

## Living as expatriate wives/mothers: Balancing work and family issues among Korean working women in Singapore\*

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### I. Introduction: Studying Korean married women's work and family in Singapore

Pursuing a career internationally often leads to the reorganisation of spousal and parental roles, as well as that of the careers of couples. This post-migration change is not a gender neutral experience. It also involves the use of coping strategies for either a couple or a family. By means of a case study of Korean married working women in Singapore, this paper addresses the following two related questions: As sojourners, what are the challenges or difficulties of migration for Korean professional married women who work and live abroad? What are their lived experiences of balancing work and family and the coping strategies that are employed by them as wives and mothers?

Professional migration and its implications for the family has become

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a newly emerging area of sociological research, particularly, with ethnographic investigation based on the transnational migration perspective(Aranda 2008; Dreby 2007; Cooke 2007; Hardill 2004; Sørensen and Olwig 2002). Existing sociological studies, however, have paid little attention to the migration experiences and family dynamics of professional or highly skilled sojourner migrants until recently(Aranda 2008; Scott 2006)<sup>1)</sup>. In fact, professional migrants have long been conceived of as being mainly confined to Western expatriates(e.g. Cohen 1977) or Western elite migrants(e.g. Hardill 2004; Scott 2006).

Sojourner professionals and their families are an increasingly salient and important migrant group to Korea, although few researches have been conducted on this population as yet. For instance, over 1.5 million Koreans were estimated to live abroad within the category of 'sojourners'(Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2007). Although not all Korean sojourners are professional migrants, at least a substantial portion of them seem to be professional migrants and their families. The available data suggests that the number of these sojourners has overtaken that of permanent emigrants from Korea, over the past decade(see Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, various years). In doing so, the globalisation of Korean business operations has created a push and pull situation. In 2007, 9,568 Korean companies operating in 78 countries were listed by KOTRA(2007). Therefore, there is little doubt that Korean

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1) Partly, this reflects the permanent immigration-centred and host society-centred approaches of American sociology, which has been primarily concerned with adaptation, assimilation and incorporation issues of immigrants into the host society (Heisler 2008). Many recent works have been conducted by anthropologists and geographers rather than by sociologists. See, for example, Lam et al.(2002) and Parreñas(2005).

professionals and their families now constitute a significant portion of these sojourners, particularly since the 1990s. Considering that the Korean community in Singapore is often described as an expatriate-dominated sojourner society, a study on professional Koreans in Singapore has merits not only as a study of Korean professional migrants abroad but also as a study of a newly emerging population group of Korean sojourners. Also, this paper adopts qualitative methodology to explore their lived experiences, considering the fact that we know little about Korean sojourners' migration experiences.

## II. Literature Review, Background and Data

### 1. Married women's careers abroad

Some studies of professional expatriate married people have noted that career decisions are often made at the couple level and for the good of their family. For instance, the spouses of leading migrants, particularly wives, give up their own careers to follow their partners, becoming 'trailing wives', despite being highly educated and professional workers in their home country before their migration (Cooke 2007; Hardill 2004). This is particularly apparent for those from the countries where gender norms are strong and whose qualifications are not easily transferable into the host country (Cooke 2007). Cooke (2007), by means of a case study of Chinese academic couples in the

UK, showed that when wives faced a barrier in the labour market, they took the ‘husband’s career and children’s welfare first’ strategy.

In another qualitative study of dual career professional migrant families working in Canada, the US and the UK, Hardill(2004) showed that couples adopted various strategies, including declining the assignment, long-distance commuting, maintaining separate households or harmonising the assignments of both members, even though many tried to find suitable employment for both members of the couple, in addition to the ‘trailing’ of the leading migrant spouse. Hardill(2004: 344) argued that “while for many households transnational living is brought about because of the career of one partner, non-economic factors, such as augmenting their own or their children’s cultural and social capital, can ... result in households having a transnational dimension - and the investment in children in the form of education can take precedence over parental career-related decisions.”

These recent studies show that professional couples are actively trying out various approaches, as their coping strategies not only for the sake of the leading migrant’s career but also for that of the accompanying spouse, as well as other family members’ wellbeing and welfare, particularly the long-term social mobility and the social and cultural capital of their children. Also, some European and North American case studies are related to what Ong(1999) called the “family regime” or Yeoh et al.(2002: 3) called the principle of “for the sake of the family” or “all in the family” - “a principle which mobilizes family members to work towards common interests” and which may go beyond Asia(Chan and Seet 2003; Chan 1997) and labour migrants(Asis et al. 2004). Therefore, paying attention to contexts and “shifting the focus on

the ‘family’ area” will enable us to make sense of the way in which “institutionalised strategies and their underpinning ideologies are mediated”(Yeoh et al. 2002: 2).

