



Shu-Yi Huang

*Being a Mother in a Strange Land:  
Motherhood Experiences of Chinese Migrant  
Women in the Netherlands*

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reviewed by [Roma Dey](#)

Of late there has been enormous amount of media debate and deliberation on immigrant Chinese mothers and their child-rearing practices owing to the high scores and success of their children in academics, especially mathematics. The other side of the story often remains untold, the issues that immigrant Chinese women face as they try to juggle their mother work and careers. *Being a Mother in a Strange Land* takes on the challenge of being part of the latter. In doing so the author, Shu-Yi Huang, has made a significant contribution to the fields of Gender Studies and Chinese Migration and Diaspora Studies.

Shu-Yi Huang offers a nuanced reading of the gendered character of Chinese chain migration based on the work of Minghuan Li (1999)<sup>[1]</sup> in three phases—before 1949, between 1950 and 1975 and after 1976 (p. 14). Huang argues that even though Chinese women outnumbered men from the second stage of Chinese migration to the Netherlands that started after World War II, the numbers did not necessarily liberate women from their gender roles. Every Chinese male would bring two female family members to the country, one his spouse and the other his own mother or mother-in-law to take care of the grandchildren and the domestic chores, both of which remained gendered responsibilities.

Huang gives a detailed historical account of the political economy of both the native and the destination countries affecting the trajectories of Chinese women's migration to the Netherlands. One such system is *hukou* or household registration which defined the population of the country by the occupation of the male head of each household. It functioned as a highly centralised state tool for controlling human mobility. Under this system only male members from amongst the non-agricultural *hukuo* (a total of 20 per cent of the population was non-agricultural) in particular coastal cities such as Wenzou, Sanghai and Guangzhou could legally migrate for work. Even amongst them it was only possible for those who could pull the favours of the Communist Party by having served it for years. Women could not exist independently within the *hukuo* system and it was illegal and almost impossible for single women to acquire a passport for migrant labour work abroad.

In sync with the second phase of migration it was only from 1960s that the Communist Party and Mao changed their stand on women's contributions and position in society and nation building. While the state recognised women's labour participation and contributions it did not challenge the patriarchal systems and norms in Chinese society and Confucianism which served as the

dominant ideology.

Huang lays bare the historical and political undercurrents that hold definitive effect on the different regions of China and hence their identities as Chinese. Specifically for these reasons and the diversity and complexities of Chinese groups, Huang restricted her study to first generation migrant women from Taiwan, Hongkong and China, which have been culturally and ethnically closer and the majority Han ethnic group (22). As a theorist, Huang locates her work within the critical Chinese discourse—a critique of both the greater China discourse and the cultural China discourse. She argues that both these discourses ahistoricise and ignore the ethnic minorities within and outside China. Further, these discourses have obliterated the transformation amongst Chinese emigrants who have integrated with local cultures in their migrant countries. In a myopic vision of Chinese identity, both these discourses tend to deny the cultural and social diversities of Chinese identity. Further, the discourses invisibilise the role played by Chinese women.

As a work emerging from within the nascent Critical Chinese Discourse, this book takes into account various intersectionalities, namely, gender, class, ethnicity, region, dialect, race to make sense of the practices of motherhood of thirty-nine Chinese immigrants (18 from Taiwan, 14 from China and 7 for Hongkong) in the Netherlands. These women are varied in their age, educational qualifications, mother tongue and careers. From chapters four to seven, Huang deals with different aspects such as the work-home balance that is fraught with multiple roles, education of children which is largely relegated as the responsibility of the mothers, issues of language learning and lessons, everyday racism that the women and their children faced and negotiated and their experience of using *Kraamzorg* (maternity care services) and negotiating the cultural and language differences in their interactions with maternity nurses and care givers.

Huang does a great service to Gender Studies in particular by bringing together the strategies used by the women in each of the above spheres to overcome the challenges pressed on them. For working class restaurant owners and as mothers of young children many of these women strategised by staying close to their workplace and making time for nursing their babies. Most of the women had to also bear the sole responsibility of their children's academic performance while sharing or negotiating and often fighting to support their education. Huang shows how the difference in the education system of the parents, especially in the case of families with women from Hong Kong who had a modern British education and their husbands from the traditional Chinese education system where corporeal punishment and disciplining is dominant, would lead to friction and fights when it came to decisions regarding the education of children.

In the chapter on language Huang uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'field' to understand motherhood as a field and language education as an area that immigrant Chinese mothers have to negotiate at multiple levels—with their husbands on the need for their children to learn Mandarin the official Chinese language, financially to be able to utilise the services of language teachers to smooth the transition of their children to school, where the medium of instruction is Dutch. Huang argues that the emphasis on learning Mandarin came from the recognition of its utility in the background of the increasing economic rise of China rather than an aspect of Chinese identity. The narratives show a range of power equations when it came to the language spoken at home in families where Chinese women were married to Dutch men, some respecting the child's need to learn Mandarin and others deeming it useless. Similarly, within families where Chinese women were married to Chinese men, there were men who were least bothered about the issue to men who felt Mandarin was of great importance for the future employment of their children. English seems to be preferred in this context to Dutch, showing the relative powers between languages. In the eighth chapter the book deals with the racism that the women and their children faced in their daily lives—within transnational families at home, in public places such as shops

and schools—racism that is often mislabeled as ethnicity. Huang explains how the women negotiated racism and taught their children to cope with such situations.

In the prologue Huang has brought to the table the notions of motherhood within the Western feminist movement, debates around the essentialisation of motherhood, and recent debates on Asian emigrant mothers including Amy Chua's work on the notion of the *Tiger Mother*.<sup>[2]</sup> She locates here study within a standpoint feminist perspective borrowing practical and conceptual frameworks such as intersectionality from black feminist scholarship. She further nuances the idea of motherhood with debates around motherhood and nation. Towards the end of the book she reviews some of these debates and applies Rossi Bradotti's theory of the *nomadic subject* to analyse the narratives of the emigrant Chinese mothers.<sup>[3]</sup> Huang shows through the narratives that for the women their condition of *living in transition* or nomadic subjectivity is a strategy for them to resist and challenge dominant notions of nation and nationalism. The women tended to have their own notions of home, nation and nationality based on their roles as caregivers, daughters and mothers.

The book is thought provoking and in each of the chapters the author unfolds a new angle from which to engage with the lives of Chinese mothers in a *Strange Land*. Based on the author's PhD fieldwork and thesis, the book is a valuable addition to feminist methodologies with special reference to the standpoint feminist perspective and narrative analysis.

## Notes

[1] Li Minghuan, *We Need Two Worlds': Chinese Immigrant Associations in a Western Society*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999.

[2] Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, London: Bloomsbury, 2011.

[3] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011.

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