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# The migration–family nexus in East Asia: Chinese family and the invisible within

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**Abstract:** *Rapid economic growth in East Asia brings with it not only a development ‘miracle’ but also increased migration within and from China as well as in the Northeast–Southeast Asia corridors. The expanding migration flows make Chinese families in Singapore, Taiwan, mainland China and Hong Kong one of the most noticeable groups whose life trajectory is punctuated by migration. This special issue is a collective endeavour to explore deeply the internal dynamics between Chinese family members across generations in regard to care, production and reproduction in light of the challenges and opportunities brought about by neoliberal globalisation.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese family, Chinese migrations, East Asian migrations, gender and migration, family and production/reproduction*

## Context and research questions

Rapid economic growth in East Asia brings with it not only a development ‘miracle’ but also increased migration within and from China as well as in the Northeast–Southeast Asia corridors. Migration is one of the driving forces that brings about changes to family structure (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Parreñas, 2005). The expanding migration flows make Chinese families in Singapore, Taiwan, mainland China and Hong Kong one of the most noticeable groups whose life trajectory is punctuated by migration. However, there has not been sufficient attention given to how the family is affected by migration in regard to its functions for care, production and reproduction. Although migration scholarship conceptualises the family as a decision-making unit (Lauby and Stark, 1988; Chen and Liu, 2012; Fong *et al.*, 2013; Sheng, 2014), in which migrants move for the sake of individual and collective well-being, researchers (except for those concentrating on remittance) continue to prioritise individual migrants over family as their unit of analysis (Gaetano, 2004; Liu, 2012). Internal dynamics

within families will over the long term affect wider socio-economic development in East Asian economies. Thus, this special issue is an opportune collective endeavour to explore deeply the internal dynamics between Chinese family members across generations. Adopting this *time-sensitive* approach, this special issue underlines how migration has had different impacts on husbands, wives, parents, children and grandparents. Bringing the family back onto the research agenda, this special issue also includes migrant carers in the picture of the family as a unit for care, production and reproduction. As shown by the articles by Isabelle Cheng, by Jian An Liew, Brenda Yeoh, Shirlena Huang, Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho and by Tuen-yi Chiu and Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, included in this collection, this new perspective will not only situate migrant carers within state-regulated home-based care but also shed light on how migrant carers and their employers grapple with the tension and interdependence arising from the private home as a workplace. [Correction added on 30 September 2020, after first online publication: ‘Tuen-yi Chew’ has been corrected to ‘Tuen-yi Chiu’ in this sentence.]

By treating the family as a unit of analysis, the scholars included in this special issue present the ways in which migration brings about changes to the Chinese family and how these changes test the resilience of structural forces within the family. Without our common efforts, these changes would remain *invisible*. To put the invisible under the spotlight, we juxtapose the family against migration, arguing that the family is a place where the causes, processes and consequences of migration can be observed in a longitudinal spectrum by exploring the life course and livelihood of family members. Therefore, we make the invisible visible and show how the Chinese family has responded to change and the effect of its socio-political circumstances. Conceptualising the family as a socio-economic unit for care, production and reproduction, this special issue raises three critical questions: (i) How would migration generate different impacts on husbands, wives, parents, children and grandparents? (ii) How would migration render the family as a workplace for home-based care? (iii) How have Chinese families responded to the changing structural forces brought by broader social and economic changes?

These questions arose from the rising mobility of Chinese families in East Asia due to marriage, divorce, employment or provision of care. As shown in our research, Chinese family members depart from or return to their hometowns, they may be reunited with their old or new family in their destinations and their preference for home-based care sees them accommodating migrant carers in their household. Their decisions and experiences in these migration flows exemplify how family has become deeply entrenched in the logic of neoliberalism shaping contemporary societies. Building on the empirical cases shared in this special issue, we elucidate how Chinese families navigate through the challenges and opportunities brought about by neoliberal globalisation.

