

“I am the Only Woman in Suits”: Chinese Immigrants and Gendered Careers in Corporate Japan

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This paper uses Chinese immigrant women’s career experiences in Japanese firms to explore the impact of economic globalization on the gendered career patterns in Japan. Gender stratification characterizes corporate Japan. Japanese firms frequently assign women to career tracks with few job responsibilities and promotion opportunities. Chinese immigrant women working in Japanese firms inevitably confront such gender inequality. Their foreigner status further increases the difficulty for them to advance their careers in Japan. However, although still at a disadvantage, by situating themselves in occupational niches in Japanese firms’ transnational businesses, some Chinese immigrant women are able to overcome the gendered career arrangements and to achieve upward mobility. This paper describes how they struggle with organizational constraints, economic opportunities and gender norms. It suggests that economic globalization, in the forms of international labor migration and increasing volume of transnational economic practices, might bring positive changes to Japanese firms’ gendered employment structure.

Economic globalization affects women’s chances in both global and domestic labor markets. In the existing literature, the impacts of economic globalization on women’s labor market positions are said to be produced by mostly two aspects of economic globalization—the international trade and foreign direct investment. Studies have found that international trade increases women’s labor market participation in less developed countries (Braunstein 2006; Joekes 1987, 1995; Joekes and Weston 1994; Lim 1990; Standing 1989, 1999; Wood 1991). Women are employed at a proportionally high rate in export industries.¹ Foreign direct investments, on the other hand, increase gender equality in the labor market by reducing income gaps between men and women and providing more career opportunities to women working in foreign firms (Valarreal and Yu 2007, Ono 2007). This study, through Chinese immigrant women’s labor market experiences in Japanese firms, explores the impacts of a third aspect of economic globalization—international labor migration—on gender stratification in the labor market.

Gender inequality characterizes Japanese firms’ employment practices. Corporate Japanese women face insurmountable institutional and organizational barriers in their career advancement. Compared to men with similar educational backgrounds, they are assigned to corporate positions with fewer responsibilities, less income earning potential and fewer promotion opportunities (Brinton 1992). Foreign direct investment provides a much needed career alternative to Japanese women. Ono (2007)’s comparison of Japanese employees’ career patterns in foreign and domestic firms in Japan indicates

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that foreign corporations in Japan, with their short-term market-based operational logic and skill centered personnel management styles, provide better pay and more job opportunities to Japanese women than those working in domestic firms (Ono 2007). As a consequence, many Japanese women seek international education in US professional schools to gain access to foreign firms in Japan (Sugano 1990, Ono and Piper 2004).

The current study investigates how another form of economic globalization—international labor migration—together with other economic forces might also bring about changes to the gendered employment structure in Japanese firms. While through international education many Japanese women seek to break out of the domestic labor market that constrains their career development, through international education, Chinese women seek to break into the Japanese corporate labor market. In the process of making their careers in the corporate Japan, Chinese women inevitably confront the gender norms and the gendered career tracks in Japanese firms. Sometimes, gender disadvantage is coupled with their foreigner status to further dampen their career prospects. However, with the increasing volume of transnational economy between Japan and China, by possessing bilingual and bicultural skills, Chinese women found their occupational niches in the host labor market, and therefore manage to carve out a space of better career potentials in the corporate Japan. This paper suggests that the incorporation of immigrant workers whose career mobility trespasses the existing gender structure within the organization might become possible transformative influence on gendered employment practices in Japanese firms.

In what follows, I briefly present the data and methods of this study; introduce the student migrant origins of Chinese women employees in Japan; describe their occupational niches in the transnational economy; and outline their career mobility trajectories. I then conclude the paper by discussing the potential impact of Chinese immigrant women's career mobility on the gendered career structure in corporate Japan and the implications for the relations between economic globalization and women's labor market conditions.

Data and Methods

The data used in this paper consists of 38 in-depth interviews with Chinese women who had extended migration experience in Japan and who were employed in Japanese firms. At the time of the interviews, 31 of them worked in Japan and 7 of them worked in Japanese firms' Chinese subsidiaries in either Shanghai or Beijing. These interviews are a small part of a larger data set I have compiled since 2001 when I started my research among Chinese immigrants in Japan and those returned to China.

