Part 3

Asian mothering/mothers

Chapter 9

Motherhood experiences of East Asian women in Britain

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Introduction

Women's experiences of gendered lives vary because gender intersects with other social divisions, such as ethnicity. As such, motherhood is culturally specific, and women from different national/ethnic backgrounds hold different beliefs around 'good' mothering and exercise heterogeneous practices of mothering. Built on this, this chapter aims to enhance our understanding of motherhood by examining the stories of first generation East Asian (Chinese, Korean, and Japanese) women living in Britain. The research is founded upon a feminist approach that seeks to illuminate the experiences of being a woman in a gender-divided society. Consistent with this, life history interviews were taken of 30 East Asian mothers with children under the age of 11 (10 Chinese, 10 Korean, and 10 Japanese). The data was analysed using an intersectional framework, which consists of seven categories outlined in the section below.

An intersectional framework

Intersectionality refers to the interlocking relations among different social categories, such as gender, class, and ethnicity (Andersen and Hill Collins 2004). Overcoming the mechanical

addition of these categories on top of each other, its central tenet lies in its endeavour to examine the interaction among them and its effects on individuals' lives, especially those who are at the margin of society (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). The major intersectional categories have been centred around identity. However, I argue that the intersectional framework should be broadened beyond identity categories in order to unpack the effects of the interplay among multifarious structural and individual factors. Not only identity categories but also other factors are of significance to migrant women, such as their pre-migration and post-migration circumstances. For example, the work of Lee et al. (2002) on Chinese migrant women highlights the importance of motivation for migration as the post-migration experiences differ between those who came as independent career developers and those who were dependent on their husbands. In addition, the research of Brah (1996) on South Asian women illustrates the impact of educational level on their experiences in the labour market. Moreover, the work of Evans and Bowlby (2000) on South Asian migrant women underscores the effect of these women's class position, including financial situation, in their involvement in the labour market as well as gender dynamics within the family. The study of Zhou (2000) further illuminates that the gender ideology migrant women hold, especially obtained in their exit country, is vital in shaping their post-migration experiences. Portes (1995) additionally demonstrates the influential role the location of the settlement has on ethnic minorities, especially whether they have settled in an ethnic community with wider social networks available. In particular, ethnic communities play a crucial part in shaping the lives of immigrants, in buffering the negative impact of discrimination whilst reinforcing the 'imagined' cultural values of their 'home' country (Portes 1995).

On this basis, I have identified seven categories that are considered to have most relevance to East Asian migrant women's experiences. These are their motherhood and gender ideologies,

especially influenced by their cultural heritages; educational level; economic circumstances of the family; reasons for migration; the length of settlement in Britain; gendered beliefs of their husbands influenced by their ethnic heritages; and the local areas of their settlement. The role of husbands' gendered beliefs influenced by their cultural heritage has been vastly overlooked in existing studies. Filling in this lacuna, I aim to illuminate the importance of this in understanding migrant women's experiences.

Narratives of stay-at-home mothers

The accounts of stay-at-home mothers, especially those from Korea and Japan, were strikingly supportive of intensive motherhood, based on the premise of the mothers' dedication, putting their needs and desires aside. In this, the mother's absence through employment was largely regarded as having a detrimental effect on the emotional wellbeing of her children. This view was illustrated in the narrative of Seyoun, a mother from Korea with two children aged eight and six, who lived in New Malden, with the household income of £70,000–80,000. She came to Britain to accompany her Korean expatriate husband less than three years prior to the interview. Despite having a real potential to progress high up in her career as a primary school teacher, Seyoun took six years off work after having children, then resumed briefly when her youngest child began nursery full-time before stopping again to migrate to Britain. Her motherhood ideology seems to have played an influential role in her decisions towards employment:

> When they need care, when they need mothers, if they don't have (mothers), they are psychologically unstable definitely, especially when they are younger. For me when the child is young, it seems better for mothers not to have a job. It's better to be with them. …

According to Cho (2008), in Korea the negative representation of employed mothers began during Korean industrialisation, through Japanese annexation and the emergence of the urban middle-class and nuclear families. The establishment of couple-centred families buttressed the Japanese ideal of 'good wife, wise mother', which was deployed as 'wise mother, good wife' [*hyun-mo-yang-cheo*] in Korea, stressing more significance on women's mothering roles (Lee et al. 2008). This imagery began to have a dominant influence on women with a modern education in the construction of their identity, principally founded on their roles as wives and mothers. Reflecting this, existing studies have observed the unsupportive attitudes of Korean society towards the labour market participation of married females with children (e.g. Patterson and Walcutt 2013).

