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## **Challenging hegemonic femininities?**

### **The discourse of trailing spouses in Hong Kong**

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#### **Abstract**

While the notion of hegemonic masculinity has received a lot of attention in recent scholarship, hegemonic femininity remains largely under-developed. We aim to address this gap by illustrating the benefits of using the concept of hegemonic femininities in sociolinguistic scholarship. Conducting a case study on the discourse of trailing spouses in Hong Kong, we analyse hegemonic femininities at the local, regional, and global level, and explore how they are interlinked with each other. Findings show how these trailing spouses often challenge and reject hegemonic femininities on the local level, but largely accept and reinforce them on the regional and global level. The specific femininities which are considered to be hegemonic are highly context-dependent, and, unlike masculinities, the hegemony of femininities is a matter of internal degree – i.e. certain femininities take hegemonic status compared to other femininities but do not take a dominant position in the gender order.

**Keywords:** hegemonic femininities, hegemonic masculinities, trailing spouses, Hong Kong, gender order

## **Introduction**

Building on the pioneering work by Connell (1987, 1995) on hegemonic masculinities, in this paper we aim to develop the related concept of hegemonic femininities and demonstrate some of the benefits of applying this notion to sociolinguistic research on language and gender. This is a timely undertaking because, although the notion of hegemonic masculinity, defined as ‘the form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide setting that structures and legitimates hierarchical gender relations’ (Messerschmidt 2012: 58), has received a lot of attention in recent scholarship, the notion of hegemonic femininity remains largely under-developed (Schippers 2007). This paper aims to address this gap by responding to Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) call and analyses hegemonic femininities at the local, regional, and global level, and explores how they are interlinked. We apply the concept of hegemonic femininities, as outlined below, to a specific group of women, namely trailing spouses in Hong Kong.

The term trailing spouses refers to those women who have followed their partners on an overseas work assignment (e.g. McNulty 2012). Many of them are in their late twenties to mid-thirties, and are highly educated with prestigious and often well paid jobs. As a consequence of the change in circumstances that this move involves, many of these women give up (or temporarily put on hold) their own professional career. And although the lifestyle that many expatriates experience in Hong Kong appears to be relatively privileged – and is often characterised by considerable leisure time, relatively large amounts of spendable cash, and domestic help (usually a woman from a country in South East Asia who is responsible for household maintenance and childcare, and who lives with the family) –

many trailing spouses experience considerable difficulties in adjusting to and coping with their new situation.

It is the aim of this paper to give these largely overlooked and under-researched women a voice and to understand their views and experiences of their overseas move to Hong Kong. More specifically, we explore how they attempt to make sense of the new situation in which they find themselves by mobilising and orienting to specific roles and expectations associated with hegemonic femininities. Our particular focus is how these women strategically draw on, as well as sometimes challenge and vehemently reject, specific localised hegemonic femininities that circulate in their expatriate community in Hong Kong, in their attempts to make sense of their new, and often very unsettling, situation. In what follows, we first briefly introduce the notions of hegemonic masculinities and hegemonic femininities before outlining our methodological approach and analysing how hegemonic femininities are constructed, enacted, and often challenged by these trailing spouses in Hong Kong.

### **Hegemonic masculinities**

The notion of hegemonic masculinity was originally proposed by Connell (1987, 1995: 77) to refer to 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women'. In other words, it describes those practices, values and structures that place men in a more dominant, more privileged position compared to women. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been

productively employed in research on gender relations, especially with a political dimension, across disciplines where 'hegemonic' is generally understood in the sense of 'normative' rather than 'statistically most widely represented' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 832).

Since its conception in the mid-1980s hegemonic masculinity developed 'from a conceptual model with a fairly narrow empirical base to a widely used framework for research and debate about men and masculinities' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 835) which is now often used to conceptualise 'how patriarchal relations are legitimated throughout society' (Messerschmidt 2012: 63). Subsequent research has used the term in at least two different meanings, namely to refer to certain masculinities which take a dominant position over femininities in the gender order, and also to describe those masculinities that take a hegemonic stance over other, often marginalised, masculinities (as reflected, for example, in the masculinities associated with heterosexual versus homosexual desire). These notions of masculinity and the specific forms that are considered to be hegemonic, however, are not static but are subject to change (Murgia & Poggio 2009, Luyt 2012, Lampropoulou & Archakis 2015; Anderson 2008). They are conceptualised 'as produced, contested, and transformed through discursive processes, and therefore embedded within and productive of power relations.' (Schippers 2007: 94).

Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity was initially conceived in the singular form, we follow Messerschmidt (2012: 73) and use the term hegemonic masculinities (and by analogy also the term hegemonic femininities) in its plural to acknowledge that it is not always easy (or even possible) to say with certainty which masculinity (or femininity) exactly 'is indeed the hegemonic ascendant', and also to allow for some variation between

hegemonic notions of masculinities (and femininities) on different levels, as explained in more detail below (see also Wetherell & Edley 1999).

After having undergone several discursive reformulations (e.g. Wetherell & Edley 1999; Speer 2000), the concept of hegemonic masculinities also found its way into sociolinguistic research, where it is often used to refer to the dominant masculine habitus (e.g. McElhinny 1995; Koller 2004). For example, Kiesling (2005) describes how the members of a fraternity in the US draw on the sometimes contradictory cultural discourses of masculinity – including gender difference, heterosexism, dominance, and male solidarity – thereby constructing and reinforcing (but also sometimes challenging) societal assumptions about what is considered to be masculine and, more or less explicitly, positioning themselves in relation to these underlying ideologies. Luyt (2012: 47) in a study on men in South Africa explores how ‘local and regional representations of hegemonic masculinity are (re)produced, and how men’s gender identities are constituted through situated interaction’. And Lampropoulou and Archakis (2015) analyse the narratives of Greek adolescents who have been sexually involved with women who hold senior, institutional roles. They show how the story tellers position themselves in relation to heterosexuality and heteronormativity thereby constructing their (hegemonic) masculine identities.

