

# Being Female and Ethnic Minority: Gender and Social Capital among the Nepalese in postcolonial Hong Kong

Siumi Maria Tam

Department of Anthropology

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Paper for First Global Conference on “Multiculturalism, Conflict and Belonging”, Mansfield College, Oxford, 3-6 September 2007.

## Introduction

This paper examines the situation of Nepalese women in Hong Kong as members of the smallest ethnic minority in the former British colony. It looks at the interface of gender, ethnic minority identity and negotiation of social capital, and provides ethnographic data on how transnational mobility has led to the double marginalization of the female half of this minority population. Historically, the first generation of Nepalese women traveled to British Hong Kong as wives of the Gurkha regiment in the British army. As dependents of these soldiers, they were physically secluded as they were restricted to the barracks. As a colored minority in a predominantly Chinese society, they were misunderstood at best, and socially and culturally discriminated against at worst.

The second generation consisted of daughters of these transnational marriages, who experienced a reverse migration back to the mountain kingdom as their mothers' sojourn ended. They were raised in a split household, away from the father, but nonetheless brought up among his kin and thus a highly patriarchal family structure centered around the needs of the male members. In the 1990s these daughters returned to Hong Kong, not as individual migrants but as wives of yet another generation of Nepalese men. A third generation of migrant women is now emerging, as granddaughters of the Gurkhas they seek to settle permanently in their birthplace, and demand the right to be educated and to work. While they consider Hong Kong their second home, and many consider themselves Hongkongese (*heunggongyahn*) they are faced with the daunting prospect of unemployment, domestic abuse, and ethnic discrimination.

Among the three generations of women migrants, there are dissimilarities in terms of motivation and circumstances surrounding their migration decisions. Yet there is an obvious common denominator among the three generations, which is the female submission to

arranged marriage, parental authority, and familial duty. In different stages of their lives, gender roles as wife and mother have been the most important determinant. This study is based on in-depth interviews of Nepalese in Hong Kong, and participation observation of their family, religious and community life between 2006 and 2007. It is found that women migrants are important building blocks of a transnational network, and agents in the maintenance of family and cultural integrity. Yet they are often neglected and victimized, by their own community and the host society. In analyzing how social capital is accessed and utilized among this subaltern group, the author concludes that Nepalese women should play an active role as agents of change, not only in achieving gender equality within the Nepalese community, but also in the larger society as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government begins to pay attention to ethnic relations and their potential impact on social harmony.

### Being Minority in Hong Kong

“Being ethnic minority” in Hong Kong is a very diverse experience because minority status is multi-layered and multi-determined. This paper focuses on one aspect of this diverse experience – that of gender, especially as it interfaces with migration – marriage among the Nepalese women in Hong Kong. While these mobilities of women are not forced in the sense that they are trafficked, they do share the similarity of being part of an arranged marriage package, and thus for the women involved, these “arranged migrations” carry a much higher sense of uncertainty and anxiety. I will show, mainly through citing the experiences of individual women interviewees, how arranged marriage and migration across national borders have combined to produce a ghetto effect for Nepalese women, as they managed life based on the re-creation of the Nepalese mother-wife role in a Chinese society.

A “sinicization” of anthropological research in Hong Kong has led to a “false consciousness” that Hong Kong is an ethnically homogenous society and that ethnic relations and problems arising thereof do not exist. Among anthropologists of the 1970s, for example, academic interest was focused squarely on the sub-ethnicity among the Chinese. Fred Blake and Nicole Constable studied the Hakkas, and Susanne Choi studied the Chiu Chows, to name just a few. An exception is Barbara Sue White who studied the Indians in Hong Kong in the 1980s, but since then little work was done. It was the historians (such as Carl Smith) who took interest in the British-Chinese ethnic relationships, but most of the work focused on the expatriates of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until the past five years when ethnic minorities of South Asian origin have begun to attract social attention—they were stereotyped as welfare abusers and a potential threat to the population mix as their numbers increased at the rate of 10,000 (14%) per year.

The construction of a racial harmony discourse in Hong Kong was conveniently carried out by stressing the fact that 95% of the Hong Kong population is of Chinese origin. As the remaining 5 %, they are characteristically written (off) as “consisting of British, Canadians, Japanese, Koreans and persons of South Asia origin.” Obviously, among the minorities, a hierarchy exists both in terms of consciousness and practice, and is largely based on class and the Chinese population’s experience of British colonialism. Sadly, on everyday life, this hierarchy manifests as, a 19<sup>th</sup> century understanding of race – one that is ranked according to the shade of skin color. For a long time, mainstream (Chinese) society concerns itself only with white people and glosses over the existence of other ethnic groups.

