and social relations, even in a significantly transnational and 'deterritorialized' contemporary era (Hannerz 1996).

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