In spite of its wide usage, the concept of hegemonic masculinities has also attracted some criticism, most notably for its underlying notion of masculinity as being flawed (i.e. essentialist, vague and tending to de-emphasize issues of power and domination), and for not specifying how hegemonic masculinities are enacted in actual practice (e.g. Wetherell & Edley 1999; Collinson & Hearn 1994). Taking these and other criticisms into account, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 847) propose that ‘the concept of hegemonic masculinity is in

need of reformulation', and they argue that it is crucial to move beyond identifying hegemonic masculinities at the societal level towards empirically analysing prevailing hegemonic masculinities at three levels: the local, the regional, and the global.

The local level refers to hegemonic masculinities that are constructed and negotiated in relatively specific, small communities, such as families and organisations; while the regional level captures hegemonic masculinities constructed society-wide (e.g. in a particular culture or nation state). The global level refers to those hegemonic masculinities that are constructed in 'transnational arenas as world politics, business and media' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 849). Moreover rather than being independent entities, these different levels are interlinked with each other: 'global hegemonic masculinities pressure regional and local hegemonic masculinities, and regional hegemonic masculinities provide cultural materials adopted or reworked in global arenas and utilized in local gender dynamics.' (Messerschmidt 2012: 59) We adopt this framework for our analyses of the discourse of trailing spouses in Hong Kong and pay particular attention to the local and the regional level thereby acknowledging the importance of the locality in which hegemonic masculinities and femininities are constructed, enacted, reinforced, as well as sometimes challenged and rejected. At the same time this approach also allows us to position the analysed local practices in relation to more global gender ideologies.

## **Hegemonic femininities**

In contrast to the huge interest in the concept of hegemonic masculinities and the subsequent large amount of empirical research that has utilised it, the notion of hegemonic femininities remains largely under-theorised and empirically under-researched (Budgeon 2014). One noteworthy exception is the study by Schippers (2007: 94) who developed a framework for analysing hegemonic femininities built around the definition of the concept as consisting of ‘the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.’ However, as we illustrate in our analysis section below, what exactly is considered to be ‘womanly’ and whether this contributes to establishing and reinforcing gendered hegemonies is context-dependent and to some extent dynamically negotiated and co-constructed by interlocutors.

Schippers (2007) questions Connell’s (1987: 186-7) initial claim that ‘there is no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men’ because ‘all forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men’. In a similar vein, Budgeon (2014: 322) maintains that empirical research has shown that ‘the interplay between different masculinities and between femininity and masculinity is more multi-faceted than first conceptualized by Connell’, and that this ‘relational dynamics of gender’ contributes to constituting masculinities, femininities and the gender order. Schippers (2007: 94) argues that there is ‘an ascendancy of hegemonic femininity over other femininities to serve the interests of the



gender order and male domination', and that a distinction is to be made between different femininities. She distinguishes between hegemonic femininities, i.e. those femininities that are legitimised by and created in complementary relation to hegemonic masculinities, and what she calls pariah femininities (c.f. Connell's (1987) own notion of emphasised femininity<sup>1</sup>). Pariah femininities are those femininities that are sometimes referred to as subordinate and which 'are considered socially undesirable' and deemed 'contaminating to social life more generally' (Schippers 2007: 95). While certain femininities are hegemonic (compared to other femininities) in the sense that they capture what is considered to be 'womanly' in a particular context, pariah femininities are marked as deviant and are often stigmatised because they challenge the gender order with its masculine hegemony (Schippers 2007: 94-5). For example, in those cases where women display behaviours, attributes or values traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as physical strength or sexual interest in other women, they challenge traditional notions of hegemonic masculinities, which are based on male dominance and female subordination. As a consequence, these 'pariah' femininities pose a threat to the gender order and its central tenet of male dominance and female subordination, and they blur the boundaries between masculinity and femininity.

These relatively recent theoretical debates about the concept of hegemonic femininities have not only added much needed models on gender relations but have also led to an increase in empirical research which has analysed hegemonic femininities in a range of different contexts, including for example the representation of women in advertisements in Polish magazines (Pawelczyk 2008), as well as research on female athletes (Krane 2001; Wright & Clarke 1999), and female contestants in the TV beauty show *The Swan* (Marwick

2010). However, from a sociolinguistic perspective, the concept of hegemonic femininities is largely neglected and remains surprisingly under-researched. We aim to address this issue and contribute to the growing body of research by conducting a sociolinguistic study of hegemonic femininities in the specific socio-cultural context of Hong Kong. We are particularly interested in the ways in which female trailing spouses mobilise and draw on different femininities in their discourse – which they either reinforce or challenge in their interactions –to make sense of their new life situation.

### **Researching hegemonic femininities**

The data that we analyse in this paper is part of a larger scale study on expatriate spouses who have relocated to Hong Kong following their partners' international work assignment. The data that we look at here consist of twenty, mainly one-to-one, interviews with female trailing spouses who live in different districts of Hong Kong (many of them in areas predominantly populated by expatriate families). They all enjoy similar benefits of an expatriate lifestyle, such as access to high-standard private medical care, supermarkets selling a range of Western products, exclusive sports and leisure facilities in the form of private clubs, international private schools for their children, and so on. Moreover, as our examples below illustrate, there are several similarities among these women – especially in relation to how they experience and evaluate their 'new life' in Hong Kong (see also Zayts, Schnurr & Hopkins *fc*). However, in spite of these similarities and in spite of treating these women as a group for the purposes of this paper, we do not want to claim that their

experiences as recounted here are typical for or representative of all female trailing spouses in Hong Kong. They are, however, representative of the 20 women whom we have spoken to, and therefore to an extent suggest certain patterns of how these expatriate women perceive themselves in their new life circumstances.

