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A Brief Report from Pilot Study Findings Examining the

Contemporary Taiwanese Transnational Family Unit

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Mrs. Lee: It was a long boat ride from Hong Kong to America, thirty-something days, and we were always seasick. But luckily my husband, who was already in America, knew someone who worked on the boat and that person always snuck some Chinese food for me to eat.

GL: So who were the other people on the boat? Were they rich? Were they poor?

Mrs. Lee: Of course they weren't poor! You could make more money in America, but you had to have money to pay your way out of China first!

——Interview, San Francisco, 2014

Ms. Lin: Taiwan is just not able to compete any more. It's not just in the next ten years, it's like in the next few years we will be beneath China for sure. I love Taiwan, but there is no money to be made here. The only way to make money is to go to China.

——Interview, Taichung, 2018

Introduction

I draw quotes from interviews about transnational migration I conducted referencing two very different Chinas nearly 70 years away in time and space. Mrs. Lee, a 96-year-old Chinese American elder living in the San Francisco, was telling me how she and her daughter came to the U.S., escaping China for hopes of a better life in the 1950s. Ms. Lin, a 36-year-old woman from Taiwan completing doctoral studies in the U.S., was lamenting about the limited prospects in 2018 for her and her family members to live and work in Taiwan.

Viewing narratives as a way of exploring one's position in the world through the act of (re)telling one's experiences, both narratives, though describing China from two perspectives and moments, are framed around elevating socioeconomic status through ascribing to neoliberal ideals about mobility. While Mrs. Lee referenced how only certain types of people could pay their way out of China, Ms. Lin mentioned feeling "forced" to go to China to make

money. Both responses anchor China as a transnational site where "money talked" and allowed people to flexibly move in, out, and around. These two respondents were actually relatively privileged when it came to travel and reaped the benefits of their transnational connections: Mrs. Lee was able to leave China through the help of her husband who was already working in the U.S., and Ms. Lin was a transnational scholar able to earn money as a researcher in the U.S. and Taiwan. Thus this type of neoliberal thinking about the global market, especially in relation to rapidly shifting discourses about China, had me wondering how, in this day and age, people who migrate to China for work narrate their experiences of and rationales for being there. I began informally talking to Taiwanese families with one spouse considering moving to China for work, citing they had "run out of options" and had to "look to China" for more economic prospects. I heard the commonly cited reservations, tensions, and resistance the other spouse, usually the wife, had about moving to China. It would usually be decided that one spouse would move to China as a matter of "necessity" for the family, while the other would stay in Taiwan and take care of the household and/or children. They would meet intermittently, sometimes over the weekend and holidays. This arrangement of being situationally "single" and part of a "weekend marriage/couple," as dubbed by Shen (2005), wherein the spouses (and their children) would be geographically together only on the weekends, is situated within an interdisciplinary vantage point, and researching about these migration choices connects squarely to work on neoliberal and neocolonial discourses about global and transnational marketplaces, Cross-Strait relations, and contemporary family life.

Background

Transnational marriages are not a new phenomenon in the slightest, and family migration patterns have always been largely driven by the pulls of the economy or world powers, a strategy to maximize social and economic resources. In the research literature, much of the work on transnational marriages investigates the relationships between marriage migrants (Newendorp, 2011; Bélanger & Wang, 2012), educational migrants (astronaut and goose families, Abelmann & Kang, 2013), "paper" or "brokered" marriages (Constable, 2003; Kim, 2011), and couples from two different countries living in third countries (Tseng, 2017). This corpus of work highlights the agentive roles of the subordinated, of negotiation and resistance from female migrant partners, and the emotional sentiments and aspirations of these migrants' family members (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Yet while scholars agree intimate activities cannot be separated from economic activities (Zelizer, 2005), not enough work has fully examined the

nuances of the impact of transnational migration has had on marital relationships (Piper & Roces, 2003).