## 2. Expatriate community and migrants’ transnationalism

The ‘expatriate communities’ literature emphasises the exclusive relationship aspects of these expatriate professionals, and their lack of assimilation efforts, which can typically be found among permanent immigrants. They mostly confine themselves within their own ‘community’, interacting mostly with co-ethnics/co-citizens or international expatriates(Cohen 1977). Researchers have explained that this phenomenon is a product of the superior social status of expatriate professionals in relation to the local population. Also, it has been attributed to the temporary nature of their stay in the host countries(Cohen, 1977: 17). However, recent studies on professionals from developed countries have suggested that even these ‘expatriates’ are increasingly diversified, including those who show different migration motivations and maintain different ways of life from their co-ethnic ‘elite’ counterparts(Thang et al. 2002; Scott 2006).

In contrast, the transnational migration perspective(Basch et al. 1994; Portes 2001; Vertovec 1999; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Castles 2003; Levitt and Nadya Jaworsky 2007; Khagram and Levitt 2008) has recognised the continuous and concurrent involvement of migrants in socio-cultural, political and economic issues in both their countries of origin and of destination. Particularly, some recent works focusing on the transnational family has argued that family relational issues such as

parenting, conjugal relationships(Pribilsky 2004) or the ideology of familism are reconstituted or renegotiated during the migration process (Parreñas 2005; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Yeoh et al. 2005; Yeoh et al. 2002). Due to the constraints of a lack of resources, legal status or kin or family members, many migrants innovatively develop strategies and use them to their own advantage.

### 3. Korean migrant women's work: the permanent immigration setting and the Singapore context

Studies on Korean working women abroad are mostly conducted within a permanent immigration context, especially in the USA(e.g. Min 1992; Min 1990; Park 1997). These researches suggest that Korean married women typically worked long hours of work at their workplace and continued their household tasks(Min 1992). Also, despite their immigration, their traditional orientation towards the division of labour and towards power relations with their husband has changed little. This situation has been explained by several contextual reasons. Firstly, many first generational Korean women could not gain access to a mainstream career as their credentials are not fully recognized and due to their lack of English fluency. As a result, they were engaging in business within the ethnic enclave or ethnic economy, as employees or as self-employed people, where they utilized the available work opportunities. Secondly, dual work is also pursued as a strategy to enhance social mobility in the long term across the generations. Indeed, Koreans' self-employed businesses, often tapping into the unpaid family members'(particularly, wives') labour, is pursued to achieve "security"

or *anjong* at the family level (Park 1997).

In contrast to the Korean immigrant community in the USA, a popular agreement among Koreans in Singapore about the characteristics of their community was that it is a professional expatriate dominated one (or *jujaewon sahoi*) whether they are long-term residents with a permanent resident status (hereafter PR, an equivalent of 'green card' in the USA) or a newcomer. In fact, it has long been so since the early- or mid-2000s. The biggest change was the huge influx of educational migrant families from the mid-2000s, who came for the sake of the international schooling of their primary and secondary school children (Kim 2010; Park and Bae 2009). Also, from the late 1990s and early 2000s, many new Korean sojourners, who were not affiliated with Korean multinational companies, came to Singapore to work. As a result, the Korean population in Singapore nearly tripled with the influx of new sojourners over the last decade. In 2006, there were about 15,000 Koreans, a number which had rapidly increased from about 3,000 to 6,000 in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The number of Korean permanent resident holders was estimated to be over 1,000 in 2005 (Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade various years). This is, in fact, what other Korean communities in other parts of Southeast Asia have experienced within the same period.

#### 4. Method and Data

Given the nature of the research, qualitative in-depth interviews were used, as this is the most appropriate method for this type of research (Creswell 2007; Silverman 2004): an exploratory study involving an

in-depth inquiry into gaining migrants' opinions, understanding their practices of balancing work and family in an international migration context. Analysis and interpretation of the collected data were informed by the grounded theory approach(Charmaz 2006), due to the fact that little is known about sojourner Koreans. As the grounded theory approach states(Charmaz 2006; Creswell 2007), continuous interim analyses of the interviews, cross checking and interim analysis were undertaken during the field research.

