

Juggling Citizenships for Transnational Familyhood: Mainland Chinese Immigrants in Canada and Their 'Return' Migration to China

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Abstract

By considering the return migration of Mainland Chinese migrants who had immigrated to Canada, this contribution focuses on the way transnational families navigate citizenship regimes in two legal systems. It argues that despite their strong legal position in Canada, members of transnational families experience de facto deskilling and integration barriers. This prompts return migration decisions by the lead migrant, resulting in transnational family separation as the rest of the family remains behind in Canada for children's schooling and to fulfil the residency requirements for citizenship status. However, the difficulties of transnational family separation result in later return by the remaining family members as well, usually after naturalising in Canada. The remainder of the article examines the immigration issues they face in China as naturalised Canadian citizens and further explores their intentions for sustained transnationalism.

Key words

Return migration; transnational families; citizenship law; Canada; China

Resumen

Al tener en cuenta la migración de retorno de los emigrantes de China continental que habían emigrado a Canadá, esta contribución se centra en la forma en que las familias transnacionales navegan entre regímenes de ciudadanía en dos sistemas legales. La autora sostiene que a pesar de su fuerte posición legal en Canadá, los miembros de las familias transnacionales experimentan, de facto, barreras de integración y desprofesionalización. Esto lleva a que el emigrante principal decida retornar, lo que da lugar a la separación transnacional de la familia, ya que el resto de la familia permanece en Canadá para la escolarización de los hijos y para cumplir con los requisitos de residencia para obtener el estatus de ciudadanía. Sin embargo, las dificultades de la separación de la familia transnacional dan como

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resultado un retorno más tardío de los miembros restantes de la familia y, por lo general, después de la naturalización en Canadá. El resto del artículo analiza los problemas de inmigración a los que se enfrentan en China como ciudadanos canadienses naturalizados y explora aún más sus intenciones para el transnacionalismo sostenido.

Palabras clave

Migración de retorno; familias transnacionales; ley de ciudadanía; Canadá; China

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1. Introduction

The cross-border phenomenon of transnational familyhood has received significant scholarly attention in recent years. The extant literature describes family formations that include transnational marriages, transnational parenting, transnational grandparenting and transnational care practices for the elderly (e.g. Constable 2003, Baldassar 2007, Zhan and Montgomery 2007, Coe 2008, Ho 2008, Lie 2010, Cabanes and Acadera 2012). These studies focus on the nature of caring from a distance and the way migrants negotiate transnational family separation. While earlier writings portray family dispersal, especially of Chinese immigrants, as a strategic means of taking up multiple citizenships (e.g. Ong 1999), subsequent writings have problematised this perspective by highlighting the legal requirements needed to renew permanent residency or meet citizenship eligibility, and the familial costs of meeting these obligations through transnational family separation. This article considers the way migrant families try to optimise outcomes for themselves and their family members but also underlines the everyday difficulties faced by Mainland Chinese migrants in transnational family situations. It further discusses the 'return' migration decisions they undertake in an attempt to resolve these challenges, which in turn results in a new set of attendant issues.

The paper contextualises the reasons contributing to transnational familyhood formations amongst Mainland Chinese migrants who have immigrated to Canada. It highlights the routine difficulties they face in terms of adapting to a new immigration context whilst maintaining familyhood transnationally. It further suggests that these challenges prompt their subsequent return to China but only as a temporary arrangement. The research also found that Mainland Chinese migrants are opting to relocate their family units together with their own move back to China so as to maintain familyhood in proximity rather than transnationally (although some families may still leave an older child in Canada for schooling). However, this relocation of the family unit back to China does not mark the end of transnationalism because the interviews suggest that these Mainland Chinese migrants intend for some family members to move back to Canada again in the future. The discussion pays careful attention to the way legal categories of permanent residency and citizenship statuses shape how such migrants navigate transnational familyhood and sustained transmigrancy between Canada and China. In so doing, it looks at how the Mainland Chinese migrants are situated in the Canadian immigration and citizenship regime as well as the way they become subject to immigration laws in China after return migration because they have naturalised as Canadian citizens.

The next section considers the intersections between the literature on transnational familyhood, its relationship with the study of the everyday realm and the role of law during transmigrancy. Thereafter, the article focuses on the factors prompting transnational familyhood amongst the Mainland Chinese migrants in this study and emerging trends of return migration. Following that, the paper looks at the extent to which legal categories, such as permanent residency or citizenship, provide migrants choice over whether to remain in Canada or return to China when balanced against economic and familial considerations.