Undergirding beliefs about why and whether or not to migrate is the ideology that living in a "free market" economy, one has the choice to approach the option offering the most competitive benefits and yield. Existing work has examined these neoliberal and neocolonial ideologies in deciding which language to learn for the global marketplace (Piller and Cho, 2013), in rampant efforts by universities to "internationalize" (Lin, 2017), or the commodification of emotions in transnational intimacies (Shen, 2008). As many scholars have noted, despite the promise of choices neoliberalism supposedly offers, its mechanisms actually have the opposite, constricting effects on global inequalities, though they are largely uncontested because they are presented as simple fact. Theorists like Gramsci also note that one must reflect upon one's own background and social positioning in order to unpack ideologies packaged as common sense. Thus understanding what "everyday economists" (Chun, 2017) think about complex social issues and how they make sense of the world around them is crucial in exposing how neoliberal fundamentalism operates in the lived realities of those it impacts the most.

As alluded to in the opening quotes, China's rapid shift in the acceptance of the market economy following a socialist tradition has left gaping contradictions in Cross-Strait discourses of economic power, moral corruption, and sociopolitical influence. This present research addresses these contradictions by examining how the local-level agents of Taiwan-as-an-industrial-unit, or the Taiwan transnational family unit, have been impacted by these discourses.

Description of the Pilot Research

To better understand the phenomena of "weekend marriages" or being "situational singles" (Shen, 2005) in Taiwan, I was in Taiwan for six weeks between December 2018 and January 2019 with the aims to unpack some of the common-sense ideologies that contemporary Taiwanese families have in deciding they "must" move to China for work and bettering themselves economically. By interviewing various stakeholders of the family unit (including the spouses and children, if any), I was looking to unveil the voices of these "everyday economists" in their own words and stories as well as their capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004) given their specific circumstances. What are their lives like? How do they feel about the migration choices they have made or will make? What specific challenges do they face as an employee, as a spouse/child, and as a family unit? What do they believe their assigned and self-

assigned roles to be, and how do they narrate these roles? How do they view Taiwan and China and larger Cross-Strait relations as a result of this arrangement?

Recruitment of participants were done through purposeful snowball sampling. Prior work (Shen, 2014) has shown younger couples are more likely to communicate more often using web-based technologies, and this research seeks to explore the ways in which contemporary Taiwanese couples negotiate their relationships, so I made an intentional choice to try to look for individuals under the age of 45. I found eight individuals who were willing to be interviewed, all of whom were Taiwanese and the wife or child of someone working in China. Their ages ranged from 15-50. There were two males and six female interviewees.

Methods and Data Analysis

Participants were asked individually to give their personal (or public) accounts through semi-structured interview questions, which were used as a guide rather than a strictly followed template (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Sequencing and the exact wording of questions determined the flow of the interview, and unanticipated points and topics raised during the course of the interview were pursued with follow-up questions that respond to the interaction. This strategy combines what McMillan and Schumacher (1997) refer to as the "informal conversation interview" and the "interview guide approach" (p. 447). Data were transcribed and analyzed through an iterative process of open coding, initial memos, focused coding, and integrative memos. Another researcher not involved with the data collection was enlisted to participate in a data conference. In this data conference, the scholar reviewed and critiqued the analysis, refined categories, and validated the themes originally identified.

Presentation of Data

What is presented below is a brief report of three main themes that emerged from the data.

A Dual Framing of China and Taiwan

All participants discussed the many ways China and Taiwan were "good" and "bad," but these descriptions were not simplistic, nor were they always polar opposites of each other. China was almost always praised for being a place filled with opportunities and options, of higher pay, of larger markets, and also for being an efficient place that had a very international outlook. At the same time, it was demonized for its censorship and for being a place that was not always morally trustworthy, especially for wives with a situationally single husband.

Taiwan, while considered "home" and "better," was often described as very small and short-sighted in comparison to China's wider worldview and reach in the world. The rationale to stay apart as a family stemmed from the fact that while China was better for economic reasons, Taiwan was better for educational and/or democratic reasons. Participants were constantly comparing between economic allure of China (push) and educational/family values (pull) factors as they rationalized why their families were kept apart. Some particularly interesting perspectives came from the children with a father working in China. When asked under what circumstances they thought their family would reunite in Taiwan, one high schooler said after they make so much money that their family does not know what to do with it. When asked under what circumstances they thought their whole family would move to China together, another high schooler said when she and her younger siblings would get into fights and annoy their mother, the mother would frequently threaten to ship them to China to live with their father if they did not behave. These two examples from the youngest of my participants, stood out to me in that they still anchored Taiwan as "home base" but operated within a constellation of locations that were situationally meaningful to the participants. At the same time, one wife and mother responded that since her husband lives in a company dormitory exclusively with other Taiwanese workers working in China and were not allowed to fraternize with local Chinese workers, this gave him (and his family) a very manufactured version of China and its perks. That is to say, they were living in a "Taiwan-ized" version of China.