The whole data set includes over two years of participant observation at Chinese immigrant leisure venues and religious congregations between 2002 and 2004, an independent survey with a sample size of 218 individuals I administered in Tokyo and its surrounding area in the second half of 2003, and 178 in-depth interviews conducted between 2001 and 2007. The first 125 of these interviews were conducted in Tokyo, Japan and Shanghai and Fujian, China between 2001 and 2004 as part of my dissertation project. Therefore the interviewees were a collection of Chinese immigrants of diverse demographic, socioeconomic and legal backgrounds. 52 of these interviewees were women, and 18 of them were women migrants employed or having been employed

in Japanese firms. In the fall of 2006, I shifted my focus to Chinese immigrants' corporate career mobility in Japan. I conducted 27 interviews with Chinese immigrants in corporate Japan, including employees in IT and high tech business. Twelve of the 27 employees were women. During the summer of 2007, I went back to China and interviewed 26 former Japan migrants working for Japanese firms in Beijing and Shanghai.

Because of the much publicized gender differences of career patterns in the corporate Japan, I usually brought up the gender inequality issues in my interviews with Chinese women who were working or had worked for Japanese firms. While preparing this paper, I coded the sections related to gendered work experience and career concerns of the 38 cases using grounded theory coding methods (Strauss and Cobin 1990). The other interviews, the ethnographic data, the survey and statistics published by Japan Ministry of Justice and Japanese Student Support Organization (JASSO) are used as supplemental data.

From International Students to Corporate Employees

Tens of thousands of Chinese immigrant women are currently working for Japanese firms in Japan. The majority of these women are former student migrants. Student migration is one of the major patterns of migration from China to Japan in recent decades. Since the opening up of international education market in Japan in mid-1980s, over a quarter million Chinese people have entered Japan as either university students or pre-university language students. Chinese students make up over two thirds of the total international student population in Japan. In 2005, 105 thousand international students in Japan were Chinese. Close to 90 thousands of them study in higher educational institutions. Although Ministry of Justice's statistics on student migration do not provide gender ratio, my own survey conducted in 2003 shows that as many women as men entered Japan as students. Of 218 respondents, 117 entered with student visas, including 60 men and 57 women.

Chinese students show a strong tendency to stay on in Japan upon graduation. According to the JASSO survey among 5,500 privately-funded foreign students on Japanese campuses in 2005, being employed in Japan was the most preferred option for these students. College students expressed particularly strong preference for working in Japan. 61 percent of them hoped to be employed in Japan upon graduation versus 38 percent wanting to go back. Only Ph.D. students and research students showed a slightly stronger inclination to return to the home country to work.² Since mainland Chinese students represented over three quarter of the respondents in this survey (3,131 out of 4,155) and were more likely to be college students than graduate students, the result clearly indicates Chinese students' intention to enter Japan's labor market upon graduation.³ In fact, Chinese students are the majority of the international students who are employed in Japan. According to Ministry of Justice' statistics on visa status changes, since 1991, over half and in recent years over two thirds of employment visas have been granted to Chinese students. Since the student migration trend began, the total number of Chinese students who have obtained employment visas exceeded 30,000 (Liu Farrer 2007).

I encountered as many women employees as men during my fieldwork. Although

I don't have official statistics that allow me to show the exact scope of Chinese women's labor force participation in corporate Japan, nor gender ratio of Chinese students who have become employed in Japan, I believe Chinese women are as likely as men to access the labor market upon graduation. I observe that Chinese women prefer employment in Japan not only because of the wage gap between China and Japan and the increasing difficulties for overseas students without overseas work experience to find desirable employment in China, but also because of the attraction of life styles in Japan. Economic motivation and career concerns might be gender neutral, the lure of life styles in Japan is particularly strong among Chinese women. Compared to urban China, Japanese cities are perceived quite, clean and orderly—qualities my women informants found desirable. Some also found the social life in Japan endearing. Chinese women are more comfortable with social etiquettes such as gift giving and ritualistic visits than men. During interviews, they frequently accounted experiences of being taken care of by Japanese families, whom they sometimes taught Chinese to, worked for or neighbored with. As a matter of fact, it is acknowledged among Chinese immigrants in Japan that women like Japan more than men do. Some male interviewees reported that their decision to return to China was often objected to by their wives.