2. Transnational families in perspective

Transnational families refer to families that are dispersed in two or more countries yet they maintain a sense of familyhood across national borders, such as strong bonds of collective welfare and unity (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, Huang *et al.* 2008). Transnational families can be distinguished from another term, 'immigrant families'. While the latter may consider cross-border familial relationships, such analyses still tend to be framed within the nation-state and study mainly the way immigrants and their family members adapt and live their lives within the immigration context (Clark *et al.* 2009, Glick 2010). In comparison, the literature

on transnational families emphasise the ties that stretch across national borders, thereby linking 'sending' and 'host' countries dynamically.

The transnationalism literature problematises assumptions of migration as a linear trajectory. Instead emigration, immigration, 'return' migration and onward migration are seen to be part of a broader canvas of migration trajectories. The formation of transnational familyhood comes about as a result of migrants' intentions to optimise outcomes for themselves and the family through mobility. For example, the 'astronaut families' and 'parachute children' literature foregrounds the way sub-standard employment prospects in a host country prompt one parent to return to the sending country to make a living while leaving behind the other parent to look after children who are studying in the host country (Waters 2003, Chiang 2008). A more utilitarian perspective argues that such astronaut families aim to maximise their chances of obtaining citizenships in more than one country, by leaving some family members behind in the country of immigration in order to fulfil the residential requirements needed to obtain citizenship status (Ong 1999). In these depictions, astronaut families traverse the geographical and political-legal boundaries that delineate nation-states and rights to citizenship. However, multiple citizenships are difficult to acquire and retain in reality.

A growing scholarship foregrounds the actual challenges faced by transnational families as they go about their daily lives. Yeoh *et al.* (2005, p. 307), for example, foreground the 'micropolitics and social practices of transnationalism as they are worked out within the realm of the family'. These are the nitty-gritty details that go into the making of transnational familyhood on a routine basis. Some writings consider the maintenance of familial relationships through technological means such as phonecalls, texting, video-conferencing and emails (Baldassar 2007, Cabanes and Acadera 2012) thus drawing attention to the emotional negotiations that go into bridging transnational familyhood (Ho 2008). Researching the everyday aspects of migration draws out the discourses, thoughts, feelings and actions underpinning social structures, including the 'family' and metanarratives like 'transnationalism' (see Ho and Hatfield 2011).

Some scholars studying transnationalism also argue for attentiveness to transnational mobilities that extend over the life course. Here, for instance, the sustained transnationalism of the 1.5-generation draws attention to the way children of immigrants may not simply integrate or assimilate into the host country, instead choosing to spend some time living in the sending country while remaining open to the possibility of moving back to the host country in the future again (Ley and Kobayashi 2005, Chiang 2011). These types of transnational mobilities are not limited to the 1.5- and later-generations. As this article suggests, immigrant parents also chart their migration trajectories over the life course as they seek to reconcile conflicting family priorities situated in different parts of the world and the actual legal choices open to them in terms of their permanent residency and citizenship status.

A popular misconception frames immigrants and their class positionings at two ends of a spectrum. At one extreme end are migrants with insecure legal status and who struggle to make ends meet, while at the other end are those with rights to residence, work and income. In this framing, law is configured as immigration and citizenship policy. Attaining legal recognition in these areas is seen as taking a step closer towards realising migrants' aspirations in terms of finding work and securing residency rights in the country of immigration. While not undermining the difficulties faced by immigrants without legal documentation, this contribution also argues that the preceding view claiming relative 'privilege' neglects the life-world experiences of those who suffer the effects of deskilling (e.g. self-esteem issues) and sustained uncertainty (e.g. about the family's future) even if they have legal rights in the country of immigration. The deskilling of immigrants leads to fluidity between assumed class categories. The presumed security attached to class and

legal status needs to be interrogated critically through empirically grounded studies in order to unpack some of these assumptions. This article undertakes such an endeavour through the study of Mainland Chinese immigrants in Canada who experience considerable deskilling after immigration, resulting in trends that suggest many are choosing to return to China temporarily with their spouses and children in tow.