Participants were recruited through a post on a local expatriate online forum where we asked for volunteers who were interested in participating in a research project on the experience of people who have relocated to Hong Kong. In addition, we also used the friend-of-a-friend approach (Holmes 1991; Milroy, 1987). The response to our call for participation was overwhelming, with more than ten women contacting the research team within the first ten minutes of the call being posted on-line. Our sample can be described as 'convenience sample' (Richards 2003), and as a consequence, we will refrain from making generalisations, but will rather treat this as a partial snapshot of the situation in the expatriate community in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, we hope that insights gained from this study – especially in relation to the usefulness of the concept of hegemonic femininities for sociolinguistic research – will be of interest and may be applied to other cases in different contexts.

Interviews lasted on average around one hour, and the overall recording time is 20+ hours. All interviews were conducted in English by a research team member who is an expatriate woman living in Hong Kong herself. They were transcribed using simplified transcription conventions adapted from the conversation analytic literature. This choice of interviewer was deliberate as we wanted to create a relaxed atmosphere which would enable our participants to talk relatively openly about potentially sensitive experiences. However, we

acknowledge that meaning is co-constructed in interviews (Richards, Ross & Seedhouse 2012; Edley & Litosseliti, 2010; Holliday, 2012; Kvale, 2007). Hence, using an interviewer who shared many aspects of our interviewees' backgrounds and who could thus be described as an insider in this expatriate community may of course also be potentially problematic. For example, it was not always easy for the interviewer to remain 'neutral' and to avoid taking a stance (for example, by agreeing with the interviewees). But, given the enormous benefits of such an interviewer with 'insider' knowledge, these potential pitfalls were considered to be relatively minor and worth engaging with. Moreover, we hoped that by providing our interviewees with a platform for expressing and sharing their very personal, and at times even traumatic, experiences, these interviews would also function as a means of empowerment for them.

We opted for mostly one-to-one interviews, as opposed to group interviews or focus groups, because we believed that a more intimate environment may facilitate participants' openness and their willingness to express their own beliefs without the fear of being judged by others (Denscombe, 2010) – a benefit which we hoped to intensify by our choice of the interviewer. In line with this approach, our interviews were semi-structured where the interviewer had only a few prepared questions which were mainly used to encourage participants to talk (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010) and to enable them to bring up issues they considered to be important (Dornyei, 2007).

## **The discourse of trailing spouses in Hong Kong**

During our analysis of these interviews we have identified several recurring cultural discourses of femininity. Drawing on Foucault (1972), Kiesling (2005: 696) applies the concept of cultural discourses as ‘culturally shared ways of thinking, doing, making, evaluating, and speaking’ to his research on hegemonic masculinity. He uses the cultural discourses identified in his data as ways of capturing the taken-for-granted background assumptions that members of the same group share and on which they rely to make sense of their everyday experiences. They are thus, as Kiesling (2005: 698) maintains, ‘a valuable part of a theory of how social practices, structures, and beliefs structure language use, and how that language use as a social practice is interpreted.’ In other words, they provide useful entry points into understanding not only participants’ views on what they consider to be gender hegemonies but also on how these hegemonies are enacted and oriented to in and through their discourse.

Among the most prominent cultural discourses that these women frequently (re)produced throughout the interviews are the discourse of motherhood, which is often contrasted with the discourse of professionalism; the discourse of change and adaptation, which is often linked to the discourse of regret, and the discourse of masculine hegemony, which in turn, as shown below, is often related to the discourse of femininity. The discourse of motherhood describes the women’s often very personal experiences of being a mother, which is sometimes accompanied by their evaluation of the mother role (see Example 4 below). The discourse of professionalism, which is often set in sharp contrast to the discourse of motherhood, refers to the women’s ‘former life’ where they had, often very successful,

professional careers (Example 5 is a good illustration of this). The discourse of change and adaptation, as well the closely related discourse of regret, captures the women's experience and feelings before, during and after their relocation to Hong Kong (see Example 1). In contrast to these relatively explicit discourses, the discourses of hegemonic masculinities and femininities are more subtle and refer to comments that reinforce (and sometimes challenge) societally sanctioned notions of what practices and values are considered to be 'manly' and 'womanly', and which largely accept and reinforce hegemonic gender relations that place men in dominant and women in subordinate positions. These cultural discourses are organised along a temporal dimension (see Zayts, Schnurr & Hopkins *et al.*) in which the discourses of professionalism and change typically orient towards the past, while the discourses of motherhood, change and adaptation are mainly oriented towards the present. The discourses of hegemonic masculinities and femininities are related to both temporal dimensions and fluctuate between past and present.

As we illustrate below, these multiple, sometimes contradictory, discourses make up what we refer to as hegemonic femininities in the specific local context of Hong Kong. Since the terms 'hegemony', 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'hegemonic femininity' are not, as Speer (2000: 126) rightly reminds us, 'participants' [own] categories', in exploring hegemonic masculinities and femininities in the discourse of trailing spouses in Hong Kong, we follow Schippers' (2007: 100) suggestion to start by understanding what practices and characteristics are understood as 'manly' and 'womanly', i.e. are indexed for masculinity or femininity, in a specific setting – here, in an expatriate community of Hong Kong. We then address the question of which of those practices 'situate femininity as complementary and inferior to masculinity?' (Schippers 2007: 100) By answering these questions, we hope to

empirically identify hegemonic masculinities and femininities and to shed some light on the existing gender relations between women and men in expatriate Hong Kong.

Although we did not ask the women explicitly about what characteristics and practices they considered to be 'manly' or 'womanly', in describing and evaluating their own everyday realities, the practices and activities that they, their (female) friends and their (male) partners typically engage in, they provided useful insights into what they considered to be gendered practices and characteristics. This was particularly evident in those instances where they talked about the different roles that they and their husbands played in the decision to move to Hong Kong, and when they told us how they cope with this new reality of being an expatriate in Hong Kong. These gendered roles and expectations, at the same time, heavily rely on gender hegemonies as they evoke (and often reinforce or challenge) specific ideologies about women and men.

