Gender and Trajectories of Marital Breakdown: Accounts of Chinese Immigrant Women in Canada

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Abstract
The relatively sparse literature has documented various challenges international migration poses to martial stability, yet we know little about immigrant women's experiences with marital breakdown. Drawing data from a qualitative study of Chinese economic immigrants to Canada, this article explores women's experiences of navigating the processes of this life circumstance, and of how gender—including their senses of changing gender roles in post-immigration and postmarital contexts—plays out in these trajectories. The results of this exploratory study illustrate the value of transcending dichotomous conceptions of the relationship between gender and migration, and of opening spaces in which to better understand immigrant women's increasingly diversified life trajectories and the range of barriers they encounter along the way. The study also reveals multiple opportunities for social work contributions: tackling systematic barriers to settlement, facilitating social support in the community, and recognizing individuals' diverse trajectory potentials (including the potential for this typically unwelcome event to be integrated as personal growth and transition).

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Introduction

The feminization of migration is a worldwide phenomenon: in 2015, women made up the majority of international migrants in Europe (52.4%) and North America (51.2%) (IMO, 2016). Against this background, gender, as a set of socially constructed norms and expectations, has gained unprecedented salience in migration scholarship (Gu, 2015; Herrera, 2013; Lee & Kim, 2011; Lutz, 2010; Nawyn, 2010). The broader literature on gender and international migration has presented two sets of—somewhat polarized—grand narratives: migration as "liberalization", and migration as "feminization" or "re-domestication". The first set emphasizes the emancipatory role of immigration (to a Western country) in challenging traditional patriarchy and gender ideologies. In a post-immigration context, non-Western immigrant women especially have gained unprecedented space for pursuing and practicing personal liberty, gender (or power) equality and, even, sexual freedom. These changes are possible because international migration processes typically result in changes to family structure (e.g., absence of in-laws), women's increased contribution to the family economy, and their increasing power in the home, in addition to the influence of Western cultures (Hyman et al., 2008; Jibeen & Hynie, 2012; Lim, 1997; Morokvasic, 1988; Yoon et al., 2010). These discourses of liberalization and empowerment, however, have been challenged by the increasingly diversified trajectories of immigrant women's settlement and acculturation in the context of transnationalism. Instead of moving linearly from an "old" to a "new" culture, for instance, these women may continue under the influence of the old culture, or engage simultaneously with both the host and home countries (Rashidian et al., 2013; Zhou, 2012).

At the other end of the spectrum, the conception of migration as "feminization" or "re-domestication" is built on immigrant women's—in particular, middle-class, professional women's—experiences of returning to traditional gender roles as caretakers or homemakers in the family. Very often this change is part of immigrant families' strategy for economic survival in the contexts of post-immigration employment difficulties (e.g., de-skilling, or entry into low-skill, menial jobs) and the lack of access to viable childcare (Ho, 2006; Meares, 2010; Zhou, 2000). Interestingly, this conception is largely supported by empirical studies of skilled or highly educated immigrant women in Western countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and Australia) from the People's Republic of China (PRC), where women's participation in the labor force and equal contribution to the family and national economies have been the norm since 1949 (Cooke, 2007; Da, 2003; Ho, 2006; Lee et al., 2002; Yu, 2006, 2011, 2015; Zhou, 2000). This set of narratives directs our attention to the intersection of immigrant women's changing gender roles and changing socioeconomic status (e.g., downward occupational mobility) in the host society, and to broader structural constraints and institutional processes—such as the care deficit and devaluation of non-Western credentials—embedded in the involuntary, regressive changes in gender relations within immigrant families (Man, 2004; Moon, 2003; Yu, 2011). While some women perceive the change as a stabilizer of marriage and family life in the context of international migration, others are reluctant to accept their new, "re-domesticated", gender roles (Yu, 2006, 2015).

The relatively sparse literature has documented a number of the challenges international migration poses to marital and family stability across geographical contexts. Marital distress in a post-immigration context is often attributed to such settlement difficulties as changes in employment status, income, access to social support, gender roles, power, authority in the family, and living arrangements (e.g., Andersson et al., 2015; Ben-David & Lavee, 1994; Caarls & Mazzucato, 2015; Darvishpour, 2002; Min, 2001; Shirpak et al., 2011; Zhou, 2012). For example, the employment difficulties commonly faced by Chinese economic immigrant women and men in Canada have generated the phenomenon of the "transnational family" or geographically split household. Usually, the husband returns to the homeland for work or business while the wife stays in Canada for the children's education and/or to meet the requirement of their permanent residency status (Chiang,

2008; Ong, 1999; Waters, 2010). The long-term geographical separation of married couples often leads to changing relationship dynamics, including extramarital sexual relations (on both sides) and marital conflicts, all of which directly threaten the marital stability of these families (Wei, 2017; Zhou, 2012).