3. Research methodology

The article draws on research studying the immigration experiences of Mainland Chinese migrants in Canada (henceforth referred to as 'immigrant') and trends suggesting that significant numbers of them are choosing to return to China eventually. The first stage of research was conducted in Vancouver, Canada and followed by research amongst Mainland Chinese migrants in China who have returned from Canada (henceforth referred to as 'returnees'). The research in China was carried out in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou. The interview sample comprised Mainland Chinese migrants who have Canadian permanent residency or citizenship status.¹ They entered Canada through the skills immigration program; thus the lead migrant, and usually the spouse, have tertiary level qualifications and substantive professional experience obtained in China. Given these characteristics, the interviewees are in the 30s-40s age group. In Vancouver, interviewees were recruited through associations that addressed the needs of the Chinese community or immigrants more generally. Additional recruitment was done through website advertisements frequented by the Mainland Chinese immigrants in Vancouver. In China, interviewees were recruited through Canadian associations and also contacts provided by the interviewees based in Vancouver. Further snowballing in both Canada and China helped enlarge the pool of interviewees.

Thirty interviews were conducted with immigrants still in Vancouver and thirty more interviews with returnees in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou (i.e. sixty interviews in total). Equal numbers of men and women were interviewed. Additional participant observation was done at formal and informal social events with the Mainland Chinese migrants in Canada and China.

More than half of those that returned to China have naturalised as Canadian citizens while the remainder of the interview sample have opted for Canadian permanent residency only. Of those that returned to China, they stayed in Canada for two to five years before deciding to move back to their country of origin. The interviews focused on their migration motivations, settlement in Canada after migration (for immigrants and returnees) and, for the returnees, experiences of returning to China and their intentions for the future. The interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed and coded in Atlas-Ti for analysis. Familial considerations emerged as a prominent theme in these interviews.

4. Living apart in Canada: the everyday realities of transnational familyhood

Mainland Chinese immigration comprised a substantive volume of overall immigration numbers in Canada during 1996-2006. During this ten-year period it was the fastest growing component of immigration flows to Canada as well, overtaking the Anglophone stock as well as Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigration (Statistics Canada 2006). Just as with their Hong Kong counterparts (Waters 2003), Mainland Chinese immigrants choose Canada because its citizenship status safeguards against political uncertainties in China, allows for ease of travel, access to better educational opportunities for their children and other citizenship rights (Ho 2011). As for Canada, immigration law provisions allow applicants who fulfil educational, professional and income criteria to qualify for permanent residency

¹ The term 'migrants' refers to both immigrants and returnees.

status in the country. The stated goal is for the skills immigration program to help fill gaps in the Canadian labour market (Li 2008, Ley 2010).² Successful applicants are eligible for permanent residency status in Canada, but which is subject to renewal every five years and for which the permanent resident has to show proof of residency in the country for at least two years out of that time period. Permanent residency status gives its bearer the right to work as well as sponsorship for dependants to join them in Canada.

However, Mainland Chinese immigrants who arrive through the skills immigration program realise soon after their arrival in Canada that there is a mismatch between their skills and employers' expectations in the Canadian labour market. As a result, many Mainland Chinese immigrants do not work in the occupations in which they had received formal training because employers do not recognise the qualifications they had obtained from China and see their English language skills as lacking in proficiency. With no other choice, these Mainland Chinese immigrants end up in low-skilled and low-paid jobs working as cleaners, factory assembly workers and shop assistants. This is an issue with the skills and business immigration program in Canada that a number of scholars have examined (e.g. Li 2008, Ley 2010). These observations can be related to transnational familyhood formations, 'return' migration trends and the legal frameworks under which family members operate through immigration and citizenship policy in Canada and China.

The self-esteem conflicts experienced by husbands who are regarded culturally as breadwinners in Chinese families coupled with their low earning capacity in Canada, results in decisions for the husband return to China for work. Usually the wife and child remain behind in Canada while the husband commutes regularly for visits so that, on the one hand, the child can continue studying, and on the other hand, the wife can fulfil the residency period required to renew their permanent residency status (at least two out of five years) or apply for Canadian citizenship eventually (at least three years in the past four years preceding the application). Mainland Chinese immigrants in these circumstances find themselves becoming transnational families that live their lives separated by geographical distance, national borders and societal constraints (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). In other words, their de facto work and family reunification options are restricted in spite of their legal status and rights as Canadian permanent residents.

Transnational familyhood results in distinct challenges for different members of the nuclear family unit. For married couples, geographical separation brings about anxieties over the gradual breakdown of their marital lives. Zhang (male immigrant) and Mei (female immigrant), living together in Canada (at the time of research) related their earlier experience of transnational familial separation as a married couple:

Mei: I had my concerns because I believe the married couple should stay together. If one returns [to China] then gradually they will grow apart.