Chinese women students choose to be employed in Japan also for the freedom to travel the world. My women interviewees frequently mentioned this advantage. Young women world travelers all over the world are on the rise. According to Ministry of Justice's number of Japanese citizens going abroad in 2006, among people in 20 s, 160 percent as many Japanese women went abroad as men did.⁴ Chinese women, I found, were also more enthusiastic about overseas traveling than men. However, until recently, it was extremely difficult for individual Chinese citizens in China to go abroad as tourists. Being in Japan with a formal employment, Chinese can get tourist visas to foreign countries relatively easily. The freedom to travel also becomes an important motivation for Chinese immigrants to naturalize. Guan Jing, a Chinese woman working for a big Japanese watch company, explained,

For me, (naturalization) is just like changing your household registration in the country. One advantage is you can travel easily. Lingling (her friend, a naturalized Chinese woman and former student) asked me to go to Singapore with her this Christmas. She said: "You have Japanese passport, so we can just go. Other people would need to apply for visas."

In summary, Chinese student migrants are the mainstay of the Chinese immigrant population in Japan. Chinese women arrive in Japan as international students at an equally high rate. Upon finishing education, because of economic motivations as well as the lifestyle preferences, Chinese women as likely as men choose to enter Japanese labor market.

Careers in Japan's Transnational Economy

In sleek high rises in central Tokyo, many well-groomed women in pink, beige or cream-colored uniforms dotted the often austere and clustered office interiors. They serve tea and coffee with warm smiles. While spending most of their hours burying

their heads in the excel sheets or word documents, they also operate the photocopy machines, the paper shredders and the fax machines. They are called "OLs (office ladies)". Traditionally in Japanese firms women and men were assigned to different career "courses (tracks)".⁵ Men occupied "sogoshoku"—literally "comprehensive positions"—that provide more extensive on-the-job training, request domestic and overseas transfers and offer promotion to management positions. Women entered "ippanshoku"—"general positions"—that entail no business travel or opportunity for promotion. They were expected to quit the jobs upon marriage or the birth of the first child. After the enacting of the Equal Employment of Opportunity Law (EEOL) in Japan in 1986 and several revisions thereafter, the "course system" was gradually abolished in many Japanese firms. However, in the 2000 survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) of 5,681 Japanese firms with over 30 employees, a substantial portion of these respondents reported they solely employed men for sales and technical positions. In all companies, the women who actually occupied the "sogoshoku" types of positions were a minority.⁶

In contrast, the majority of Chinese women working in Japanese firms are not the typical "OLs." Most don't wear uniforms. Instead of providing general office assistance to male workers, they worked as sales and marketing representatives. Among the 38 informants, very few worked in "ippanshoku". Although some of them were not even aware of the different career courses in practices in some Japanese firms, two women whose employers still held "course employment system" made a point of telling me that they were in "sogoshoku" instead of "ippanshoku", different from most their Japanese women coworkers.

The question therefore arises: What gives Chinese immigrant women the power to trespass the gendered career boundaries in the corporate Japan? In this section, I describe and analyze the opportunities as well as the constraints Chinese immigrant women face in their career development in Japanese firms. I argue that Chinese women entered Japanese firms as both Chinese immigrants and women. Their career experiences are therefore affected by the economic opportunities brought by the booming transnational economy between Japan and China in recent years and the organizational constraints imposed on women as well as foreign employees.

Career Opportunities in the Transnational Economy

Chinese women are hired by Japanese firms primarily because they are Chinese. The majority of Chinese students in Japan are college students majored in humanities and social sciences.⁷ One important condition that has enhanced Chinese students' employment opportunities in Japanese labor market is the booming transnational economy between Japan and China. Thousands of Japanese companies have set up branches and factories in China. In 2002, Japan poured some 4.2 billion US dollars directly into factories and other operations in China (Belson, Feb 17, 2004, New York Times), and became the number one foreign investor in China if Hong Kong was excluded (Chinese Statistical Year Book 2004). Not only do big conglomerates such as NEC and Mazda have most of their production done in China and want to sell a big portion of their products in China, numerous medium and small Japanese firms are also active and sometimes desperate players in the transnational economy between Japan and China.