According to government figures, in 2005 there are 15,000 people of Nepalese origin, making up 0.2% of the total population. Undoubtedly the Nepalese are the smallest ethnic groups in terms of number. However, they have had a long history in Hong Kong, as they have served in the British army and have stationed in Hong Kong. Their famed combat skills and service in Hong Kong have earned them a respect that other South Asians groups do not enjoy, but since 1997 when Hong Kong’s sovereignty was reverted to China, their relationship to Hong Kong people also changed. Those Nepalese who chose to stay in Hong Kong could no longer stay aloof of the mainstream society as they used to stay in the barracks. Their employment opportunities are often limited to occupations that are extension of their military background, and as such a large majority of them became security guards, construction workers, and nightclub bouncers. The few who broke out of this job segregation were able to start their own small businesses, such as grocery stores, CD/VCD shops, restaurants, and private schools including kindergartens and a primary school. Most of these cater for fellow Nepalese, Indians and Pakistanis.

### The Genderedness of Being Nepalese in Hong Kong

From the account given above, from the beginning of the arrival of the Gurkhas regiment in colonial Hong Kong, to the emergence of a business community today, the Nepalese migration is a highly gendered phenomenon. In the colonial period, the men served in the army, and the women joined them temporarily as their wives. In the post-colonial period, things have not changed much — while many of the daughters of these ex-Gurkhas were born in Hong Kong and have the permanent residency, they migrated to Hong Kong not as individuals, but, like their mothers, as wives of a new generation of male immigrants.

The interviewees in this project were invited to individual in-depth interviews through snowball sampling. Over half of them were born in Hong Kong when their fathers were serving in the British army stationed in Hong Kong, and others were born in other British

commonwealth countries when their fathers stationed there. All of the women settled in Hong Kong in the 1990s and so have lived in Hong Kong for over 10 years. In terms of education, all received secondary education or bachelor's degree, with the exceptional case of a doctor who was trained in a non-commonwealth country. But regardless of their qualifications, they were able to find only low-income, low-status, and temporary work that include mostly dead-end jobs such as construction worker, janitor, and kindergarten teacher. The physician could not register to practice her profession independently, and had to work under the supervision of a local doctor.

### Being and becoming wives

All of my informants had been married, except the doctor who was engaged. Without any exception, these marriages were arranged by their parents, though they vary in the degree of parental intervention and previous knowledge of the husband. In many of these cases, the women knew about the marriage only three days before. A typical recount was that they came home from school one day, and was told that they would be marrying to a certain man; they would be shown a photograph of the man, and was further asked to get ready to move to Hong Kong after the wedding. This often resulted in the interruption of the women's education. One 27-year-old women, Kumari for example, was studying in her bachelor's program in Kathmandu and had to leave without finishing her studies. Similarly Mamita was doing her master's program on Asian language and culture, but was recalled from overseas in order to get married.

An interesting exception was 32-year-old Lena who considered herself very lucky because although she married at the age of 17, she was allowed to stay home to finish her postgraduate studies before joining her husband in Hong Kong. She rationalized her experience in the following manner:

Some of [the women] stop [studying] right? Because they are staying with their in-laws. But it's lucky for me that my in-laws live in the village. I don't have any idea how to stay in the village because I never saw a village before... they have to get water from the pond, they are living in a hut...they even have a buffalo at home, and goats... and they have to get the grass for them.

Lena justified her resistance against moving to the village because she did not have the experience and would not be an asset to her in-laws. This in turn freed her from housewifery and in effect led to a delayed marital residence. However, although she was able to finish her studies, her dream of becoming an accountant in Japan did not materialize as she had to

transfer to her husband's home in Hong Kong soon after her studies. As she did not read or write Chinese, she was not able to find a job as an accountant either. Her arranged marriage also did not work out. Her husband was much older than she was, and they found no common interests, even after their only child was born. When I interviewed Lena in her home, sitting on the floor Nepalese style, she was full of grievances as a new migrant. She said,

It is very hard for me to find a job or even make new friends. Even now my husband is very quiet, not talking much, and I have to do everything on my own... I got lost 3 times in Tsimshatsui..."

Her helplessness was aggravated by the fact that her husband worked 12 hours a day at various construction sites, and often the couple did not see or talk to each other for days. She lamented that marrying at age 17, to a man 12 years her senior, simply by a look of the photograph, was the most regrettable thing in her life. She said she could have enjoyed her life more if she married later; and when I asked her about she future plans, she took me by surprise by saying "I don't know...may be I will find another husband.

Lena did not divorce, as she recognized that a divorced woman runs the risk of being isolated in the Nepalese community. Regardless of age, all interviewees were of the view that being married is the marker of a good woman, and one must work hard to live up to that image. Another informant, Kumari was born in Hong Kong and as such had the right of abode in the territory. However, she also came to Hong Kong as the wife of a man whom she did not know before the wedding. Her mother's relative was the matchmaker, and she admitted that she was scared; but she was convinced by her friends who "gave her bad ideas" that single women, particularly as a migrant would be insecure, and fellow Nepalese would "gossip" if she lived alone.

