Child care so costly immigrants sending babies back to China

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From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

TORONTO — Sunny Wu had just immigrated to Canada from China when she discovered she was pregnant. Overjoyed, Ms. Wu prepared for her baby's arrival, never imagining that within a year, she would have to endure the agony and loneliness of being separated from her daughter.

Ms. Wu, a Chinese teacher, and her husband, a computer programmer, were squeaking by on minimum-wage jobs and could not afford to pay $1,200 a month for daycare. Ms. Wu, 34, also knew she would have to return to university if she didn't want to spend the rest of her life as an overeducated, embittered immigrant, packaging groceries for $7 an hour.

Though the separation was devastating, the couple could see no other way out. They sent their baby daughter to China to be raised by her grandmother, who was already caring for the toddler they had left behind.

“I felt so guilty. This wasn't how my new life was meant to be. I came to Canada to have a better quality of life, not a worse one.”

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According to social workers in Toronto's Chinese community, dozens, even hundreds, of recent Chinese immigrants have sent their infants back to China to spend their early years with relatives. They are separated from their own children due to financial constraints and unaffordable daycare in a country they came to, ironically, because they thought it would be a great place to raise children.

Canadians are, by now, familiar with the heartache Filipino and Caribbean women endure when they leave behind their children to come to Canada as live-in nannies. They end up parenting their offspring via long-distance phone calls and video cameras.

But the phenomenon of Chinese professionals immigrating here, and then sending their children back to China, is a new trend in what global experts call “transnational parenting.”

It raises troubling questions about how well Canada's immigration selection model is working — and may help explain the recent decrease in immigration applications from China.

“We discovered dozens of professional immigrants from mainland China were doing this because they all asked us how to get passports for their babies,” said Florence Wong, a social worker with St. Stephen's Community House in Toronto.

In 2002, Ms. Wong conducted a study of Chinese immigrants in five prenatal programs. Seventy per cent of the women said they were planning to send their children back to China to be raised by relatives. Social workers dealing with the community in Scarborough, Ont., confirmed the trend as well.

Ms. Wong decided the problem was severe enough that she produced a documentary profiling several Chinese newcomers who sent their children back home; she now screens the film for newcomers in an attempt to persuade them to keep their families together.

The Chinese women and their husbands interviewed by The Globe and Mail are all professionals in their 30s who came to Canada believing they would find jobs in their fields that pay well. However, instead of finding employment as civil engineers or meteorologists, they were forced to accept minimum-wage jobs. With family incomes of $1,000 a month, daycare often wasn't affordable; yet they also did not qualify for subsidies.

“I have met so many immigrant women who want to send their babies back to China as soon as they are three months. I tell them not to do it. It is so hard emotionally,” said Faith Wu, an engineer who immigrated from Guangdong province in 2000. “I blame Immigration Canada. Chinese people are losing interest in coming to Canada because of this.”

As China's economy has surged ahead in recent years, the number of immigration applications to Canada has dropped off dramatically. The number of Chinese applicants decreased to 19,000 in 2006 from a high of 40,000 in 2004, compared with 132,000 applicants last year from India.

Word has travelled back to China — the Canadian dream isn't all it's cracked up to be, said Sunny Wu. She would do anything to recapture those early years with her children. When she and her husband immigrated to Toronto in 1999, they were buoyed by their good fortune, dreaming of a new life in a clean, friendly country of wide open spaces.

They were planning to send for their older daughter once they got settled. “The immigration agency said Canada was the best place to live,” said Sunny Wu, an extrovert who speaks English flawlessly.

However, when her second child was born in November of 2000, her husband was still searching for work. Her mother came from China and flew back with the baby when she turned 13 months. “It was so difficult. I had breast-fed her and so we were very close,” Sunny Wu said.

Her older daughter came to live with them when she turned 2 and her husband finally had a job in his field, but her second child didn't rejoin the family until she was 4.