The heated transnational economy gives Chinese students, including women, career opportunities. Japanese firms actively recruit people who are bilingual and have cultural familiarity with both countries. As the Ministry of Justice's student employment data has shown, the majority of Chinese students who were employed in Japan were granted visas for Specialist in humanities/international services. In 2005, 3,180 or 76 percent of all Chinese students who received an employment visa were in this visa category. Demands for foreign students in four occupational categories were the highest: translation/interpretation (*honyaku, tsuyaku*)—35.2%, sales/marketing (*hanbai, eigyo*)—15.3%, information technology (*jouhou shori*)—9.6%, and overseas business (*haigai gyomu*) 7.7%. Except for information technology, the other three categories place priority on multilingual skills or multi-cultural backgrounds. In a nutshell, 58.2 percent of foreign graduates in 2005 were hired partly because of their linguistic and cultural skills.

Chinese women employees are therefore placed in positions of responsibilities because they possess the skills in demand. Almost all women in my sample worked in departments that had businesses or would have businesses with China. Their jobs entailed frequent overseas travel. Anqi, a sales representative at a Japanese manufacturing company, took business trips by herself to Taipei and Shanghai almost every month—a practice conventionally restricted to men. She said she was the only woman in her company who didn't have to wear a pink uniform, and she was also the only woman in the marketing department of her company.

Because of vision of an integrated regional economy in East Asia, some firms give Chinese women opportunities not even available to Japanese male employees. One woman, Li Yan, along with other members of the China Team, was rotated among different domestic subsidiaries of a big construction firm to learn different aspects of the firm's business and the entire operational procedures. She said this kind of training was unusual even for Japanese men in the company. They received it because the firm was planning to establish subsidiaries in China. Members of the China Team were expected to supervise as well as to staff the firm's Chinese subsidiaries in the future.

Responding to such opportunities, Chinese women actively chose to work in positions in sales and marketing departments and firms that have businesses with China even when other alternatives are available. Chen Xiuxiu, a naturalized Chinese woman in mid-30 s, chose a smaller high tech firm that offered to place her in a key position in the newly established overseas sales department over the automobile giant Nissan who would have staffed her in the human resources department. To my question why Chinese women did not usually work as a typical uniformed OL, the previously mentioned Overseas Sales Rep Anqi answered,

We are not suitable for that kind of jobs. First, we cannot compete with Japanese women for that kind of positions. They are native speakers and they are much better trained in that kind of service-oriented jobs while growing up. They do better than us. Our strength is our bilingual ability. The companies hire us because we are Chinese and can do what a Japanese person cannot do.

In addition to situating themselves in positions in transnational economy, some

career-minded Chinese women also actively seek to expand their niche. Wu Xiaoli is one of the cases. Japanese firms rarely sent female long-term expatriates to their overseas subsidiaries. However, a Japanese personnel consultant in Shanghai admitted that Japanese firms were more willing to send Chinese women back to China as expatriates. While I was interviewing returned migrants in China in 2007, I met Wu Xiaoli, who was the deputy chief of the Shanghai branch of a Japanese game software company based in Nagoya. In her early 30s, Xiaoli was majored in Fine Arts and had worked for a computer-based visual design company in Shanghai before going to Japan as an international student. She found employment as a game software designer right after the language school. She was the only foreign employee in the company. Three years into the employment, she drafted a business plan proposing to set up a branch in China to take over the programming projects. The board of directors was persuaded and sent her over to China, together with a Japanese department head (*bucho*). She returned with a 50 percent salary raise and a full expat package.

In short, Chinese immigrant women employees in Japanese firms are not treated the same as Japanese women. Majority Chinese women are able to trespass the gendered career boundaries and access jobs with significant responsibilities. Some of them even get promoted and put in the leadership roles. Such gender neutral treatments Chinese women received are resulted from the human resources demand created by the lively transnational economy between Japan and China. By possessing bilingual and bicultural skills needed by Japanese firms to develop businesses with China, Chinese women are first identified as Chinese instead of women. Therefore, they are able to encroach on the business territory conventionally reserved for Japanese men.