Alongside Seyoun's belief in the mothering role illustrated above, unpacking her stories also reveals other intersecting factors that might have affected her decision. In her discussion of her husband's role in childcare, Seyoun described her husband's contribution as rather minimal, only responding to her requests but never helping voluntarily. This reflects a typical Korean man whose primary responsibility is associated with his breadwinning role, and thus no expectations to provide primary care are placed on him (Cho 2002). This concurrently suggests the intersection between her motherhood ideology and her husband's gendered belief in the employment status of Seyoun, as found in other studies that demonstrate the frequent women's loss of employment as a consequence of such an intersection (e.g. Cooke 2007). Here, their place of settlement in a tight Korean community was likely to have played an influential role in reinforcing the ideology of Seyoun (and possibly her husband). In addition, her middle-class position with a relatively high household income is likely to have affected her decision. The interview data indicates the distinctively comfortable lifestyles of expatriates' wives, due to high

incomes and other financial incentives offered to expatriates. This enabled them to meet and interact in cafes on a regular basis after dropping children at school, exchanging ideas about their children's education, reinforcing their gendering role. This suggests her class position provided a buffer in terms of being able to choose to stay at home instead of finding a downgraded job in the UK's labour market that largely discriminates against migrants. Concurrently, this arguably reinforced her gendered role as a primary care provider in the host society. Based on all of these, Seyoun's current employment status should be seen as the outcome of the intersection of different factors, including her motherhood ideology; her husband's gendered beliefs; the locality of her residence; and her economic situation.

The espousal of the salience of the mother's primary care similarly emerged in the narrative of Asuko, a mother from Japan, with two children aged four and eight, who had settled in Britain for 11 years. She married a white British man whom she met in Japan, and they lived in Buckinghamshire with a household income of £30,000–40,000. Using her previous role as a computer engineer, Asuko found a similar job in a Japanese company based in London. However, after having her first child, she gave up her job despite her conviction that she would always work regardless of having children until that time. Also, continuing to work seemed to make financial sense, but motherhood completely changed her mind:

ASUKO: Before I had the children, I thought bringing up children was easy and all mothers should work, and all the full-time mothers are lazy. But, it's so hard and it's so important to be with children. …

INT: Why do you think being with them is important?

ASUKO: Because they need love from, real big love from the mother not just if they're looked after by childminders or even grandmother. It's not enough. It's the first timeyou're needed by someone so much. If I leave this baby, she will die. Maybe she can survive if somebody gives her milk or warmth and change nappies but that's not good enough.

It is evident from this extract that Asuko believed that the mother's care is so vital that it is irreplaceable and the provision of physical care itself is not sufficient for a genuine quality of life for young children. The deficiency of emotional love and care by the mother could equate to near death despite the physical survival of the baby. This is consistent with the findings of much Japanese literature that underscores the vitality of motherhood in raising a healthy and happy child. According to Hirao (2001, p. 193), Japanese motherhood is constructed on the notion of a unique relationship between mother and child, having a close psychological connection and an inseparable bond. Hirao explicates that Japanese mother-child relationships are epitomised by a notion of *amae* (dependence), defined as a "desire to be passively loved" and to receive unconditional care. This is predicated upon the belief that a child is an extension of the mother, which unsurprisingly leads to the idea that the mother has a direct influence on the development of her child, especially during the formative stage of early years. This also implies that unfulfilled *amae* will have a harmful effect on the child long-term, causing psychological problems. Hirao (2001) claims that this ideology was reinforced by the Western maternal deprivation theory and attachment theory introduced in Japan in the late 1970s, providing 'scientific' support, which strengthened the belief that employed mothers are detrimental to their children. Asuko's following narrative reverberates this sentiment:

> … It's not nice to see their children only evenings and early in the mornings, just weekends. It's not good enough. But some people of course have no choice. They have to work and I can understand it. There are some families, they have a nice house, a nice car and lots of holidays like that. It looks like their mothers work for that but then children must feel lonely or feel sad about it even though they don't say that.