Zhang: You won't have any common conversation topics. The price you pay will be very high. There are many couples in the same situation as we were previously [...] She called me very often [in China]...

Mei: But we didn't have much to say to each other.

Zhang had decided to return to China to find better employment after a period of underemployment in Canada, where he worked in menial jobs such as factory assembly work and as a cleaner despite his professional credentials. Mei had initially supported the decision for him to return and commute regularly to Canada

² The efficacy of this program has come under question in recent years because of significant deskilling amongst entrants who come to Canada through the skills immigration route. As such in July 2012, the immigration authorities implemented tightening restrictions requiring applicants to show proof of an arranged employment offer in Canada. Otherwise they must be enrolled for at least two years or have graduated from a PhD program in Canada.

instead. However, maintaining the social practices of a long distance family relationship (Yeoh *et al.* 2005) proved harder than they anticipated. Despite efforts at staying in touch by phone calls regularly, the couple soon found they had few meaningful conversation topics to share with each other. Even with the technology and time taken to maintain family contact regularly, the emotional vacuum of familial separation proved harder to manage than they had expected initially. As a result, Mei and Zhang decided eventually that he should return to Canada to reunite as a family unit together with their child.

Reflecting on their earlier decision-making process in view of the opportunities presented by Canadian immigration and citizenship law, Zhang said:

When I returned to China, we had fulfilled the three years residency requirement in Canada to apply for citizenship status. At that time, we thought only she should apply since I am back in China. After she applies our child can also become a Canadian citizen while I can still easily go to and fro between Canada and China with my Chinese citizenship and Canadian permanent residency status. But after remaining in China for one year I realised we cannot maintain this family separation arrangement on a long-term basis. So I decided to apply for Canadian citizenship as well. At the back of our minds we also knew that because my sister is in America so if we have Canadian citizenship status it would be easier for us to apply for visas to visit her. Most importantly, we knew by then that I would be remaining in Canada because the family separation is not good for us.

Zhang's anecdote illuminates the way Mainland Chinese migrants perceive Canadian immigration and citizenship law. Return migration to China is meant to resolve the underemployment issues faced by Mainland Chinese migrants like them, but transnational family separation is too difficult to bear and eventually a decision is reached for the family unit to remain as a whole in Canada, thus cementing their Canadian citizenship status as well.

Other interviewees told me that divorce is likely in situations of prolonged transnational family separation. In some cases, it is because of extra-marital affairs leading to marriages breaking up. In other cases, as the married couple grow accustomed to being geographical apart, the emotional distance increases too. Relating his past experience of returning to China while leaving his family in Canada, Lin (male returnee) said:

I didn't understand it initially when the Westerners said it's not good for a couple to spend time apart but after I left [Canada for China] I began to understand the problems. When a woman goes through difficult times without her husband around and she gets through it by herself then she realises she is leading a new life. Whether he is around or not doesn't matter so much. As for the husband, there are other women around him after he returns to China and that creates problems too. Similarly for her, she has many admirers in Canada. So the best thing for both parties is to decide on the sensible thing to do.

By 'the sensible thing', Lin is referring to a divorce as the solution to their transnational marriage arrangement and its attendant difficulties. Under Canadian law, spouses that immigrate as a family unit (i.e. they obtain permanent residency status together) but subsequently divorce are allowed to retain their permanent residency status and apply for citizenship separately.

However, divorce is still stigmatised in China and most families try to maintain the unity of the family through interval visits by the parent who returned to find work and via phone calls or the internet on a more regular basis. Nonetheless, for lone mothers coping with the primary responsibility of caring for a child in Canada during the absence of the father, daily routines become harder than before, as shared by Xin (female immigrant):

After [my husband] left [Canada] I had great difficulty managing. To begin with, I don't drive and that meant the grocery shopping for our daily needs gave me a headache. I was on my own and my child is too young to help me. Carrying the

grocery bags on my own made my arms hurt. Every time I had to go grocery shopping I would say to him, 'please come back to Canada soon'. I went on like this for a year and a half. I had to hold down two jobs on my own during that time too. I had a full-time job and part-time job. I had to leave my child alone at home. Life was very difficult and in the end I couldn't do it anymore so he had to come back to Canada.

