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article

Chinese and Korean mothers in England: motherhood, gender and employment

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This article explores the lived experiences of first-generation Chinese and South Korean mothers living in England. The data are analysed using six intersecting categories: motherhood and gender ideology; educational level; reasons for migration; the length of stay in England; family economic circumstances; and the locality of settlement. The findings suggest that, while there appear to be stark differences in Chinese and South Korean mothers' understanding of motherhood and employment, their accounts concurrently indicate commonalities in terms of persistent gender inequality at home, founded on patriarchal values. Out of the six interrelated categories, their motherhood and gender ideology obtained in their country of origin seems to have had a dominant influence in shaping these women's experiences, along with their settlement into their respective ethnic communities.

key words employment • motherhood ideology • gender relations • Confucianism
• socialist work ethic

Introduction

Migration from China to Britain started in the late 1970s following the Chinese government's relaxation of its restrictions on going abroad and its encouragement of students to go to developed Western countries to learn advanced skills (Wei, 2011). Consequently, a growing number of highly educated migrants from China have moved to Britain (Cooke, 2007). According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2013), Chinese-born residents in England and Wales increased from 22,000 in 1991 to 152,000 in 2011. South Korean¹ settlement in the United Kingdom (UK) began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, mostly in New Malden (Yi, 2008). The report of The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2011) indicated that Korean-born residents in the UK increased from 12,310 in 2001 to 46,829 in 2011.

However, despite such increasing numbers of Chinese and Koreans in Britain, there is still a limited volume of literature examining these groups of people in Britain.

While there are a few highly illuminating and valuable studies investigating women from China (eg, Lee et al, 2002; Cooke, 2007; Wei, 2011) and Korea (eg, Lim, 2011) in Britain, there is a dearth of study comparing the lived experiences of these two groups of women. In addition, little attention has been paid to the impact of motherhood ideology on Chinese and Korean women's experiences of childcare and employment in a diasporic context, despite its influential role in women's behaviour (Hattery, 2001). Hays (1996) suggests that the intensive mothering ideology prevalent in developed Western countries is exclusively child centred and demands an immense amount of mothers' time, energy and finance. The research of Vincent et al (2004) similarly suggests that middle-class mothers living in London were commonly involved in 'professional mothering', in which their children's activities and play were carefully selected and structured. However, motherhood ideology is likely to differ for women from different milieu because it is a culturally developed framework (Hill-Collins, 1994). Therefore, heterogeneous modes of motherhood ideology and employment behaviours might be found among Chinese and Korean mothers in England.

While China and Korea are known to share some cultural similarities due to the influence of Confucianism, which endorses patriarchal principles (Lim and Skinner, 2012), they have trodden divergent economic, political and social paths. For instance, Korea has followed the capitalist market economy and the democratic political system since the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948. On the other hand, China has only opened up the economy to market competition since 1978, much later than Korea, while maintaining its socialist political system. As a consequence of this, China and Korea have developed different 'national cultures', founded on the distinctive socioeconomic and political characteristics of the individual countries (Ebrey and Wathall, 2006). In line with this, existing studies conducted in these countries have indicated that despite the impact of Confucian patriarchal ideals on both societies, women in China and Korea have heterogeneous understandings of what constitutes 'good' mothering (eg, Rofel, 1999; Cho, 2002). Thus, there are notable differences in the employment patterns of women with dependent children between China and Korea (see Brinton et al, 1995; Cook and Dong, 2011). However, there is a paucity of studies examining how such differences impact on the lives of Chinese and Korean women living abroad.

Against such a backdrop, this article sets out to explore the stories of first-generation Chinese and Korean mothers in England. It aims to examine the following questions:

- In what ways does the motherhood ideology of Chinese and Korean mothers in England differ, and what impact does this have on their decisions about childcare and employment?
- What are the major factors affecting such attitudes and behaviours in a diasporic setting?
- What implications does this have on gender relations at home for these women?

Women's lives in China

The social position of women in China was significantly elevated during Mao's socialist era (Jiang, 2001), as a result of the implementation of a wide range of government policies, which aimed to redefine women's roles and establish equal status with men in the public and domestic arenas (Croll, 1983). In particular, labour market participation

was seen as the precondition of women's emancipation and a central force to bring about gender equality (Liu et al, 2010). As part of the measures to enhance female economic activity, the market 'penalties' for women with care needs, such as significant wage loss owing to reduced work hours, were minimised during Mao's era, as well as providing a lifetime of employment for state employees (Cook and Dong, 2011). This contributed to a high female employment rate, especially for those with young children (Wei, 2011). As a result, the female labour market participation rate in urban China is above the world average, with the majority having full-time jobs (Zuo and Bian, 2001). Within this context, employment for women is considered to be the 'norm', marginalising non-working women who are associated with low educational status in urban China (Zhou, 2000).

