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Practices on the Periphery: Highly Educated Chinese Immigrant Women Making Occupational Niches in Canada

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Abstract: I examine learning as part of the process where immigrants negotiate personal and profession identities and participate in the Canadian labour market. I argue for a mutually-constitutive relationship between individual practices, identity construction and Canadian workplace accessibility and receptivity underpinned by gender, race and class relations and perceived language differences.

Only in the recent years have researchers started to address immigrants' learning involved in their labour market participation process in Canada. To name a few, Church et al. (2001) examine how immigrants learn through labour organization; Slade et al., (2005) depict a complex yet contradictory picture of immigrants' learning through volunteerism. Shragge et al. (2005), using an adaptive framework, show that part of the learning that immigrants engage is to unlearn their previous expectations in order to adapt to the flexible and feminized labour market.

My paper contributes to the above literature from a particular social-cultural perspective towards learning: legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). LPP is premised on the conception that learning is an integral aspect of social practices. Through LPP, Lave and Wenger specifically address learning by people located at the periphery of a community of practices, which is organized around a shared repertoire of knowledge and practices (Wenger, 1998). In LPP, personal practices and the lived-in social world are conceived as mutually constitutive.

LPP lends analytical strength to the experiences of immigrants in two important ways. First, it proposes that the social-cultural practices and the accessibility of the community that immigrants try to enter have a bearing on how they learn, what they learn and most importantly, how their identities are formed and transformed as part of the learning process. That is, LPP directs people's attention to the social organization of learning that is full of power dynamics and power struggles. Second, LPP highlights the political importance of peripheral positions. On the one hand, peripherality can be a disempowering position as newcomers may not have full entitlement of membership and may lack in power of negotiation. On the other hand, Lave and Wenger point out that throughout our lives, we necessarily belong to different communities of practices. As the crucial nexus between communities of practices, we are in an empowering position vis-à-vis the new community we try to enter. By emphasizing peripherality, Lave and Wenger do not intend to construct a center-periphery dichotomy. Rather, peripherality signals ways of belonging, which are not only a condition of learning but also a part of learning. Through such a conception of peripherality, LPP also helps to understand community of practices as an open-ended and evolving process rather than a fixed and ahistorical existence.

It has to be pointed out although LPP aptly connects learners with the large social world, it has not sufficiently addressed the heterogeneity of the learners. When it comes to the issues of identity, Lave and Wenger mainly focus on the dichotomized position of newcomers and adept practitioners. The particularity and individualities of the learners somehow get lost in their examination of learning. In their respective works later, however, Wenger (1998) and Lave

(Holland and Lave 2001) revisit the issue of identity, both in relation to practice. Wenger sees identity as ‘a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other’ (Wegner, 1998: P151). Similarly, Holland and Lave (2001) see identity as interplay between subjective formation and local practices. What is particular about Holland and Lave is that they explicitly attend to the dialogical relationship between the “I” and “the others” in local practices, which opens the space to address social construction of differences along the line of gender and race relations. Such a conception of identity can be used to amend the original theory of LPP as it helps to position learners as embodied beings in their local practices.

Immigrant Women Research Participants

This paper draws on the experiences of fourteen Chinese immigrant women: four from my master’s thesis research from 2004 and 2005 and ten from a faculty research project entitled “Learning to be Good Citizens – Informal Learning and the Labour Market Experiences of Professional Chinese Immigrant Women” (LGC)

¹ between 2005 and 2006. All women came to Canada after 1998. All had university degrees and above before coming to Canada. Prior to immigration, they had professional experiences in engineering (6) medical sciences (2), English (2), education (1), applied physics (1), library information (1), and law (1). Shortly after immigration, nine worked labour-intensive services or manufacturing jobs. By the time of the interviews, one was studying English full time and preparing to go back to China. Two moved into their previous or related professions. Five changed their fields of work or specialization to be data entry clerks, daycare assistants, superintendents, library information workers, and community workers. All the other five women were in the process of changing to other fields of work (one was a full-time graduate student, two were between jobs, two were still trapped in services or manufacturing jobs).

Learning as Labour Market Navigation and Identity Negotiation

One sentiment that came out of the interviews was that the women did not want to have their educational or work backgrounds entirely erased. Although most of them plummeted to the bottom of the Canadian labour market right after landing, they tried to upgrade their employment status through repositioning themselves vis-à-vis the Canadian labour market. Involved in their repositioning process were the women's practices of identification as well as their varying "performances" and "operations" of their socially attributed identity.