Asuko's above narrative suggests financial incentives are less important for some women's decisions to give up their paid employment, but their understanding of what constitutes 'good' mothering role is more important. As found in the study of Johnston and Swanson (2006), working mothers were described using stereotypes, devoid of their individual differences, as those who are money-driven and self-centred, unlike stay-at-home mothers who devote themselves to raising their children, putting their self-interest aside.

Dissimilar to the majority of Korean women whose husbands are also Korean, the gendered belief of Asuko's husband who was British is not clear. Nonetheless, the complete absence of fathers' role in childcare in her narrative plus their gendered role division evince that both of them are likely to support the ideal of the male economic provider and the female home carer. Similarly, the impact of her locality is not clear cut as she did not settle in an area with a large Japanese population. Nevertheless, she mentioned her more regular interaction with other Japanese mothers than British ones, which suggests a strong chance of influence by mothering beliefs and practice from other Japanese women. From this, it can be inferred that the motherhood identity of Asuko was the intersection of her motherhood ideology with possibly her husband's gendered belief and her social networks with other Japanese mothers.

The narratives of the mother's constant presence and availability prevalently found in the data of Korean and Japanese mothers, however, did not emerge in those of stay-at-home mothers from China. For instance, Fang (a mother from China), did not talk about the intrinsic necessity or value of a mother's care and presence for her child but instead described working highly positively as well as emphasising the importance of work for her life. Fang, who continued to work as a manager of a company in China after having her daughter, was actively looking for a job in Britain at the time of the interview. However, her English skills were preventing her from

getting a job. Fang's narrative might have been the result of her Chinese heritage, which encouraged women's participation in the labour market, as will be discussed in the following section.

Narratives of employed mothers

In contrast to the narratives of stay-at-home mothers, those of the employed illuminate different beliefs around 'good mothering', in which paid work is represented as a vital component in their identity as well as having a beneficial impact on their children and themselves, with the exception of a few mothers from Korea and Japan. The majority of mothers in employment, mostly from China, did not seem to have a hierarchical view of childcare (e.g. that the mother's care is the best and has an 'irreplaceable' value for their children), thus it was treated as substitutable by other people.

Many employed mothers stressed the benefits of working, for themselves as well as for their children, providing opportunities that are not available for stay-at-home mothers. This was illustrated by the narratives of Hua, a mother with two children aged seven and three, who married a Chinese man, came to Britain 12 years prior to the interview, and lived in the Southampton area. She opted out of providing information on her household income. Hua worked for an international organisation as a software developer after completing her PhD. Alongside this demanding full-time job, Hua was involved in a number of roles in the local Chinese community organisation, including running a traditional Chinese dancing class for young children at the weekend as well as being a member of a traditional Chinese female dancing group. Her following narratives are indicative of her positive view on employment:

INT: What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a working mother?

HUA: The advantage is working mothers have a business view so that's something, if you stay at home, you won't get … how to operate the business, how to motivate people. So when I talk to my children, even though some small things … I could give them some examples to say you could do this way, do that way, then I think this way helps my children to grow up and be ready for future work more easily. Also when I take my children to my work, they feel, 'Oh, that's a great place'. I feel that maybe I'm setting an example for them to see what kind of future they might have or even better – but I would say if I'm not working, I wouldn't have this kind of view. I would just work at home, handling with cooking, with my children's exercise, and also talking to mums who may also stay at home and don't have this kind of view outside the family.

INT: Do you think there are any disadvantages of being a working mother?

HUA: Umm, I think it's that my children see me less. Especially with two children my focus now is really to help my daughter education-wise so I need to spend time with her on her exercise and on her piano so I have much less time with my son.