As Xin highlights, caregiving activities that are normally mundane and manageable take on added difficulty in the absence of one parent, especially if the other parent is working as well. The deskilling of Mainland Chinese immigrants in Canada also means that, like in the case of Xin, their income levels are substantively lower than what they would be used to earning in China. As such, some of them take on extra part-time work to supplement the family income. This means, however, that children are left either on their own or in the care of family friends (rather than other family members who are likely to be in China rather than Canada).

The Mainland Chinese immigrants see from past examples that an absent parent can have detrimental effects on family unity and children's socialisation. Fang (female immigrant) speaks of her situation that is shared by other lone immigrant mothers in Canada at the neighbourhood where she lived:

Most of the time I am bringing up our child on my own. Where I live there are many others in my situation... Korean mothers, Japanese mothers, Chinese mothers bringing up their children by themselves. The fathers are in their home countries making a living. In the long term I don't think this is good for the child and the family, even the wife. I would prefer not to go down this road. I think on the whole, the father plays an important role as well. Of course, education is important too.

As Fang's anecdote indicates, Mainland Chinese immigrants like herself feel that they are caught between a rock and a hard place. They have to balance the desire for their children to obtain a Canadian education, seen to be better because of it is a less stressful learning environment and uses the English language, against the need for fathers to return to China to earn enough to give their families a comfortable standard of living. These findings corroborate the research reflections of Waters (2003) and Chiang (2008) who studied the situations of Hong Kong immigrants and Taiwanese immigrants in Canada respectively.

Apart from transnational marriages and parenting, another aspect of transnational familyhood that deserves attention is the obligation of transnational care for elderly parents who are left behind in the country of origin (i.e. the extended family unit). The Mainland Chinese immigrants often express a sense of guilt towards parents who are unable or unwilling to relocate to Canada. Central to parental considerations is the notion of filial piety that is espoused in Chinese culture and tradition (see Zhan and Montgomery 2003 but also Baldassar 2007 who addresses the social construction of cultural obligations to care). As Min (female immigrant) said:

I feel guilty because since I was 17 years old I have left my parents to study in high school, university then I left to go overseas. I have been very busy striving hard and now that my conditions have improved somewhat I would like to be with them by bringing them to Canada but they are unwilling to come [because of their old age]. I think many immigrants are faced with this situation. I call them everyday and they tell me that though we can't be together everyday I give them moral support from a distance... But just last week, one of my friends received a phone call saying that his father has passed away. He had to return home immediately. Many immigrants are like him and they live in regret.

Although Mainland Chinese immigrants in Canada have the right under family reunification law to sponsor their immediate family members to join them, in reality elderly parents are either reluctant or have difficulty relocating to another country because of their life-stage. Some, like Min's parents, are unable to do so because of mobility and health problems while other elderly parents have visited Canada and

found that they cannot adapt to life there because of language barriers and their limited social networks in a new country, that results in a sense of unbearable alienation (Mujahid *et al.* 2011). While some scholars depict Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland Chinese as migrants shuttling regularly between countries (Ong 1999), the research here suggests otherwise. Due to their deskilling and lower earning capacity coupled with higher costs of living in Canada, a number of the Mainland Chinese immigrants in this study expressed that they find it difficult to save enough money for the expensive airfares back to China (costing nearly CA\$3000 for a family consisting of the parents and a child). One interviewee said he has not returned to China for the past five years since his arrival in Canada even though he feels guilty for not visiting his eighty-three year old father who misses him as well.

The above research findings indicate that the Mainland Chinese immigrants in this study desire family reunification both at the nuclear and extended family levels. Family reunification is desired and whether it is because of the husband/father or elderly parents that are back in China, the Mainland Chinese immigrants interviewed say that familial considerations lead them to constantly deliberate if they should return to China or remain in Canada. However, they also recognise there are barriers to their return such as considerations over their children's education, especially the difficulties of re-immersion into the Chinese educational system after spending some time abroad. Some male interviewees also say that they will have difficulties finding employment in China because of questionable gaps in their resume as a result of the period during which they experienced deskilling in Canada (see Ho 2011). In these cases, these transnational families can only hope that the husband/father will remain or return to Canada permanently one day so that the nuclear family unit can be in one place; on the other hand, the guilt they feel towards elderly parents is something that they continue to negotiate on an everyday basis.