The fieldwork was carried out over 17 months between April 2006 and September 2007. All the formal interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of the interviewees.

I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 26 married working women. Almost all of their husbands were working full-time for either Korean or internationally-owned companies or organizations in Singapore<sup>2)</sup>. Several of them were working for small and medium-sized Korean firms or as self-employed. These women were mostly in their 30s and 40s, ranging between 29 and 53 years old(median age 41). Their husbands' age was similarly mostly in their 30s and 40s(median age 43). This reflected the age patterns of professional expatriates from Korean companies when they are sent abroad. It also reflected my deliberate attempt to recruit a diverse group.

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2) A number of those who worked for Korean MNCs had received an educational subsidy for their children or a housing subsidy. Some of those who were working for International MNCs received such benefits for a limited period of time(often as a three year 'immigration package' from the company at the commencement of their post in Singapore), but some were not currently receiving them. In fact, I learned whilst I was conducting the fieldwork that not all Korean MNCs or International MNCs provide subsidies for their children, even if they are working for the best known Korean companies, such as Samsung or Hyundai, especially in the construction industry, where not providing such subsidies was the norm in the industry.

They were married for an average of 14.7 years (a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 24 years). Almost all of them had received degrees from universities (including six with a graduate degree), except for one high school graduate and one polytechnic graduate. Their household monthly income was on average 11,240 Singapore Dollars (SGD), which is significantly higher than both the mean monthly household income in Korea and in Singapore<sup>3</sup>). The average length of time they had spent living in Singapore was 7 years and the average length of time they had spent living outside Korea was 8.6 years. My sample contains some families who were PR holders. 13 families had PR in Singapore. One person held Singaporean citizenship, which was gained via a previous marriage to a Singaporean spouse. All the others held Korean citizenship either with or without PR.

Among the twenty-six wives, 12 worked (seven worked full-time and five part-time) at the time of the interview. Five of them were working full-time for American, Australian and European firms and international nongovernmental organizations, respectively. Two others were working full-time: one as a low-level service worker and the other as a self-employed person. Five were other part-time teachers, tutors or freelancers. Fourteen informants did not work in Singapore. Many of the informants, including those 14 who were not working in Singapore, used

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3) The exchange rate between British Pounds, US Dollars (USD), Singapore dollars (SGD), and Korean Won (Won) were 1 SGD = 600.20 Won on 1 June 2006 and 1 SGD = 606.97 Won on 1 June 2007. Source: Korea Exchange Bank (<http://www.keb.co.kr/>). Also, according to data collected from the 2000 census in Singapore, 20.7% earn over S\$ 4,000 per month from work (Singapore Department of Statistics 2001: 14). In addition, the same source's data on monthly household income from work suggests that 10.3% earn over \$10,000, whereas 20.9% earn over S\$7000 (Singapore Department of Statistics 2001: 18).

to work in Korea or some had tried to work in Singapore.

When I recruited the interviewees, I considered the age group of their children as an important consideration, eventually pursuing diversity among the selected sample. I included those wives who had relatively young children as well as those who had relatively older ones. As a result, among the total of 51 children out of 26 working women, six were

Table 1. Characteristics of Informants

Case	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
Age	29	41	38	46	37	43	39	44	47	44	36	50	41
Education	Poly	Post	Univ	Post	Univ	Univ	Univ	High	Univ	Univ	Post	Univ	Post
Years in Singapore	14	4.25	6	7	1.4	3	4	19	13	14	3.5	11	6
Years of Marriage	5	15	13	21	12	17	11	12	20	14	8	23	6
Current work	IMNC	IMNC	IMNC	INGO	IMNC	PT	No	KSME	Self	Self	PT	PT	PT
Number of children	1	2	2	3	2	3	2	1	2	2	2	2	1
Monthly household income	9000	20000	5750	4000	14000	9500	10000	5000	10000	15000	7500	20000	12500
Case	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
Age	53	39	39	38	39	37	35	40	45	42	48	50	42
Education	Post	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Post	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ
Years in Singapore	4	2	8	1.5	3	6	2.5	5	8	12	12	14.5	1
Years of Marriage	18	14	14	14	14	12	12	11	18	16	24	20	15
Current work	PT	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	PT
Number of children	1	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Monthly household income	(4000)	10000	7000	7000	10000	15000	4000	10,000	25000	30000	13000	7000	12000

Note: IMNC refers to international multinational company, INGO refers to international non-governmental organization, KSME refers to Korean small-and-medium size enterprise, Self refers to self-employed worker and PT refers to part-time worker. High refers to high school graduate, Poly refers to polytechnic(junior college) graduate, Univ refers to four-year university graduate, and Post refers to graduate school degree holder.

under the age of 6, twenty-six were between 7 and 12(primary school attending age), nineteen were over the age of 13(secondary or tertiary school attending age). This deliberate sample was also intended to examine and to grasp their possibly different demands and needs for work and family balance by studying the different life course of their children.