Although I asked Hua both the positives and negatives of working mothers, her narratives were dominated by the benefits of work until I specifically questioned the downside of employment for mothers. What emerges noticeably from her account is there is no indication of concerns or anxiety about the detrimental effects that her employment might have on her children due to her limited availability. Resonating this, the study of Ochiai (2013) shows that the employment of Chinese women continues through marriage and childbearing, unlike many Korean and Japanese women. The labour market participation of women, including those with children, in China, particularly in urban areas, has been normalised since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Croll 1983; Fincher 2014).

Whilst Hua's narrative appears to be starkly different from that of stay-at-home mothers by portraying the mother's employment positively for their children, at the same time it suggests she practised 'professional' child-rearing, proposed by Hays (1996) and Vincent et al. (2004). For example, Hua spent a significant amount of her time on her daughter's education and taking her

to various extra-curricular activities whilst also ensuring her daughter practised piano regularly. This is indicative of Hua's involvement in intensive child-rearing, similar to the mothers with professional employment in the research of Vincent et al. (2004). Yet, the origin of her practice is likely to differ from that of Western mothers due to the concoction of multiple ideologies that juxtapose Confucian traditions, China's socialism, and the influence of Western ideologies that were introduced to China in the early 20th century. Moreover, as illustrated in Hua's account, education of children is one of the most important facets of child-rearing in East Asia, including China (Chan 2012). Within Confucian ideals, communitarian values are regarded as more important than individual ones, which renders a child's academic success to be largely regarded as the achievement of the family as a whole, not only as a pathway for happiness and the self-fulfilling life of an individual child (Lee 2003). In this context, children might be forced to work hard against their will: for instance, Hua's interview did not suggest she had asked her daughter how she felt about her extra-curricular activities and the regular practice she had to do, but the focus of her talk was on achievement and success. This seems to contrast with Hays' (1996) child-centred intensive mothering where an individual child's happiness is seen as the central tenet of 'good' mothering. Furthermore, her other interviews revealed highly gender segregated childcare arrangements in her family; despite both her and her husband working full-time, it was Hua who organised and managed their son's childcare as well as their daughter's educational work and activities, with no real contribution from her husband.

Hua's narratives suggest somewhat contradictory construction in her motherhood and employment identity. Thus, Hua's experiences should be understood in the light of the intersection of multiple juxtaposing factors. Her husband's gendered belief and practice originated from his Chinese upbringing; described by Hua as '*They (men) are not trained to do*

anything at home' these are important factors affecting her gendered role, in conjunction with her own belief. Contradicting gender relations have been developed in China due to the influence of Confucianism and Mao's socialism (Jiang 2001). Women's labour force participation has strongly been encouraged since Mao, and a lack of jobs for educated middle-class women is largely seen as shameful or negative in China (Zhou 2000). Nonetheless, the deeply entrenched gender norms have persisted, pervading every sphere of Chinese society (Guoying 2013). Hence, whilst women's employment rate is one of the world highest (Cook and Dong 2011), women's subjugated position in the private and public domains has not been changed, with expectations on women to take primary care responsibility. This seems to a large extent to explain the position of Hua, who has strong conviction of women's employment but at the same time continues to take the primary care role. In addition, her move to Britain following her husband, not the other way, also indicates the gendered pattern, although this did not discourage her career development. Moreover, her educational qualifications are likely to have played a significant part in her positive views and pride in her job as her PhD allowed her to gain a professional career in a competitive field, especially for migrants. Another factor that needs to be considered is her heavy involvement in her ethnic organisations. In that sense, the locality of her residence is important as it had a large Chinese community, which enabled her to get involved in a range of activities closely tied to her ethnic identity as well as her children's. This also meant she had regular and close interactions with other Chinese migrants in the area, which was likely to have strengthened her beliefs and practices around motherhood and employment associated with Chinese culture.

Resonating with Hua's accounts, women from China showed a strong work identity, compared to those from Korea and Japan. The majority of my interviewees from China grew up in the post-

Mao era in which educated middle-class women's participation in the labour market was regarded as the norm and as positive (Zhou 2000). Interviewees talked of the impact of Chairman Mao's ideology that encouraged women's economic activities.