However, despite China's apparent success in achieving gender equality, such improvement in women's involvement in paid work has not removed deeply ingrained conventional values (Ren and Foster, 2011). Additionally, some studies have suggested the reverse trend of gender equality and the resurgence of traditional Confucian patriarchal values due to globalisation and economic reform in China (Cook and Dong, 2011). In a similar fashion, the existing literature on women's lives in post-Mao China largely indicates the continuing influence of the traditional patriarchal ideology and gender disparity prevalent in Chinese society (Yuen-Tsang, 1997; Ren and Foster, 2011). For example, Rofel (1999), drawing on her exploration of the effects of post-Mao changes on women's lives in China, argues that while women's liberation has been the central engine of China's project of modernity, women's subordinated position has persisted. Analogous with this, Liu (2008) suggests that women continue to take major care responsibilities, bearing the double burden of paid employment and care.

Women's lives in Korea

Existing studies commonly highlight the influential role that Confucian patriarchal principles play in women's lives in Korea (eg, Ye, 2010). Even though the proportion of women involved in paid work has gradually increased since the 1960s (Korean Association of Women's Society, 2003; Korean Economic Research Institute, 2013), Korean society remains rather unsupportive towards female employment, particularly those who are married and have children (Patterson and Walcutt, 2013). Therefore, those women who continue to work after marriage and childbirth are subject to a range of severe discrimination in the workplace, affecting wages and promotion (OECD, 2012). Additionally, Cho and Kwon (2010) point out the lack of job security for the majority of women in Korea, with over 67% of female workers involved in non-standard employment due to employers' discriminatory attitudes towards women. Consonant with these, the studies of both Sung (2003) and Won and Pascall (2004) elucidate the difficulties that Korean working mothers face owing to the strong influence of Confucian ideals. According to these authors, an array of policy reforms have been made in Korea in order to assist the increasing number of employed women with dependent children. However, these measures have not brought a genuine level of change in gendered norms in Korea, imposing an extra burden for employed mothers as they continue to take major responsibility for domestic work and childcare on top of their paid work.

Furthermore, Kim (2005) highlights the impact of the intensive mothering ideology on mothers living in Korea. Within this belief system, mothers are regarded as having direct responsibility for their children's physical and emotional wellbeing as well as intellectual progress (see Cho, 2002). In this regard, the absence of the mother is perceived to have a detrimental impact on children's psychological stability (Cho, 2008). Therefore, many Korean working mothers take time off from work in order to devote themselves to their children during early preschool or school years (see Kim, 2005). Also, there is strong social pressure for mothers to dedicate their time and energy to their children's education by staying at home full time and it is common for college-graduated mothers to leave their jobs to focus on this (Kim, 2013). Given all of these, it is not surprising that the female employment rate in Korea is the lowest among the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development despite having a high proportion of women with university degrees (Cho and Kwon, 2010).

The experiences of Chinese and Korean migrant women

Based on their examination of Chinese migrant women in Britain, Lee et al (2002) highlighted divergence in women's experiences of migration, affected by various individual and social factors. Particularly, there appeared to be considerable differences between women who migrated as dependants of husbands and 'independent migrants' who migrated for personal development. Many independently migrant women did not accept the gendered practices at home, requesting regular participation of their husbands in housework and childcare. In comparison, gendered norms and practices had a significant impact on those who migrated as dependants of their husbands (Lee et al, 2002). The findings of Cooke's (2007) research on Chinese academic couples in Britain are similar to those on the experiences of dependent migrants presented in Lee et al's (2002) study. Despite having had similar educational qualifications and professional careers to their husbands in China, the majority of the women either gave up their career opportunities altogether or took up lower occupations than they were qualified for. Cooke suggests that it was mainly because all the women prioritised their husband's career needs and their children's wellbeing in a new country over their own employment. While there are a number of intersecting factors at play, such as childcare issues and the loss of human and social capital through migration, Cooke (2007) argues that the traditional gender ideology contributed to this most. Similarly, Wei's (2011) research on Chinese 'trailing wives' in Britain stresses the intensification of gendered roles for Chinese women. According to Wei, the vast majority of her participants were well educated and actively engaged in paid employment in China. However, the chasm in gender relations was deepened among the Chinese couples in the process of settling into Britain. While men were able to continue their career development, women mostly took the principal responsibilities for facilitating the settlement of their family by withdrawing from paid employment or taking up low-skilled jobs. Consistent with Cooke (2007), Wei's findings indicate the profound influence of patriarchal gender ideology, alongside the loss of family support networks.