The following parts will look into the ways in which married working women balance their career and family, describing their lived experiences from a wife's point of view and focusing on the coping strategies developed by Korean working women. Firstly, I will look into full-timers' experiences. Then, I will move into the experiences of part-timers. Lastly, I will investigate why Korean wives/mothers as sojourners express the view that the availability of domestic helpers in Singapore, which actually enables them to work, is not perceived to be enough for them to meet the demands of work and family and to fulfil their role as a mother. In doing so, I relate this experience to the popular idea that 'migration is for the family', which I identified whilst I was conducting my field research. In fact, this idea was not only prevalent amongst Korean professional migrants in Singapore but also amongst other contemporary transnational migrants elsewhere from middle class backgrounds(Kobayashi and Preston 2007; Hardill 2004; Yeoh et al. 2002; Chan and Seet 2003; Chan 1997; Waters 2002, 2005). In other words, this paper pays attention to both the particularities that Korean sojourners may have and the commonalities that they may share with professional migrants from other countries.

### III. “There were small discordances here and there”: Balancing work and family among Korean working women

#### 1. Switching to a family-friendly workplace: Full-time working women's coping strategy

A prevalent coping strategy found among full-time working women was either utilizing the practices of family-friendly policies of their workplace or switching to such a workplace, if their previous workplace was not sufficiently family-friendly. Their conscious awareness and deliberate search for such a workplace reflected the priority they gave to their family. This is due to the fact that women's work does not end at their first shift at their office but continues at home as a second shift (Hochschild and Machung 2003), which is also the case in an international migration context, including professional dual career households (Hardill 2004; Cooke 2007). In particular, this strategy was an important option for those who have young children. For example, Mrs A, who had a two year old son, working for a European bank, is such a case. In undertaking her current work, this was the most important factor:

“When I changed jobs, I looked for one which was more favourable for mothers in its work schedule. In the previous job, I often had to take international conference calls with other branches, even when I came back home. I looked for a job where I did not need to do that and where I did not need to pay attention to work when I came home.”(Mrs A)

In her workplace, about 90% of the employees were working mothers and there were some female managers with two or three children. This provided a more favourable environment for her, as her other colleagues understood very well the situation of working mothers. In her current role, she has another colleague with whom she can arrange to take leave alternately if a situation arises at home. If they have one at the same time, her husband covers the home affairs. This strategy could be utilised not only by those whose English proficiency was near native, like Mrs A above, or very fluent, like Mrs B, but also those whose English proficiency was not at such a level, for example, Mrs C (see in the later section). They could also utilise this strategy if they were engaged in the ethno-linguistic niche labour market, for posts requiring Korean speakers, such as guides, interpreters, translators and regional support staff in the service sector of international multinational corporations (hereafter International MNCs).

Some workplaces, such as international organizations, maintained relatively favourable policies towards work-family issues, so that employees for these organizations could utilize such arrangements. In doing so, many professional women, who are able to reallocate the time they spent at their office, have made family issues, particularly raising young children, their first priority over their work.

“When I go to China for a business trip, it is for one week. ... I control the schedule (of the trip) so as not to exceed one week. ... Work is my second priority, not the first one for me. That is clear. ... As I am a working woman, there is a tension arising from my desire to work more. ... I received some offers asking me ... but I refrain from that. ... I think ‘now is not the right time’.” (Mrs D)

In fact, one reason, regardless of whether their husbands share domestic work or not, why Korean married women were able to put more emphasis on their family affairs than their own career was that all their husbands were working. Also, almost all(except for two in my sample) had got their jobs after their husbands had got their own jobs or were deployed in Singapore. Most of them, therefore, can be regarded as 'trailing wives'. Many capable Korean women have managed to find a way into the niche with their linguistic capability and professional experience in Singapore, where many IMNCs' headquarters are located.

