

Chinese Female Return Migrants' Emotion in the Domestic Sphere

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Abstract: Recently, the study of emotion has become an important subject in sociology. Many works have been done on analyzing people's emotions and emotion work, especially on migrants and transnational families, how people feel when they are apart from their families, and how they try to manage their feelings. However, not many studies have been done of the emotions and emotion work of return migrants and their relationship with their family members. Therefore, in this paper, the emotion work of female return migrants and their relationship with their family members is studied. In this thesis, the feelings experienced and how they manage their feelings will be examined, and the consequences and impact of their effort in trying to manage their feelings will be discussed. In most cases, female return migrants may face more severe challenges than males for many reasons such as social stereotypes of women and roles they should take on in a family, and the emotions they are supposed to feel. Hence, it is noteworthy to study how they deal with these issues.

Keywords: Return migrants; Emotion work; Feeling rule

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1. Introduction

This thesis will focus on the analysis of Chinese female return migrants' emotion work within the domestic sphere. In the first section of this thesis, two basic definitions are introduced: emotion work and feeling rules, to further discuss of how return migrants manage their feelings. The second section of the thesis demonstrates some of the key works that have been done on analyzing emotions and emotion work. In the third section, the research design and data collection will be explained. In the fourth section, the empirical details of how female return migrants manage their feelings in the way of evocation and suppression will be presented. In the last section, the transition of Chinese family styles, change of feelings rules and how female returnees cope with feeling rules and manage their feelings will be further discussed.

1.1. Emotion work

In this thesis, Chinese female return migrants' emotion work with their family members after they came back to China will be analyzed. To analyze emotion work, the definition of emotion work must first be clarified. Goffman has introduced the social patterns in emotive experience. He suggested that people spend a good deal of effort managing impressions, that is, acting ^[1]. Hochschild referred emotion work to an "act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling" ^[2]. The emotion work that is going to be further discussed in this thesis refers to the effort, the act of trying, which is derived from Hochschild's theory. Hochschild divided emotion work into two broad types: "evocation," in which the cognitive focus is on a desired feeling which is initially absent, and "suppression," in which the cognitive focus is on an

undesired feeling which is initially present ^[2]. She also suggested three techniques of emotion work. The first one is cognitive: the attempt to change images, ideas, or thoughts in the service of changing the feelings associated with them. The second one is bodily: the attempt to change somatic or other physical symptoms of emotion. The third one is expressive: trying to change expressive gestures in the service of changing inner feeling. This definition of emotion work will be used throughout this thesis to analyze how Chinese female migrants deal with their emotion after they get back to their family.

1.2. Feeling rules

Hochschild stated that feeling rules are what guide emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges ^[3]. Feeling rules could be noticed by the way others react to what they think we are feeling. In different situations, there are feeling rules and culture norms to judge if a person's feelings are appropriate ^[3]. It is common to feel a gap between the ideal feeling and the actual feeling, in other words, a dissonance between what a person should feel and what they actually feel, which leads to emotion work when coping with these situations. Based on these concepts, we could try to figure out when a gap appears in the feeling rules of female return migrants versus what they actually feel and the way they cope and manage their feelings.

2. Literature review

Previous studies have been indicating how people's feelings change when they are apart and together. For example, many migrants mentioned feeling some kind of obligations when they are apart from their families ^[4]. They had a strong sense of having to keep in touch with the family they "left behind," and they are more likely to avoid conflict with family members ^[4]. On the other hand, studies showed that migrants feel guilty for not being able to spend more time with their families ^[4]. Meanwhile, migrants tried to use all kinds of approaches to maintain their relationship with their families like phone calls, e-mail, and texting. These approaches allow migrants and their family members to keep up with each other's lives, and provide emotional care and support for each other, especially for their children ^[5]. Mcleod and Valentine stated how migrants felt a strong need to keep in touch with their "left behind" family; while on the contrary, migrants who have returned believed that they actually have less time to communicate with each other than when they were apart, and the guilt grew rather than decreasing ^[5]. Studies of migrants' emotion work with their families when they return home are not as much as the studies of when they are apart. Most studies of return migrants are about return motives, culture adjustment, self-identity, and financial adjustment, while little study mentioned about their emotion work with family members upon return.