In a few studies that explicitly explore issues of divorce or dissolution of a marital relationship in ethnic minority immigrant families and communities in Western countries, changing or conflicted gender roles after immigration were also cited as a major reason for marital breakdown, along with domestic violence and abuse, and post-immigration financial problems (Chang, 2004; Donkor, 2013; Guru, 2009; Molina & Abel, 2010). In her study of Korean immigrant women in the United States, for instance, Chang (2004) pointed out that women's increased labor force participation, along with men's un- or underemployment and constrained ability to provide for their families, have challenged traditional gender norms of male dominance and, in turn, generated conflicts within marriage. In addition, Donkor's study (2013) of Ghanaian immigrant women in Toronto, Canada found that living in a new cultural environment has enabled women to learn new gender roles and to unlearn old or more traditional gender-based expectations (e.g., submissiveness and gratitude to their husbands); and that this, in turn, destabilized their marriages.

These studies also reveal some complex impacts of marital breakdown on immigrant women. Specifically, it appears to have a wide range of negative effects on their lives, including psychological distress (e.g., grief, emotional torment, shame, low self-esteem and, even, depression), social and cultural exclusion from their own ethnic communities, financial insecurity, vulnerability to predatory men, and various barriers to remarrying (Chang, 2004; Guru, 2009; Molina & Abel, 2010). Marital breakdown can, nevertheless, with the necessary and appropriate social and institutional support, also offer opportunities for women's life adjustment, self-expression, independence (including sexual independence), and other positive changes, all of which have the potential to transform women themselves, as well as the cultures immigrant women inhabit (Guru, 2009; Molina & Abel, 2010). Recognizing marital breakdown as a major change in immigrant women's lives, however, these studies rarely consider marital breakdown as a transition *process*—or, in Riemann & Schütze (1991)'s term, a trajectory—in which women make sense of, come to terms with and, even, reorganize their life circumstances.

The PRC has been one of the top source countries of immigrants to Canada since the 1990s, and the majority of them are economic immigrants (as compared with those admitted under the family class or the refugee class) (Guo & DeVoretz, 2006; Wang & Lo, 2005). During the period from 2006 to 2011, for example, the PRC was among the top five birthplaces of female immigrants to Canada, second only to the Philippines (14% of female immigrants) (Hudon, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2013). Drawing data from a larger qualitative study of Chinese economic immigrants to Canada, this article explores immigrant women's accounts of marital breakdown—in the circumstance of legal separation or divorce—and their experiences of navigating this life event. In particular, we are interested in understanding how gender, as an evolving, multilevel set of practices across geographical, social, and cultural scales, shapes their senses of themselves, as well as their places in the social worlds. Focusing on the trajectories of these immigrant women's marital breakdown, we pay close attention to their "status passages" (Riemann & Schütze, 1991, p. 336)—that is, different phases—in the course of passing through them and, in many cases, finding ways out of them.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this article draws upon theories of trajectory (Riemann & Schütze, 1991) and gender–migration relations (e.g., Lutz, 2010; Mahler & Pessar, 2006; Nawyn, 2010). This framework helps us to understand immigrant women's experiences of marital breakdown through their own accounts, and illustrate the role of gender when women navigate those processes.

Bridging these theories also enables us to explore the possible trajectories for women to move from a precarious or perceived dubious life circumstance—that is, the dissolution of a marital relationship—to a place where they are able to reconstruct their lives and relationships with others, as well as with themselves.

Using cancer diagnosis and immigrant settlement as examples of disorderly social processes that bring about suffering, Riemann and Schütze (1991) argue that "trajectory" should be used as a basic theoretical concept for analyzing such contingencies, over which people do not have total control, but still have to "go through and endure" (p. 334). Paying attention to the processes of suffering (or what happens as the "sufferer" perceives it when going through it), they see a trajectory as a status passage consisting of different dimensions. First, an undesirable life event (marital breakdown, in this case) unexpectedly interrupts one's organized life, and disorganizes one's expectations of, orientation to, and relationship with the world and identity. Second, one's account about the processes reflects the person's (changing) relationship with the normative principle of biography (e.g., gender norms), which also mediates how they go through—for example, react to and make sense of—the life circumstance. Third, the processes are also shaped by other participants (e.g., family members, friends, and professionals), who, along with the person, can help build up trajectory potentials—for example, to reorganize, traverse, mitigate, or escape—of the life situation.