PING: In China everybody works, ladies and men, everyone from old, young, everyone works so there is no tradition in staying at home. I think it's to do with Chairman Mao. He said "women hold up half of the sky", just equal to men.

CHEN: In China, women go to work I think for equal rights. If women don't have a job, maybe you depend on your husband, so you can't be independent. … In China you have to go to work. I had to. It's not because your family pushes you or the government pushes you but the circumstances, the environment, you feel you have to.

The invisible yet powerful cultural pressures faced by women in China are notable here. This is suggestive of their perceptions of the deeply and widely pervasive axiom of paid work outside the home in Chinese society. In this sense, it is not surprising to find that Chinese women are keen to work full-time:

CHEN: If I can afford a nursery, I would like to work full-time because in the summer I tried to let her go to the nursery but the fees were so expensive, I couldn't afford it.

Dissimilar to China, where she was able to work full time even after having her first child, thanks to support from her family, familial help was not available to Chen in Britain. The availability of affordable quality childcare plays a significant role in the employment status of (Chinese) immigrant women, as observed by Ho (2006). In this respect, her decision was not made in a vacuum but within the structural context of Britain, which is one of the world's most expensive places for childcare (Hansen et al. 2006). Owing to the loss of a familial network among Chinese immigrant families, women mostly take up the caring responsibility, which accentuates their gendered roles.

A full-time employed mother from Japan also talked about the benefits of working whilst stressing the 'quality' time she spent with her children. Yoko was a mother of two children aged four and ten who lived in London. She immigrated to Britain to follow her British husband whom she met in Japan. She had lived in Britain for 11 years and worked as an administrator in a company. Their household income was £50,000–60,000:

> Being a working mum means that I also have a life other than just being a mother, which I like, because when I was just a mother, which is nice, I kind of felt I missed out on social life. Just grown-up conversation was missing and although my husband is lovely, you get kind of bored of talking to him just alone. I mean you get bored talking to other housewives, other mums because they ONLY talk about children or husbands or clothes or shopping. And I just find that a bit boring and uninspiring so I just felt like I need to get out and have my own life as well as being a mother, which is lovely … I'm full of energy at the weekend. We do lots of things together on the weekend: go to like forest, park, and I try to like REALLY REALLY listen to them and play with them and I do like that too.
>
> [my emphasis]

The importance of work in her identity is palpable in Yoko's account. Simultaneously, there is clear evidence of her attempt to justify her limited time with her children due to work. In the milieu where intensive motherhood takes the hegemonic cultural position, employed mothers construct 'good mothering' divergently from stay-at-home mothers to justify their time away from their children. The study of Johnston and Swanson (2006, pp. 513–514) indicates employed mothers emphasised 'periodic quality interaction based on the quality of communication with their children' or 'focused attention and affection'. Echoing this, Yoko stressed the quality time her work was able to provide her children during the weekend when she was around. Her

account also suggests that she did not choose to work because she did not love being a mother but because she needed identity and life outside motherhood by stressing ‘being a mother, which I like’ and ‘being a mother is lovely’ to make it clear to the interviewer. Here, her account implies that her work is not only valuable for herself but also benefits her children by providing a space for herself whilst enabling her to give her children focused and quality time; therefore, she is ultimately a ‘good mother’. In Yoko’s case, she was exposed to other cultures during her formative age, as she was educated in an Anglophone International school in Thailand when she was 15. Therefore, the impact of Japanese culture that is strongly marked by gendered roles is likely to be relatively weak. In conjunction with this, her interview also suggests her husband who worked as a primary school teacher full-time took the primary caring role by doing the majority of school pick-ups and household chores during the week. In that sense, the intersection of her life path with her husband’s ethnicity and egalitarian gendered belief played an influential part, for instance, unlike the majority of men from Japan who have internalised male-breadwinner and female-carer ideology (Germer et al. 2014). In addition, the fact they lived in London with its multiple ethnic composition could have an impact as she was less exposed to the implicit and explicit pressure of Japanese cultural norms. However, despite seemingly egalitarian and transgressive gender practice in her household, gendered norms continued to shape her narrative as shown above. Furthermore, Yoko mentioned the financial benefits of her employment, as with her husband’s income alone they would have a less comfortable life than now, with less holidays, etc. Thus, economic reasons played a part in her decision, different from the majority of stay-at-home mothers.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the motherhood ideologies of individual women, influenced by national and/or ethnic cultural heritage, had a major impact on women's beliefs around what constitutes 'good' mothering and subsequent decisions towards childcare. Reflecting this, the accounts of stay-at-home mothers were predominantly characterised by the importance of the mother's direct care for the emotional wellbeing and healthy development of their children. By contrast, the stories of employed mothers, mostly from China, did not support the incessant presence and availability of mothers, seeing care as replaceable by other women, such as grandmothers and nurseries. Women from China talked of this in reference to their perception of the culture in China where all adults are expected to work, regardless of childcare responsibilities. In intersection with this, the ethnic origin of their husbands added another dimension, as it seems to have influenced the gendered experiences of East Asian migrant mothers. The data suggests that having husbands who share the same ethnic and/or national origin as themselves might have consolidated the continuation of the conventional gender beliefs and practices between couples.