While the majority of studies focusing on the lives of Korean migrant women who are married with children have been carried out in United States (US), the work of Lim (2011) offers some insight into Korean women's lives in Britain. The study underscores Korean mothers' racialised experiences and intensified gender roles

through migration to Britain, together with divergence in their settlement processes, largely due to different economic situations. For instance, a Korean mother could not retain similar occupational status in Britain despite having professional qualifications and work experience in Korea, which resulted in her giving up her career altogether; for the employed mother, she took up a double shift of domestic labour and paid work, owing to little contribution from her husband. However, despite their divergent economic positions and employment status, they shared similar gender roles and a motherhood ideology in which the mother is seen as the primary carer (Lim, 2011).

Compared with Korean migrants in Britain, existing literature on Korean women in the US has indicated slightly different characteristics of their migration and settlement processes. Many Korean women in the US, who used to be housewives in Korea, are required to participate in paid work, particularly in small family-run businesses (Lim, 1997; Min, 2001). This is mainly because a high proportion of Korean men, faced with disadvantages in the US labour market, turn to self-employment by opening up small businesses, which require their wives' involvement and support (Espiritu, 1999). Financial contribution to the family provides some women with an impetus to challenge the highly gendered norms at home and to demand their husbands' engagement in housework. However, often women take up the double burden of working outside the home as well as doing the majority of housework (Kim and Grant, 1997). Furthermore, Korean husbands often resist shifts in the established gender relations, considering changes in their wives' attitudes as a threat to their male authority (Yoon et al, 2010). Concurrently, the Korean wives' challenge to their husbands' domination at home is also limited: although women might question the gendered division of housework, they do not attempt to subvert the hierarchical relationship within the couples (Lim, 1997). Alongside this, Min (2001) claims that the social segregation of Korean communities from mainstream US society perpetuates the traditional gendered norms among Korean couples even after a dramatic increase in women's engagement in paid work.

Analytical framework

Scholars have suggested that the impact of migration on gender relations is diverse and cannot be seen as a linear process (Zhou, 2000; Erel, 2009). Various intersecting factors affect migrant women's experiences of gender differently (Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000). Women who move to another country often renegotiate boundaries between cultures as well as their position between private and public arenas in the process of crossing borders (Evans and Bowlby, 2000). As a result, the construction of diasporic identities is fluid and multiple, originating from both their country of origin and country of settlement (Hall, 1990). In this regard, migrant individuals' lives cannot be fully understood without considering the circumstances of pre-migration as well as post-migration settlement in association with various other factors, which are social, economic and cultural (Brah, 1996). It is therefore vital to gain a 'situated' understanding of the experiences of migrants and this 'situatedness' is crucial in fathoming the relational position of different groups in a given context (Brah, 1994).

Relating to the above, the migration trajectories of individuals – whether they have migrated independently for personal development or as dependants of their families – are important in understanding their post-migration experiences, along with the length of their settlement (Lee et al, 2002). In addition, the gender ideology that

women hold, especially obtained in their country of origin, plays an influential role in the reconfiguration of gender relations in the host society (Zhou, 2000). Class and financial situations of migrant families can also have a significant impact on women's relationship to the labour market and subsequent gender dynamics at home (Evans and Bowlby, 2000; Zhou, 2000). Moreover, the educational level of migrants is another important factor affecting migrant women's labour market experience (Brah, 1994). Further to this, Portes (1995) claims the importance of the locality where individual migrants settle in the acculturation processes and outcomes for them. Using the notion of 'segmented assimilation', Portes (1995) argues that immigrants tend to assimilate into their immediate surroundings of the local community within the host society, rather than the general culture of the whole country. Hence, assimilation processes of immigrant groups are not homogeneous but vary depending on the segment of the host society they are settled in. Particularly, co-ethnic communities often play an influential role in the lives of immigrants, reinforcing the 'imagined' cultural norms of their country of origin (Portes, 1995; Min, 2001).

Drawing on the above works, this study has identified six components that are central to the analysis of the lived experiences of Chinese and Korean women in England. These are:

- their motherhood and gender ideology;
- their educational level;
- their reasons for migration;
- the length of stay in England;
- the economic circumstances of the family;
- the locality of the settlement.