Riemann and Schütze (1991)'s advocacy for "a constantly alternating and mutually integrated analytical grasp of 'inner' and 'outer' aspects" of the trajectory also makes it possible to incorporate conceptions of gender–migration relations (p. 336). In the context of international migration, gender as a system of power relations shapes and regulates every aspect of these migratory processes at various levels, from national border control to individual marital relationships and self-perceptions (Nawyn, 2010). While gender is consistently operating in the migratory processes, it is also restructured and fractured through the experiences of international migration. In other words, gender cannot be viewed in isolation, because it intersects with other structures of difference (e.g., class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, nationality, geography, and locality), and simultaneously operates on multiple geographical, social, and cultural scales in both home and host countries (Mahler & Pessar, 2006). In the context of international migration, it is also important to consider "social location" or identity—such as gender—as scalar and fluid, because "individuals and groups are situated in multiple, intersecting, and mutually-constituting hierarchies" of difference (Mahler & Pessar, 2006, p. 44). For example, some Chinese economic immigrants in Canada experience downward mobility when it comes to power associated with ethnicity, class, and nationality, while simultaneously occupying high social statuses in their home countries. Furthermore, social location "plots individual and group identities and agencies along multiple social hierarchies or continuums at the same time" (ibid.). This conception also enables us to address the inadequacy of the polarized "migration as liberalization" or "migration as re-domestication" narratives to identify, deconstruct, and understand the dynamic and complex processes of immigrant women's increasingly *diversified* life trajectories in a post-immigration context. While there are new opportunities and alternative orientational principles to reorganize their lives in the host society, immigrant women often face new barriers to personal autonomy as well (Nawyn, 2010).

Methods

The larger qualitative study from which the data for this article were drawn aims to understand the HIV risk faced by immigrants from the PRC to Canada in the contexts of international migration and transnationalism (see Zhou et al., 2017 for more details). The data reported here were collected through individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eight Chinese immigrant women who self-identified their sexual orientation as "heterosexual," their relationship status as

"(legally) separated or divorced", and who were willing to talk about the sexual health (including HIV) risk faced by themselves and/or by Chinese immigrants to Canada.

Using purposive sampling, these women were recruited through the Internet (e.g. recruitment notices posted on Chinese-language websites popular among immigrants from the PRC), Chinese community networks (including settlement services), and personal referrals in Toronto (4/8) and Vancouver (4/8).

The project received ethics approvals from the academic institutions of all of the members of the research team. Written informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and demographic information was also collected. All these eight participants were interviewed in Mandarin by the researchers or by trained research associates of this project, who are also economic immigrants from the PRC, at a location of each participant's choice. The length of the interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours. With permission, all interviews were audiotaped.

The ages of these eight women range from 39 to 54 years, with an average age of 44 years. The years of their entry into Canada ranged from 2000 to 2011: their current status in Canada is either "Permanent Resident" (4/8) or "(naturalized) Canadian citizen" (4/8). Their education backgrounds are divided between "university" (5/8) and "college" (3/8). They self-evaluated their levels of English ability as "bad" (1/8), "so so" (1/8), "medium" (2/8), or "very good" (4/8). At the time of the interview, four women were employed full-time, one was self-employed, two were unemployed, and one was receiving disability benefits. Accordingly, their levels of income (Canadian dollars) are "none" (2/8), "below 20K" (1/8), "20–39K" (3/8), and "40–59K" (1/8), and one (1/8) unknown. In terms of living arrangements, five reported living alone, and the other three reported living with their children, including one living with her mother and two young children.

During the interview, all participants were asked about their experiences of immigration to and settlement in Canada, including post-immigration changes in intimate relationship, along with the questions about their perceptions of and experiences with sexual health risks. To ensure the data's accessibility to all researchers in the project, interviews were transcribed into English by an experienced translator who is highly proficient in spoken and written Chinese and English. All transcripts were imported into NVivo (9.2), a computer software program for qualitative data analysis. Initially, a tentative coding scheme, consisting of a set of major coding categories (e.g., "post-immigration lives") and subcategories (e.g., "employment challenges" and "relationship changes") and their defining criteria, was developed by the research team, consisting of eight researchers from both Canada and China, based on their reading of selected transcripts.