To answer the three questions proposed above, eight papers across different disciplines are included in this cutting-edge special issue. They come from disciplines including development studies, human geography, sociology, gender studies and anthropology. Collectively, they triangulate the Chinese family's multifaceted experience through interviews, participant

observation and by analysing life stories and postings on social media. They also integrate document analysis of parliamentary debates, government briefs, migrant workers' handbooks and social survey results. Supported by such analytical rigour, this special issue demonstrates how individuals in the family negotiate patriarchy, patrilocality and hypergamy in contemporary times and how their agency, growing out of this struggle, opens a new inroad for us to grasp the dynamics within this migration-family nexus. Based on their significant findings, they indicate new directions for future research and practices for policymakers and practitioners in the areas of migration, population, family, gender, education and welfare.

## Significance and contribution

### *Family in migration: Change and continuity*

Since we use the experiences of Chinese families as our case study, this interdisciplinary special issue contributes to the study of the contemporary Chinese family. The literature on Chinese families emphasises the power of the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal structures and ideologies over family members, particularly women and younger generations (Wolf, 1972; Lively, 1991; Evans, 1997; Hershatter, 2007). In this light, Chinese traditional values require family members to prioritise solidarity, filial piety, frugality and collective well-being over individual interests and restrict women to the domestic sphere in their reproductive roles as mothers, wives, daughters-in-law and carers. However, as shown by our research, migration has loosened traditional norms, reconfigured the power relations within families and generated new resources and opportunities. Nevertheless, the family also stands against the increased migration flows as a unit for care, production and reproduction. Our research underlines the contrast between change and continuity in regard to family members' mutual relationships and their strategies for negotiating patriarchy, patrilocality and hypergamy.

### *Family as a unit for care, production and reproduction*

Our conceptualisation of the family as an analytical unit focuses on its functions of care,

production and reproduction. Truong (1996) reminds us that '[no] production system operates without a reproduction system and it should not be surprising that the globalisation of production is accompanied by its intimate "Other" i.e. reproduction' (p. 47). The two spheres of production and reproduction overlap in the *everyday* interactions and practices of (step)parents, partners, (step)children and elders within the family. They also overlap in home-based care for elderly family members or those unable to care for themselves. Taking the vantage point of family for these functions enables us to situate the family against the state in light of the latter's continued promotion of the family as a care unit in order to ensure the delivery of the output of production and reproduction in a neoliberal economy.

#### *Agency and structure: Making the invisible visible*

Our examination of the family's functions is also embedded within the tension between family members and structures. We explore how individual family members negotiate patriarchy, patrilocality and hypergamy in the socio-economic environment undercut by migration. By exploring their strategies, which have been overlooked by the literature on family, we will shed light on the agency of (step)children in parent–child relationships, elders in transnational care, husbands and divorcees in cross-border marriages, same sex attracted persons in heterosexual relationships, and migrant carers in home-based care regulated by the host state. By making their struggles and identities visible, we foreground how their agency challenges, or reinforces, the stability of family functions.

#### *Space and time in migration*

As mentioned above, migration has the potential to change family structure. Our juxtaposition of family and migration enables us to examine the motivations, decision-making and impacts of migration on the structures and functions of family from the experiences of husbands, wives, (step)parents, (step)children, grandparents and the migrant *other* cohabiting with the family. Our cross-generation examination allows us not only to focus on space, which is the dominant interest pursued by migration

studies, but also on time, which is an emerging interest within this field of study (Lager *et al.*, 2016; Marcu, 2017). The articles by Clara Wai-Chun To, by Tuen-yi Chiu and Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, and by Jian An Liew and colleagues, included in this special issue, underline how the manifestations of time, such as the life course of individuals, age gaps between the members of family, and the duration of time spent in the destination, punctuate the trajectory of family as a collective unit.

#### **Contributing papers**

As mentioned above, this special issue presents rich case studies illuminating how Chinese families in Singapore, Taiwan, mainland China and Hong Kong are affected by migration in East Asia. Holistically examining the family's functions of production, reproduction and care, Clara Wai-Chun To, Tuen-yi Chiu and Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, Jian An Liew and colleagues, and Isabelle Cheng explore the strategies adopted by Chinese families in Singapore and Taiwan for securing home-based care, the scarcity of which results from the two Asian Tigers' rapid development. Their ageing populations have been increasingly reliant on transnational care sourced from abroad. Although this ensures that the family can care for the elderly without support from public finances, it nevertheless generates new challenges to the family itself, migrants' families as well as the host state. On the whole, they problematise the relationship between caregivers and care recipients (Liew *et al.*), between migrants and the state (Cheng), as well as the relationships across three generations (Chiu and Ho). Liew *et al.* underline the mutual dependence between foreign care providers (migrant workers) and local care recipients (elderly family members) in a quasi-family environment where constant 'tuning' is required between the two sides, whereas Cheng argues that the host state of Taiwan treats migrant caregivers as a disposable and expedient workforce when they become a major source of care labour providing home-based care for local families. Turning to Chinese migrants in Singapore, Chiu and Ho investigate the self-sufficiency of home-based childcare provided by Chinese grandparents, whose migration to