Alongside this, my analysis also suggests the impact of the locality of settlement for East Asian women, especially through their connection with local ethnic community organisations and networks as well as interaction with people from same countries, as exemplified in the stories of Seyoun and Hua. For example, all my Korean interviewees resided in or in propinquity to New Malden, known as 'Korean Town'. Owing to the availability of Korean products and services, the continuation of the 'Korean way of life' seemed possible here.

However, the length of settlement in Britain did not seem to have a major influence on the majority of the women's acculturation processes. In addition, the reasons of migration did not seem to have an obvious impact on East Asian women's decision towards childcare and

employment. The study of Lee et al. (2002) suggests more gender egalitarian and self-fulfilling post-migration experiences for women who migrated for their independence and career development and gender defined post-migration lives for those who immigrated as dependents. My data, however, suggests that such implications are rather ambiguous, with mixed patterns: Some women continued to pursue their dreams by obtaining higher qualifications and improving skills according to their original intention of immigration while others forwent their individual aspiration for their identity of wife and mother, dissimilar to the findings of Lee et al.

In terms of educational level, most of the time, this category did not have a notable influence on the intersectional outcomes. However, the case of Hua illustrates the possible impact of her high educational qualification at a British university on the positive construction of her worker identity. The secure employment position in a professional sector seems to have reinforced her positive outlook on worker identity and its beneficial influence on her motherhood. This in a sense illuminates the possible effect of the labour market condition of Britain, which treats her qualification and chosen career path favourably. Thus, dissimilar to the majority of East Asian women in my study, Hua experienced upward mobility in her career.

It is arguable that there emerged mixed responses with regard to the impact of the financial situation of individual women on their decision towards childcare and employment. On the one hand, stay-at-home mothers made their decision, largely based on their belief in 'good motherhood', rather than driven by economic rationalities, as can be seen in the account of Asuko. On the other hand, the narratives of a few employed mothers, such as Yoko, indicated financial incentives as an important component in their decision towards paid work. In addition, subtle differences can be traced in their mothering practices, depending on their financial situation, although these data were not included in this chapter due to limited space. While some

mothers were keen and able to carry on the intense educational practices of their children, not everyone was able to do so due to financial strain. In this respect, household income played an important part in understanding different practices of child-rearing among East Asian mothers. However, it is important to stress here that financial motives alone would not be sufficient to determine mothers' behaviours but have to be interweaved with their beliefs around 'good motherhood' unless their circumstances are extreme.

All in all, despite divergence in the construction of motherhood and employment identity among East Asian mothers, all women in this study continue to be subject to the gendered expectations of motherhood and most of them remained as a primary care provider. My study highlights that out of seven intersectional categories, women's motherhood ideology is significant, in intersection with their locality of settlement, husband's gendered beliefs, and economic circumstances to some extent. In addition, the labour market condition of Britain, which is rather hostile to migrants, as well as expensive childcare costs, also affect the translation of these women's motherhood beliefs into practice, at times reinforcing their gendered roles.

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