Four of the six women who majored in engineering decided to change to clerical accounting. Cong initially tried to work as an engineer. When the resume that she sent out brought her no response, she decided to change to accounting. Her explanation of her decision typified the response of the women geared towards accounting:

Fast, and easy to get into the field. Plus, it is very easy for Chinese to learn accounting. You don't have a whole lot of barriers in language, ...And accounting is also a hard skill. [As well], people have to be able to not only speak but also perform [in accounting], right? This way, I am kind of bypassing my weakness [in language]. So, I decided to study accounting and to thereafter look for a job.

After failing to enter her previous professional field, Cong retreated to being a Chinese. She intended to circumvent her "weakness in language", and make up for the weakness with her "strength in Math". In this very choice she made, she drew on discourses that "the Chinese are poor with English" and that "the Chinese are good with Math". Both are plausible claims and need to be interrogated, which is not the focus here. It is however clear that in the very choice of accounting, the women operated the delimitation of "us" Chinese and "others" the Canadians in ways that they considered beneficial to them. It has to be noted that these women became conscious of their identity as Chinese speaking English as a foreign language as opposed to the mainstream Canadians only when they found themselves excluded from their professional fields.

Accounting was but one (although a major one) of the fields that the women chose. Mei was a university teacher, and she became a superintendent in Canada. The researchers were curious about how she bridged herself into that field. She explained that although she was never a superintendent before, she and her husband were familiar with the breakdown tasks of a

¹ This project was funded the Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS) during 2005 and 2006. Dr. Roxana Ng was the principle investigator. Dr Guida Man was the co-investigator. Hongxia Shan, Willa Liu, and Liping Peng were on the research team. Canadian Chinese National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNC) was the community partner on the project.

superintendent, such as house maintenance and cleaning. After she decided to go for such a job in Canada, Mei and her husband went to the library to read extensively on the job and started to prepare themselves for interviews. Despite their preparation work, they found that employers needed extra persuasion. At one interview, they were told on the spot that ‘no Chinese [work] as superintends’. They sensed the same thing in their interview with a second company. But she did not give up in the face of overt exclusion.

[after the first job interview]... I found they [were] still [looking for] a super.... I wrote a letter to the manager, the same manager. I said “you [have not found] the right person. We are the right person you are looking for. You should give me an opportunity. Let us try. If you are not satisfied with us, you can stop any time...”. After the manager got my letter ... she called me... She said she can give me the opportunity to have a second interview. Then she asked all the people in the house, more than 10 people to come to talk with us. She said, “...if anything you can’t understand, no job for you”. We said that’s OK. Then after that, she said, “no, you can’t talk, just your husband can speak”. I said “OK”. Maybe they know I know English. They just let my husband talk to them. My husband talked to them. They said, “OK, I can understand what he was saying”. The manager said “OK, sign, sign the job offer”. That’s how we got the job.

Apparently, Mei caught the employers by surprise with her letter of request. After the second interview, Mei and her husband became assistants to superintendents. A year later, they became superintendents themselves. In the face of marginalization based on race and perceived language differences, Mei treated “no” as a new ground of negotiation. They did not stay away from the field of superintends as the Chinese were expected to. Their actions helped breach the discourse around where the Chinese should or should not work. With assertiveness and persistence, Mei won herself an opportunity to show that she, a Chinese, could work as a superintendent in Canada. Her experience, to a certain extent, disrupted employers’ comfort practices excluding Chinese from traditionally non-Chinese occupations and changed the racilized labour market locations of the Chinese although in minute ways.

Learning as Participation

Finding their ways into non-ghetto jobs was only the starting point of the women’s occupational settlement in Canada. Given that majority of the women changed or were in the process of changing their occupations or specializations, some women reported a distinct transitional process while adjusting to their new work. During their transitional period, they were often faced with an indifferent or, worse still, hostile work environments. To survive such work environments, some women resorted to professional commitment; others displayed tremendous tolerance and perseverance. In many cases, it is found that the women manipulated their meaning-making schemes to relieve themselves of the grievances that they felt especially during the initial period of work. As well, the women actively drew on their repertoire of knowledge and skills gained through their previous training and work in order to gain full membership at their new work.

Fei, a pediatrician in China, found a job doing research on diabetes. On this job, Fei received no orientation, training or any other kind of assistance. When she started her job, she asked her colleagues for a work protocol. No one would share it with her. Only after the intervention from the boss did she get an old version protocol. Perceivably, this workplace endorsed terrorized practices and knowledge and did not encourage collaboration or peer consultation. If workplace protocols can be conceived as the ‘congealed’ artifact for the community of practices at this particular workplace, this community was not particular receptive

to her. She was deliberately prevented from accessing the knowledge and practices particular to this place developed over time.

