Women and Migration in Contemporary China

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This paper shows that the huge numbers of rural migrants who have left the Chinese countryside in recent years to go to work in the newly industrialising coastal areas have included a substantial minority of women. It discusses the gender-specific aspects of migration and the occupations taken up by female migrants. It also considers issues such as female autonomy, fertility and prostitution in relation to migration. It contends that since the state restricts permanent settlement in the urban areas, rural to urban migration in China is characterised by a high level of circulation. The result is that successive waves of migrants return to the rural areas to marry and have families bringing with them new ideas about gender relations and family roles. Migration, especially female migration, thus presents a challenge to the traditional patriarchal family in the countryside and offers rural women the chance to negotiate more power and choice in their lives.

Migration in contemporary China has to be understood in the context of the country’s astonishing economic transformation since the introduction of the economic reforms. The economy has grown between 8 and 12 per cent per annum for over twenty years. However, this growth has for the most part concentrated on the eastern seaboard, in the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and in the large cities. The growth rate in such areas has been considerably higher than the national average while in the interior, away from these prosperous regions, it tends to be much lower. Not surprisingly, growth in the prosperous areas has generated a huge demand for labour which has been satisfied to a significant extent by the movement of rural people from the poorer, less developed regions of the interior. Estimates of the numbers of migrant labourers in China vary from 80 to 150 million.

The reform era has been marked not only by this rise in the demand for migrant labour but also by a considerable easing of the restrictions on migration. In the past, in Maoist China, restrictions were so considerable that it was more difficult for a person from a rural area to work legally in a city than it was for someone in Europe to cross national boundaries in pursuit of a job. Villagers in China were given rural registration when they were born and that registration meant that they were not permitted to live or work in the towns. Strict food rationing in the cities made it possible to enforce these regulations. Without an urban residence certificate, no one could get ration tickets, and without ration tickets one could not buy food. It was thus impossible
for a peasant to survive for long in a city. In the early eighties, the development of a free market in food made rural to urban migration less difficult and for twenty years since then restrictions have been steadily eased.

Chinese migration is still strongly characterised by circulation. Although peasants are now allowed into the urban areas, rural migrants still suffer discrimination in terms of entitlements to welfare, education and health and are routinely denied access to better forms of employment. This encourages them to maintain strong links with their native places and they tend to return to their villages after spending a few years away. A fresh cohort replaces each returning cohort of migrants. This characteristic has the effect of maximising the influence of returned migrants on the sending areas since so many people are involved.

Migration is, of course, highly selective in terms of sex and age and thus tends to distort sex ratios and age structures in both the sending and the destination areas. In China, as elsewhere, migrants are predominantly young, single and male. However, there is also considerable migration by women and it is estimated that somewhere between 30 to 40 per cent of the migrants are female. Women take up employment in assembly line factories of China’s new industries (often foreign-invested), in garment workshops, hotels, restaurants and the rest of the service sector. They also work as domestic servants, as small traders and as sex workers. Obviously the lives of migrants vary greatly, yet there are common threads in their experiences no matter what work they do.

This short article focuses on women, discussing some of the gender-specific aspects of migration and takes up issues like female autonomy, fertility, motherhood and prostitution.

**SEX RATIOS AND THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN CHINESE SOCIETY**

Migrant sex ratios have to be understood in the context of China’s gender system. The Chinese family system and gender inequality affect both women’s desire to migrate and the likelihood of their being allowed or selected to do so. The lower proportion of women in most migration streams can be attributed to various factors. All individuals in China are expected to live within their family circle unless there is good reason for them to do otherwise, but the feeling that this is appropriate is stronger in the case of women. Women are considered more vulnerable and less capable of dealing with the outside world. Single women are seen as especially in need of the protection and supervision of their families, a view certainly related to the wish to preserve their virginity, and thus their marriageability. The mobility of married women is also constrained by the idea that they should live under the protection of their families. However, once one woman has been allowed to migrate she may break down the barriers for others in her family and perhaps her village (Zhang, 1997: 7). Female migrants often travel to join other family members who have gone before them and when single women migrate they tend to do so with a female relative or
friend (Hoy, 1996: 217). Nonetheless, cultural reluctance to allow women to leave their families no doubt partially accounts for migrant sex ratios.

Marriage arrangements also tend to inhibit female migration. Some women migrate either to seek out partners in wealthier areas or because they have married a husband in another administrative area. However, for labour migrants it is seen as difficult, and perhaps undesirable, to marry at the place of destination. Lacking urban residence papers, a migrant is not an eligible partner for the urban resident so the choice of partners open to a migrant may be poor. A marriage arranged at destination also deprives the family of the chance to vet the match, weakens the migrant’s links with home and reduces the chances of eventual return. Migrants therefore often go home to marry. This is more likely to curtail migration in the case of women because they marry earlier and because once married they are less likely than men to migrate.