Importantly, decisions concerning pursuing overseas careers for both members of the couple were made at the couple(and the family) levels, not only whether they should work or not, if they can choose to, but also how to arrange their migration: the timing, location and other familial issues. This was the case for Mrs E, who was one of the rare female professional 'leading' migrants. She had been transferred from her Australian MNC's Seoul office to Singapore. Her family followed a strategy of calibrating timing and location for both the couple's careers and their family concern. When she was offered an opportunity of an intrafirm transfer, her husband was also offered an opportunity of having a company sponsored MBA program. They synchronised their departures from their companies in Korea as much as possible, even though there was an inevitable six months' interval. At the time of the interview, her husband was studying for an MBA in one of Singapore's universities. In fact, he was offered admission to a top university in the USA, where prospects would be better than at his current business school, but he chose to come to Singapore, after considering the couples' career and other family issues. In the decision making process,

the couple considered also the need to provide educational opportunities for their two children in primary schools.

During their stay abroad, full-time professional women, as they are 'surrounded' by other Korean women of their age, many of whom are housewives, this leads some to rethink their career and family issues. At the time of the interview, Mrs E was asking herself what to do with her own career, a question to which she had changed her answer since she came to Singapore. She responded to my question about her future career by saying that "if I were asked the question in Korea, I would say 'I will work for life.' However, I am not so sure now." What made her think twice about her work was interrelated not only with the 'glass ceiling' in her workplace as a female professional officer but also with her experience as a migrant:

"In the office in Korea, there were only nine members of staff and two bosses above me. I am the highest (and oldest) among the women. . . . I do not know whether I will be promoted (to the top). . . . Also, even if I am not promoted in the company, I will have a job whether I work for the company or do something else. . . . [But] whilst I am living here, I come to envy the wives of Korean MNC professionals." (Mrs E)

What she came to envy other Korean wives for was to do with the relatively 'stress - free' living environment for women, not only due to the help of domestic workers but also the temporary absence of the 'kin work' (Chee 2005) pressure that they used to have in Korea.

In addition to managing overseas business trips, other dual earner couples managed their overtime work, which was inevitably required by their role as a professional worker. Help, due to the availability of

domestic helpers, was often viewed as limited for professional women. Mrs B explained how her work in Singapore and Korea was different, as she now had to resolve the issue at her couple level, as follows:

“If I was working in Korea, ... I might not feel that I have to come home before my children go to bed. ... [Here], I feel that either I or my husband should be at home in the evening. ... If I were in Korea, I might send my children to my mother’s or one of my sisters’ or brothers’ during the evenings or weekends.”(Mrs B)

It should also be noted that the flexibility and family-friendly practices of both women’s workplaces and those of their husbands made such arrangements possible. Mrs B’s account illustrates the point:

“[Here,] I and my husband manage our overtime alternately during weekdays. ... At first, I did not know about managing overtime, so I worked without asking for possible rescheduling of overtime at my office.”(Mrs B)

In sum, Korean professional women facing their challenges of pursuing careers in Singapore developed and adopted coping strategies. This involved utilizing the family-friendly practices of the workplace and coordinating and sharing family responsibility at the couple level. Despite relatively favourable practices towards the family, the fact that they lived abroad, without their own relatives and social networks created tensions for them in balancing their career and family.

2. 'Realising time of my own' versus 'realising the difference between working mothers and those who are not working': Contrasting experiences of part-timers

Many of my interviewees experienced the transition from being a full-time professional in Korea to being a part-timer in Singapore. Two types of part-timers were identified during the field research. The first type was found among relatively more affluent families, who could choose to work part-time. This type of part-timers' experience revealed their hectic experience of working full-time in Korea and their temporary experience of becoming a housewife until they took up their part-time position. For example, Mrs F, who had been a teacher in Korea, but now worked on Saturdays only at the supplementary Korean School, recalled her first year of not working in Singapore as follows:

"At first...for about six months it was so good. Not working was so good. ... In Korea, what I wanted to have was to have some time of my own. That was it. Reading a book or having a cup of tea, alone. It was hard to do it. ... Time of my own. That wish was realised [in Singapore], so I was so happy for the first six months. Then, I felt lonely."(Mrs F).

Similar accounts of 'temporary happiness' at not having their own careers in Singapore were often heard from other previously working professional wives. Their cases may be exceptional, or confined to teachers or civil servants, whose job security is guaranteed and for whom long-term unpaid leave is allowed for a significant number of years if they accompany their spouse aboard. However, for these

women, working for a few days a week added meaning to their lives in Singapore.

