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Review of Migration and Gender Identity

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economic anatomy of contemporary call centre work in urban India. Reviewing her findings, I have no difficulty going along with her general conclusion that:

Instead of revolutionising gendered norms of mobility and spatial access, women in general continue to be held under stricter regimes of surveillance. Access to the urban night – justified by being paid workers in a somewhat legitimate profession, as opposed to prostitution – certainly represents a dramatic shift in when some women work outside the home. Their entry into the urban night does not, however, draw from re-envisioning women as individuals who have an inherent right to move about in any way and at any time they see fit. (p. 143)

However, as with all books dealing with a subject as fascinating as this, I wanted to know more! For example, how do young single female call centre workers in general socialise, and what do they do in the day? Are daytime rendezvous with boyfriends or lovers easier to facilitate and/or regarded as more ‘innocent’? Do call centre workers actually enjoy their work? And what do young women do when they finally leave this exhausting, antisocial, time-intensive, ‘stop-gap’ employment?

While such questions might well be taken up by Patel in subsequent research, there is little doubt that she has carved out new terrain with the present volume. Its accessible, personalised style will undoubtedly appeal to students in gender, geography, anthropology and sociology, keen to flesh out the human face of feminised employment. Working the Night Shift also provides an excellent basis for debate and new lines of enquiry among researchers of evolving labour markets in developing nations in academic, policy and activist circles.

References
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Migration and gender identity: Chinese women’s experiences of work, family and
identity in Australia, by Christina Ho, Saarbrücken, VDM Verlag, 2008, 280 pp.,
$122.12 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-639-03106-5

Contemporary migration policy in Australia adopts an economistic approach that emphasises immigrants’ qualifications, skills, and work experience. Based on human capital theory, this approach aims to attract skilled immigrants that help to enhance Australia’s economy and international competitiveness. The government’s assessment of its migration policy includes numerous stories of skilled immigrants’ successful assimilation and their economic contributions to the host society. Christina Ho argues that these success stories tend to disguise diverse employment outcomes among immigrants, especially women. Challenging human capital theory, Ho examines the history and changes of Australia’s migration policy, analyses skilled immigrants’ employment outcomes, and uses a case study to illustrate the complexity of Chinese immigrant women’s employment experience.

In this study, Ho uses both quantitative and qualitative data, including the Australian Census, Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia, and 44 in-depth interviews with
immigrant women from China and Hong Kong. The major text of the book is divided into two parts: (1) ‘Australian migration: Economics, culture and gender’ and (2) ‘Chinese women in Australia: Feminization of roles’. Using quantitative data, the first part describes the history and changes of migration policy and examines data that challenge human capital theory. The second part uses mostly qualitative interview data to depict Chinese immigrant women’s experiences and explore how various migrant experiences are shaped by gender, ethnicity, and culture.

In the first part of the book, Ho introduces the history and demographic characteristics of Chinese immigrants in Australia. A comparison between China- and Hong Kong-born immigrants is provided. Ho explains the political-economic factors in China, Hong Kong, and Australia that push and pull Chinese immigrants to Australia. Following this introduction, Ho reviews changes of Australian migration policy in historical contexts. The government has increasingly emphasised human capital criteria in immigrant selection, and it is a prevalent belief that immigrants with higher qualifications and skills tend to have higher labour force participation rates and better employment outcomes. Nevertheless, Ho observes that male primary applicants are more likely to enter on the basis of their human capital criteria, whereas women tend to enter through the family stream. This gender difference results in different employment experiences for men and women. Ho argues that many immigrants have not been able to fully utilise their human capital acquired before immigration, especially women. For instance, Chinese immigrant women have lower rates of labour participation than the overall Australian female population, regardless of their higher educational level. Ho thus contends that immigrants’ employment outcomes cannot be completely explained by human capital theory, as they are greatly affected by gender, ethnicity and culture. She states that human capital is culturally specific and that immigrants need ‘the cultural resources and knowledge to effectively deploy their human capital’ (p. 97), which she calls ‘human-cultural capital’ (pp. 97–100).

In the second part of the book, Ho exemplifies Chinese women’s experiences in Australia and provides a comparison between her subjects from Hong Kong and China. Because most Chinese women enter as dependants, they are less likely than their male counterparts to be in the labour force, even when women are admitted as skilled immigrants. After migration, women experience reduced paid work, downward occupational mobility and deskilling, and cultural barriers in the workforce. At the same time, women take on more domestic responsibilities as their families adapt to the new social setting, which Ho describes as the ‘feminization of roles’ (p. 219). Compared to their active roles in the labour market before migration, most Chinese women sacrifice their careers and return home after migration. Their household roles, in turn, constrain their employment. Although frustrated with their paid jobs, Chinese women gain new freedom, more time with family, and a sense of independence in the new country. Compared to their pre-migration life, these women are content with having more balance between work and family as well as more flexibility and autonomy at work. These new gains lead to invaluable self-growth.

This book is a valuable text for students and scholars who are interested in Australia’s migration policy and history. It challenges the taken-for-granted perspective on immigrants’ human capital and economic efficiency by highlighting the influences of gender, ethnicity, and culture in shaping individual employment outcomes and adaptation experiences. Ho brings a gender lens to migration policy studies and discloses the heterogeneity of immigrant women’s lives. In particular, her qualitative data raise important questions about the interplay of gender, immigration, and work—family contexts.
As most studies of immigrant women focus on labourers, this case study of middle-class Chinese is a timely addition to the literature on gender and immigration.

However, the book is weakened by the author’s attempt to cover two themes, leaving neither completely addressed. In the first part, Ho does a fine job challenging the major assumption of the human capital approach but fails to refine the theory in the end. She draws from Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital but limits most of her discussion of the culture to language and communication. The notion of cultural competence could go beyond this scope. Ho needs to further elaborate the cultural factor and clarify how it differs from acculturation in order to sharpen her argument. In the second part of the text, Ho successfully reports the variations in women’s lives but fails to ground her empirical data in a theoretical discussion of gender and immigration. Little attention is paid to gender theories, gender identities, or gender relations. The women’s ambivalent and contradictory feelings about their work, family, and self-concepts provide invaluable data for discussing how international migration interplays with gender in creating both constraints and opportunities in different domains of women’s lives. Unfortunately, Ho’s preoccupation with challenging human capital theory distracts her from digging deeper into the women’s stories. In sum, this book is more useful for migration policy studies but less satisfactory for scholars of gender and immigration.

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This book deals with the education and life experiences of young men from different social groups in Uttar Pradesh, North India. The approach is one of a critical engagement with a powerful theme in South Asian society (indeed, in many societies), that education endows the individual with personal and social freedom. Degrees Without Freedom? argues that power and inequality structure people’s access to educational ‘freedoms’ and that a number of different coping strategies are employed by educated young men in their encountering of adverse post-education social and (un)employment situations. The book focuses upon what might be termed ‘formal’ education, that of the school and university, rather than community or workplace-based education programmes. Of eight chapters, the narratives of four are heavily dependent upon fieldwork conducted by the authors over a period of two years. Other chapters make reference to the macro-economic and political characteristics of contemporary Uttarakhand, and the contours of literature on education, masculinity and youth culture. As such, the book has a rather complete feel, though it focuses upon only two villages, Nangal and Qaziwala. The style of the writing lucidly connects the case studies of individuals from these villages to their broader social cohort, and beyond to theories of agency, cultural capital, and unemployment.

The book can be situated at the confluence of a number of approaches to the study of education, gender and non-metropolitan South Asian life. The authors utilise a range of