At the stage of writing this article, we developed a comprehensive synthesis of the themes relating to its focus through intensive engagement with the transcripts of interviews with the eight women, while attending to the larger study in which this subset of data is situated. Specifically, we worked with the relevant coding categories (e.g., "marital breakdown") identified in the larger study as they appeared in these women's stories, and also developed sub-codes (e.g., "understanding of marital breakdown", "self-reflection", "reflection on marriage", and "perspective on future relationship") that reflect the trajectories of these women's experiences. The organization of the themes presented below is informed by our theoretical framework that attends to the intersection of gender and migration in the context of marital breakdown and to the phases of women's *going through, transforming their identities and lives,* and *making sense of* this process. As well, the term "martial breakdown (*hun yin po lie*)", a phrase often used in the Chinese context, is adopted by the authors of this article to accommodate the participants' different marital statuses (i.e., legal separation or divorce) and reflect our conception of this life circumstance as a process as these women perceived it when going through it (Riemann & Schütze (1991). Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identities.

Results

Recalling Marital Breakdown: Stories About Settlement in Canada

Experiencing "unexpected" marital breakdown after immigration, seven out of the eight female participants described their marriage in China as stable, harmonious and, even, wonderful and loving. Like their husbands, these women were college educated, and had careers in China. *Bai*, a 41-year-old divorced woman who is currently unemployed, commented that she had barely noticed any incompatibility in her marriage while still in China, where both held professional jobs and had economic independence and a relatively comfortable life. *Dao*, another woman who has been living with her mother and two young children since the divorce, echoed this sentiment:

> In China, there was nothing obvious that showed [incompatibility in our marriage], because we didn't have children then. We were both working […] I was working, there was nothing I depended on him for, really.

Yet such "marital compatibility" was soon challenged by many changes and difficulties that are primarily beyond their control—for example, unemployment or underemployment, subsequent financial hardship, and downward social mobility—in the context of settlement. Changing her role from that of a career woman in China to a stay-at-home mom in Canada, *Chu*, a single mother in her early 40s, perceived that her lack of paid employment and financial independence had contributed to their post-immigration marital conflicts. She said that the challenging settlement process—including settlement stress—had helped reveal her husband's many "flaws" (e.g., being controlling and even abusive), which destroyed their relationship. As well, *Qing*'s marriage to her university sweetheart failed after immigration: "We couldn't adapt [to Canada] very well, and our personal incompatibility appeared clearly".

Facing various barriers to professional employment in Canada, like many skilled or professional immigrants, women in this study had to take low-skilled jobs to survive. The downward occupational and socioeconomic mobility, along with the mental stress associated with career uncertainties in the future, were reported by some women as factors in their marital tension. While working as an engineer back in China, *Bai* had moved between menial jobs in Canada and was currently unemployed. She attributed her marital breakdown somewhat to financial difficulties but also to the personal changes of themselves: "It seemed that we did not get along any more after immigration, and our main objectives of life have also become very different". Unlike her ex-husband, for example, *Bai* was a firm believer that immigrants should not stick to their own cultures but rather should fully embrace "new" cultures to be integrated into Canadian society. To various extents, marriages were unprecedentedly tested by settlement difficulties that exposed the couples' differential capabilities to adapt to the changes and to access income, and their increasingly divergent values and goals in their post-immigration lives.

As shown in the larger study, the difficulties of pursuing and securing suitable employment in Canada have increasingly led to "return migration" by skilled immigrants, especially men. Although the arrangement known as the "astronaut" or transnational family is often informed by the collective interest of the family as a whole, the prolonged geographical separation also weakened marriages and, in some cases, resulted in extramarital relationships for men, as well as for some women. When she was infected with sexually transmitted diseases by her then-husband when he visited her in Canada, *Qia*'s suspicion about his extramarital sex in China was confirmed. The participant recalled how they eventually arrived at the current stage of their marriage because of various issues (e.g., her husband's access to employment and later returned migration, and geographical distance between two countries) that she did not have control over:

He couldn't find his place [in Canada] either. And we didn't have children, so we didn't have any strong emotional ties [to maintain the marriage]. We quarreled a lot. At the time, it was his decision [to return to China], not mine. […] As time passed [during the geographic separation], our feelings for each other faded.

She also believed that her marriage would still be intact had they not immigrated to Canada: "If we hadn't immigrated, if I had been around him, I don't think this would have happened."

Reflecting on Marital Breakdown: Stories About Self-Struggle

After the breakdown of their marriage most participants experienced the stigma associated with divorce in their peer Chinese immigrant social circles. *Lai*, in her 50s, reported that divorced women like her are often viewed as "unfortunate" and "pitiful", including by her own highly educated extended family members living in another Western country. *Dao*, in her late 30s, reported that people gossiped behind her back. According to these participants, however, the fact that they were now living in Canada, and away from the social circles they had frequented in China also gave them the opportunity to minimize stigma by simply constraining their contact with other Chinese immigrants.