5. Return migration to China: is it the end of the journey?

In other cases, families actually choose to relocate all or most of their family unit from Canada back to China. This is a qualitatively different trend from the widely observed 'astronaut families' and 'parachute children' phenomenon. Return migration trends amongst Mainland Chinese immigrants have started to catch the attention of researchers and policymakers. Although Canada does not keep exit data on migration, researchers have arrived at estimates of emigration by comparing census data, the longitudinal database (IMDB) and tax records across the years. The data suggests that exit rates for naturalised Canadians are significant at 4.5 per cent between 1996 and 2006. Immigrants from Mainland China had a low exit rate during this period but they tend to mimic the migration patterns of the Hong Kong and Taiwanese Chinese who had exit rates of 24 per cent and 30 per cent respectively during that period. The Mainland Chinese experienced a later immigration peak than their Hong Kong and Taiwanese counterparts; thus, it is anticipated that their re-migration rates will see an increase as well (Devoretz 2009). The qualitative research informing this article, drawing on interviews and participant observation, corroborates the above projection. The study suggests that more Mainland Chinese families are choosing to return with their families to China as they recognise the perils of transnational family separation (discussed above) based on the earlier experiences of other Mainland Chinese, as well as their Hong Kong and Taiwanese families (Waters 2003, Chiang 2008). For families with young children, all of them also want their child to experience life in China and learn the Chinese language and culture because of their roots.

However, 'returning' to China is not a straightforward process for them because some family members had given up Chinese citizenship in order to naturalise as Canadian citizens. Acquiring Canadian citizenship is seen as a preferable option

because otherwise the Mainland Chinese migrants would have to fulfil a two-years residency requirement to renew their permanent residency status every five years. With Canadian citizenship they need not do so. As Peng (male) puts it:

The reason why we apply for Canadian citizenship is so that we won't have to return to Canada for two years every five years in order to retain our permanent resident status. If something bad happens in China we can also go back to Canada. We have no confidence in how things will turn out in China in the future.

Despite China's economic rise in recent decades, the Mainland Chinese migrants interviewed felt that the country lags behind Canada in terms of social and political stability. Thus, for interviewees like Peng, obtaining Canadian citizenship is still desirable in their viewpoint. However, China has a dual citizenship restriction so the Mainland Chinese migrants who naturalise as Canadian citizens have to give up their Chinese citizenship and with it their hukou status. The hukou, or household registration system, acts as a second-tier of rights provision in China differentiating between residents of urban and rural China but also within urban and rural localities. Hukou in China is passed down by family lineage and provides for rights at the local level such as pertaining to employment benefits, children's education and medical and pension provisions (Chan 2009). Some government sector jobs are reserved for those with hukou status only. Conversely, those without hukou status of the locality are not privy to those rights. Giving up Chinese citizenship means that the right to hukou is automatically forfeited as well. Hence the Mainland Chinese returnees from Canada who have given up their Chinese citizenship, and with it their hukou status, face new and unexpected issues resettling in their motherland. The specific challenges have been documented elsewhere (see Ho 2011) so this issue will be discussed here only briefly and, following that, focus instead on their deliberations about ways to navigate the citizenship frameworks in which they are situated simultaneously as a result of transmigrancy and also in view of present and anticipated family circumstances.

Mainland Chinese returnees without Chinese citizenship and hukou status are required by Chinese immigration law to apply for visas to legally remain in China. A number of those in this study had entrepreneur or employment visas that gave them the right to work in China. However, such a requirement ties them to the sustainability of their businesses in China or the employer that sponsored their employment visas. These visas are usually valid for only a year. For example, Yang (male) explains:

As a 'foreigner', you would have to get a work permit [also known as employment visas] to become a temporary resident. The application takes a long time then a year later you have to renew it. Like in Canada the work permit is for a longer period of up to five years. It is troublesome to renew the work permit every year in China. It is also weird because you look Chinese and you speak Mandarin but you have now become Canadian so you need a temporary residence permit. Renewing the visa is not a problem in itself but it is a lengthy process. It takes time and you have to go this agency and that agency. It is all very bureaucratic.... If you stay longer than the visa allows you would become an illegal migrant.

As seen in Yang's comment, obtaining a work permit is not of great difficulty to the skilled Chinese professionals returning to China for employment but they are conscious of their precarious status as potential over-stayers if they are late to renew their temporary residence permits. Moreover, the identity dissonance they experience in relation to their changed citizenship status is one that they find tricky to resolve on a personal level.

The employment visa allows them to apply for dependants' visas for their spouses, usually the wife, and family members who have given up Chinese citizenship for Canadian citizenship. Bearers of dependants' visas do not have the right to work in China resulting in the economic marginalisation and social isolation of women who accompany their husbands back to China after spending some years in Canada.

