

Wives lose out when husbands go regional

Study shows that women often have to sacrifice their careers when their partners go abroad to work

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THE careers of some Singapore women may have ended on the backburner because of the county's regionalisation drive.

When a Singapore man heads overseas to work, in two out of three cases, his wife and family move with him.

This often means that the wife gives up her job to take care of her children and husband in a new country.

When she returns, she is often unable to find a job and goes on being a stay-at-home mother and wife.

These are the findings of a study by Associate Professor Brenda Yeoh of the National University of Singapore and Dr Katie Willis of the University of Liverpool.

They interviewed 150 Singapore men and women, all professionals or business people, who had ventured overseas to China's Wuxi and Suzhou regions or had opportunities to do so.

Only three women in the sample group moved to

China to enhance their careers and seize business opportunities. In contrast, only one husband accompanied his wife overseas.

Dr Yeoh, director of the Centre for Advanced Studies at NUS and a social geographer, said that as Singapore regionalises, women "can get locked into the stereotypes of being only mothers and wives".

"Inevitably, the regionalisation drive puts an extra burden on women — whether they stay behind for the sake of the children's education or they go along with their husbands," she said.

"Their households are women-centred as husbands become visible players in the workforce."

Mrs Christie Hu, 42, accompanied her husband Mr Robin Hu, 42, to Beijing six years ago.

A former regional director with the Economic Development Board, he is now senior vice-president of Asiatic Solutions, a company, conceived in Singapore, which was listed on Nasdaq last year.

Mrs Hu gave up a career as a research scientist at the NUS medical faculty to

become a full-time housewife in China.

"I made the sacrifice to accompany my husband. It was difficult to give up my career at that time, but I knew the job could still be there for me," she said.

Mrs Hu has no regrets and does not mind playing a supporting role to her husband.

But other women had less positive experiences.

One woman returned home after seven years in

China and was unable to secure the professional job she once had.

Dr Yeoh said her study, which she presented at a recent conference on "Migration And The Asian Family In A Globalising World", showed that regionalisation has deepened the difference between men's and women's roles.

"The go-regional policy becomes one that helps men more than it does women," she said.

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— Dr Yeoh, who says women can be stereotyped as wives and mothers



The Hu family on holiday in Inner Mongolia in 1998. Mrs Hu gave up her career as a research scientist to accompany husband Robin to China six years ago with their kids, Richard, 16, and Michael, 14.