For the second type of part-timers, their work was not really optional like the first type but their contribution to the household economy was significant, if not essential. Their spouses typically worked with a local contract remuneration package in a Korean or Singaporean firm, without housing or educational subsidies for their children, or they ran service businesses of their own, where often the 'family' was an important resource, like typical first-generational immigrants(Park 1997; Min 1992). These women's work and family balance experiences revealed a sacrifice of their perceived mother role, even though their workplace allowed them some degree of flexibility, like their counterparts. For example, Mrs C was working for an IMNC as a support staff as a local contract worker. At first, she chose to work as a part-time shop attendant, as the shop required Korean speakers. Then, she would go to work at 10 am and finish by 4 or 5 pm. During this period she took her son to a full-time child care centre, since she did not have a domestic helper at home. For the last two years, she has been working for her current company and she has hired a domestic helper as she had to start working early. When I asked her how she managed her work and family balance and whether she felt any tension about it, she responded that she did not feel under much stress in the past but that recently she had realised that it is different for a dual-earner working mother. This is because she has been able to observe her children much more closely recently, due to the fact that she has started to shorten her work schedule because of her illness, as well as because of the need to support her son more closely, now that he is in the sixth grade, and he has had to take the

Primary School Leaving Exam(PSLE) at the end of the sixth grade, which acts as a key entrance exam for public secondary schools in Singapore. She said:

“The roles of a maid and of a mother are different. ... As I came to look at him closely, how he managed his time and how he studied, I realised the difference between working mothers and those who are not working [when I shortened my work schedule]. ... I could see that he was finding it hard to manage and to control his time by himself. ... If I was at home, I could provide advice on how to manage his time during this critical period. ... I felt the lack of such help from me. ... Playing computer games is also a good example. ... I feel that he has a lack of patience about handling it. *I realise that this is an area that working mothers cannot support well. I came to realise it by becoming a mother of a sixth grade child.*”(Mrs C, emphasis added).

Her remarks illustrate the grounded reality of balancing work and family for relatively less affluent families and its nexus in relation to motherhood.

On the whole, part-timers, under the relatively favourable work-family practices, had variegated experiences when they were working, largely depending on the fact that their work was an essential contribution to their household economy.

### 3. Working as a sojourner mother: “Domestic helpers cannot help much”

One prevailing idea that I repeatedly heard from many interviewees as well as other Koreans was that Singapore is a good country for wives. At

the heart of this idea is the ready availability of domestic helpers for middle class families in Singapore. In addition, many Korean women told that their husbands helped their wives to some degree, if not exactly in domestic work, in matters such as ‘playing with or helping the studies of their children’, except for those working for Korean multinational companies, which have a reputation for being a hard working environment with long working hours<sup>4)</sup>. This subsection discusses their perceived roles as a mother and their experiences of working and why the help of domestic workers is viewed as limited in the Singaporean context. This subsection argues that the opposite of the popular discourse about the role of domestic helpers is often the case, especially for full-time working women, and why this is so.

Firstly, even though actually domestic work is helped by the employment of domestic helpers, working mothers differentiated and recognized the domain of their own ‘mothering’ role, which they perceived as not being substitutable by domestic helpers<sup>5)</sup>. It should be noted that this notion of mothering is emphasized by working mothers themselves, who are in a more disadvantageous position for providing

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4) In addition, for some families, the elderly parents of the couple played a role in helping the domestic work of the wives. This aspect will not be discussed in this paper.

5) It should also be noted that despite the fact that hiring a domestic worker was affordable, I found that surprisingly many Korean middle class families did not hire one. Whether or not they hired one largely depended on whether the wives actually needed one, possibly because of their relatively more expensive cost compared with elsewhere. In other Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia, where I have field research experience, hiring one or more domestic workers was the norm. In contrast, I found that, for example, among Korean middle class families, even among my sample, housewives did not hire one, if their children were relatively grown up, i.e. secondary school students. However, all the full-time working mothers hired a domestic worker. Others, such as some part-time working mothers or housewives, hired one if their children were young or if their elderly parents were ailing.

mothering than housewives. Although many married working women appreciated the usefulness of having a domestic worker at their home, which enabled them to do their work outside their home, they usually regarded their responsibility for their children, mothering, as lying in a different realm, as the above Mrs C's remark pointed out. They took the view that the practice of mothering required their own physical presence and engaging in emotional and mental work for their children. The following Mrs B's account illustrates the point:

