

Feminist composite narratives of Chinese women: the interrelation of work, family and community in forced labour situations

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Abstract

This contribution builds on the work Lewis has engaged in around women's decision-making processes on work and care. Gender has been an important consideration across her work and this has been explored in familial and organizational settings. The personal is undoubtedly political and a feminist lens privileges this. Previous research (including Lewis) has marked a shift from work-life balance to work personal life integration. This implies agency and perhaps a particular kind of woman able to make choices. In contrast, this paper focuses on Chinese migrant women working in vulnerable situations. Drawing on data gathered from a forced labour project, we present some composite narratives from women as daughters, mothers and wives. These highlight the role of the core economy in decisions about migration for work. Inevitably work decisions are bound up with and situated in wider care and familial networks. These insights around emotional and practical labour are feminist concerns. We present the complex decisions made by women around precarious work, present and distant 'families' and care. We suggest that future work-life research should heed Lewis' call for more nuanced understandings of the multi-layered context of people's experiences, workplace practices and relevant national policies, but go beyond this, to pay attention to the globalised forces underpinning ever greater inequity in work, in families and in communities.

In this paper we utilize a contemporary issue, that of forced labour,¹ to interrogate how choice and agency around work and family are theorized and experienced for women. The paper is organized around a number of aims. First we briefly rehearse the knowledge production around women, work and family, drawing on gendered understandings of labour, choice, care and family (here utilized primarily by Lewis and others). We articulate with a feminist understanding, recognising the diversity of feminisms (Mama, 2002), the interrelated domains of work, family and community for women, noting the importance of place and context in situating knowledge. We then present composite narratives of women as daughters, mothers and wives to exemplify how these interrelated dimensions play out for women. We draw upon a dataset of Chinese migrant women's stories of labour, family and choices to construct these narratives. Lastly, we provide some reflections on these intersections and the narrative approach, highlighting some of the challenges for the future of research into community- work-life integration.

The feminist rallying call linking the personal to the political continues to be an important starting point for thinking about women, families and work. As globalization unfurls to a wider neoliberal agenda, we see that the flows of labour (forced or unforced), goods and of course humans are neither straightforward nor equitable. The personal is undoubtedly and perhaps even more enmeshed with wider global processes at play. Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2004) note the feminization of migrant labour, as poorer women make journeys to accommodate a 'care deficit' in high-income countries. Care and work here function as chains or networks, which traverse nations and position women as maids, sex workers and nannies. It is a call to think about the place of work in families and the place of families in work.

We have been heavily influenced, in our work by several strands of Suzan Lewis' work. Firstly, she has used feminist analyses to highlight the gendered nature of experience at

¹ The International Labour Organisation defines forced labour as: '[...] all work which is extracted from any person under the menace of any penalty for which the person has not offered himself voluntarily' (ILO, 1930).

work (Kagan and Lewis, 1989) and of work-life policies in work organisations, taking the debates beyond the existence and implementation of family friendly working (for example, Lewis and Cooper, 1987; 1988; 1996).

Next, grounded in her earlier work, she has highlighted the importance of taking a life course approach, drawing attention to the ways that ways in which the different roles women play at different life stages interface with their experiences of care and work (for example, Klee et al., 2002; Brannen et al., 2002; Rana et al., 1999; Kagan, Lewis and Heaton, 1999; Nilsen et al., 2012). Through the exploration of these and other diverse work and life situations, Lewis argues that work life integration and the decisions people make about their lives are situated in a multi-layered context. It is impossible to make sense of individual choices and decisions, or, indeed, organizational and social policies without understanding the different layers of context, including personal, family, cultural and national contexts (Kovacheva, Lewis and Demireva, 2005; Lewis and Haas, 2005; Lewis and Rapoport, 2004; Lewis and Smithson, 2001; Lewis, Gambles and Rapoport, 2007; Rapoport et al., 2004).

This consideration of the contextualized nature of paid work with a family life, a social life and other community roles place these concerns within a wider policy discourse, operating through organizations. Within the business world and certain Governments, the importance of paid work and the primacy of economic competitiveness, whatever the personal costs, is almost accepted wisdom. In this discourse, profits and short term efficiency gains are often placed before social issues of care or human dignity (Lewis, Gambles and Rapoport, 2007), reflecting and contributing to contemporary, interlocking crises (Kagan and Burton, 2014; Lewis and Kagan, 2015). Indeed, Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport (2006) questioned the impact of intensive work regimes on men and women's well being, and the long-term sustainability of people, families, society and economy. The present paper picks up this challenge, drawing on a project that explored the decision-making processes of Chinese undocumented workers in the UK. In this paper, we focus on migrant women whose experiences of 'choice' are interwoven within

complex networks around care, work and kinship. We write these stories as feminists with a clear social justice agenda.

