

'Home and Away': female transnational professionals in Hong Kong

Mobility has become a buzzword of our times. There is an increased sense that we are no longer constrained to live in one place throughout our lives, or even in one place at a time. Indeed, there is now a growing body of literature that advocates the concept of transnational mobility to make sense of the new fluid living patterns, the affective and instrumental relationships that cross national borders and span localities, and the conceptualisations of transnational 'lifespaces'¹ within the broader perspective of pluri-local attachments in late modern society.

Maggy Lee

TRANSNATIONAL PROFESSIONALS are part of this broader trend of mobile people moving either part-time or full-time, temporarily or permanently. These 'transnational elites' – a term used to refer to the highly skilled professionals in global cities² – have been described as the archetypal transmigrant, the nomadic worker, the embodiment of a new cosmopolitan identity in cross-border spaces. They are able to take advantage of the flexibility in global labour markets, the ability to live and work in different places, and with these, increased leisure time in affluent societies, extended holidays, and flexible working lives. Yet we know relatively little about their motivations and actual experiences. Apart from a few notable exceptions,³ there is relatively little sociological work on what transnational mobility means for female expatriate professionals. Does it bring about greater freedom and security or social exclusion, improved or weakened social and financial status, better career prospects or new constraints?

Our two-year research study, 'Home and Away: Female Transnational Professionals in Hong Kong',⁴ looks at what transnational mobility means for female expatriate professionals, how and why they move from one place to another and under which conditions, their needs and aspirations, and the advantages and disadvantages of their mobile lives. The study involves in-depth interviews with forty highly educated, highly skilled female transnational professionals who relocated to Hong Kong either as lead migrants or as accompanying spouses on a dependent visa. The forty interviewees cover a broad spectrum in terms of age, Western and non-Western nationalities, employment status and sectors in which they or their partners work. About two-thirds were married at the time of interview. Their length of residence in Hong Kong varies from three months to thirty years. We used snowball sampling as well as a number of social institutions, non-governmental organisations, residential forums, internet-based blogs and expatriate websites as our recruitment sources. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, typically in coffee shops or the university campus; a number of respondents even welcomed us into their home or workplace to share their stories.

Meaning and practices of mobility

What is striking about these female transnational professionals is the extent of their mobility and how much this features as an integral part of their individual biography. Over half of the respondents have studied, lived and/or worked in other countries prior to relocating to Hong Kong. Their stories are full of intersecting forms of mobility and vivid memories of travel - for example, growing up as a child with parents with a history of military or missionary postings, backpacking and travelling for pleasure, working as au pairs or on overseas

postings, studying as exchange or research students. Some respondents kept moving in order to stay close to the family at different stages of their life course. For example, one interviewee was born in France, moved to Gabon in Africa with her parents at the age of two, finished her high school in Madagascar and university degree in France, lived and worked in Beijing and Switzerland before relocating to Hong Kong with her husband and their children.

Economic and non-economic motivations

For many respondents, relocation to Hong Kong depends heavily on financial and career considerations and is perceived as part of a career advancement strategy for themselves or their partners/spouses. It involves obtaining employment opportunities and professional experiences that would otherwise be difficult to come by. Although perceptions of economic opportunities prevail across different cohorts, the conditions of possibility for female expatriates have been shaped by the changing socio-economic conditions, state policies and Hong Kong's colonial legacy and development as an international centre for global business and finance. Transnational professionals who are now coming towards the end of their working lives set out on their overseas careers in very different social and political environments. Single women who arrived during the era of colonialism and Hong Kong's rapid economic expansion in the 1980s encountered relatively few immigration restrictions and employment barriers. Most were able to secure job offers with high remuneration and tended to describe their relocation to Hong Kong as empowering and life-changing. One British respondent who joined the local civil service before the recruitment of expatriates officially ended in the mid-1980s recalled her excitement and sense of adventure when she was recruited to work in the legal department without having to retake any examinations: "The government paid for my business class flight. I was twenty-five. They did everything for me and gave me a serviced apartment. I got paid HK\$16,000 a month. It was an amazing deal."

In contrast, women who arrived in postcolonial Hong Kong have to navigate increasingly restrictive immigration policies and economic uncertainties. As one respondent explained, she had 'a fantastic time' as a single woman working as a pre-school teacher in Hong Kong when she was recruited by an international company in the early 2000s. However, her experiences during a second relocation with her unmarried partner on international transfer and their son were far less positive. The combined effects of her visitor status and visa restriction meant she could not seek part-time employment, open a bank account or join the local library, and she was constantly fearful that her tourist visa would not be renewed.

Our study demonstrates the continued importance of understanding how female transnational professionals negotiate their mobilities and moorings and the gendered effects of transience on individuals and families today.

Besides economic motivations, many respondents aspire to enhance social freedom and to break constrictive gender roles and family life through their spatial mobility. This is particularly evident amongst single women who spoke of their new lifestyle in terms of new beginnings and self-development as their status changes from being a student or self-initiated mover to a highly skilled transnational professional. Their relocation has enhanced their ability to be more self-confident and enabled them to clear their student debts: "I love my family dearly, but I found that I was doing things for them rather than thinking about myself. In Hong Kong I am doing everything for me. I have just started Mandarin classes. I am looking to join a choir or something so I can meet other people. I travel a lot using my own savings. It's all very liberating!"

Gender matters

Nevertheless the empowering possibilities of leading an itinerant lifestyle often go hand in hand with less positive feelings of loneliness and loss, of being unable to attend important occasions in the lives of family and friends (e.g., birthdays, christenings), of children growing up in the absence of grandparents and cousins. Seen in this light, transnational mobility involves both continuities and discontinuities, being able to embrace some sort of freedom while retaining certain social connections. Furthermore, their freedom from constraints and obligations is tempered by gendered expectations. This is particularly evident in the stories of accompanying spouses with children. Although many described shouldering a reduced burden of domestic labour in the expatriate household, this is almost always achieved through outsourcing household and childcare labour (e.g., employing live-in domestic migrant workers) rather than through renegotiation of gendered roles and practices. Others described or anticipated the obligation and stress of caring for elderly parents or parents with health problems especially in the current era of global austerity.

For many respondents, the focus of social interactions and leisure spaces tend to be shaped by their life course – revolving around colleagues, travel and the pub focus of expatriate life among single women, and around children and their school activities among accompanying spouses. This means women who do not fit into these categories can feel particularly vulnerable and socially isolated. Accompanying spouses who put their career on hold spoke of the practical and emotional challenges they face, frustrations of losing their financial independence and sense of identity, and the extra efforts required to lead an independent social life: "Back home where I grew up, people know me all my life. I have been a professional, so I am who I am ... Here, everything works around my husband. I want my husband to be better experienced and so on. But financially, I am insecure. In the past I knew that I have complete ownership of my income. Now even if my husband gives me money, I am not so sure if I want to go ahead to buy a pastry for myself because I am so used to enjoying my own money."

Negotiating mobilities

Our respondents' stories highlight the ongoing nature of migratory plans as highly skilled transnational professionals make continuous decisions to relocate, cut short or extend their stay, leave and then return to Hong Kong, often in the context of practising mobility as a family project. Although many women feel empowered by their mobile lives, there are still concerns about the persistent constraints of professional women's social lives and how these are exacerbated when the husband's career necessitates or precipitates the move abroad. Our study demonstrates the continued importance of understanding how female transnational professionals negotiate their mobilities and moorings and the gendered effects of transience on individuals and families today.

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- 4 The project 'Home and Away: Female Transnational Professionals in Hong Kong' (HKU7011-PPR-11) is funded by the University Grants Committee under the Public Policy Research programme.