There have been little studies about Chinese return migrants' feelings and emotion work with their family members, especially those about mainland Chinese return migrants. Since there's a huge difference between eastern culture and western culture, many migrants who had returned from western countries have altered their values and beliefs about family life and relationships between parents, children, and siblings ^[6]. Sussman has done some important studies about Hong Kong's (China) returnees. For instance, many return migrants felt a cultural difference when it comes to the relationship with their parents who have been deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture. Some returnees felt an "infringement of their freedom and individuality" as Chinese parents often interfere in every aspect of their children's lives ^[6]. In Chinese culture, a family should always be together, but returnees who were influenced by western cultures may feel suffocated and the need for personal time ^[7].

While most studies were done on the emotion people experience when they are apart from their family members instead of after their return, many studies also focused on the experience of emotion rather than the management of emotion. Although Hochschild has studied how people manage their emotion in the working place and a few papers mentioned emotion work was, but most of them did not mention emotion

work in the domestic sphere or in the social and cultural context in China, especially for returnees.

3. Discussion

In this the emotion work of Chinese return female migrants is studied through eight interviews and it is clear how they manage their feelings through evocation and suppression. In families that are more open and democratic, the emotion work performed was mostly evocation, but in more conservative and traditional families, the emotion work done were both evocation and suppression. There were mainly two ways in which the participants used to manage their feelings: one is to trying to change their feelings, one is to challenge other people's opinion and feelings. Therefore, we can see that the feeling rules and coping mechanism used varies from different types of families, which also indicates three changes that are happening in Chinese families.

3.1. Transition of family type and way of parenting

Based on the eight participants of this study, it was found that not all families in China are traditional and conservative anymore. Three participants defined their family as "different from traditional families" and that their family members treat each other equally and respectfully. Even in more conservative family, two participants mentioned when they expressed their feeling of being controlled by their parents, their parents promised to give them more freedom; in this case, although their families did not keep their promise, but the act of giving this promise showed their willingness in changing the way of parenting, like participants A and C. Therefore, we could say that Chinese family are shifting from being more traditional to more open-minded and democratic. The definition of a traditional family was mentioned previously and it was assumed that people who have migrated to Western countries would most likely be influenced by western cultures, as it was indicated in a study of cultural models of East Asia and North America. Middle-class American models of self-relation is an example of an independent cultural model in which an individual should be independent and free. In this model, individuals are not expected to just accept the constraints imposed by others, but rather close relationships ought to afford independence and support personal initiative ^[8]. We could see some of the figures of a western cultural model of family from family of participants A, C and D in which their parents were willing their decision and respect their feelings as individuals. Although most of the families are still parenting in a traditional way where individuals are to be seen as part of the group and individual needs to focus on self-improvement to fit the expectations of others ^[8].

3.2. Change of feeling rules

The first question that should be addressed is what kind of feeling rules exist in the cultural context of China. In traditional Chinese culture, individuals are ought to make sacrifices for the family and live up to their parents' expectations ^[7]. In a traditional Chinese family, parents are the highest authority and filial piety is expected of children ^[7]. Chinese parents make the rules of how their children should feel ^[8]. For instance, five of the participants mentioned their parents said they should be thankful for the bright future that was arranged for them. If they did not feel the same way, their parents would pressure them in the name of love, saying thing like "this is for your own good!" or "why can't you understand that we did this because we love you!"

Secondly, there are certain feeling rules for females in the cultural context of China. Throughout most of the studies of emotion work, one point was clear: emotion rules differ in women and men. The cultural perspective suggests that emotion norms are a result of deeply held cultural understanding about women and men ^[10]. In the specific context of China, women are seen as the weaker one and that they should be obedient and willing to stay at home and be satisfied with little achievements, as the saying goes, "a woman

without talent is a virtue.” From an interview with H, she stated that whenever she expressed her thoughts on her future plans and what kind of job she wanted to do and which city she wanted to live in, her parents always rejected her thoughts by saying: “We’d let you do this if you were a boy.” From the interviews that were done in this study, it is clear that there are certain stereotypes of cultural norms that define Chinese women as fragile and weak, and that they need to settle down with a stable job and a family instead of building a career. Participant B was forced by her parents to get married with a man that she did not like that much because he was “suitable for marriage” and that she should settle down sooner as she was over 30 years old. From other people and her parents’ perspective, she should feel happy for being able to settle down and have a stable life yet she felt like she lost the meaning of life and the hope of finding true love.