Method

Collaboration and collection of narratives

The research was conducted as a collaboration between our university based research team and a non-governmental organisation whose purpose was to support the Chinese community in a Northern City in the UK. Staff from both teams worked together on project development, delivery, data analysis and sense making. Interviews were undertaken with thirty two Chinese migrants to the UK, with experience of exploitative labour conditions (Skrivankova, 2010). Fourteen women participated in the study. They were recruited via the NGO and informal networks of Chinese migrants working in the North West of England. Women were working in the hospitality sector and were aged between 20 and 45.

Data analysis

Transcript texts were subsequently treated as narratives. In 2010 we carried out a thematic analysis and this formed the basis of the formal project report (Kagan et al., 2011). Since then, we have immersed ourselves further in the data, writing about Chinese migrants' experiences of forced labour (Fisher et al, 2014; Lawthom et al, 2013, 2014, 2015), talking at conferences and seminars about the project and campaigning for anti-slavery legislative proposals. We have dwelt for over four years on the data, discussing them with members of the Chinese community and with our colleagues from the Chinese support agency and others working and living in the field of migration. We have witnessed changes in global migratory trends and, in particular, the UK political and media responses to these. During this process, as we have endeavoured to make sense the stories told, from feminist and interpretative perspectives, and discussed our own emotional and cognitive responses to the data, we have seen our task to be the representation of, or restorying the experiences of migration and of exploitative work.

Through our feminist lens, it was clear to us that those accounts given by women in the study emphasised the central role of family in their migratory experiences. Their accounts included experiences of work in the money economy, but also in what feminist economist Neva Godwin refers to as the ‘core economy’ (Nelson and Godwin, 2009). The core economy is the economy of family, neighbourhood, kith and kin, and is underpinned by women’s roles as daughters, wives and mothers.

For the purposes of this article, we have used composite first person narratives (see Todres, 2008; Wertz, Nosek, McNeish and Marlow, 2011) to restory the narratives collected from the 14 women, a restorying with a focus on their experiences as daughters, wives and mothers. Wertz et al. (2011:2) describe the composite first person narrative as a reflective story. “It draws a composite picture of the phenomenon emerging from the informants. The composite is not simply a re-telling. It is interpretation by the researcher in several important ways: through her knowledge of the literature regarding the phenomenon under enquiry, through listening and hearing the stories told by the informants and through her own reflexivity during the process.” For us, it also included understanding of and engagement with global migration trends and UK legislative processes concerning forced labour which followed the publication of the initial research, showing the public response to migration (Tyler, 2013, cited in Fisher et al, 2014).

The Daughter’s Story

When my parents suggested, six years ago, that I should go to work in England I jumped at the chance. I did not finish my primary school and was helping on the family farm. It had got particularly hard to find work in Fujian. Fishing has almost dried up and lots of people are out of work. We could not even survive on our farm without other work. We are so poor. We spent a lot of time discussing it, including my two sisters who are older than me. I think they were envious I was chosen to go. I thought it would be a great

chance to see something of the world. I thought the UK would be a paradise. All the families around us have someone working overseas and they build big houses and pay for schools – the family can live a lot better because of the money they send back. Friends of my mother's put her in touch with some travel facilitators – or snakeheads - who, she said, were very good. Of course they charged a fee. For me it was 300,000 RMB. They agreed to organise my travel to England and once I had arrived my family would pay the money to their agent in China. I would then pay back my family. If my family could not pay then the snakeheads would cause trouble for them.

Of course my family could not afford the money but they scraped it together, borrowing from friends, relatives and friends of relatives – everyone understands why people want to borrow money for travel to England. This meant that my family owed their friends, and I owed my family, so I knew I would have to work hard, but that did not worry me as people had told us you could earn a lot of money in England.

I had to go to some classes before I left. They made me practice what to say when I arrived in England. They told me I would be asked a lot of questions and that I should try to make them feel really sorry for me. Then I would get a house and lots of support before I found a job. It wasn't like that at all. I travelled for 2 years by coach, boats, planes, more coaches, through lots of different countries. Sometimes I did not know where I was. In one place we were kept in house and not allowed to go out for about four months. This was quite scary. We were not treated kindly. At the airport in London I was asked a lot of questions but I did not understand them as there was no interpreter. I tried to remember the story I had learned in China but it was not always easy. After 2 days in the airport I was sent somewhere – I don't know where. It wasn't nice. But I climbed out a window and one of the snakeheads picked me up in a car. He took me to another house and told me to ring my parents and tell them I had arrived and that the money should be paid. He tried to make me do sex with him but I refused. My uncle

helped me get a job as a char² in a restaurant. My job paid very little and I worked 6.5 days, 14 hours a day. It was hard and my arms were not strong enough for the work. In the kitchen I was shouted at and I felt frightened.

