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The revolution will have child care

Sally Campbell Galman ^a

^a Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies,
University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA E-mail:

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BOOK REVIEW

The revolution will have child care

Whose culture has capital? Class, culture, migration and mothering, by Bin Wu, Bern, Peter Lang, 2011, 205 pp., £39.00/US\$62.95, ISBN 978-3-0343-0605-8

I recently conducted an informal survey of university faculty mothers' experiences with work and child care. The results were disturbing, but not wholly unexpected; data revealed a landscape of women's experience defined by resourcefulness and high scholarly productivity but also struggle and pain. The women, all mothers, expressed intense concern about difficult work environments characterised by uninformed colleagues, financial hardship brought on by the prohibitive cost of child care and scarce institutional resources or support. I also saw that one man had taken the survey, despite my invitation to women only, and written angrily in every field. Among other less-savoury observations, he wrote 'It's hard to be a working father and an adjunct professor but I don't whine and complain or ask for special privileges'. While I understand the problems faced by faculty fathers, his belief that women – especially mothers – 'whine and complain' in pursuit of 'special privileges'¹ made me, predictably, quite furious. However, I should not have been surprised. After all, the general landscape of working mothers' experience is a contentious and politicised target of convenience (after all, 'working mothers' have been blamed for everything from obesity² to misbehaviour³ to the disintegration of society⁴). However, for all this attention (and inattention to the fact that this is not a new phenomenon, and that, historically, many women have always worked outside the home), the everyday realities remain relatively shrouded in popular disinterest (Lynott and Logue 1993; Mannis 1999). One of these neglected realities is the cost of early care and education for the youngest children and the effects of balancing child care with women's lives as skilled workers. In the USA, the prohibitive cost of child care combined with the absence of universal public preschool constitute the chief contributions to middle class families' rapid descent into the ranks of the poor (Warren 2007).

Like so much powerful work, Wu's text begins with personal experience. She reflects on the double-bind of the 'conflicting roles of paid worker and unpaid mother' as 'having a young child and being a new Chinese migrant, there were very few choices of paid work that could accommodate childcare, allow me to have a reasonable income and pursue a career all at the same time' (p. 13). She observes that while Bowlby and others in the West were advocating for a stay-at-home mother and nuclear family as the best possible environment for the young child, the prescription for healthy early development was radically different in her Chinese homeland. There, she writes, 'the CCP adopted Engels' belief that women's liberation would only be realized through participation in the paid workforce' (p. 18), an ideal that was realised, in part, by traditional extended-family living arrangements, one-child policies and state supported child care (Stoltzfus 2003).

Wu's book focuses on the everyday experiences of eight mothers who immigrated from China to New Zealand. These women, who had an average of two children each, were mostly degreed professionals, all of whom were working full time in paid (employment or student status) as well as unpaid (at home mothering) contexts. Wu's analyses focused on the everyday as a window into the ambiguity and complexity of gender, class and ethnicity when roles and expectations become subject to interpretation through an event like immigration. Participants braved what was often a difficult, even painful, transition from lives as skilled workers in China to lower-status lives as immigrants in their new home, all so that their children might benefit from high quality education and care in New Zealand. Indeed, the mothers (beautifully portrayed by Wu as agentive, complex, multi-faceted human beings forging a new everyday reality and not just idealised images of the self-abnegating and long-suffering others) marshalled every available resource to maximise these benefits. This often included the difficult work of navigating transnational norms and belief systems around what is 'best' for children in the absence of traditional support networks.

Framed primarily with Bourdieu's work on habitus, cultural capital and some excellent thinking around the concepts of identity, practice and the 'everyday' Wu's work comes to the conclusion that even in New Zealand, with its focus on high quality early education and care, the lives of immigrant mothers remain low-status and marginalised. This is because, she writes 'Mothers' work remains in the private domain, and thus is not regarded as productive. As long as women's unpaid work in the private sphere is not recognised, gender equality cannot be achieved' and mothers' – especially skilled new migrant mothers of young children – will continue to be denied economic rights (p. 165). As an American, so used to naively, enviously, gazing southward at New Zealand as the promised land of child and family-centred public policy, this was initially a hard sell. New Zealand ranks no. 2 on the Mothers' Index in the annual *State of the world's mothers report* (Geoghegan 2011). The UK does slightly less well (no. 13) and the USA quite abysmally (no. 31 out of the 43 'more developed' countries – most likely because of their draconian maternity leave policies (Livingston and Cohn 2010)). Considering what we know about mothers' welfare – that is, that improved quality of life and mothering experiences for mothers are highly correlated with improved outcomes for the children (Hoffman and Youngblade 1999), it appears that those places that are good for mothers would also be good for children. But, as Wu reminds us, 'good' does not address the issue at hand, and a comparative rating of 'good' does not always mean 'fair'. She writes that even New Zealand, with its vision of an 'equitable, inclusive and sustainable society where all women can achieve their aspirations', does not offer fair opportunities for women with young children. She writes, as 'women with young children are in general disadvantaged, skilled new migrant workers are doubly disadvantaged' in the face of downward mobility, pernicious discourses of 'self-sufficiency' and isolation (p. 166).

Most of Wu's practical recommendations are aimed at early education and care practitioners and policymakers. In the book itself, of course, the early childhood teachers tended, as so many do, to lump all immigrants together, to the detriment of the children and their families. In recommendations that are useful far beyond the context of the study, Wu suggests that teachers and others look to the individual, and move beyond grudging, or even well-meaning 'tolerance' of difference to real pursuit of genuine understanding. The mothers themselves are selectively engaging with forms of dominant and non-dominant capital in ways that can be described as

contradictory, strategic, agentive and fluid. In the end, Wu asks the question, ‘Whose culture has capital?’ And the answer is: It’s complex. In that complexity lies generativity and transformation. The immigrant mothers were effectively creating something new from their transnational reality, ‘forging a new culture by selectively combining the two’ (p. 161).

Notes

1. As Yoshino (2007) writes, this could be an example of ‘angry straight white man reaction’ wherein the speaker lashes out from his own place of pain, as ‘one of the mass of men leading a life of quiet desperation’ and alienation from his own authentic self, denied full humanity by the mechanisms of hegemonic masculinity (p. 24–5).
2. <http://healthland.time.com/2011/02/04/are-working-moms-to-blame-for-childhood-obesity/>
3. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1280400/Working-mothers-blame-children-misbehave-says-leading-psychologist.html>. This one has a particularly manipulative photo of a mother, grimacing, looking at her watch while holding an unhappy baby.
4. <http://www.ivillage.co.uk/working-mothers-get-the-blame/83172>

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Sally Campbell Galman
 Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies,
 University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA
sally@educ.umass.edu
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