We illustrate two of the themes that emerged from the interviews here, namely i) reclaiming agency over the move to Hong Kong thereby rejecting (but sometimes also reinforcing) assumptions about hegemonic masculinities; and ii) mobilising some of the gendered roles traditionally available to women in the context of Hong Kong – thereby largely challenging notions of hegemonic femininities as legitimised by hegemonic masculinities on a local level. As our examples below illustrate, the cultural discourses described above, frequently occur in the accounts of these women and are closely interwoven with both themes.

## **Re-claiming agency over the move to Hong Kong**

Among the women we interviewed there was generally a sense of rejecting the assumption that it is necessarily the wife who follows her husband on the overseas assignment thereby supporting his career advancement at the expense of her own – in spite of the fact that this was precisely what motivated their own relocation. This assumption about who ‘follows’ whom is in itself closely linked to gender hegemonies that position men as the breadwinner and, as a consequence, as the dominant and more powerful partner, while women are typically placed in a less powerful and subordinate position. However, this traditional gender hegemony on the global level was, to some extent, challenged, by our interviewees in their very personal accounts of their situation on the local level. For example, although most people we spoke to, told us that it was their husband’s job that brought them to Hong Kong, they also emphasised that it was a joint decision. Interestingly, though, attached to this acknowledgement was often a sense of resentment, regret or even blame, as in Example 1.

### Example 1

*Context: H is a European woman in her late thirties. Before moving to Hong Kong she used to work as marketer in a luxury goods sector. She has travelled extensively around the world and also spent a few years in the Middle East, where she met and married her husband, and gave birth to her two children. Soon after the birth of her children, H and her husband jointly decided to relocate to Hong Kong for the latter’s new job. H’s initial excitement upon arrival in Hong*



*Kong quickly evaporated as the daily challenges of living in the city proved overwhelming. At the time of the interview, H has been in Hong Kong for just over one year.*

H: The decision to go there was a mutual decision. What I had not considered was how far it was. [...] I think all of the chaos that comes with one-year-old children, one and a half at that time, plus moving continents, led to what I would call, and don't quote me on that, piss poor planning. PPP. I definitely did not plan the move. [...] I should have been much more involved, much more on the ball, done my research – my husband did his research for the job. Would he like the job? Would he like to live here? Da, da, da. All those components went completely, phew! Left, by my left ear. I was like 'Yeah! It's fine [...] it's all good, let's move to Hong Kong!' And then came the awakening. [...] Why did I then let go off the ball. I'm like in a constant amount of football game, so you have the ball, you have the ball, you got the ball. Why didn't I check the contract myself? Why did I just leave it to my husband? Because I trust him, of course. But why, so [...] so, yes, basically I do blame my husband to a certain extent, which doesn't make us very happy at the moment. I do blame myself for my own stupidity, that one causes a lot of anger within myself. Because I'm like, 'how could you have been so stupid!' [...] So that makes me incredibly unhappy. Unhappy is the wrong word– it makes me feel desperate.

At the beginning of this extract H establishes that the decision to move to Hong Kong was mutual. She thereby claims ownership and responsibility over it. However, soon after this initial statement, she strongly distances herself from the decision and describes it in negative terms as “piss poor planning”. This is followed by assigning blame to both herself and her

husband: she blames herself for not having been involved more (thereby relativising her earlier claims about conjoint decision making), and she puts responsibility to her husband for not planning the move properly and, perhaps more implicitly, for focusing on himself, what the move involved for him personally in relation to his job and also the new living environment (“*my husband did his* research for the job. Would *he* like the job? Would *he* like to live here? Da, da, da”).

Throughout this extract the interviewee sets up different, and often opposing, subject positions for herself and her husband. This is reflected, for example, in her choice of pronouns where she establishes clear boundaries between herself (*I, me, my*) and her husband (*him, he, his*). In this entire sequence there is only one collective *we* – and according to the interviewee this *we* is not “very happy at the moment”. So, although one could argue that she, through her choice of pronouns, claims (at least some degree of) agency over the move to Hong Kong – thereby challenging gendered hegemonies which position men in dominant (and hence decision making) positions and women in subordinate positions – this is accompanied by strong expressions of self-blame and regret for not having taken a more active stance (which could be interpreted as reinforcing gendered hegemonies). Her use of the generic *you* in the middle of her account could be interpreted as an abstraction and perhaps even generalization that relate her largely personal position which orients to hegemonic femininities on the local level to a more abstract, global level which captures gendered hegemonies in more general terms.

Interestingly, most of the women we spoke to, said that they are assuming their husbands would follow them if they had been (or were in the future) offered a job that they would like to take on and which would entail relocating. Such a claim can be interpreted as attempts to

downplay or annihilate gender hegemonies which position men in dominant and women in subordinate positions. However, upon closer scrutiny, this claim is often relativised. Examples 2 and 3 show this.

### Example 2

*Context: A is an Australian woman married to an American. Before moving to Hong Kong she worked as an advertising agency executive. A's husband is a finance professional. She met her husband in Sydney, where he was also an expatriate. It was understood that the relocation was imminent due to the requirements of his job. Before the move, A's husband travelled frequently to Hong Kong and China. The family moved to Hong Kong when their eldest child was less than 1 year old. (I – interviewer)*

I: If you were offered this fantastic job,=

A: Yeah,

I: =Um, in a week or in five years,=

A: Yeah,

I: =Um, would he follow you, would your husband follow you?

A: I think yeah, I think he would, yeah. I think if um, if I was making more money, um and it made sense, absolutely, he would.

I: So, would he, would he compromise his career now?

A: I think he would.

I: Or in five years?

A: Yeah, he'll need to. Eh huh huh huh.

[...]

A: Um, I know he doesn't really hold specific gender roles, I think. I think right now it makes sense for me to be home, because otherwise we'll be living on not very much right now. Well we can't afford to be here. [...] Yeah, but yeah, I think he'll absolutely follow me for sure.