Singapore as providers of free childcare is sponsored by their adult children. They underline the difficult decision-making faced by these migrant grandparents, whose retirement is made uncertain partly because of their migration.

No examination of families' production and reproduction can be complete without taking a close look at marriage. This is facilitated by the papers of Clara Wai-Chun To and Lara Momesso, which elucidate the spousal and familial dynamism of Chinese migrant families in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Chinese men and women who move to Hong Kong or Taiwan because of their marriage wrestle with the immigration legislation, which is fraught with socio-political exclusion. Their struggle is manifested in the private home by their relationships with their spouses, birth children and stepchildren, and with their host government. By focusing on the intimate relationships between husbands and wives as well as (step)parents and (step)children, To sheds light on the role of (step)children in marital relationships of cross-border stepfamilies in Hong Kong, whose difficult positioning in the family is exacerbated by immigration legislation regarding their residency and citizenship. Momesso looks at the role of husbands in shaping migrant spouses' civic organising. Defying the tendency for marriage migration scholarship to be saturated by research on women, Momesso unveils the instrumental role played by Taiwanese husbands in the rights-claim movement, where the public and the private intersect and where patriarchy becomes a structure negotiated by both parties to the marriage.

The papers of Chiu-Wan Liu, Beatrice Zani and Pierre Miège take this special issue into the multifaceted world of labour migration within and from China. Going beyond conventional research in this field that concentrates on migrants' struggle in urban destinations, Liu focuses on how migrant returnees take advantage of their socio-cultural capital and the fast growing e-commerce, whereby their online entrepreneurship takes off and has the potential of rewriting power relations between husbands and wives as well as between women and their in-laws. Focusing on former female migrant workers (*dagong mei*), Zani further challenges the conceptual boundary of research fields between labour migration and marriage migration. Documenting their biography, Zani

demonstrates how migrant workers became migrant spouses by cross-border marriage and, after divorce, return to the towns where they found employment before marriage. Similar to those migrant returnees studied by Liu, these migrant divorcees also utilise their socio-cultural capital obtained via labour and marriage migration and develop their online entrepreneurship, which partly realises their aspiration to modernity, independence and betterment that is associated with an urban lifestyle.

More conventional boundaries derived from marriage and family are shaken by Miège's research into same sex attracted men. By participant observation, Miège presents a rich ethnography of male migrant workers who are attracted by other men. He demonstrates how physical departure from family generates an otherwise unavailable social space for them to live a life true to their sexuality. He unveils how migration facilitates new forms of individualism emerging from their close-knit community in urban areas. Their relationship not only supports a community of intimacy but also constructs a private space where they could experiment and explore aspects of their self that are suppressed by mainstream family values. On the other hand, they continue to be constrained by mainstream values constructed by heterosexuality, such as marriage and reproduction.

Together, these eight articles project intertwined images of the Chinese family standing in various migration flows and clinging onto cultural norms, but at the same time grappling with opportunities emerging from new socio-economic circumstances as a result of migration. Our interdisciplinary project demonstrates how Chinese families in East Asia negotiate or utilise migration when their internal relationships are under challenge. From transnational care in Singapore and Taiwan to marriage destinations of Hong Kong and Taiwan and further to China divided by urban and rural lifestyle, we incorporate time and space into our examination of the change and continuity affecting the contemporary Chinese family. The former is manifested by generational conflicts within family or the growth of socio-cultural capital obtained in destination societies; the latter is the home and destination differentiated by their disparity of development. By using the family as an analytical unit, our findings introduce a holistic approach to

studying migration in East Asia as an interplay between, rather than discrete patterns of, labour and marriage migration or domestic and transnational migration. Within this interplay, we offer an innovative and more sophisticated understanding of how the family survives in a ruthless neoliberal global economy.

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