The Extra Responsibilities of Those "Left Behind"

All participants mentioned how they were tasked with additional responsibilities because a family member was working in China. Wives whose husbands were in China mentioned having to take over their husbands' filial responsibilities in taking care of parents (e.g., paying for medical bills, taking elderly parents-in-law to the doctor, checking on them in their free time), though they also stated their husbands not being around meant they did have a justified reason not to spend much time at their in-laws' homes. A family member's absence also demonstrated the strength and resiliency of other family members. One daughter whose father was working in Shenzhen said that ever since she was a child, her father had always worked night shifts in Taiwan, and she usually never saw him during the day, so she was already used to his absence; that being said, she said she made sure to go out of her way to check on her mother's emotional welfare because of the various stressors involved with her father's absence. Another son whose father was working in China for nearly all his childhood stated with his

father's absence he saw his mother help run the family's cosmetics business in Taiwan and becoming even more of an industry leader than his father was. One wife noted that she was willing to undertake these extra responsibilities, since not doing so would hinder him from the work opportunities awaiting him in China. This phenomenon of shouldering extra responsibilities was clearly gendered in the data.

Presentation of the Transnational, "Open-minded" Self

Perhaps most evident in all participants' talk about their experiences with a family member who was in China was the ways in which they presented themselves as "international" people. Younger respondents talked about the snacks, gifts, and toys they would receive from their fathers in China and the vacations they would take together in China. Wives talked about looking into different ways to navigate the international school system so that their children could reap the benefits of their husbands in China. Several even mentioned considering going to Southeast Asia after China since the international schools were less costly there. One mother talked about the benefits of reading in both traditional and simplified characters and how that would advance career opportunities in the future for her daughter. Another wife and mother talked about taking her three-year-old daughter to visit her husband and father of her child who was working in Suzhou. Taking a vacation to over five different cities in China, the mother proudly exclaimed after only a few days of traveling around China, how her daughter introduced herself as being a Suzhou person, highlighting how cosmopolitan her daughter had become because she was well-traveled. When asked what advice she would give to others who were about to have one family member move to China, this woman said, "You really have to go see China for yourself." Several others iterated this point, that while some people had stereotypes about China, the best thing to do was to experience it for oneself. This type of "open-minded" discourse situates members of weekend marriages and families as being progressive and modern, thereby normalizing and distinguishing their "uniqueness" (and even superiority) compared to those Taiwanese people whose families do not leave Taiwan or hold static stereotypes about China. Moreover, all participants in the study reported using WeChat or QQ messaging systems to communicate with their family member in China, communicating with them nearly every single day via text or video. It was during these moments where wives could complain openly to their husbands about the parenting struggles they were facing. Coupled with in-person visits anywhere from once a month to once every few months, this combination of in-person and online communication seemed to be the "new normal" and even

seamlessly commonplace for those interviewed.

Discussion

The themes presented above are just a start at disentangling the complex ways Taiwanese people with one family member working in China make sense of their lifeworlds. While nearly all family members stated that ideally the family unit should be together, given that many of these families had been living apart between five to over twenty years, this arrangement seems like it is the next best arrangement in the eyes of the participants. Moreover, when asked what types of jobs for Taiwanese people necessitated living in China, all respondents named various types of white-collar, upper management positions; it seems like this classed and gendered phenomenon is not looking to cease any time soon. As such, it is of great importance to continue examining the ways in which members of these family units see themselves and their (changing) roles and identities. Of particular interest also is how the children of families who have a family member working in China enter the workforce and, if they have families of their own, make choices about careers and childrearing.