Although this interviewee explicitly rejects the assumption that her husband (and by implication she herself) holds "specific gender roles", in this excerpt she frequently mobilises a range of gendered roles and thereby orients to and reinforces gendered hegemonies. For example, although she answers our question about whether her husband would "follow" her in the affirmative ("I think yeah, I think he would, yeah"), this initial confirmation is followed by listing several *ifs* which considerably relativise her previous claim. More specifically, she clarifies her initial affirmative response by spelling out the conditions under which her husband might follow her, namely "if I was making more money" and if "it made sense". Interestingly, several of these conditions are related to gendered assumptions and ideologies (which, for example, view the husband as the main breadwinner), which in turn reinforce gendered hegemonies and position women in subordinate relation to men. Moreover, her repetition of *yeah* in this relatively short utterance makes it sound as if she is trying to be over-affirmative in order to sound particularly persuasive, which may point to her actual uncertainty.

There is an interesting climax in this excerpt from the interviewee's initial relatively tentative statement "I think he would [follow me]" at the beginning to a much firmer "he'll need to", followed by laughter towards the end. Although the last statement appears firmer, the accompanying laughter mitigates its illocutionary force considerably and thus hedges the relatively strong (and, one could argue, non-hegemonic feminine) stance that it indexes. Moreover, the interviewee's frequent use of intensifiers (e.g. "absolutely", "for sure") is somewhat counterbalanced by her equally frequent use of the hedging and mitigating device "I think" throughout the excerpt. These apparently contradictory tendencies could perhaps be interpreted as signalling her uncertainty.

Throughout her answer, the interviewee also mobilises and orients not only to these elements of hegemonic masculinities but also to hegemonic femininities, which, for example, portray women as homemakers ("it makes sense for me to be home"). This argument for upholding what could be described as global gender hegemonies, however, is based on the rather dubious claim that her husband needs to work as they otherwise would not be able to "afford to be here" – but the fact that they would not need to "be here" if it had not been for his job is overlooked. Some of these observations can also be made in the next example where the interviewee, after initially confirming that her husband would follow her in the future, soon relativises and actually negates her earlier claim.

### Example 3

*Context: A is Italian and worked as a fashion designer before moving to Hong Kong. She is married and has a small child. Her husband moved to Hong Kong with his company seven years ago and A followed him to the city one year later. She initially continued working for the same fashion company after her relocation, but when her job required her to fly regularly between Europe, Hong Kong and China, and she had her baby, she temporarily stopped working. At the time of the interview the family was planning to move to Europe at the end of the year for A's husband's new work posting. A herself had several work interviews scheduled and planned to return to the workforce after the relocation. (I – interviewer)*

I: Can I ask you, if you had the great job, a great offer for a job, um, that took you to England or Europe, would your husband follow you?

A: Yes, maybe.

I: But when you were single,=

A: Yeah,

I: So he would have gone anywhere in the world where you have gone?

A: Yes, maybe yes.

I: Would he still do that now?

A: Sorry?

I: And would he still do that now?

A: Yes.

I: Really?

A: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah. I think so.

[2 minutes later in the same interview]

I: If you were able to get a job in Madrid or Barcelona, in Spain, if you were able to get a job in Spain, eh, would your husband be able to ask his company to move?

A: Nah, absolutely no.

I: No. Really?

A: This is impossible.

Although the interviewee in this excerpt initially expresses her (tentative) belief that her husband would follow her on a potential overseas job assignment that may arise for her in the future (“yes, maybe”, turn 2) and repeatedly confirms her belief when probed further by the interviewer (“yeah”, “yes, maybe yes”, “yes”, “yes, yeah, yeah, yea, I think so”, turns 4, 6, 10 and 12), a few minutes later in the same interview, when the interviewer constructs a more concrete scenario, she negates this possibility and categorically rejects it (“nah, absolutely no” and “this is impossible”). The woman thereby orients to and reinforces hegemonic masculinities – which she does without providing any explanations (as in Example 2). Interestingly, she draws on the same strategies as the interviewee in the previous example, namely the frequent use of hedges and repetition. And while the repetition makes her point sound stronger and more convincing, the hedging mitigates her

message and conveys a certain degree of uncertainty. These seemingly contradictory tendencies can also be interpreted as a reflection of the complex situation in which these women find themselves and which involves drawing on different, sometimes opposing, roles when constructing and negotiating their identities throughout the interviews (see also Zayts, Schnurr & Hopkins fc).

In the next section we look in more detail at the specific gendered roles that these women mobilise and orient to in their interviews, and how they thereby reinforce or reject hegemonic femininities on the local, regional and global level.

### **Mobilising gendered roles traditionally available to women in Hong Kong**

Throughout the interviews the women frequently and, it appeared, sometimes strategically draw on and mobilise gendered roles that are traditionally available to women in this expatriate community in Hong Kong. By orienting to these roles and positioning themselves in relation to them, they at the same reinforce or challenge different femininities. These relatively regional femininities, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 849) have argued, provide 'a cultural framework that may be materialized in daily practices and interactions.' Among the most prominent roles that these women orient to in their interviews are the role of the mother and homemaker, and the role of the tai tai.<sup>2</sup> In the specific context of Hong Kong, these roles are closely linked to hegemonic femininities as they reflect the practices and characteristics typically associated with expatriate women. Being a mother, a homemaker, or a tai tai is considered 'womanly', while other roles, such as being a career woman, has rather different connotations, and is not a role that is equally readily available



to these expatriate women. Thus, the femininities underlying the roles of mother, homemaker or tai tai can be considered as hegemonic in this specific context, while the femininities associated with other roles are pariah (using Schippers' (2007) terminology). Orienting to these roles and portraying oneself as being, for example, a mother and a homemaker (including all the activities typically associated with it, such as preparing lunch and taking care of children) become part of the embodiment of the performance of hegemonic femininities in this expatriate community in Hong Kong. Interestingly, these roles share a lot of similarities with the roles 'allocated to women in the social marketplace', as described in Guendouzi (2001: 47), which 'are restricted by characteristics such as 'physical appearance', 'moral worth', and being seen to be 'a good mother''. And the role of homemaker in particular is also frequently projected onto women in the advertisements that Pawelczyk (2008) looked at.