Kumari recalled that on the day of arrival she was picked up by a relative from the airport, and without much help she and her husband had to start looking for jobs. Very soon she was working at a McDonald's restaurant, and she volunteered in an NGO so that she could acquire more working experience. She then proceeded to find herself a waitress job at another American restaurant, Ruby Tuesday; she was working in the housekeeping department of a hotel as room attendant at the time of interview. She was separated from her violent and abusive husband and taking a facial massage course at a community center, hoping to open a beauty parlor in future. In the meantime she has to raise her son, and has helped her ex-husband repaid his debts. Yet she always found time to do volunteer work, be it in an elderly home, or helping fellow Nepalese read letters. When I asked for her opinion on the government she thought that the government should expedite the assignment of public

housing for single mothers like her, and provide free Chinese language classes and low-cost childcare.

Obviously Kumari was a very resourceful person, and was able to make use of, and constantly accumulate cultural capital despite an unhappy marriage. She empowered herself by building up and constantly expanding her social networks, and freed herself from social and cultural effacement that is so characteristic of Nepalese women in Hong Kong. She rebuilt a selfhood independent of her husband. Yet despite this extraordinary sense of self, she retained a strong concept of familial responsibility and believed in fulfilling wifely duties even when she had divorced, by repaying her husband's debts.

This familialism is all the more persistent among the other informants, and Mamita is representative of this concept of female fate. She tried her best to be a dutiful wife and protective mother, and when the family did not develop the way she hoped it to, she justified it by the personality miss-match between herself and her husband, rather than seeking systemic reasons such as the arranged marriage, parental authority/control over her mobility, or the Hong Kong government's lack of sensibility towards the conditions of ethnic minorities. Like Kumari she believed that her life would improve if the government relaxed its housing policies so that her family could enjoy public housing, but she did not feel that her negative experience in Hong Kong were of a systemic nature that should be dealt with on a government or social-cultural level. These problems included being stuck in a tiny apartment on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of a old village house without an elevator, her only child was a victim of bad practice in a local hospital, and the child could not secure the same education as local Chinese children. Mamita 's personalization of difficulties, was common among the interviewees. As a result it led to a misplacement of problem ownership, which further contributed to the maintenance and reproduction of asymmetric relations, firstly, between the mainstream Chinese society and its ethnic minorities, and secondly, between women and men in household politics.

Another important area in which Nepalese women suffered from segregation was employment. For Nepalese men, their employment opportunities are often limited to occupations that are an extension of their military background, and as such a large majority of them became security guards, construction workers, and nightclub bouncers. For the women, employment is even more scarce, and so eight of my informants alternated between full-time housewifery and unemployment. Those who were employed found work mostly in low-pay and insecure positions, especially those that are an extension of their domestic duties. Among the 23 interviewees, one was a janitor, four were kindergarten or primary school teachers, and one was employed in an after-school care centre. They were also able to find jobs that were

considered feminine, so one was working as a beautician and another one studying to become a beautician. The few who have been able to break out of this job segregation were the ones who started their own small businesses. For the men the choices were grocery stores, CD/VCD retail shops, small restaurants, and private schools—mostly kindergartens and one primary school. As to the women, they opened small shops that provide service in clothes alterations, facial massage, and hairdressing; or they sold clothing and custom jewelry from Nepal, as well as cosmetics and undergarments from China. Without any exception, these private enterprises catered for fellow Nepalese, as well as South Asians especially members of the Indian and Pakistani ethnic groups. From the beginning of the arrival of the Gurkhas regiment in colonial Hong Kong, to the emergence of a business community today, the Nepalese migration has been a highly gendered phenomenon.

## Conclusion

The introduction of the Race Discrimination Bill in December 2006 serves to remind members of the Hong Kong society that racial inequality is alive and well, and needs to be regulated by means of legislation. The double marginalization of generations of Nepalese women in Hong Kong, as presented above, clearly shows that the patriarchal structure is an important factor in keeping women ghettoized. In civil society, NGOs such as the catholic Caritas or the protestant “Hong Kong Christian Service” have began providing services to Hongkongese of South Asian origin, and individuals such as Christie Lam have started charitable work in a village in Dhading. But it must be stressed that the Nepalese minority women in Hong Kong must begin to construct a new sense of femininity, then building a citizen identity, exercising their rights, and taking the role of agents of change in the designing of a multi-cultural Hong Kong society.

The lack of open-mindedness in seeing ethnic diversity as a social and cultural asset, and a lukewarm education reform claiming to integrate all ethnic groups, have contributed to the perpetuation of ethnic inequality. Coupled with a mainstream patriarchal view of women’s place in the home, being female and being ethnic minority in Hong Kong make it doubly difficult for Nepalese women to exercise their citizens’ rights and individual potentials. A policy that works to improve the situation of the Nepalese women must take into consideration gender-specific factors that intervene into their lives as women members of the smallest minority group in Hong Kong, and create more space for their development, whether in public or in private space. To do so, it is imperative that women are able to take part as partners of change, and not as recipients of “help”. More importantly, they should be treated, and treat themselves, as individuals with their own rights, in different levels of public space and private space, and not only as a part of the family system in which they fulfill duties as

daughters, wives and mothers.

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