Facing Constraints

Although escaping the fate of serving tea to their male colleagues and braving into the rank of suited employees, most Chinese immigrant women are by no means exempt from the organizational constraints in the corporate Japan. Once entering the firm, Chinese women realized that despite their unfeminine job responsibilities, they are still subject to gendered treatments. They earn less than their male counterparts and they are less likely to be promoted within the structure. Facing these constraints, Chinese women adopt different strategies. How they resolve the clashing cultural expectations result in their ensuing career choices. Some adhered to the egalitarian gender norm cultivated when they grew up in communist China. Others learned to accept and even appreciate the Japanese gender culture, represented mostly by a clear division of labor in the society.

The first organization constraint is unequal earnings. Japan Institute of Labor Policy and Training's 2006 data shows that, between 1989 and 2004, Women's wage level was 60 to 65 percent of men's. Even after controlling occupational and industrial properties, firm size, academic backgrounds and length of employment, women employees' wages were still between 75 to 80 percent of male employees'.⁸ I have no numbers proving that Chinese women make less than either Chinese men or Japanese men in Japanese firms, but I do hear Chinese women acknowledging this matter-of-factly.

Zheng Jia explained why her salary was low, saying,

Women who came before me are also like this (working long hours with less

pay). When we just entered (the firm), we didn't make the same. Two years later, the gap (between men and women) became even larger. In Japan, a woman quits job after getting married and having a baby. You will leave. So when there are opportunities for promotion or salary increase, they give them to men. It is almost like unwritten rules. Nobody can say anything about it.

Coming from a developing country and stayed in Japan partly because of the wage gaps between the host and home countries, Chinese women seem more willing to accept such wage differentials. I did not hear Chinese women quitting a job because they felt they were discriminated against earning-wise. On the contrary, they value employment security over earnings. As a result, they would let go a lucrative contract-based jobs to be a permanent employee (*seishayin*).

Second constraint is the lack of upward mobility, despite their crucial position in the transnational economy. Compared to the lower pay, Chinese women fret over the lack of prospects for upward mobility much more frequently. Chen Lan complained,

Although I am in charge of an important part of the company business, I can never become an office manager, let alone a branch manager. The Japanese men would be horrified if a Chinese woman sitting on top of them.

Ailing, a sales representative working for a big high tech firm, felt placing Chinese women in "sogoshoku" was in fact Japanese firm's strategy for exploitation.

In Japan, they say that you are serving the bridging function etc, but in fact, they are just using you. In US, Chinese, such as those ABC, could get promoted in their companies. But here in Japan, it would be almost impossible to be promoted. I don't think I can possibly make a manager. Not for a Chinese person, particularly a Chinese woman. So, although I have many choices in my life, and I can do whatever I like privately, I don't have much hope for my career. When I was in school I was ambitious, thinking I had to have a career. But now that I have been working for several years, I have seen too much. I know a woman in a Japanese company has no future. First I am a foreigner, and second I am a woman. These two factors adding together determine that I won't have a promising future.

Finally, some Chinese women expressed resentment toward the gendered career expectation in corporate Japan. Yao Lin, who worked for a trading firm for five years, said,

Japanese men are so very narrow-minded. Guess what the men in my company had always said to me? '*toshimo soro soro, kekkon mo soro soro deshou*' (You are about the age. Get married soon.) I couldn't stand it and had to quit."

Most Chinese women interviewees said they struck Japanese coworkers, especially men, as "too tough" (*qiang* in Chinese, or *tsuyoi* in Japanese). Ailing, who went to Japan in 1986, had been in Japan for almost half of her life when I met her. She thought she

was a cultural hybrid. However, she said:

I think my personality and my toughness are not like Japanese girls. The other day I was talking to a Japanese coworker, and said people thought I was very Japanese. He said, "Hah?" He thought I was not at all Japanese In a Japanese company, women used to be mostly office assistants, waiting on men. Men say, "Copy this," and they will run to copy it. It is so pathetic. N Corp (her current employer) is OK. After all it is a technical company. M Corp (her previous employer) was horrible. There was this girl who graduated from Ochanomizu University, a prestigious women's college, and who also studied in the States and spoke very good English. She was just an assistant there, serving men. Another lady, already in her 50 s, had been waiting on men all her life. She graduated from junior college a long time ago. And every morning, she would prepare tea for every man, to the degree that she remembered every man's cup. Those men were so used to it, and wouldn't even say "thank you." She was used to it, too. She had always been the lowest person in the office, and any new male employee could manage her.