We have included four examples here to demonstrate how the women we interviewed utilise and orient to these hegemonic femininities. The first two examples show how they mobilise the role of the mother and homemaker, and the last two examples illustrate how they use and position themselves in relation to the role of the tai tai.

#### Example 4

*Context: This excerpt is taken from the same interview as in Example 2 above.*

A: Well, I do get bored. I think being a mom can be a boring role. Um. It's a loving role, and it's really, it's half time rewarding, you know, 'cause you know being a mom is not that, all roses, especially when I have one of them screaming in my ear and slobbering on me and that. But it, it has its rewards. But it's boring. I think being a mom is harder than being in any office that I have ever worked in. I think, I remember, it's non-stop, it's twenty four hours, they still need you in the morning, you can't just clock off, um, you can't resign, um huh huh, and eh, you know, it's boring, but it's also, beautiful. Yeah. Yeah.

This example is a very good illustration of the dilemma that many of the women we spoke to find themselves in: having to adopt and adapt to a role (here, the role of the mother) that they do not really enjoy ("it's boring") while at the same time being expected to take it on and enjoy it with very little alternatives. Throughout this excerpt it becomes clear that the interviewee finds herself caught between two extremes: she admits that "being a mom can be a boring role" which is immediately relativised and contrasted by her claim that "it's a loving role". This tension between "boring" and "beautiful" is maintained throughout the excerpt with only a few attempts at solving it, for example when she states that "it's half-time rewarding". Of particular interest is the interviewee's use of laughter towards the end which seems to function here as a means to express this ambiguity of her feelings, and to

utter her frustration and vent her disappointment and despair with her situation. At the same time the laughter also mitigates the illocutionary force of her complaints and criticisms and contributes to establishing solidarity among interlocutors (e.g. Glenn 2003).

By mobilising the traditional, and one could perhaps say, global gender role of mother, and then distancing herself from it by resisting and rejecting underlying societally sanctioned ideological assumptions (e.g. of the mother role being fulfilling and beautiful), the interviewee at the same time challenges this particular femininity that is considered to be hegemonic in the local context of her expatriate community in Hong Kong. She thereby challenges hegemonic femininities on various levels: on the local level this is achieved by recounting her own experience (e.g. “when I have one of them screaming...”), and on the regional and perhaps even global level, she does this by describing the mother role in a more general, abstract, and context-free way as “boring”. Similar behaviours are evident in the next example taken from the interview with another woman.

#### Example 5

*Context: C is Canadian with Asian heritage. She C used to work as a portfolio manager in a finance sector (managing a portfolio of 12 billion dollars). C and her husband have three young children and are planning to stay in Asia for approximately five years. (I – interviewer)*

C: So::, it is a big big shock, because like as I said I’ve always worked, even after my children were born I stayed home for about a year for my maternity, and then I went back to work. I’ve always, always worked, and to now waking up in the morning thinking, ‘hmm what do I pack for their lunch boxes?’ It’s, it’s a big change, you know,

whereas in the past, I'll wake up and I'll say, 'ok, what happened to the rest of the world when I was sleeping that will affect my markets?' And now it's sort of, 'oh, it doesn't matter, one works hard for lunch.' It's a big shock, I would be lying if I said I was happy at the beginning, I wasn't, and the adjustment was hard.

[6 turns are omitted]

C: I signed up for the whole bunch of seminars as well that are related to what I do because I found even after, even after doing a lot of the volunteering and whatever you have, I miss the mental stimulation, mhm, I am not trying to say, to put volunteering in a bad light, it's not, but it is very different, it is very different and=

I: =Is it the responsibility?

C: No, I think just being mentally challenged, just being mentally challenged, emm. With volunteering when you are reading to a class of seven year olds there is really nothing very stimulating for me, emm and in terms of my- of my mental stimulation. But by attending seminars that talk about, you know, trading, derivative currency, whatever, it's just, it's just got me thinking, oh, I forgot about it, I should read more about it [...] It's things that I used to do (.) on a daily basis.

Like many of the women we talked to, this interviewee also describes her daily reality in Hong Kong as "a big big shock", which she largely accounts for by the fact that she had to give up her professional career as a consequence of the move ("I've always worked"). She

contrasts her past experiences as a professional with her current daily routines – as a mother and home maker. She uses a lot of relatively dark humour, such as irony and sarcasm to make fun of her daily activities in these new roles (e.g. her sarcastic remark “one works hard for lunch”, and “reading to a class of seven year olds there is really nothing very stimulating for me”). By emphasising the importance of her (former) professional career in contrast to her current motherly duties, she is challenging hegemonic femininities that place women in subordinate positions and construct them as mother and home maker (which is set in contrast to the role of the father who provides for the family). Like the interviewee in the previous example, she does this on various levels: on the local level she talks about her past (thereby drawing on the alternative role of career woman/professional) which she sets in sharp contrast to her present situation as a mother. On the regional level she challenges hegemonic femininities by vehemently rejecting the societally sanctioned expectations that the mother role is fulfilling and rewarding. The shift between these levels is signalled, for example, by her choice of pronouns and the shift between first person singular *I* referring to the interviewee and a generic *you* or *one* referring to women more generally. She thereby combines regional and global hegemonies with her own localised experience.

The next two examples illustrate another gendered role that the women we interviewed frequently draw on, namely the role of the *tai tai* – a role that is closely linked to relatively regional hegemonies that apply specifically to expatriate women in this community in Hong Kong.