Dependants' visas are valid a year and allow for multiple entries to China but those on this legal status are expected to leave China only to re-enter again every three months, which creates considerable inconvenience for the women and their children.

Apart from issues over residency rights in China, those without hukou status also receive fewer benefits at the workplace. The majority of the Mainland Chinese returnees are not from the coveted elite spectrum courted by China's pro-talent policy encouraging the return of Mainland Chinese abroad (see Zweig and Wang 2013).³ As such, the returnees from Canada do not have privileged expatriate remuneration packages and work on local terms and conditions instead, earning similar (or lower) salaries as their counterparts who have not left China at all. Due to their prior deskilling experiences in Canada, the Mainland Chinese returnees are also likely to have fallen behind their counterparts who remained in China to develop their careers. Their foreigner status as Canadian citizens working in China further disadvantages them because they are not entitled to rights provided for those with Chinese citizenship, such as health insurance, pension top-up schemes, subsidised schooling for their children and other social security provisions. From their previous experiences of being in Canada, they also realise that these are rights they would have been able to enjoy if they had stayed in Canada instead of moving back to China. Yet the sub-optimal employment opportunities and the difficulties of transnational family separation that they would have to face if they did not return to China as a family unit also makes them aware that remaining in Canada is not a realistic option for the family's well-being in the long term. As a result of these limits on their residency, economic and social rights, the Mainland Chinese returnees from Canada claim they experience dissonance between their newfound legal status as foreigners in China and their actual cultural identity as Chinese living in their ancestral motherland.

Even so, their time in China is but a temporary stopover as many of the Mainland Chinese returnees said that they intend to move back to Canada later in life. Ley and Kobayashi's (2005) earlier study of Hong Kong returnees that had been born and educated in Canada found that the 1.5 generation intend to move back to Canada later in their life course. To an extent, the Mainland Chinese returnees have similar intentions as the 1.5 generation Hong Kong returnees; they see China as a place for work and Canada as a place for retirement. But it is only because they have experienced deskilling in Canada. Returning in their post-retirement years is a strategy to side-step the employment difficulties they had faced when they lived in Canada previously.

For others, they plan to return to Canada when their children are embarking on further education in Canada. For example, Liu (female immigrant) still has a teenage daughter studying in Canada but she moved back to China with her son to be with her husband. She said:

[My daughter] has lived at a friend's house for two years. I told her to bear with it and she said ok. Some of her friends are envious of her because she had no one to mind her. I chat with her everyday on MSN but now she doesn't want to communicate much with me now. When she needs me she will say, 'money, mummy, money'. I told my husband we are in a situation where either we live separately or we have to be separated from our child. He kept saying it's only for a few years. I'm now thinking about five years later I will return to Canada. My son is only seven years old so when he is older we will go back because I don't like the educational system in China. It's hard on the children...

³ Examples of such pro-talent policies are the Thousand Flowers Program introduced by the Chinese Communist Party in 2008, which provides salary, housing, healthcare and other incentives to encourage the return of 'highly talented' Chinese scientific personnel from abroad. For a fuller account of the evolution of China's pro-talent policy, refer to Zweig and Wang (2013).

Liu's anecdote portrays vividly the familial stress of transnational familyhood as well as the reasons prompting future reverse movement back to Canada again. As a result of their intentions to return to Canada, Mainland Chinese returnees like Liu are reluctant to give up their Canadian citizenship despite the restrictions they face in China because of their legal status as foreigners. Several of the interviewees also expressed it is questionable if they would re-qualify for Chinese citizenship or permanent residency status even if they relinquish Canadian citizenship at this point, as they had given up their Chinese birth right by choice previously.

For some families that anticipated the attendant difficulties of returning to China on a foreign citizenship, their strategy is for one parent to remain as a Canadian permanent resident and retain Chinese citizenship status while the other parent and/or children apply for Canadian citizenship instead. This circumvents the difficulties faced by those who have given up their Chinese citizenship but it also presents another set of complications. For instance, Chen (male immigrant) who intends to move back to Canada in the future reflects on the family's citizenship decisions and future migration plans:

I feel that we are deceiving the Canadian government by capitalising upon the loophole in their policy. I would like my child to go to Canada at some point yet I can't bring myself to do that because if you leave your child and wife there your family will be separated in two countries. What will life be like? You can't make these decisions based on what you think Canada is like or what China is like. What's most important is for your family to be together regardless of where you are... I am considering whether to apply for Canadian citizenship and also if I should send my child back. This is a dilemma for me and I can't decide.