Still, the feeling rules of how children should feel and how women should feel have been changing for several reasons. The first reason is the change of cultural norms and social status of women. Chinese have been a long way in terms of personalization, during which culture norms of women are changing as women start to pursue independence. The increase of gender equality led to change of cultural norms of women. Although till today many countryside areas of China still think that men are important than women, most people willing to accept that men and women are equally capable of pursuing a career and a better life. Before the 1950s, women were expected to accept their family’s arrangement in terms of marriage, while now it is normal for women to choose their significant other. Secondly, the change of education policies has affected the way of parenting. The state has taken active role in disseminating what is called “scientific knowledge” for parenting, since the policy of education changed from “education for exams” to “education for quality.” This policy has focused on ensuring children’s psychological health and promoting creativity and entrepreneurship, which could be developed by parents who govern themselves rather than the child. Many families have been influenced and started to care more about children’s psychological health and feelings, like family of participants C and D; and some are trying to change their way of parenting by trying to respect their children’s opinion and feelings like participants A and B. Thirdly, the media’s effect on people’s behaviors is undeniable. Multiple TV channels have programs of experts giving advice on parenting, and bookstores also devote a large amount of space to education on parenting. Advice of how to be a good parent could be found on websites, newspapers, magazines, and TV shows. Talk shows discussing the reform of family education can also be found in major Chinese TV channels like China Central Television (CCTV) [7].

3.3. Change of ways of coping with feeling rules

First of all, the influence of western culture can be clearly seen through the interviews. Many of the participants have mentioned that the experience of living abroad made them more willing to express themselves and more independent. For example, participants B, G, and H tended to listen to their parents before they went abroad, but they became more willing to express their thoughts and feelings to their parents after their return. Secondly, the improvement of gender equality and the increase in the social and economic status of females also influenced the way that women manage their feelings. The social transformation that resulted from the women’s liberation movement penetrated the private life sphere, resulting in new laws and regulations on sex and marriage and new patterns of consumption and lifestyle [9]. Romantic love, gender equality, freedom of marriage, and independence were promoted, thus women are more likely to challenge feeling rules or the authorities such as their parents when their feelings are different from what they are expected to feel. Thirdly, the change in authority has changed the way women deal with their feelings. The structural perspective of feeling rules suggests that individuals of lower status are subjected to a higher status counterpart [10]. Based on the interviews, parents in Chinese traditional families were the ones who make the rules and children are to obey. However, after children have obtained economic independence, that authority shifts of weakens. Three participants mentioned their parents could not control

them as much as before since they have their own job and economic independence. With certain social and economic status, they are more likely to have the courage to challenge their parents' authority instead of suppressing their feelings.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the interviews, there are two different types of emotion work: evocation and suppression. In the two types of family – democratic family and traditional Chinese family, participants from democratic families are more likely to evoke their feelings because they long for more attention and care from their parents; while participants from families that are more traditional evoke and suppress their feelings as they want to be recognized but at the same time do not want to be controlled. On one hand, they are expecting to gain love, recognition, support, and understanding from their parents; on the other hand, their opinions and feelings are easily rejected by their parents, and their lives are controlled by their parents from many aspects including choice of career and love life. When there is a conflict between how they should feel and how they actually feel, there are generally two ways of managing their emotion, that is trying to change their own feelings or trying to change their parents' thoughts and feelings. The choices they made also influenced the actions and relationships with their parents. Consequences such as children constantly lying to their parents would occur if they choose to obey the feeling rules in the presence of their parents. Meanwhile, those who challenged their parents but failed to change their parents' mind will choose to study far away. We could also see some wider change happening in China, such as the changes of parenting styles, feeling rules, and the way people manage their feelings, especially for women. These changes have taken place due to the change of policies, especially policies on education and gender equality. Besides, these changes also resulted from the increase in women's economic independence and social status, changes of cultural norms due to the influence of media on women's rights and parenting styles, the influence of western culture especially towards return migrants, and the weakening of parents' authority and the transfer of authority from parents to the children themselves. The feeling rules of women are changing due to political, economy, and cultural changes in China, and also due to the increasing influence of western culture from return migrants. Although emotion work is still greatly influenced by feeling rules of traditional families, many families are trying to change when there is a gap of what returnees really feel and they ought to feel.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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