Most participants in this study had not expected or anticipated divorce in their lives, and viewed the end of their marriage as a tremendously difficult life change. When her efforts to save the marriage were unsuccessful, *Lai* viewed herself as "a huge failure in life". She commented that she would live under the shadow of the divorce, and endure the pain caused by her ex-husband "for the rest of [her] life". Feeling regretful about her marital breakdown, *Dao* blamed herself for "provoking" her then-husband, for "not keeping the house clean and tidy", and for "making a big fuss over some small things".

In addition to their sense of failure, marital breakdown also generated a wide range of negative feelings for these women, such as betrayal, distress, and distrust. *Hua*, a participant in her early 40s, expressed feeling betrayed, scared, and hopeless due to her divorce, and also feeling deeply hurt by her ex-husband's extramarital affairs with many women in China during their geographical separation. She perceived the divorce as something incomprehensible, given her long-term, unconditional dedication to her marriage and the family: "It's really scary to see a person who lived with you for so long be so cold to you". Her distrust of her ex-husband, and of the marriage itself, also made *Hua* somewhat pessimistic about starting a new relationship with another man in the future, a sentiment shared by others:

I really don't want a relationship [in the future]. It's so exhausting. As a woman, I feel that such emotional suffering and worry make me age quickly. (*Hua*, 42 years)

I look back, and what this marriage gave me is that I don't have the courage to walk into another one. Even if the person loves me very much, I can't trust anyone anymore. (*Lai*, 54 years)

Marriage is not a big deal to me anymore. I'm reluctant to enter another one. (*Bai*, 41 years)

Along with these accounts of struggle and difficulty, however, over the course of their interviews participants also described their marital breakdown as a pivotal moment and an opportunity for them to reflect on themselves and on their priorities in life. Recalling the fact that she had never used a condom with her ex-husband, who was sexually active outside their marriage, *Hua* soon came to recognize a need to protect herself in future relationships. Overcoming her initial sense of failure, *Lai* also tried to dissociate her sense of self-worth from the divorce, and declared her belief that "there is still someone in this world who will love me", and that "I am still worthy [of love]". She commented

that the divorce has taught her to stand up for herself, to understand herself better, and to prioritize her own needs over those of a relationship. She continued:

> I learned that I need to build myself up, to be strong. If I live a good life, then a relationship is just a nice addition. [If] I can have a good life without [a man], why should I care? […] Now I know who I am, and I know what type of person I need [in a relationship].

Imagining a Postmarital Life: Stories About Reorientating Oneself

Despite their hesitancy about new relationships, some participants explicitly expressed their desire for a serious, long-term relationship, and all indicated the importance that a future partner be "compatible". By "compatible", they meant the couple's compatibility in terms of cultural background, age, personality, and/or socioeconomic status. Most still regarded Chinese men as more compatible companions, because they believe that similar or familiar cultural values—including lifestyles and spending habits—and linguistic background would make it easier to form and maintain a harmonious and stable relationship. If it is difficult to find a culturally compatible partner, according to them, the man in question should, at the very least, respect Chinese culture. As illustrated by the quotes below, several participants emphasized that an ideal future partner should be someone trustworthy, responsible, kind to their children, and, most important, someone they like and who likes them—something to which they did not give much thought before.

> It has to be that I like him, and then that he likes me, and then he has to like my children, and then the children like him. Everybody has to get along. (*Dao*, 39 years)

> I think I want to find a suitable person with whom I get along, and we both like each other. At my age, it is unrealistic and shallow to talk about [romantic] love [alone]. (*Lai*)

In reality, however, these participants often found it very difficult to find someone compatible, in part because men's perspectives on ideal partners seemed inconsistent with theirs. Despite their preference to remarry a Chinese man, they also perceived that they were disadvantaged by a number of gendered characteristics including their older age, their status as a divorced woman with a child or children, their physical disabilities (in some cases), and/or their "non-traditional" individual traits. For example, *Qing*, one of the few participants who has held a full-time, professional job in Canada, commented that her confidence, straightforward personality, and accomplished career seemed less appealing to many Chinese men. Other participants added:

> For a man, the more he ages, the more mature he becomes, and the more attractive he is. For women, the more we age, the less attractive we are. (*Qia*, 46 years)

> Once you are divorced, and have two children, you don't have much room to choose men. First, you don't have time. Second, the pool from which you can choose is much smaller. (*Dao*)

> [At] this age, most suitable men already have families, and younger men aren't interested in people at my age. The [older] men who are doing really well usually want younger women in their 20s or 30s. (*Qing*, 42 years)

> [This Chinese man, who has very good qualities all round,] told [my friend] his concerns about my health condition. … All he thought about was my disability. (*Lai*)

Participants also reported various barriers they faced at an individual level. Some said that their hectic daily lives and economic survival after marital breakdown had constrained their time to

explore a new relationship, so they had to be very careful about whom they deemed worthy of "investing my energy in".