Chen is self-reflective about how his personal and family choices contradict the Canadian government's policy of encouraging highly skilled and business immigration in order to mobilise their contributions to the Canadian economy and society. However, his decision to return rather than remain in Canada is borne out of the practical difficulties of earning a salary good enough to provide his family with a comfortable life. The decision to bring his family back with him eventually is in recognition of the difficulties and perils of transnational familyhood experienced by other Mainland Chinese migrant families. His deliberations over whether and when to return to Canada is a result of the countervailing pressure to give his child a learning environment that is conducive and able to maximise the child's future opportunities. Yet their family strategy of having some family members remain in China on visas means that they are still subject to limited residency and other rights while in the country. The parent with Canadian permanent residency is still subject to residency requirements for the renewal of this status if he or she wants to retain the right to return and remain in Canada.

This section examined the circumstances of Mainland Chinese returnees who have gone back to China and relocated most, if not all, of their family members along with them. The discussion highlighted the barriers faced by those who have given up Chinese citizenship in exchange for Canadian citizenship status. In spite of their cultural affinity with China, the Mainland Chinese returnees are treated as foreigners under the new legal framework they find themselves in and where they are required to obtain visas to legally remain and work in the country. Even if they are employed gainfully in China, they are not entitled to receive the social rights they used to have as Chinese citizens nor are they able to claim similar rights in Canada because they are Canadian citizens living abroad. While some families try to optimise their choices by having some family members remain Chinese citizens and others naturalise as Canadian citizens, this also creates new dilemmas in terms of the way they have to continue negotiating the terms for renewal of their permanent residency status in Canada or visa status in China respectively. The possibility of returning to Canada or remaining in China also means that families find themselves in a limbo as they try to balance their individual aspirations, marriage obligations, hopes for their children and guilt towards ageing parents.

6. Conclusion

Comparing three cohorts of Italian transnational families, Baldassar (2007, p. 278) argues that migration should be 'mapped onto family life-cycles', emphasising the need to conceptualise migrancy as a set of processes that extend beyond settlement to incorporate the continuing connections between home and host countries over time, including those of the subsequent generations'. The empirical case presented here of Mainland Chinese migrants engaging in a transnational sojourn between China and Canada over their life course is one such endeavour to be attentive to the way family considerations shape migration trajectories over space and time. This contribution underlines everyday difficulties faced by transnational families seeking to maintain familyhood across borders and the actual limits placed on physical and emotional caregiving from a distance. Deskilling experiences by Mainland Chinese migrants in Canada prompted return migration decisions, first by the lead migrant, followed by other family members usually after a period of transnational family separation and its attendant difficulties. Legal status in Canada should have entitled them to residency, working and social rights but they are unable to receive those rights as a result of de facto marginalisation in the labour market and society. This results in decisions for one parent to move back to China, where they hope to make a better salary to support family members remaining in Canada.

However, transnational family separation results in stress for the family members even in their daily routines and results eventually in the relocation of the family unit back to China. Returning to China, nonetheless, presents an attendant set of complications over the family's legal right to stay, find employment and claim social rights because of their new status as foreign citizens. Others who remain Chinese citizens do not face these difficulties but they have to negotiate ways to extend their permanent residency status in Canada and renew the visa status of family members, who are now Canadian citizens while living in China. At the back of their minds lies the possibility of returning to Canada in the future so giving up Canadian citizenship is unappealing to them. Instead, they continually juggle their citizenship statuses in order to maximise options across national borders for their families. One interpretation of their situation may claim that despite the strong legal position of these Mainland Chinese migrants in Canada, it did not prevent deskilling and disappointing migration outcomes that prompt return migration decisions. However, another interpretation could argue that it is also because of their status as legal citizens that they have the option of choosing to move back to Canada again in the future. In this sense, law is vital in shaping the way members of transnational families chart their geographical and temporal trajectories.

In sum, this article contributes to the literature on transnational families by drawing out the ways in which family members negotiate the national legal regimes in which they are simultaneously embedded. Familyhood is critical to personal emotional well being but also the social well being of the communities upon which nation-states are built. National legal systems may take into account the legal rights to family reunification such as provided through dependant schemes. But other socio-legal (e.g. residency requirements for naturalisation or dual citizenship restrictions) and practical constraints (e.g. deskilling and children's educational opportunities) to *family togetherness* can prove to be just as important for determining how family migration decisions materialise over the life course.

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