All these elements are not independent and autonomous categories but simultaneously interact with each other (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992), through which certain components might have more dominant influence in structuring the lives of Chinese and Korean migrants than others (Valentine, 2007). The effect of such interlinked factors on diasporic identity formation is multifarious and changeable even if it might be seen as fixed (Brah, 1996). Hall (1990) proposes that ethnic identity is in a constant process of developing, 'positioned' in a particular historical and cultural context. Although diasporic individuals continue to maintain a tie with their homeland through 'memory, fantasy, narrative and myth' (Hall, 1990: 226), their identities should not be seen as firmly fixated in their past.

Research method

The data used in this article have been drawn from a larger study of 30 East Asian mothers' stories. Out of the 30, stories of the 10 mothers from Korea and eight from China will be the focus. The participants were mostly living in Southampton and New Malden in England where there are relatively large Chinese and Korean populations. Both areas regularly run and organise ethnic cultural events and activities, such as Chinese New Year ceremonies. The interviewees were recruited by visiting local services used by these communities, such as a private after-school institution and a Chinese Saturday school, as well as by snowballing. All the participants were married and lived with their husbands (see Tables 1 and 2 for further details).

Table 1: Details of Chinese mothers

Name	Age	Years in Britain	Reason for migration	Education	Employment in China	Employment in England	Household income per year
Hua	30s	12	Accompany husband	PhD in Britain	Public sector employee	Computer programmer, full time	Not given
Lang	40s	3	Study	PhD in Britain	Medical researcher	Medical researcher, full time	Over £80,000
Ping	40s	20	Accompany husband	Degree in Britain	Primary school teacher	Accountant, part time	Not given
Jia	40s	3	Accompany husband	Diploma	Accountant	Self-employed, full time	£50,000-£60,000
Lucy	30s	8	Accompany husband	Degree	International trader	Shop assistant, part time	£20,000-£30,000
Chen	30s	5	Gaining wider experience	Master's	Doctor	Acupuncturist, part time	£20,000-£30,000
Fang	30s	1	Daughter's education	Degree	Company manager	Unemployed	£30,000-£40,000
Bian	30s	7	Join British husband	Degree	Salesperson	Unemployed	Not given

Table 2: Details of Korean mothers

Name	Age	Years in Britain	Reason for migration	Education	Employment in Korea	Employment in England	Household income per year
Jina	40s	3	Accompany husband	Degree	Accountant	Unemployed	Over £80,000
Seyoun	30s	2	Accompany husband	Master's	Primary school teacher	Unemployed	£70,000-80,000
Mijung	30s	9	Accompany husband	Degree	Student	Unemployed	£30,000-40,000
Miri	40s	5	Accompany husband	Master's	Science teacher	Self-employed	Not given
Hojin	30s	9	Better life	A-level	Wedding planner	Self-employed	£50,000-£60,000
Sunmi	20s	8	Study	A-level	Hairdresser	Hairdresser, part time	£20,000-£30,000
Minju	30s	12	Study	Degree	Administrator	Unemployed	Less than £20,000
Han	40s	3	Accompany husband	Master's	Language specialist	Unemployed	Over £80,000
Heji	40s	11	Study	Master's	Healthcare worker	Unemployed	£60,000-£70,000
Sook	30s	8	Accompany husband	Degree	English teacher	Unemployed	£30,000-£40,000

Prior to the interview, I obtained informed consent from the participants. The consent form clearly stated the goals of the project, their right to refuse to answer any questions or topics that they did not wish to discuss, as well as their right to withdraw from the research at any time. It also included information on the secure storage of the data, the future use of the interview for publications, and the protection of confidentiality and anonymity. Accordingly, pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

On average, the interviews took two hours and were conducted in a place chosen by the participant, such as their home or workplace. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews began with a brief outline of the project and the key areas of interest, such as the interviewees' experiences of migration, motherhood and employment. Then, the interviewees were asked to tell their life stories up until the present time in whichever way they wanted. I listened attentively with little interruption until they finished their stories to allow them to determine the direction and the contents of their narratives. After this, a number of probing questions were asked to explore themes that they did not address or I wanted them to develop further. They were also asked to fill in a brief questionnaire at the end of the interview to gain general background information, such as their age, educational qualifications and household income.

As I am from South Korea originally, I was able to speak Korean but could not speak Chinese. Consequently, interviews with Korean participants were conducted in Korean while interviews with Chinese participants were carried out in English. In order to preserve original meanings and nuances, Korean interviews were transcribed in Korean and only selective extracts of the Korean interview data were translated after being analysed. Translating interview data into another language might bring changes in subtle meanings as the exact vocabulary is not always available for different languages (Wu, 2007). Bearing this in mind I tried my hardest to retain the original meaning and structure of the Korean interview data as much as it was possible.