Their reflections on their marital breakdown and on their current life situations led some participants to be unwilling to compromise when it comes to whom they should date or whether they should commit to a new relationship (e.g., one woman described it as being "picky"). The tone of their narratives is often a mixture of a sense of sufficiency and a sense of freedom or, even, relief:

> I don't need status, I don't need his money, and I am not in a hurry to have kids. So I don't want to compromise: he has to be compatible with me in all respects. (*Qing*)

> If you don't offer me a [foreseeable] future, then don't waste my time. It doesn't matter how much fun you are; I can live on my own. I want to live peacefully and be strong, so I don't need those things. (*Lai*)

As well, a couple of participants clearly indicated that they would rather stay single if a new relationship would mean they had to accept the role of traditional caregiver or make another significant change to their current lifestyles. *Dao*, a 39-year-old single mother with two young children, even talked with other divorced Chinese immigrant women about the possibility of developing some kind of alternative arrangement for living and companionship, in case they ultimately proved unable to find a compatible partner: "[If] we can't find [a partner], then we will all live together [like a family]."

Starting a New Trajectory: Stories About a Bigger World

Driven by both loneliness and desire to move on with their lives, some participants tried to start dating. Given their limited social circles in Canada, the Internet—such as Chinese-language websites popular among immigrants from China, and English-language dating websites—was identified as a primary venue for meeting new people. Nevertheless, participants expressed misgivings about online dating, as explained below:

> There are many bad guys [at dating websites]. It would be good enough if half of what they say about themselves is true. So you have to be really careful. But if you don't use dating websites [in Canada], it's hard to find guys to go out with. (*Bai*)

> Men on these websites know a lot about women, they know what women want, and they assume that all the women who use the websites want sex. Most of them hide their marital status, and are there only to look for sex, especially white guys. (*Hua*)

Due to the difficulties of finding a "compatible" Chinese man, a few participants were open to dating Caucasian men, in part because of their general lack of interest in their past (i.e., marital breakdown). *Lai* perceived Caucasian men as more accepting of her disability than their Chinese counterparts, although she also emphasized that she would only consider a Caucasian man who "has a decent understanding of Chinese culture, and is willing to accept and learn about Chinese culture". Feeling deeply hurt by her ex-husband, *Xiao* expressed her preference for a Caucasian man, given her desire to make a change in her life and her wish that the man could help her improve her English and facilitate her settlement in Canada. In practice, however, cultural differences and, sometimes, perceived racism made interracial relationships hard to maintain. For example, *Lai* ended her relationship with a Caucasian boyfriend she had dated for over a year, in part because he had been unaffected by a racist joke his father had made about Chinese women. As well, *Qing* decided to break up with her "very compatible" Caucasian partner because he does not believe in marriage, which is something she desires.

Seeing few opportunities to find a long-term companion, *Qing* later took a new route to explore her sexuality. Instead of seeking a marriage-oriented relationship, she decided to "have fun" with some younger Chinese men who were attracted to her. In such relationships she felt free of expectation about and pressure toward marriage, and able to simply enjoy sex and the company of the other person. Other participants, however, were not enthusiastic about the idea of having a short-term lover or a fun-oriented relationship because of worry about their reputation, as well as the sexual health risks, as explained by 50-year-old *Xiao*:

> One female friend from Northern China told me that I shouldn't let Chinese tradition constrain me, and that Chinese tradition can also be harmful. She said women can't always be like this; they have to enjoy life. Actually, I do want to enjoy life, but I'm also afraid. For example, if you get some kinds of bacteria, you can cure it; but if it's HIV, what am I going to do?!

Concerns about their sexual health, especially at the beginning of a new romantic relationship, were commonly reported for two major reasons. First, unlike the norms of the generation of these women back in China, sex was now seen by them as something expected to occur before marriage or the development of a serious relationship. Second, they reported their lack of knowledge about sexual health and of skills to negotiate safer sex. Despite her worry, for example, *Bai* did not initiate condom use for fear that this would be interpreted as her distrust of a Caucasian man or, even, as an indication of her involvement in the sex trade. Yet her mindset was soon challenged by her sexual partner, who insisted that using a condom is simply a "necessary protection", and "has nothing to do with relationship or [emotional] closeness". The status of these and associated subjects as both private and culturally taboo among Chinese immigrants led these participants to express a need to access linguistically sensitive information and services about sexual health in Canada.

