MIGRATION AS FEMINISATION

Chinese women’s experiences of work and family in contemporary Australia

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the Western world, governments have increasingly viewed migration through the lens of economic efficiency. In the era of globalisation, they argue, migrants should be selected on the basis of their skills and qualifications. Australian governments have been strongly committed to this policy direction, and over the last two decades, have reoriented the country’s migration program from the recruitment of unskilled labour to targeting educated professionals. The current Liberal-National Coalition government claims that this policy redirection has paid off, with migrants more skilled than ever, and successfully contributing to the economy. The government bases these claims on research conducted by scholars of migrant employment, who equate high levels of human capital with successful employment outcomes. Using the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia (LSIA), these researchers show that migrants with qualifications and English language ability have higher rates of labour force participation, lower unemployment, and higher occupational attainment and incomes, compared to their less skilled counterparts.

This thesis critically analyses this ‘success story’ narrative. It argues that the focus on human capital has overshadowed exploration of other important factors shaping migrants’ employment experiences, including the gender and birthplace of new arrivals. This thesis shows that male and female migrants, and migrants from English versus non-English speaking backgrounds, can have very different experiences of working in Australia, regardless of their skills or occupational histories. I highlight the importance of these factors by investigating the experiences of Chinese women in Australia today. Using in-depth interviews with women from China and Hong Kong, and quantitative data from the Australian census and LSIA, I show that Chinese women’s employment experiences in Australia do not conform neatly to the prevailing ‘success story’ promoted by the Government and migration researchers.
Migration to Australia causes a widespread reduction in Chinese women’s paid work. While it is normal for men to seek work immediately after arrival, women find that migration intensifies their domestic workloads, while depriving them of sources of domestic support, such as relatives and hired help. Consequently, for Chinese women, migration often means moving from full-time to part-time jobs, or withdrawing from the workforce entirely. In the process, they experience a ‘feminisation’ of roles, as they shift from being ‘career women’ to fulfilling the traditional ‘female’ roles of wife and mother. Thus migration and settlement are highly gendered, and the household context is crucial for understanding migrants’ employment experiences.

Among those women who are in the labour force, employment outcomes vary substantially by birthplace, pointing to the cultural specificity of human capital. Although both mainland Chinese and Hong Kong migrant women tend to be highly educated, mainland women achieve far poorer outcomes than Hong Kong women. Hong Kong women, with their relatively good English language skills and officially-recognised qualifications, are generally able to secure comparable jobs to those they had in Hong Kong, although they often have problems advancing further in Australia. Meanwhile, mainland women tend to have poorer English skills and greater difficulty in having their qualifications recognised, and thus suffer often dramatic downward mobility, moving from highly skilled professions to unskilled, low-paid and low status jobs in Australia. Thus this thesis demonstrates that the value of human capital is context-dependent. It can only be valorised in a new labour market if it is sufficiently culturally compatible with local standards.

Therefore, the experiences of Chinese migrant women complicate the ‘success story’ that dominates discussions of migrant employment in Australia. Ultimately, the prevailing economistic approach fails to see the diversity and complexity of migrant experiences. We need to see migrants as social beings, whose settlement in a new country is crucially shaped by their gender and birthplace, and broader institutional factors, which determine how human capital is used and rewarded. This is the mission of this thesis.
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