### Example 6

*Context: M used to work as a PR manager in the US. She has children, and expressed her desire to return to the workforce in the near future. Also present during the interview was S, another expatriate woman living in a Hong Kong who is a close friend of M (I – interviewer).*

I: And how do you fill your time, look, I mean you've got more time because you don't have to do stuff around the house, or not as much as you would have to in the US, yeah, you know, yeah.

M: Eh hmmm ((sighs))

I: And you know=

M: =Yeah, that's it, that takes a lot of effort=

I: eh huh huh

M: =to fill up my time. Eh heh huh huh

((laughter echoed by two other interviewees and the interviewer. On and off laughter ensued afterwards for around 12 seconds, punctuated by inaudible speech))

M: You know, trying to take care of the finances, you know, bill paying.

Something that my husband used to do when he was eh, back in the States. Now I'm trying to do this, um, of course managing, a helper that's also, a big part of the job. Taking care of the kids eh when they're home? And they're at home at least seven hours a day, so I do not have a lot of time left. Taking care of myself? Sports, umm, gym? Swimming? ((cheeky tone of voice)) You know, just, you know trying to look nice for my husband? ((quiet laughter elicited from the interviewer and from the other interviewees)) That's not working most of the time?

(4) ((pause accompanied by breathless laughter from the interviewer and the other interviewees))

S: That sounds like a full-time job.

M: Yes, yes. ((laughing lightly throughout, laughter echoed by the interviewer and the two other interviewees))

The interviewee here draws on several roles (e.g. the homemaker who "manages the helper" and the mother who takes "care of the kids") but mostly she mobilises the role of the tai tai, i.e. a married woman who does not have to work to earn money and who, according to Hong Kong local associations, spends most of her time looking after herself "trying to look nice for my husband" (just as the interviewee humorously suggests), and spends the money that her husband earns on buying clothes, cosmetics and other luxury items. All these activities and characteristics associated with this relatively localised role are,

of course, closely related to gendered hegemonies that exist on a regional and even global level and that place men in a more powerful, dominant position (as the breadwinner and the one with a “meaningful/real” job), while women are constructed in relation to this hegemonic masculinity as being subordinate, relying on the money earned by men and spending part of their time (and constructing their self-understanding and identity) in relation to their husbands, namely “trying to look nice” for them. However, what is particularly interesting about this example is that while the interviewee mobilises the role of the tai tai here, she does this in a humorous and ironic way, thereby challenging the underlying gender hegemonies associated with it. This interpretation is further supported by her friend’s ironic supporting remark “That sounds like a full-time job”, which also humorously suggests that doing all these activities and leading a life of leisure is actually hard work. By describing her daily activities with a tongue in cheek tone of voice, laughter, the initial sighing, and some humour, these women send up and distance themselves from the gendered hegemonies associated with this role. Like the boys researched by Renold (2004: 254), the women in our data often used humour and parody to do this and to resist, subvert and sometimes challenge ‘the power relations embedded’ in these hegemonic femininities.

The next example shows how the interviewer rather than the interviewee mobilises the role of tai tai (or “lady of the lunch” as she calls it) and how this is vehemently rejected by the interviewee.



### Example 7

*Context: This excerpt is taken from the same interview as in Example 1 above.*

I: So tell me, what, what if you have no children, what would be your passion? If you were a lady of the lunch.

H: No, no, I wouldn't be a lady of the lunch, no.

I: But if you were, what would be your passion,=

H: No, no, no.

I: =would you go sailing, would you go to tennis, would you go horse-riding, [...] what would be your dream, to be here?

H: In Hong Kong? As in lady of the lunch? I don't know. No, I wouldn't be a lady of the lunch. I would love to get back into my job. I would love to, get kind of, and I used to do marketing for five-star hotels and for golf clubs

In this excerpt it is the interviewer who mobilises the role of tai tai (or "lady of the lunch" as she calls it) by creating a fantasy scenario ("if you were a lady of the lunch"). Interestingly, although she makes it very clear that this is just hypothetical, the interviewee strongly rejects this role: "No, no, I wouldn't be a lady of the lunch, no". Her repeated use of the disagreement marker *no* occurs at important points in her utterance, including utterance-initial and utterance-final, which intensifies her almost verbatim rejection of the

interviewer's hypothetical scenario. This is followed by further strong rejections and strong disagreements in subsequent lines (where she again repeats *no* several times – to which the interviewer latches on and further elaborates, thereby almost trying to make this role sound attractive). But the interviewee maintains her position, and after some questions at the beginning of her reply (to express her resistance), she repeats her initial statement “No, no, I wouldn't be a lady of the lunch”, which is this time followed by referring to an alternative femininity related to her former job (“I would love to get back into my job”) and some explanations. In this example, thus, the interviewee not only challenges and rejects the role of tai tai but actually provides an alternative, non-hegemonic, role namely that of a career woman.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

In our analyses of a group of trailing spouses in Hong Kong we have shown that these women frequently mobilise the gendered roles of mother, homemaker and tai tai. These roles are closely linked to hegemonic femininities in the sense that they dominate other, alternative roles (such as that of the career woman, which is not legitimised to the same extent in this specific local context). However, while the roles of mother and homemaker are related to relatively global notions of femininity (e.g. Pawelczyk 2008), the role of the tai tai is more locally coined and receives its hegemonic status specifically in the local context of this expatriate community in Hong Kong.

Moreover, the roles that these women often draw on in their interviews take on mostly subordinate forms and are characterised by their powerlessness and their close relationship to hegemonic masculinities (e.g. the role of the tai tai is inextricably linked to the role of a wealthy husband). However, the ways in which these women utilise these roles is not always powerless – rather, they sometimes reject them (Examples 4 and 5), offer alternatives (Example 7), or make fun of them and distance themselves from them (Example 6). Like the female athletes studied by Krane (2001: 115) they thereby resist, challenge and ultimately transform ‘expectations of hegemonic femininities.’ By mobilising these roles and orienting to their underlying hegemonic femininities, these women, like the school boys researched by Archer (2001: 842), take on ‘discursive positions that help them ward off anxiety and avoid feelings of powerlessness.’ They, too, use these local hegemonic versions of femininity to ‘promote self respect in the face of discredit’ (Archer 2001: 842) and to make sense of their current, often deeply unsatisfactory, situation. Taking on these discursive positions enables the women to cope with their situation (about which they often expressed a great dissatisfaction or even “despair” as one of our interviewees put it) and to reinstate themselves as active agents (who, for example, actively participated in the life-changing decision to move to Hong Kong) rather than as merely reactive protagonists (who take on the gendered roles available to them).