Discussion and Conclusion

Focusing on Chinese economic immigrant women's own accounts, this article explores how women have traversed and passed through the trajectories of marital breakdown as a painful life circumstance in a post-immigration context, and how gender as an evolving, multi-scalar construction—such as traditional cultural norms, a "new" identity as a racialized immigrant woman in Canada, and changing senses of self or womanhood after marital breakdown—plays out in these processes. Instead of seeing marital breakdown as a singular life event, we consider it as a trajectory in which women navigate their changed relationships "with others, groups, social worlds, and [themselves]" (Riemann & Schütze, 1991, p. 338). This exploration enables us to describe the phases (not necessarily linear) in which women recognize, make sense of, acknowledge, come to terms with, and, in some cases, transcend this important change in their lives, as well as their subsequently changing relationship to world and identity. The analysis also illustrates the dynamic, complex relationships between the "inner" and "outer" aspects of women's trajectories, and between gender, marriage, and migration.

Recalling their marital breakdown, women in this study commonly presented it as a story of post-immigration struggles, in which both immigrant women and men had lost control over their "new" lives in Canada. Marriages were unprecedentedly tested to points beyond individual control by various settlement difficulties, such as the lack of access to professional employment and financial security, "re-domestication" of these highly educated women in the home, the couple's differential or "incompatible" adaptation to and acculturation in Canada, and geographical separation of the family. Despite all the settlement stress, women's perspectives on unexpected or inconceivable martial breakdown and their initial emotional reactions (e.g., surprise or, even, shock) suggest their confusion about and disorientation resulting from this life circumstance, in which they saw themselves as victims of the overwhelming settlement processes, as well as of their "ruthless"

husbands. Although "the mood and logic of suffering become the dominant state of mind" (Riemann & Schütze, 1991, p. 342), in this phase women's tendency to conceptualize it as a problem of "marital incompatibility" caused by post-immigration settlement also reveals their intention to blame themselves for the circumstance and, thus, to make the embedded gender inequalities—such as gendered settlement processes (Yu, 2011) or immigrant women's sacrifice within the family—less visible.

Marital breakdown also means the sudden interruption of those women's normative gender roles and social expectations. As Chinese immigrant women exiting marriage, they experienced "a disorder of expectation, orientation, and relationship to world and identity" (Riemann & Schütze, 1991, p. 340). The strong stigma associated with divorce in Chinese culture negatively shaped their relationships with their family members, other Chinese immigrants in Canada, and social circles back in China (Xu et al., 2008). Moreover, the perceived failure of their marriage also challenged their sense of self (including self-worth), as well as the basic trust relationship of social interaction. As a result, their social worlds began to shrink, their self-esteem was at stake, and their expectations about future relationships were lowered. At this status phase, women's accounts of personal struggle reflect the conflict between their marital breakdown and the normative principle of biography; in other words, Chinese traditional norms around gender as a system of power relations are perpetuated in various aspects of immigrant women's lives (Nawyn, 2010). Nevertheless, we also see the movement of their storylines: from their earlier out-of-control settlement struggles to their own developing reflections on themselves in marriage. The trajectory potentials, as Riemann and Schütze (1991) call them, start to surface.

For these reasons, women's discussions about a hypothetical new relationship are of great importance for understanding their trajectories of marital breakdown for both conceptualization and social work practice. First, imagining a life outside marriage—despite their sometimes-pessimistic tone—signals women's efforts to find ways out from their current status phase, in which their suffering or emotional pain has lingered. Second, women's descriptions of an ideal future romantic relationship reveal not only their intention to see their places in a relationship built on mutuality and relative *egalitarianism*; they also illustrate women's deep reflections on themselves and re-evaluation of their relationships with men. Third, in this phase, we also see women's creativity in rearticulating their stories, where their sense of changing gender roles in post-immigration and postmarital contexts becomes clearer. On the surface, most women expressed a preference for a partner from a similar ethnic and cultural background; but the deeper pattern across their accounts is their increasing self-assertiveness about their own desires, as well as their reluctance to compromise. While earlier they had oriented themselves around marriage as the normative ideal of womanhood, now they began to organize a future relationship around themselves and their own interests and, even, a life without men. Instead of moving from an "old" to a "new" culture, the simultaneous influence of both cultures on migrant women's conceptions of gender roles and their imaginations about their trajectories is also clear, as found in other immigrant studies (e.g., Rashidian et al., 2013; Zhou, 2012, 2021). Identifying status phases and related possibilities to mitigate and even to escape the perceived suffering, social workers or helping professionals are able to participate in the processes and assist women to build up and consolidate their trajectory potentials.