The interview data were initially coded using NVivo 8. Through this process the data were organised based on themes, identifying main themes and sub-themes. Then, I read the categorically organised parts of transcripts a number of times, searching for patterns. Out of this close examination, I identified differences (eg, accounts of stay-at-home mothers and those of working mothers) as well as similarities (eg, what commonalities the talk of mothers in a similar employment status shared). Also, using the aforementioned six dimensions, each individual's account was closely examined to find out how they reconfigured their life and identity in England through the interplay between pre-migration factors and post-migration situations.

Korean mothers' stories

The stories of the Korean mothers were highly gender biased, viewing childcare as their primary role and responsibility. Reflecting this, all three employed mothers gave as their main reasons for working the financial need to support their families or to establish financial security for their children, although one of them also expressed her desire to work. While household income varied among the Korean participants, the majority of them were in a position to make a choice about their participation in paid work, except two employed mothers. The narratives of Korean mothers, especially those of stay-at-home mothers, were dominated by the perceived salience

of the mother's care for the emotional wellbeing of their children. In this, the mother's absence was portrayed as having a damaging effect on the healthy development of young children. Not surprisingly, all Korean stay-at-home mothers stated that they 'chose' not to work in order to care for their children. The significance of the mother's care was evidently demonstrated in the talk of Seyoun, who took six years off from her teaching job and relinquished her career ambition for her children: "When they need care, when they need mothers, if they don't have [mothers], they are psychologically unstable definitely, especially when they are younger. For me when the child is young, it seems better for mothers not to have a job..." This emphasis on the importance of the mother's presence was also echoed in the account of Heji, who decided to stay at home looking after her children despite her initial intention to continue working after her Master's at a British university: "I think this is the most important period [for children] ... and working mums can be a bit neglectful of their children, aren't they?" A similar pattern emerged from the story of Minju, who briefly returned to her administrative job in a large Korean company in London when her children started school full time. Yet she decided stop working because of her concerns about her children's emotional welfare: "Mothers tend to think they can do many things they want to do for their children if they work and have extra money to spare, but I don't think that's certainly the case. The more important thing for children is mother's care, the fact that their mum is present." Such a taken-for-granted role of the mother was echoed in the accounts of the majority of Korean mothers.

However, some narratives suggested that decisions about employment and childcare in England might also have been driven by other intersecting factors, such as a disadvantaged position in the labour market as an immigrant. This was illustrated in the account of Mijung, a Korean educational college graduate, who stated that looking after her children was "natural for her as a mother ... even though I work in the future, I don't want to do a nine-to-five office job while my children grow". While here she represented childcare as her duty, her later interview suggested that her construction of motherhood and employment was much more complex than it initially appeared to be:

'If we lived in Korea, I probably would have worked. Here I can't use my teaching qualification. With my limited English, I won't be able to find a decent job, either. Unless I can find a job with some level of social status, I don't see the value of going out to work whilst leaving my children to somebody else...'

The above statement has a double-edged meaning: although Mijung's disadvantaged position as a migrant in a racially structured society consolidated her gendered position as a mother and wife, her choice to stay at home was used as a way of resisting racially segregated treatment in Britain. In this her middle-class position played a crucial part in enabling her to 'opt out' of employment and giving her leeway to exercise a certain degree of control over her life.

Consistent with the child-centred view of stay-at-home mothers, a Korean working mother negatively portrayed her employment. Hojin began her catering business after having her second child in order to establish herself financially for the future:

‘Because my children are still babies, spending lots of time with mum is important for them. So I don’t feel any merits [of working] so far. Of course advantages are, not really advantages, just I can earn money and provide better environment for them. But, in fact, that’s just what I want and that’s just our plan as a married couple. From my children’s point of view, there is nothing good about it for now. Because it’s a period when they should spend a lot of time with their mum for their emotional stability, but I can’t take them out to play often so I only have feelings of sorrow for them.’

These narratives resonate with the existing studies in Korea, which have indicated the dominance of Confucian patriarchal norms and strongly gendered beliefs and attitudes of women and men. In relation to this, their settlement in New Malden seems to have resounding impact on their lives, reinforcing their conventional gender views and practices. Also, their middle-class positions might have aggravated their gendered relations as the majority of them did not have to work to survive. In this respect, my findings are significantly different from the studies of Korean migrants in US. Dissimilar to many Korean couples in US, none of my participants were involved in the family business and the husbands of those who ran their own businesses had separate occupations from their wives. Although their household income levels varied, as shown in Table 2, the economic circumstances of the family did not seem to have had a visible effect on the Korean women’s support for intensive mothering. Similarly, the reason for migration and the length of settlement in England did not appear to have been influential in the majority of the women’s acculturation processes. For example, Minju came to England independently to improve her occupational skills and lived in England for 15 years, while Seyoun migrated as a dependant of her expatriate husband and lived in England for two years. Yet, both of their narratives were suggestive of their continuing support for the ‘Korean way’ of life. Consistent with this, no notable differences were identified in terms of the impact of their educational levels, as illustrated in the narratives of Heji (Master’s) and Hojin (A-level equivalent).