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Appendix A: Pilot interview questions (for children whose parents work in China)

1. What is your occupation? 你目前的工作職務是什麼？

2. What is your parents' occupation? 請問你父母的工作職務是什麼？

3. How did your parents and you decide that moving to China for work was the best decision for your family? 請問你跟你父母怎麼決定分開兩地工作的？

4. How long has your family been separated? 什麼時候開始分開兩地工作的？

5. What challenges do you and your parents face with one parent in China? 在你父親/母親分開工作的情況下是否你或你父母遇到生活上/工作上/家庭上等問題？

6. Do you or your family go about your life any differently because one parent is in China? 你或你的家庭是否因父/母親不在台灣工作而在各方面有所改變/改變習慣？

7. Do you know many other couples/families in the same situation as you? Are there certain professions where this type of arrangement is more common? 是否你周遭朋友有和你一樣情況的家庭，或大概哪種職務常需要到大陸分隔兩地工作？

8. What do you see your role as a long-distance child to be? 在分隔兩地的情況下，你認為你在各方面的角色為何？

9. Describe a time where being a long-distance family was a good and a bad thing. 請分享在兩地工作的家庭情況下，曾發生你認為好或覺得不好的人/事/物

10. Under what circumstances would it take for your parent to decide to move back to Taiwan? 什麼情況下你會覺得你的父/母不再繼續兩地工作？

11. Under what circumstances would it take for you to leave Taiwan and move to China? 在什麼情況下你會決定全家移至大陸住一起？

12. If you could give any piece of advice for to parents considering this kind of work/living arrangement, what would it be? What advice would you give to a child whose parents are going to be separated because of work? 如果你的朋友或家庭正要面臨兩地工作的情況，你會給他們的孩子跟父母什麼建議？

13. If you yourself were considering this situation, how would you arrange your family situation? 如果是你正要面臨兩地工作的話，你會怎麼安排家庭？

14. What types of technology do you/your family use to keep in touch? 你和你家人如何聯絡？

15. How frequently do you see your parents? 你跟你父母多久見一次面，或視訊，或相片？

16. Do you have anything else to add? 你還有其他要補充的嗎？

17. What age category do you fall into? 你的年齡落在哪一個區段？

        1. 10-15

        2. 16-20

        3. 21-25

        4. 26-30

你的年齡落在哪一個區段？

Appendix B: Pilot interview questions (for spouses who work in China)

1. What is your occupation? 你目前的工作職務是什麼？

2. What is your spouse's occupation? 請問你另外一半的工作職務是什麼？

3. How did you and your spouse decide that moving to China for work was the best decision for your family? 請問你們怎麼決定分開兩地工作的？

4. How long have you been separated as a family? 什麼時候開始分開兩地工作的？

5. What challenges do you face with your spouse in China? 在這個分開工作的情況下是否遇到生活上/工作上/家庭上等問題？

6. Do you go about your life any differently because your spouse is in China? 是否因另一半不再台灣工作而在各方面有所改變/改變習慣？

7. Do you know many other couples/families in the same situation as you? Are there certain professions where this type of arrangement is more common? 是否你周遭朋友有和你一樣情況的家庭，或大概哪種職務常需要到大陸分隔兩地工作？

8. What do you see your role as a long-distance spouse to be? 在分隔兩地的情況下，你認為你在各方面的角色為何？

9. Describe a time where being a long-distance spouse was a good and a bad thing. 請分享在兩地工作情況下，曾發生你認為好或覺得不好的人/事/物

10. Under what circumstances would it take for you/your spouse to decide to move back to Taiwan? 什麼情況下你會決定不再繼續兩地工作？

11. Under what circumstances would it take for you to leave Taiwan and move to China? 在什麼情況下你會決定全家移至大陸跟你另外一半住一起？

12. If you could give any piece of advice for a couple/family considering this kind of work/living arrangement, what would it be? 如果你的朋友或家庭正要面臨兩地工作的情況，你會給他們什麼的建議？

13. What types of technology do you/your spouse use to keep in touch? 你和你另一半如何聯絡？

14. How frequently do you see your spouse? 你們多久見一次面，或視訊，或相片？

15. Do you have anything else to add? 你還有其他要補充的嗎？

16. What age category do you fall into? 你的年齡落在哪一個區段？
    1. 10-15
    2. 16-20
    3. 21-25
    4. 26-30