My uncle introduced me to my husband. I told my family about him and they asked around to see if he was suitable for me, before they would allow me to have a relationship with him. They said he was OK, so we got married – though not formally. When I got married I went to live with my husband – he had paid off his debts and was now renting a room. I miss my family very much and it does not look as if I will ever see them again. With my husband's help I have nearly paid off my debt though, and then I can start sending money back – but I will have to get another job. I do not tell my family in China how hard life is for me here.

The wife's story

I have been in England now for 7 years. I come from Jianmen. My husband came here before me: he left when our daughter was only a few months old, but I stayed in China to look after her until she was a teenager. He had to leave because he was³ Falun Gong⁴. He told me not to come as the tough work and long days would be too much for me. But I was worried about him. I discussed leaving with my parents and brother and sister. They all thought it a good idea as my husband was already working in England. The hardest thing was leaving my daughter, who was 12 years old with my parents. I worried about them as they are getting old. When I left I was working making tea leaves which was quite a good job, but I still had to borrow 220,000 RMB to pay the snakehead. I borrowed it from relatives. My husband had just finished paying off his debts when I

² Dishwasher

³ approximately 25,000 sterling

⁴ **Falun Gong** or **Falun Dafa** (Great Law of the Falun) is a Chinese organization based on traditional [qi gong](#) practices that was founded in 1992. The Chinese government's attempts to suppress the movement they see as a cult have resulted in the group becoming known among human rights groups.

travelled, and so he took on my debt too. That's how it works. The agency arranged for me to go to England with a work permit, so I had legitimate status when I entered the country. I had to work with the employer named on the work permit and I did cleaning for them in Manchester, which is where my husband lives. I was paid a lot less than it said on the work permit, but I did not know how to change this. Soon after I arrived they told me to go to London. I could not choose not to, because my work permit meant I had to stay with that employer. I had to go. They were very critical about my work and I was not happy. At the end of the year I ran away, back to Manchester and found my husband who was working in a town near to Manchester. My work permit ran out and it has been difficult for me to get status even though I have been here all this time. My husband has not got status either, even though he has been here a long time. He keeps changing jobs, but they are more difficult to find now. I had a job but the employers stopped their business and then I could not find work. There were not so many Chinese employers in this town. I did not speak English and my husband did, a bit, so I relied on him to know how everything worked in the UK. I felt like a prisoner with my husband, although he said his life was better now I had come: it was not so boring. Before I came he used to go gambling with his friends and he still does this which means we often have money difficulties still. We have not paid off my travel debts yet. I hope we will have finished this soon so I can start sending money back for my family. I hope my daughter will go to college but without my money she won't be able to. At one time I left my husband because he was unkind to me. I went to stay with my cousins in London. But then I was pregnant and so I found him again. When the baby was born I applied for asylum even though I was afraid they would deport me to China. I thought once the baby was born we would get status but this was not the case. We lived in the place where my husband worked but when he changed jobs we had to find another place. The biggest challenge for me, so I can be more free from my husband, is to learn English. I am still waiting to hear if I have permanent residence. If I do, I can start my own business and be able to choose where to live.

The Mother's Story

I came to England a year after my husband in 2003. I left our five year old son with my parents in Fuqing. I paid 200,000 RMB to the snakeheads and part of the service was to find me a job when I arrived. I came into the country with a visitor's visa for 6 months. But that ran out. Still, the snakehead did find me a job in the same town as my husband – somewhere between London and Manchester. It was long hours and the work was hard. My husband had to help me pay off my debts, which have now been paid back, and he worked long hours as a delivery man for a Chinese takeaway. The money was not good for either of us so we asked around and paid some people £200 for information about other jobs. We moved to Manchester, where our daughter was born. I worked on the counter and my husband worked in the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant. The boss was quite kind but the other workers did not like us and shouted at us a lot. We did not speak the same Chinese language. After our daughter was born, I didn't work for two years and looked after her. Then we sent her back to China, to my mother, so I could go back to work: I had to keep working to pay the debt. When my daughter was born I applied for asylum. My husband said I would get a house and money for food. But this did not happen. I do not know what has happened as my husband and my status is still uncertain, even though some of my friends have had their applications approved. Now I have two more sons and I am not sending them back. It will be a better life for them going to school in England. I wish I could find a way for my other two children to come to England. I do not understand why we still do not have status, especially as our children are born here. I can't go back even if I wanted to. In China my sons would have no schooling as they were not born there. They have introduced a tax for people with more than one child: I would have to pay more than 200,000RMB, which I could not afford. If I am here they cannot tax me. I worry about my sons and my daughter. I worry about whether I am doing the right thing, if I know enough about this country, especially when they are ill. I struggle when making appointments with the doctor and things like that. I would like to see my first son and daughter and my parents again. We send some money back and that is helping my parents look after them and helping them with school. My oldest son will soon go to college I hope. But what kind of a life will they have in China?. They are all still poor there. Here the food is good and the air is good. The