“In Singapore, there is less need of domestic work at home. . . . Also, domestic chores can be done by the helper. What is the most important issue (for a working mother) is managing children's time (and care), as I should spend some time with them. . . . I do not want to give up the role of being a housewife.” (Mrs B)

Mrs B was one of the few full-time professional working mothers who was working at an American MNC. However, she did not take the job right after coming to Singapore. At first, her children were very young, so she did not work for four years, as she did not have access to someone who could look after them. But as her children started school full time, she revisited her career. Her concern was not just having a nanny to look after the young children. But she felt that she “was too concerned about it”.

Secondly, this was partly because of the language issue (not only for the working wives but also for the helpers whose command of English or Korean was weak, as most of them came from South or Southeast Asia, except for the Filipinos) as well as other complications arising within a migration context. The easy availability of domestic helpers at a

relatively cheap cost in Singapore or, in some cases, the availability of an extended family at home led them to think of working again. However, this availability was not in itself of much help. Some of those who used to work in professional jobs in Korea before moving to Singapore tried, in fact, to work in Singapore as well. In doing so, arranging for a care provider was an important barrier for them to overcome in seeking to achieve their career. For example, Mrs G was a professional manager in a large conglomerate in Korea and used to work briefly in Singapore, but she gave up her career. She explained how she faced the issue, as follows:

“One day, before I started to work full-time in Singapore, my second child was hospitalised because of a high fever. ... This might not have been a big issue if we were in Seoul. ... I was busy all the day and it got on my nerves. I left the office early on the first day. I was uncomfortable and couldn't concentrate on the work at all. At that time, I had a domestic helper for the first time, but she couldn't speak any English and my mother-in-law also couldn't. ... *There were small discordances here and there, at the hospital, at school and at home.*”(Mrs G)

In fact, Mrs G's family had her elderly parents-in-law co-residing together with the family for the entire duration of their four year period of stay in Singapore. Even though her parents-in-law provided supportive roles, it was, as was explained above, not enough for her to continue the full-time work that she had attempted to do at the beginning of her stay in Singapore.

Therefore, the notion of the mothering of Korean married working women, despite the availability of domestic helpers and sometimes the

additional help of other family members, such as the more committed husbands (more committed than their non-migrant counterparts) or their elderly parents, reveal that the prevailing idea of 'Singapore as a good place for wives' does not necessarily apply to the case of full-time working women. Also, the language incompatibility between domestic workers and their middle class employers means that there is a space where physical help may not fully be able to fill the gap that working mothers may have to address in their work and family balance.

#### IV. Conclusion

Although Korean working married women in Singapore were positioned within a more family-friendly workplace environment, partly due to actively seeking such a place, than they had in Korea, their migrant status meant that they had to face challenges in their realisation of their careers. In particular, unlike their permanent immigrant counterparts in the USA (Min 1990; Min 1992; Park 1997), the lack of extended family members and Korean-speaking helpers, who could provide a helpline in contingencies, which is a typical context for sojourner migrants, imposed constraints on their work and work opportunities. Although the availability of domestic helpers in Singapore usually enabled them to work, emotional and practical considerations, as well as everyday tensions in balancing work and family, required them to pay extra attention to their family issues and, in particular, to develop coping strategies. Whether or not they were working full-time or part-time, many of them deployed strategies that

helped them to cope with the constraints that they faced; seeking a mother-friendly workplace, flexible work schedules and travel arrangements, or even strategically choosing not to work in order to concentrate on caring for their children or taking long-term leave, as well as sharing care duties with their husbands. This suggests, therefore, that there are undercurrent dynamics, since they took their family as their first priority, as other studies of Western sojourner migrants have suggested(Cooke 2007; Hardill 2004).

The fact that most working wives were not the main breadwinners may have enabled most working wives to adopt family-friendly posts or arrangements strategically, or in fact to choose not to work, at least temporarily - becoming 'temporary' homemakers, prioritising their family and their husbands' careers, even for those who were currently working as professionals or who used to work as professionals before their migration. For many, their husbands' remuneration and the fringe benefits attached to overseas assignments made possible such a choice.