‘Mums don’t need to stay at home all day’: Chinese mothers’ stories

Compared with the stories of the majority of Korean mothers, those from China did not talk about the necessity of the mother staying at home for the emotional security of their children. Even those who stayed home full time did not appear to support such views. One stay-at-home mother was in fact actively seeking a job but could not get one due to her limited English. The other one used to work even after having her first child but decided to leave her job after having her second child because she felt too busy with two children and missed them while at work. In addition, dissimilar to the majority of Korean mothers (nine out of ten), Chinese mothers talked about the merits of working for their children as well as for themselves. For example, the account of Lucy, who was working in a Chinese shop part time in England, represented involvement with paid employment positively: “You know being with the children *all the time* is sometimes very tiring so you have to relax yourself. I think working is quite a good way.” Compared with her previous professional occupation in China, Lucy was doing a lower social status job, which required no specific qualification. Nevertheless, she seemed to take a much more positive attitude towards her employment, in contrast

to the Korean mother Mijung. A similarly positive account emerged from the talk of Lang, a full-time medical researcher: “I like my career. It gives you satisfaction for being a professional. And it gives you a different field. After work, you can enjoy your motherhood and in the daytime you can enjoy the career so I think you feel more satisfaction.” In this, motherhood and employment were portrayed as two independent domains, which could easily be separated yet simultaneously exist in symbiosis. In addition, having these two different identities was represented as enabling mothers to appreciate and enjoy each of them even more without feeling jaded by either. The account of Hua, another professional, revealed a consonant sentiment:

Interviewer: ‘What are the advantages and disadvantages of a working mother?’

Hua: ‘The advantage is I think they [working mothers] have a business view. If you stay at home, you won’t get it ... how to operate the business, how to motivate people ... so when I talk to my children, this helps them to grow up and be ready for the future work more easily.’

Interviewer: ‘Do you think there are any disadvantages of a working mother?’

Hua: ‘I think it’s my children see me less. Especially with two children my focus now is really to help my daughter education-wise so I need to spend time with her on her exercise and on her piano – so relatively have much less time with my son...’

For Hua, working was represented not only as helping her to develop new skills, but also as applying these to bringing up her children to be more confident and articulate in various social settings, which would not be available to stay-at-home mothers. While Hua described the disadvantage of being a working mother as spending less time with her children, especially with her youngest child, strikingly there was no hint of concern about his emotional insecurity as a result of her infrequent presence, commonly found in the talk of Korean mothers. On the other hand, although it appeared that she did not support the idea of intensive mothering for the emotional security of her children, her accounts indicated her support of and involvement in the ‘professional’ childrearing that Vincent et al (2004) have suggested. For instance, Hua was actively involved in providing a variety of educational and extra-school activities for her daughter, spending a large amount of her time and energy taking her to different classes as well as ensuring that her daughter practised piano on a regular basis.

The account of another mother from China, Ping, also showed a similarity to Hua. Ping started an accounting degree almost straight after having her first child in England. During her study in England, her child was looked after by her mother-in-law in China:

‘Mothers staying at home all day don’t make children better. Some mothers may not look after them; they may go shopping or do other things. When you stay at home, you should play with your children, read and interact with them. But, if they go to a nursery, they can interact with other children. My daughter was brought up by my mother-in-law but she’s fine, so mums don’t need to stay at home all day.’

Dissimilar to accounts of many stay-at-home mothers, just being there for their children did not mean much from Ping's point of view. What really mattered was not a quantity of time but the quality time mothers spent with children. This in a sense suggests that she supported intensive care and attention for children albeit it did not necessarily mean by the mother.

Perceived Chinese work ethic

Chinese mothers' talk suggested that their perceived importance of paid work was dominantly influenced by Mao's socialist ideology:

'Everybody works in China. Even the women when they get married and have children, they won't resign from their work. Loss of work is a shame for Chinese people ... I also want to work ... because a housewife is not a good way to describe a woman in China.... It's because Republic of China was established and advocated to release women from home, go to work so I was grown up in this environment.' (Hua)

'I think in China everybody works so there is no tradition in staying at home. Also you want to get out, have your career, you want to achieve something in your life. I found just staying at home and doing nothing is not me ... I think it's to do with Chairman Mao, he said: "Women are the half of the sky, equal to men."' (Ping)

These narratives show the perceived significance of a strong work ethic deeply embedded in Chinese culture. Like many women in urban China who carried on their work even after marriage and children, it was culturally appropriate for these women to continue their work. It is clear that the impact of their perceived Chinese cultural heritage remained firm in constructing their life and identity even outside China. This might be largely due to the settlement of the majority of them in Southampton where the Chinese community is relatively well established.