Fei refrained herself from directly commenting on whether her experience was racialized. She did not allow herself to moan over such a negative dynamic at work. Instead she redirected her energy to her work. She resorted to and developed a set of her own practices. She learned on her own, surfing the Internet and exploring research materials; she also worked from home using her own facilities. A month after she started her job, she accomplished a task that a previous colleague was not able to finish in two years. She instantly won the respect from her colleagues. Her boss did not only give her a promotion, but also expressed interest in hiring more Chinese. Although Fei promoted the image of the Chinese at her work, racialization remained to be working although it might work for the Chinese in this particular case.

While Fei established her reputation at work through working double hard than others, some other women found that they had to be doubly tolerant in order to retain the opportunity to learn about their jobs. Three women related that when they started their new jobs, they had problems with workplace English communications, and had less than sufficient knowledge of the practices in their fields of work. They were as such often mistreated, yelled at, and misused by their bosses, and colleagues. Faced with such dehumanizing work situations, the women often tried to be emotionally detached from their work in order to make the most out of the depressing work situations. For example, Yi told us what happened when she found a job working in a shelter:

When I joined the shelter, I did the kind of work with heavy physical demand. As my language was not good enough...I was given a hard time....I knew that they were bullying me because of my language.... I was sorry that I had to put up with that ... But I thought to myself, just because I was not good at English, I needed to study it. It was like they paid me to study English in an English environment. ... In any case, I treated it as a learning opportunity.

In this case, Yi was acutely aware of the discriminatory treatment that she received. But she suspended this interpretation of her experience and turned it into a learning event instead. Hua, a chemical engineer who became a daycare worker had similar experience:

Initially, my English was not good. My supervisor often lost her temper with me. Sometimes, I did not understand her well and did the wrong thing. (When such things happened), she would throw a fit. When that happened, I would show tolerance. If I were not tolerant, I would have lost my job. Now, I am familiar with her language.... I had no experience with daycare in China, and could not express myself well at work. Now, I know and I have also learned English songs.

In both Yi and Hua's case, "the language problem" that they identified was not simply about language. It signified a whole set of discursive practices particular to their new work and their new workplace. However, employers as well as their coworkers expected them to be instantly productive yet providing them with no substantial support. The employers' pursuit of instant productivity and profits helped to obscure the fact that the women were new to these workplaces and needed time and orientation towards their jobs. Without the support from their new workplace, the women had to resort to other means of learning at their new work. For example, Hua, reported that to create activities for the children, she resorted to the Internet. She said:

I used to be a computer engineer, and ...I use the Internet with facility.... I did not know how to draw bear or cock, but I can find samples on line.

With the materials that she found on the Internet, Hua put together a range of creative games for the kids. That is, when the women were provided with little support, they made use of their previous training and ways of learning in order to fit into their new environments.

The tolerance that the women showed to their abusing employers or coworkers might be an indication of their lack of power at the periphery of the labour market. It however should not be taken to reinforce the stereotypical image of submissive Asian women. Rather, while making their ways into their new workplaces, the women also actively made change to their new workplaces. After becoming a superintendent, Mei needed to deal with housing agents. She did not find that to be an easy task.

The rental agent is very boss(y); she wants to control me. ... For example, my manager liked me (to) rent (an) apartment. After I rent, ... (the rental agent) was very angry with me. She came to my office, and said some, very unpleasant words to me.This is the first time. The second time, I rent (an) apartment, she said, "you can't rent that apartment". I said why? (She said) "I keep (it) for certain people". I said "which people?". (She) said, "for Canadian people". I said "all the people ... here are Canadian".... why she was angry with me.... Maybe she is afraid he will lose her job. After (what happened), I talk(ed) to the manager... after these two things happened, she changed his mind. She is very very polite to me. She gave me something ...to eat, she gave me some plant to put in my lobby, in the building. She treats me very nicely. ...she comes to me, "(Mei,) please save this apartment for me". I said "OK".

Mei drew on the discourse that Canada is an immigration nation, to counter her colleague's essentialist notion of Canadians. In addition to the ideological and attitudinal construct of worthy tenant of her colleague, commission was also one of the reasons causing problem between her and the rental agent. This case vividly shows how racial relations were articulated into class relations to shape the women's experiences at their new work. However, it has to be noted that the women were also active participants in these relations, and occasionally changing them for the better.

Conclusion

In this paper, I investigated the learning experiences of highly educated Chinese immigrant women making occupational niches in Canada. I argued for a mutually-constitutive relationship between individual practices, identity and Canadian workplace accessibility and receptivity underpinned by gender, race and class relations and perceived language differences. It has to be admitted that both research projects on which I draw my analysis studied people in occupations ad hoc. Further research could be conducted on the experiences of women in specific occupations or professions. Such knowledge could help to inform immigrant training programs, labour market policies and employers on the best practices bridging immigrants to specific professions and fields. Such information could be potentially useful for immigrants seeking for career changes after immigration as well.

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