Many Korean married women in Singapore made their strategic choices at the couple and family levels, including continuing or reconfiguring their careers. As a whole, many 'trailing wives', in the conventional sense, particularly among older age groups - those who were in their mid or late 40s or older - chose to accept a discontinuity in their career, whereas many younger women were working full-time or part-time. Therefore, their 'trailing' after their husbands and looking for alternative work or indeed withdrawing from it altogether were both a matter of 'swapping' and of 'balancing' their career and their family. In short, many of these wives could have more time for themselves or their children, which was often something that some of them yearned for,

especially 'working' mothers with children, who redefined or reinforced their role as mothers rather than as working women (Yeoh et al. 2002; Asis et al. 2004).

The idea of the mothering role that is revealed by their differentiation of the roles of a mother and of a domestic helper suggest that Korean professional women in Singapore share these norms and practices not only with contemporary middle class migrants of diverse origin (Kobayashi and Preston 2007; Hardill 2004; Ong 1999) but also with the contemporary Korean middle class (Park and Abelman 2004) or the American middle class (Lareau 2003). As all of these studies suggest, operating with the aim of consolidating children's future social mobility, parents not only organise and practice parental support involving delicate and concerted efforts (Lareau 2003) but also sometimes, as many studies on the migration context have suggested, they even sacrifice themselves in the short-term for the sake of long-term success (Kobayashi and Preston 2007). Korean professional migrants, therefore, show their middle class orientation in their balance of work and family but this is still bounded by the traditional roles of mothering.

**Key words:** sojourner, expatriate community, Koreans in Singapore, work and family

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<국문초록>

체류자 아내/어머니로 살아가기:  
싱가포르 거주 한국인 기혼 직장 여성의 일과 가족 양립  
문제에 대한 탐색적 연구

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이 글은 싱가포르에 거주하는 한국인 기혼 여성을 대상으로 영구 이민이 아닌 체류이주 맥락에서 일과 가족 양립 문제의 어려움과 그 대응전략을 살펴보는 탐색적 질적 연구이다. 지난 십여 년간 꾸준히 증가한 해외 거주 한국인 중장기 체류자(sojourner)의 수는 2007년 기준으로 1백5십만 명을 넘어섰다. 그 중 상당수는 한국계 기업 파견 직원(‘주재원’)이나 비한국계 다국적기업 혹은 현지기업 종사 이주자로 파악된다. 고학력 전문·기술직 이주자(highly educated professional/high skilled migrant)에 대한 연구가 매우 드문 한국의 맥락에서, 전문·기술직 체류자 중심으로 이주 한국인 사회가 구성된 싱가포르는 전문·기술직 이주자의 일과 가족 양립 문제뿐만 아니라, 체류자 사회(expatriate community) 전반적인 연구의 중요한 대상지로서의 장점이 크다. 연구 질문은 다음과 같다. 체류자로서 외국에서 일하며 살아가는 어려움은 무엇인가? 특히, 이러한 맥락에서 기혼 여성의 일은 어떠한 의미를 지니며 어떠한 대응전략을 마련하는가? 이 연구는 2006년

부터 2007년 사이 수행한 전일제 전문직종 종사자, 파트타임 종사자, 전업주부 등 자녀를 둔 26명의 기혼 여성에 대한 심층면접 자료에 근거하여, 아내이자 어머니로서의 일과 가족 양립에 관한 체험적 경험(lived experience)을 탐색적으로 파악하였다. 연구결과는 다음과 같다. 전일제 전문직 종사자의 경우 가정친화적 근무 환경을 갖춘 직장에서의 이직, 남편과의 야간근무 조정 등을 포함한 다양한 전략들을 채택하였다. 파트타임 종사자의 경우 과거 한국에서 전일제 근무를 경험하고 현재 상대적으로 경제적 여유가 있는 경우는 전일제 근무로부터 벗어나는 ‘일시적 행복감’을 느끼는 경우가 많았다. 비교적 경제적 여유가 없는 경우, 어머니 역할 부족을 발견하는 계기가 되기도 했다. 이러한 어머니로서의 역할은 친지를 비롯한 한국어 구사를 할 수 있는 가사 보조 네트워크가 결핍된 체류이주 맥락에서 일하며 살아가는 것에서 있어, 비교적 쉽고 저렴하게 가사노동자를 고용하더라도, 어머니로서의 역할을 보조하는 데 큰 도움이 되지 않는다는 생각을 확 인식켜준다.

**주제어:** 체류자, 일과 가족 양립, 주재원, 전문직 이주자, 싱가포르, 한인 사회