As for the other intersecting factors, the length of their settlement in England did not seem to have had any significant impact on their beliefs towards motherhood and paid work since all the participants from China, regardless of the length of settlement, showed similar attitudes towards motherhood and employment. Likewise, there was no evidence of the notable influence of their reasons for migration, as illustrated in the narratives of both independent (eg, Lang) and dependent migrants (eg, Ping and Hua), alongside their financial circumstances. Also, their educational levels did not appear to have had a direct bearing on the way they constructed their stories around motherhood and employment, despite differences in their career trajectories.

Continuing gender disparity

As presented above, there seemed to be a stark difference in the way mothers from China and Korea talked about their belief in motherhood and employment. In this the accounts of mothers from China almost appeared to indicate gender equality through the active participation in the labour market. However, a detailed analysis

of their accounts and other extracts revealed the persistent impact of gendered tradition among Chinese mothers, similar to those from Korea. As can be seen from the previous section, gendered beliefs and roles were dominant in Korean mothers' talk, supporting women's caring role as 'natural' and their duty. The following extract from Minju's interview displays gendered beliefs, which she perceived to be prevalent in Korean families:

'Korean men don't have the mentality that they should look after babies. He [her husband] still doesn't have that sort of mentality. Doing paid work is for the family. That's the Korean mentality so I don't ask him to do housework. Even if I want to ask him, I don't think it's right. So we just live in our own way, following our own culture.'

Consistent with this, the stories of all the Chinese mothers indicated that they took the major responsibility for looking after their children, regardless of their employment status. Particularly, the accounts of three Chinese mothers suggested that they took almost sole responsibility for childcare and housework even though two of them worked full time, the same as their husbands. For example, Hua had to organise and manage her daughter's school work and activities as well as her son's childcare arrangements while her husband worked or entertained himself watching movies:

Interviewer: 'As for your husband's role as a father, how important is his role for the development of your children?'

Hua: 'Not very important [laughs]. Firstly he is a very career-minded guy... Even when he is at home, busy with talking to various people and working on proposals or sometimes enjoys himself watching films. He never makes sure his daughter does piano properly. He never takes her to swimming lessons even though he is at home. He never takes her to piano lessons. He always escapes.'

Similar to Hua, Jia did most of the household chores even though she ran her own business full time:

'Her daddy doesn't do any housework. In terms of housework, he is so lazy. His room is so messy and sometimes I do the cleaning. And for cooking, even if I'm here [in her own shop], he is just waiting so I have to go back and cook and wash after finishing [the meal].'

The typical reason for such men's behaviours was represented as those men's fixed ideas about gendered roles, inherited from their upbringing, which Hua described as: "They [men] are not trained to do anything at home."

These narratives to a large extent mirror the double-layered gendered norms and practices commonly identified in many studies in China (eg, Rofel, 1999; Ren and Foster, 2011). These authors have noted the persistence of patriarchal gender relations in China, disguised by ostensible gender equality achieved by a high rate of female labour market participation. As a consequence, both Korean and Chinese women

in the present study continued to live gendered lives in spite of the supposedly stark differences in their motherhood ideology and gender relations.

Discussion and conclusion

The stories of first-generation middle-class Chinese and Korean mothers in England highlighted that the two groups of mothers upheld different modes of motherhood ideology owing to their exposure to divergent socioeconomic and cultural environments prior to their migration, together with their post-migration situations. This subsequently had a significant influence on their decisions about childcare and paid work in England.

In the case of the Korean women, they retained their traditional values and gendered roles, having chosen not to get involved in paid employment in order to undertake childcare responsibilities. Even those who were in employment did not show much difference in terms of their support for intensive motherhood, as illustrated by the account of Hojin. However, at the same time, their intensive mothering ideology and roles as stay-at-home mothers seemed to have been accelerated by their disadvantaged labour market position and a lack of familial and social networks, intersecting with their class position, as illustrated by the story of Mijung. In this sense, the way motherhood ideology was articulated by some Korean mothers in explaining their choices with regard to childcare and employment might have been more complicated than it appeared to be, having been influenced by multifariously subtle and often invisible factors.