So returning to Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) call to empirically investigate gender hegemonies on different levels, our observations show that on the local level, the trailing spouses that we interviewed ‘do not simply follow the dominant cultural models’, as Murgia and Poggio (2009: 419-420) argue, but they ‘enact practices that adapt those models to themselves’ and they often resist and challenge them. The women thereby challenge

localised hegemonic femininities – i.e. what it means to be ‘womanly’ in the very specific context of their expatriate community in Hong Kong. However, while they often reject these femininities (as expressed in specific gendered roles) for themselves and thereby challenge hegemonic femininities on the local level, they often do not explicitly challenge the roles available to (expatriate) women in Hong Kong more generally. And although some interviewees provide a certain abstraction (and thus create some distance) – e.g. by using the generic terms *you* and *one* – most interviewees focus on their own very personal experience and do not generalise or abstract the situation beyond the boundaries of their local community. A similar picture emerges in relation to the global level, i.e. the global gender order (which still largely portrays men as the head of the family and as the main breadwinner and main decision maker). On this level, gender hegemonies also remain largely unchallenged by the women’s accounts. Rather, in spite of claiming agency for the decision to move to Hong Kong, they put a lot of blame on themselves, and draw on a set of specific, and rather limited and limiting, gender roles (of mother, homemaker and tai tai) – which are all in line with notions of femininity as sanctioned by hegemonic masculinities. Thus, in spite of a certain degree of abstraction (again, as reflected in their use of pronouns and comments about the mother role in more general terms (Examples 4 and 5)), the women largely reinforce rather than challenge gender ideologies on the global level which assign hegemony to men.

Clearly, hegemonic femininities exist in different forms and on different levels, and our interviewees evoked and utilised them at different points during the interviews to position themselves in relation to them. As our analyses have shown, we found the concept of hegemonic femininities particularly useful to describe the relatively localised femininities

which are dominant and which take precedence over other non-hegemonic, and often non-legitimised, femininities. For example, the notion of hegemonic femininities enabled to us explain the hegemonic status of the tai tai role as opposed to the subordinate status of the role of career woman in this particular community.

Thus, unlike, masculinities, the hegemony of femininities is a matter of internal degree – in other words, certain femininities gain their hegemonic status in relation to other femininities in a particular context. They do not, unlike hegemonic masculinities, take a dominant position in the gender order, and they are thus not hegemonic in their relationship to masculinities. That is, the femininities associated with certain roles, such as the role of mother, homemaker and tai tai, are hegemonic in this particular community when compared to, for example, the femininity associated with the role of career woman. But these femininities, albeit being hegemonic in relation to other subordinate femininities, are themselves subordinate to specific masculinities which take hegemonic status over all femininities in the gender order in this community. This hegemonic status of masculinities was evident, for example, in the observation that most women constructed their roles as legitimised by masculinities and in relation to them (e.g. as tai tais of wealthy husbands, or as home makers who support their working husbands).

Thus, unlike certain masculinities which are hegemonic in a dual sense, femininities are usually only hegemonic when compared to other femininities. In the gender order they typically take on subordinate positions (with certain masculinities taking on dominant positions) and are often very much defined in relation to and thus legitimised by (often hegemonic) masculinities. This is an important distinction as it points to the different nature

of the concepts of hegemonic femininities and hegemonic masculinities. However, in spite of these differences and the fact that the hegemony of femininities is somewhat more restricted than that of masculinities, we believe that the concept of hegemonic femininities is very useful for sociolinguistic enquiry and may help better understand the often subordinate and disempowered positions that many women – like the trailing spouses that we have researched here – find themselves in.

We thus hope that this empirical study of the discourse of trailing spouses in expatriate Hong Kong provides further much needed evidence of how hegemonic femininities and masculinities are constructed, enacted, reinforced, exploited or challenged in a specific locality by a specific group of women, while linking these relatively local observations to the notion of hegemonic femininities on the more abstract regional and global levels. In addition, we hope to have demonstrated the usefulness and benefits of applying the concept of hegemonic femininities to sociolinguistic research on language and gender. Clearly, this is only the beginning, and more research is needed in order to better understand this concept and how it is enacted and oriented to in interaction; and we hope that other sociolinguists will find this concept equally valuable and will productively incorporate it into their future research when exploring issues around language and gender.

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## Appendix

### Transcription conventions

[...]	parts omitted from transcript
'...'	reported speech
–	unfinished or broken off word or utterance
?	rising intonation
.	a stopping fall in tone
,	continuing intonation (like when enumerating things)
!	an animated and emphatic tone
(.)	just noticeable pause
::	lengthening of sounds
Huh huh	laughter particles
((xxx))	paralinguistic information
=	latching on of two utterances without a pause
<u>love</u>	spoken with emphasis

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Connell (1987: 184) understands emphasised femininity as being 'defined around compliance with this subordination [of women to men]' and as 'oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men'.

<sup>2</sup> In line with the practice in the expatriate community of Hong Kong where we collected our data, we use the term tai tai here to refer to the wife of a wealthy man, and who, due to her husband's role as the exclusive breadwinner in the family, does not pursue a professional career but rather leads a life of leisure and luxury. Used in this sense, the term tai tai has slightly negative connotations and is often used to describe women who lead, what is generally considered to be an idle and privileged life-style, and who spend a lot of money on shopping and beauty treatments.

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