“I found when I saw my second daughter again in the airport, she was like a stranger to me. I missed her so much,” Sunny Wu said. “She said, ‘where is my mommy? My mommy is a computer.' She was so used to be talking to me via video camera.”

In China, it is the cultural norm for grandparents to help raise children (though they are usually together in the same house). Sunny Wu was raised by her grandmother, and only reunited with her mother at the age of 11. She could never overcome the estrangement, and remains more closely bonded to her

grandmother.

Now that her two daughters, aged 6 and 8, have been reunited with their parents, Sunny Wu believes they are exhibiting signs of psychological damage from the separation. Her younger daughter always seeks out her grandmother, who also lives with them, if she is hurt or upset. She is a less confident child than her first-born, and tends to be clingy, Sunny Wu said.

“During her first week in kindergarten, she wouldn't let us leave the room. It's like she doesn't trust us as parents any more.”

The family doesn't discuss the separation because they fear it would upset the children.

“We try to let her forget about it. We also probably spoil the second one because we feel badly.”

Sunny Wu did gain one thing from all her personal suffering: she has now successfully retrained as an accountant and has a good job. But the price seems too high.

“In China, we really stress a good education and good job. A good job equals a good life. Now I'm not so sure,” she said.

“I think Chinese immigrants to Canada should be educated that sending their children back isn't the best thing. We keep our fingers crossed there won't be latent effects when they are teenagers.”

Judith Bernhard, director of the Early Childhood Education master's program at Ryerson University, says the psychological damage of separated children who reunite with their families can be severe.

“The most common issue is that the parent loses his or her status as an authority figure,” says Prof. Bernhard, who has conducted research into transnational mothers from Latin America.

The children often feel resentful and may rebel by refusing to listen or accept their parent as a decision-maker. Prof. Bernhard recalls one child who refused to eat in front of his mother.

For mothers, the most common emotion is guilt, and they sometimes compensate by spoiling the child, which can lead to more disciplinary problems.

An immigration selection model that recruits professionals who end up being forced to accept blue-collar jobs is a flawed one, she says. “This story also points to the fact that Canada doesn't have subsidized daycare, while countries such as Sweden, Finland and even China do.”

Marina Wilson, a spokeswoman with Citizenship and Immigration Canada, says the department is acutely aware of the difficulties foreign professionals face getting their credentials recognized and is

working closely with the provinces and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada to address the issue. “We are also putting up a portal on the CIC website so prospective newcomers can assess themselves before deciding to immigrate. We don't want to mislead them,” Ms. Wilson said.

Last month, Ontario passed the country's first bill aimed at helping internationally trained professionals work in their fields. The bill requires the province's regulated professions to ensure their licensing process is fair and transparent, and to assess credentials more quickly. A commissioner will look at eliminating barriers to entering professional associations.

This initiative has been applauded by agencies working with immigrants — although some say still more internships are needed so that foreign doctors and engineers may requalify here.

The change is also welcomed by Faith Wu, the electrical engineer from Guangdong. When she immigrated six years ago, the best job she could get was selling stationery in a Toronto Chinatown.

She had her first baby months later, and decided to send her to China as soon as she was weaned. “She was eight months. I felt so sad. But we couldn't afford daycare, couldn't get a subsidy and I had to go back to school,” said Faith Wu, a handsome woman with long hair who looks worn down and pale.

She spent many nights crying for her baby, yearning to hear her voice and smell her sweet scent.

In 2004, she gave birth to a second child, whom she also took to China to be raised by her grandmother. “When I flew back to Canada all alone, I felt so lonely. We never expected it to be this way,” she said.

In the meantime, Faith Wu, also re-qualified as an accountant and got a decent job. Her husband worked in a restaurant and then managed to start a small import-export business.

When their first-born turned 4, Faith Wu flew to China and brought her to their Toronto home, leaving behind her second-born. Her daughter could go to junior kindergarten, and Faith Wu hired a sitter to mind her after school. She is now pregnant with her third. “I will keep this child. I want to enjoy the milestones,” she says, massaging her belly with pride, and smiling for the first time in the interview.