Compared with the Korean women, Chinese mothers did not support intensive mothering and showed their strong inclination to work even after moving to England, similar to their middle-class counterparts living in urban China. It was clear from the data that the majority of the Chinese women (five out of eight) were also subject to disadvantaged British labour market conditions through their downward employment. However, dissimilar to Korean women, it did not prevent them from viewing paid work as positive for their independence and emotional wellbeing as well as for their children due to a strong internalisation of the 'Chinese work value'. They constructed this as an effect of Mao's socialist work ethic, under which they were brought up, irrespective of their economic circumstances and educational levels. In this sense, their paid work was not a mere means to provide financial support for the family, but also a crucial part of their identity. In association with this, some of those who came to Britain as 'trailing wives' (Hua and Ping) continued to pursue their career ambitions by going into higher education and re-qualifying themselves.

However, despite seemingly stark differences between the two groups, gender relations at home appeared to be similar. Although the accounts of Chinese mothers seemed to indicate gender equality on the surface, their interview data suggested continuing gender inequality for the majority of these women, taking the double burden of childcare and paid work. Although the Chinese and Korean mothers showed very different beliefs and attitudes towards employment, all the women took the primary responsibility for household labour, regardless of their educational level and employment status. Such gendered practices were also reflected in the fact that the majority of the Chinese women (five out of eight) migrated to England to follow their husbands who came for their studies while having given up their professional career, parallel with the majority of their Korean counterparts. In addition, it was

often women who took part-time employment to combine with childcare, not their husbands. Thus, Chinese women in the study showed many commonalities with existing studies on middle-class Chinese women in China as well as Western countries, which have highlighted the persistent and pervasive influence of gender stereotypes and roles for many Chinese women.

In terms of intersecting analytical components, individual women's beliefs in 'good' mothering, especially deriving from their perceived cultural heritage, appeared to be the most influential component that had affected the Chinese and Korean interviewees' behaviour towards childcare and employment. In this sense, their national and/or ethnic origin seemed to be a salient factor affecting their diasporic experiences, producing different attitudes towards employment and childcare. Consonant with Min (2001) and Portes (2001), their settlement into ethnic communities seemed to have a notable impact on this. Living in these communities enabled them to retain their cultural heritages since most Chinese and Korean products and services were available in their respective communities. Moreover, their settlement in their ethnic communities was likely to have reinforced these women's socialisation with those of the same ethnicity, which again had a crucial impact on their retention of motherhood and gender ideology. In this context their exposure and active acculturation into perceived British values were likely to be limited. Although there seemed to be some similarities between childrearing among the participants and the intensive childrearing found in British middle-class families, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusion on the extent of the possible influence of the dominant British ideology on the lives of the Chinese and Korean mothers in the study.

As for the characteristics of individual migration, these seemed to have had a less obvious impact on Chinese and Korean women's lives, especially compared with the findings of Lee et al (2002). For instance, Lang, a Chinese woman, who originally came to England to obtain a higher educational qualification, continued to pursue her dream and had relatively equal gender relations with her British husband; on the other hand, this was not the case for other women, especially those from Korea (eg, Minju and Heji), who all came to England independently to enhance their career prospects. Unlike their original intention, these women forwent their career ambition, taking highly gendered identities and roles as wife and mother, dissimilar to the independent migrant women in Lee et al's (2002) study.

In addition, the timing of migration and the length of settlement in England did not seem to have had a major effect on the majority of the women's acculturation process, alongside their educational levels and the economic circumstances of individual families. This might be a result of these women migrating to England in their adulthood, by which time the majority of their upbringing and education were completed in their country of origin. For example, Brah (1994) notes that the market experiences of South Asian participants differed depending on whether they moved to Britain as a child or as a teenager. Those who came to Britain as a child, who completed most of their schooling and education in Britain, showed much more involvement in the labour market, compared with those who came as a teenager and had limited schooling in Britain. This suggests that the stage of their life when they migrated needs to be also considered alongside the length of settlement in analysing the lives of migrant women as it appears to have had a defining effect on their lives.

Overall, the data suggested that Chinese and Korean women's motherhood and gender ideology as obtained in their country of origin, along with their settlement

into respective ethnic communities, continued to have a dominant impact on their lives in England. However, drawing on Hall (1990), it could be suggested that what is considered to be 'an East Asian way' in a transnational setting is not the same as what it is in their 'home' countries because it is 'imagined' and 'reconfigured' in a diasporic context. In this sense, mothering ideologies and gendered lives for the participants in the present study may be 'hybridised' forms that are distinctive from those existing in both their 'home' countries and England.

Note

¹ For the remainder of this article, Korea or Korean is used to refer to South Korea or South Korean.

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