Facing the organizational constraints, Chinese women reacted differently. One choice is to become entrepreneurs. Because of these perceived disadvantages of being women in the corporate Japan, some career minded women such as Yao Lin chose to start their own businesses. Yao Lin quit her company when she turned 30. In 2002 when I interviewed her she was thirty-two, still single and the owner of a small trading firm. In 2005, Chen Lan also quit the trading firm and started her own business in the same trade, partnering with her former boss, the office manager. Both of them work in the transnational economy between Japan and China, and both continue the businesses they had already been doing while being employees. Economic globalization not only provides them career opportunities in the corporate Japan, but also provides opportunities for entrepreneurship. In fact, the trajectory from corporate employment to transnational entrepreneurship is not limited to women, but typical of Chinese student migrants in general (Liu Farrer 2007).

Some women stayed on in the corporate Japan, testing the gender hierarchy in the firm. After putting in 12-hour work days for several years, the pessimistic Ailing eventually made a team leader, although she thought it was an insignificant promotion and she paid too steep a price for her career. Others took the choice professional Japanese women made. Anqi quit the company where she worked for six years when she obtained her permanent residency. She went to UK to study English. After returning to Japan, she changed several jobs and eventually found a job as the head of a small personnel department in an Italian Apparel Company.

Not all Chinese immigrant women believed in fighting for a career. Some, in the course of stay in Japan, embraced the feminine culture in Japan. Lin Ying was such a case. Her first job after she got out of college in Japan was an overseas representative position in a small Japanese trading company. She soon applied for naturalization. Her citizenship status provided access to a wider range of jobs. She left her first job and found an administrative assistant position at a big firm working for its China Department. Ying made such a choice because she didn't consider herself an ambitious person.

She wanted more time to herself. Doing what she was doing at this big trading company, she was guaranteed to leave the company at 5:30 pm to do whatever she felt like doing. “If you are in sales position, you have to work long hours. There is also a lot of stress. I don’t think it is something I want.”

In addition, some Chinese women follow the gendered division of labor and quit their jobs upon getting married. Lin Yueling obtained a master’s degree in a Japanese university and started working for a Japanese firm as an overseas rep. Although a natural career choice of a Chinese person with her background, Yueling did not like sales and found her work environment stressful. Feeling miserable, she accepted the first marriage proposal that came her way. She didn’t love the man she married, but marrying him meant she could leave her corporate job and still live in Japan. As much as she dreaded working in a Japanese company, she also dreaded the idea of going back to China with the same suitcase she left with and added years of age. She didn’t know what she could have found in China. When I met her, she was several years into a marriage, and a part-time Chinese teacher.

Conclusion: Skilled Labor Immigration and the Gendered Labor Market

This study aims to explore how aspects of economic globalization—international migration and increasing transnational economy—affect women’s job market outcomes. Using Chinese immigrant women employees’ job experiences in the corporate Japan, I show that transnational economy increases demand for skilled labor. Such demand creates opportunities for Chinese women to overcome the gender barriers to occupy positions that are often denied to Japanese women. However, such career progress does not mean that Chinese women are above the gender barriers. The gendered career structure in corporate Japan is real. It persistently hampers Chinese women’s career development. Although some Chinese women succeeded in getting promoted, others toil at the positions laden with responsibilities but without corresponding rewards. Some quit the corporate labor market altogether and become entrepreneurs. Others resign to the lack of a career. Their individual career choices show the various degrees of adherence to Chinese gender norms and the reception of the Japanese gender norms.

Although a case about Chinese immigrant women’s careers in Japan, I do not mean to stop the discussion at this particular population’s labor market outcomes. Instead, through this case I hope to explore how globalization can potentially affect the organization of local labor market, in this case, gendered career structure. In the conclusion session, I would like to briefly discuss the possible process Chinese immigrants’ career experiences might help change the gender inequality status quo in Japanese firms.