Despite the potential trajectories for personal autonomy (including sexual freedom) in their accounts, however, women's experiences of actually engaging in a new trajectory turned out to be both complex and challenging. Being "pushed" out of the previous social worlds (e.g., the Chinese immigrant community) by the stigma and the gender-based disadvantages associated with marital breakdown, they were also experiencing other forms of inequality (e.g., based on immigrant status, race, and sexuality) when encountering the "new", broader worlds through, for example, interracial dating. Although women's growth—in such forms as self-determination, sexual autonomy, and self-motivated learning—is observed in this status phase, their gender-based vulnerability in both "old" and "new" social worlds is salient. On the one hand, passing through the phases of

their trajectories of marital breakdown facilitated women's (re)understanding and empowering of themselves as women and, finally, reconstructing their lives in the world. On the other hand, their capacities to meaningfully embrace individual autonomy and a new trajectory are also shaped by the sociostructural conditions, and by others—such as their friends and sexual partners—who participate in and shape their new trajectories (Riemann & Schütze, 1991). It is clear, then, that gender and changing gender roles cannot be understood in isolation, but require consideration of their intersection with migration processes, which have contributed to these women's downward occupational and socioeconomic mobility, racialization, marginalization, and sustained struggles between two cultures or worlds (Micollier, 2017; Zhou et al., 2019). In addition to helping professionals' role in facilitating women to navigate this life circumstance, therefore, social-justice-oriented changes at a macrostructural level—such as immigrant integration policies and services—are also needed to enable immigrants to maximize and sustain their autonomy in the process of settlement.

In conclusion, this article reveals how Chinese immigrant women in Canada navigate the processes of marital breakdown (in part as a result of their settlement struggles), and how gender—including their senses of changing gender roles in post-immigration and postmarital contexts—plays out in these trajectories. Based on women's accounts of their passing through the status phases of these trajectories, this analysis makes visible the ways that marital breakdown shapes women's conceptions of themselves and their places in the social worlds; it also shows how other structures of difference (e.g., cultural norms, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, sexuality, geography, and locality) have significance in the context of women's efforts to find ways out. Although marital breakdown suggests a turning point in the life course, women's personal autonomy is also evolving, entwined with other structures of difference (e.g., gender, migrant status, and race) in Canada as the host country, and is simultaneously influenced by their social, cultural, and familial connections with China as the home country (Mahler & Pessar, 2006; Micollier, 2017; Nawyn, 2010; Sinding & Zhou, 2017). We argue that attending to the trajectories of immigrant women's marital breakdown enables us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationships among gender, marriage, and migration that go beyond the somewhat polarized "liberation" and "re-domestication" narratives.

Despite the relatively more progressive gender norms in Canada as the host society, immigrants' capacity to embrace such possibilities—or, to become "westernized"—is often constrained by broader social, cultural, and economic conditions, such as segmented integration and racism (Zhou, 2021; Zhou et al., 2019). In this study, for example, while dating Caucasian men brought an opportunity for a more equitable gender relation for some women, it may also mean a greater risk of exploitation for others. The results of this exploratory study illustrate the value of transcending dichotomous conceptions of the relationship between gender and migration, and of opening spaces in which to better understand immigrant women's increasingly diversified life trajectories and the range of barriers they encounter along the way. The study also reveals multiple opportunities for social work contributions: tackling systematic barriers to settlement, facilitating social support in the community, and recognizing individuals' diverse trajectory potentials (including the potential for this typically unwelcome event to be integrated as personal growth and transition).

It would be inappropriate to conclude without mentioning some of the limitations of the study. First, due to its purposive sample and multi-site nature, the results of this investigation may not be generalizable to Chinese women who immigrate to other cities or regions in Canada. Second, marital breakdown was not the focus of the larger study from which the data were drawn; rather, it emerged as a theme at the stage of data analysis. Future research in this area is warranted, including systematic, in-depth investigation of Chinese immigrants' experiences with marital breakdown; a comparative analysis between men's and women's experiences would support a fuller understanding of the relationships among gender, marriage, immigration, and transnationalism. Third, it is worth noting that class, as an aspect of social identity, was rarely brought up by these economic immigrant

women during the interview. Instead, they frequently talked about their downward socioeconomic mobility in Canada in comparison to their relative socioeconomic privilege in China. Seeing their own socioeconomic status through a transnational lens also suggests a need to rethink class as a national-bound concept, which is beyond the scope of this study but that merits attention in future research. Despite these limitations, this article has shed light on Chinese immigrant women's own accounts of marital breakdown, a unique yet little-studied phenomenon and a basis for understanding the mutually constitutive relationship between gender and international migration.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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