buildings are ugly and the work is hard but it is a better life for them. I am not working as I am looking after the children. This means my husband has to work even harder to find the money for us to live. I am trying to learn English. When I joined my husband it was difficult for me to make friends, but now in my English class I have met some people. I cannot leave my husband: if I did where would I live as our house is above the restaurant where he works: at least we have our own two rooms and do not have to share with the other workers. We cannot get our own flat because all landlords ask to see papers and we don't have them.

Interpreting the narratives

These composite narratives present a complex picture of much more than forced labour, which they move in and out of. These narratives show the ways in which work decisions are intimately enmeshed within a nexus of connections between family in China, newly formed families in the UK and networks stretching across the countries of paid work, care and familial responsibility. Work decisions and the right to work (with documents) are very much linked to the core economy and to the diverse but related roles played out by the women. Being networked within a wider Chinese community (linking the UK and China) provided shelter, work contacts and opportunities viewed in positive terms. However, the enmeshment within this community also limited potential at times, as women struggled with language, wider social networks and knowledge around everyday concerns such as health, status and education. Care, either proximal for children co-located with them or distantly provided by regular remittances is interwoven with their statuses as women, wives, mothers and daughters (Hochschild and Ehrenreich, 2004). Aspects of the imagined migrant journey of finding a better life are contemporary concerns, indeed, Lewis et al (2014) talk of the 'migrant project' as a period of time, being an 'apprentice' and ensuring hardship in pursuance of an imagined future. For these women, the imagined future was being worked on whilst simultaneously, living at times on the margins and without status.

Eaves (2015) argues that more research is needed on women migrants, as they are often neglected as a distinct group as the gendered nature of migration not well understood. This 'normalised absence, pathologised presence' (Phoenix, 1987) is also present in policy discourse. This is despite the identification of family migration (family formation and reunification) as one of the significant contributors to the increase in the proportion of women in migration flows to OECD countries (Forbes Martin, 2004 cited in Eaves, 2015). The composite narratives above show that for these women, integration into society is challenging. There are relatively low levels of integration in labour market, interrupted further by children and/or partnerships, which at times enabled and disadvantaged the women financially. The women were uniformly obtaining low wages and working in exploitative situations, predominantly in Chinese owned businesses. These offered them limited participation in communities other than Chinese ones and made language learning difficult. This in turn limited opportunities for integration, compounded by the UK Government's restriction of access to free English language courses (Eaves, 2015). Skill sets from China did not translate so lower skilled jobs meant under employment often in work that involved catering and kitchen work (mirroring domestic arrangements). The precarious positions of work and citizenship were heightened around children as women struggled with how much protection was afforded by having children born in the UK. Their positions as mothers seemed to afford much joy and concern, alongside recognition that the one child policy curtailed freedom but also meant separated families for some. Making a home in the UK was often seen as a positive choice for children around education, although involved vulnerable status and other hardships for the families.

This paper speaks to contemporary global debates about the interconnected demographic, economic and social crises resulting in the movement of people and goods from the Global South to the North. We can read these composite stories as specific migrant journeys that tell us something about agency in mobility and mothering, within limited choices. Not afforded the luxury of family friendly policies or state provision for maternity, the women existed as what Standing (2011) terms the 'precariat'. However,

they are also showing women seeking better lives, in and out of forced labour, escaping poverty, exercising agency at times, and adapting to a life elsewhere.

At the heart of women's agency lay the family and the demands of the core economy. Fine (2012) notes that globalization facilitates circuits of dispossession around care that is felt differently by women in Global North and South contexts, and within them. It is felt differently again by women crossing different contexts through migration. Nevertheless, for the women in this study, their hidden status (Pao, 2010) obscures their economic contribution and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, at home, in the workplace and in the community.