First, I suggest that the incorporation of relatively gender-neutral market-based career track into Japanese firms’ internal labor market might bring about organizational transformation. In his analysis of the different career outcomes between Japanese workers at foreign firms and those at domestic firms, Hiroshi Ono (2007) points out that Japanese women prefer foreign firms because they enjoy more egalitarian gender treatment and therefore have more career opportunities. Foreign firms embrace economic modes of transaction. They enter or exit Japanese market based on the market conditions, and are thus tend to hire employees according to the market values of their human capital. They thereby give Japanese professional women opportunity to over-

come the gender barrier typical of Japanese firms. Many Japanese elites, including the former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, hold high regard for foreign firms' modes of operation. They proposed to encourage more foreign firms to enter Japan in order to transform Japanese firms into organizations based on economic exchange instead of social exchange. However, as Ono (2007) argues, there is no evidence that foreign firms are necessarily more efficient than Japanese firms. Moreover, these foreign firms are external to Japanese corporate organization, and potential competitors of Japanese firms. Therefore exposing Japanese firms to foreign human resource management styles might not effectively change the corporate Japan's organizational characteristics.

I suggest that, instead, the internalizing of foreign elements with the organization might be more effective in transforming the organization. The fate of Japanese firms increasingly lies in their relations with China and other East and Southeast Asian countries. With the student migration from Asian countries into Japan, more and more skilled Asian immigrants are employed in Japanese firms. They are employed because of the utility of their human capital. They are the bridges in the transnational economy between Japan and their home countries. As Chinese immigrant women's experiences show, such an occupational niche works to women's advantage. Because of the demand for their human capital, they can overcome gender barriers, albeit incompletely. By creating such a gender-neutral career track within the organization, Japanese firms might have to change some organizational styles.

Second, Chinese women, by entering Japanese firms, bring with them gender norms that emphasize gender equality.⁹ By being foreign, Chinese women frequently ignore gendered customs that dominate the work place. For example, while their Japanese female employees are expected to serve teas or make copies, despite their actual job positions, they can refuse the chores by assuming their foreignness. They can also ignore some of the work conventions in the Japanese firms. For example, in Japanese companies, employees often feel obligated to stay in the office when either the boss or the subordinates are still present. Ailing said she left earlier than most of her Japanese colleagues.

I just leave when I finish my work, unlike the Japanese workers who have to stay if the session chief (kacho) hasn't left. When I say bye-bye I notice their looks. I know they might be envious of me. Because I don't have to care, I am a foreigner.

Witnessing immigrant women employees having opportunities unavailable to local employees might give Japanese women employees the confidence and justification to demand equal job opportunities. In fact, some of the interviewees reported frequent communications with their Japanese women coworkers about gender norms and expectations. Immigration, a trend Japanese government is reluctant to acknowledge, might just help transform Japanese society from within.

Footnotes:

1. Many social scientists are critical of the employment of women in the export industry. Some suggest that the employment of women in such industries represents an exploitation of docile female labor because export firms are usually in labor-intensive industries, such as the garment and electronics

- industries, which pay lower wages and provide little or no job security (Pearson 1991, Pyle 1999).
2. Among the PhD students, 66.6 percent hoped to return to their home country to work, while 51.5 percent preferred staying in Japan to work. 20 percent research students at the graduate level hoped to go back to the home country to work compared with 19 percent who preferred to be employed in Japan.
 3. In 2003, over 70 percent international college students in Japan and a little fewer than half of the foreign graduate students were from mainland China. Source: "Foreign student numbers," Heisei 18 Statistics by Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and technology. URL: http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/002/002b/mokuji18.htm, accessed on Feb. 8, 2007.
 4. Ministry of Justice, <http://www.moj.go.jp/>, accessed on January 16, 2008.
 5. The courses include as many as six fine categories specifying obligations and opportunities, including "sogoshoku"—positions with the obligations of internal transfer (therefore promotions), "ippanshoku"—positions with no transfer obligations, and "senmonshoku"—specialist positions.
 6. Among firms with "course system", 90 percent reported "ippanshoku" were solely occupied by women. 85 percent of them only have 10 percent of the "sogoshoku" positions occupied by women. Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/0105/h0528-1.html>, accessed on Jan. 16, 2008.
 7. Based on statistics published by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Data is available online at <http://www.mext.go.jp>, accessed on October 31, 2006.
 8. "Course Full Labor Statistics—Processed Labor Statistics—2006," the Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training. Pp.190–191. URL: <http://www.jil.go.jp/kokunai/statistics/kako/documents/2-11.pdf>, accessed on Feb. 13, 2007.
 9. Although it is questionable whether China fulfills the gender equality ideal, it is still an ideal embraced by Chinese women.

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