Reflecting on this approach

Space precludes a telling of our researcher tales although this is sometimes a feature of composite narrative work. DeAnne et al (2004) argue that a feminist narrative interpretative approach is characterised by the co-creation, re-presentation and interpretation of women's stories. This shares with other qualitative and interpretive research, the assumption of intersubjectivity between researcher and participant, and the mutual creation of data. Researchers make "conscious effort to consider how race, class, gender, ability, immigrations status and other contexts of diversity and inequality surface in research participants' multilayered daily life experiences, their telling of their stories and the multiple contexts within which these stories may be represented and interpreted"(op.cit, p.42.43)

Methodologically and practically narratives are of course stories and these have a particular currency in particular contexts- academia, border control and to families. When we analysed data from this study, we were faced with the challenge shared by Hordyk, Soltane and Hanley (2014), namely, 'How do feminist {} researchers represent voice of the research participants to community and service organizations while simultaneously meeting the expectations of the academic or political institutions soliciting the research?'

We consider that the choice of composite, first person stories has both protected the identities of participants, most of whom had unauthorised status in the UK, and captured the emotional as well as the cognitive detail of their stories, and experiences not just Chinese migrant workers, but Chinese *women* migrant workers. Work was the entry point, which captured the imagination of the funders but the world around work, its intersectionality with life as a mother, daughter and wife captured our interest as women, feminists and academics.

The rather staccato style of the stories we have presented, reflects the registers in which the original narratives were told. In our study, perhaps as a function of their status and possibly related to cultural expressions, women tended to represent their lives rather matter of factly, in contrast to some of the harrowing experiences they retold. Elsewhere we have written about the emotion (Lawthom et al, 2013) and the ways emotional labour appeared in the data. We have endeavoured to ensure our interpretative processes were displayed in a form closely reflecting the participants who told their stories. Following DeAnne et al., (2004) we have woven the co-created stories collected during the research and our narrative interpretations together. In our re-presentation we hope to have preserved both women migrant workers' worlds and our interpretations of the context and meaning of those stories.

As we prepared our re-presentations and the composite narratives, we were aware of the issue of ownership. We tried to privilege women's experiences but at the same time acknowledging our roles in interpreting the stories and re-storying them. We were aware, as feminist researchers, that choices had to be made about whose stories would be used and re-presented for this article and what our sense making was. Our choice of composite narratives enabled us to draw on each woman's account and thereby avoid the issue of choice for inclusion or exclusion. We view stories as 'socially constructed tapestries that weave together unique threads of personal, relational, and cultural realities, perceptions and experiences, in the process of facilitating the creation of fluid meaning' (DeAnne et al., 2004:44). The composite narrative approach helped us realise

our ‘obligation to combat the social and interpersonal structures that perpetuate the oppression of women.. by reproducing existing structures of power’ (op cit p. 47).

These stories reveal that voluntary migrants imagining a better life do not imagine the construct of work life integration, and the very construct seems antithetical to participants’ way of being. They are more concerned with the prospects of dignified work-family-community lives, embedded in the work-migration-family-care-community support-identity nexus.

Our research on forced labour, including that presented here, emphasises the need to go beyond national policy contexts to understand the complex ways in which precarious and vulnerable work interrelates with family and the wider policy context. Researching forced labour has highlighted the role of social justice in understanding contemporary living. We suggest that future work-life research should heed Lewis’ call for more nuanced understandings of the multi-layered context of people’s experiences, workplace practices and relevant national policies, but go beyond this, to pay attention to the globalised forces underpinning ever greater inequity in work, in families and in communities. Research is needed to draw attention to the damaging and undignified lives, devoid of enriched family and leisure time that contemporary precarious working creates. Not only is research in this arena needed to bear witness to people’s lives, inform policy and practice with a view to achieving greater equity, it is needed to avoid some of these globalised practices undermining the very progress made in some places to greater integration of work and life and social equity. The last word lies with Lewis and Hass (2004:340, 348).

Progress towards enhanced equity will require changes at the interrelated levels of family, workplace, society and the international community [...] With increasing globalisation we need to be concerned about the wide international context that can both support and undermine social policies for integrating work and family in equitable ways. [...] the globalisation process and especially the hunt for cheap labour with minimal social protection can undermine [work-life balance] social policy or even render it irrelevant.

Note:

Carolyn Kagan was founding editor of *Community, Work and Family*, along with Suzan Lewis. Rebecca Lawthom is a current editor of *Community, Work and Family*. Both are concerned to ensure that the ‘community’ side of the work-family-community triangle is fully explored and understood. Both have been heavily influenced by Suzan’s ability to argue for feminist, complex and multi-layered understandings of socially important phenomena, of her formidable international research achievements and of her capacity to support new researchers. CK has worked closely on some projects and in many many conversations. We are pleased to call her a friend.

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