The low propensity of married women to migrate reflects the difficulty that migrants face of bringing up families in destination areas. They are hampered by inadequate accommodation and the difficulty of accessing education or health facilities. A few overcome these problems and bring their children up in the urban areas, but most do not. Some female migrants send their children back to the villages to be cared for by relatives while they continue to earn. But most women, once married, stay home to look after their children in the villages. Their husbands may continue to engage in seasonal or even longer-term migration. This choice is reinforced by the landholding system. Migrants retain rights to the land as long as they arrange for it to be cultivated. From the perspective of a household, it may make sense for the woman to look after the family plot while the husband migrates to exploit his higher earning capacity in non-agricultural work. The retention of the plot is viewed as a kind of social security because it gives migrants something to come back to if things go badly for them in the destination areas.

In the past, women’s lower migration rates were probably also related to their lower earning power. When a household decides to send someone out as an investment, it will be concerned about maximising that investment, especially when travel costs are high. So usually a man might be chosen. However, the relative value of household members at home also affects the decision. Where women do not customarily work in the fields they are freer to migrate. Young female hotel attendants I interviewed in Chengdu told me that as there had been no work for them in their villages, their families were happy to send them to the city where at least they could earn their own keep. Moreover, families with only one son, a common situation under China’s strict population policy, may be reluctant to risk allowing him to migrate. A son represents the family’s future and when he marries, the family will be guaranteed another labour power. A daughter once married is perceived lost to the family so her long-term value is far less.

A strong demand for female labour in destination areas encourages the development of a female migration stream. Thus the great majority of migrants going to the new export-oriented industries of the coastal regions are women and this has contributed to the rapidly growing proportion of women migrants. Employers in SEZs deliberately
seek to recruit women, sometimes even sending agents to sign them up in the areas of origin. To facilitate recruitment they supply dormitory accommodation at the destination or even help with transport. The local state also contributes. Some county governments in the Sichuan province organise coach transport for migrants to Shenzhen and to other towns in the Guangdong province (fieldwork notes, 1994). Though the hours are long, the earnings of women workers in export-orientated industries are higher as compared to what they could earn elsewhere and may sometimes outstrip what a male migrant would receive. Once a few women from a village take advantage of an opportunity, others hear about it and a chain develops.

THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON WOMEN’S LIVES

Women who live in the sending areas can be affected by migration either because they migrate themselves or because they are left behind. In either case the impact is complex and the gains and losses are hard to assess. The effect of migration on agriculture has provoked widespread discussion in China. There is much concern that the agricultural labour force is becoming dominated by women, the old and the weak (nühua, laohua and ruanhua). Officials worry that changes in the structure of the labour force will lead to a fall in agricultural production. But changes in the lives of women left behind depend on who has left. If the migrants are female, the mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters or sisters-in-law at home are likely to need to give more time to traditional women’s tasks like the preparation of food, the care of the house and of clothes, child-rearing including caring for children not their own and raising poultry or vegetables. If these demands are very heavy, women may actually reduce the agricultural work they do. Thus in some circumstances the traditional sexual division of labour within the household between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ work (Jacka, 1997) will be reduced, but in others it may be reinforced by migration.

Research on migration in many other parts of the world has portrayed the women left behind in the sending areas as unfortunate victims of modern economic growth (Akeroyd, 1991). They are left doing poorly paid, physically taxing work in the least mechanised, least productive part of the economy (Rogers, 1980). Their property rights to land are often weak, or dependent on male relatives. They struggle to bring up their children alone helped only by minimal and irregular remittances from their menfolk in the cities. Their relationship with the men comes under strain and the men may start new families in the towns during their long absences.

We lack detailed survey findings on this subject in China but the picture it seems is less grim. No doubt in China, as in other societies, spousal separation in migration does place a strain on marriages. Fieldwork has shown that Chinese male migrants are suspected by their wives of starting new relationships when they are away (Wang, 1997). But in general the marriage bond is still strong in rural China. Women left behind continue to receive remittances and expect their husbands to return. Close contact is often maintained and the absent man is still consulted about decisions at home and about the land. Family ties are undoubtedly reinforced by the highly
temporary nature of most Chinese migration which gives migrants a strong incentive to stay in regular contact with their families, preserving a place for the future in their villages. Kinship bonds are maintained by giving and sharing. Moreover, migration and the economic aspirations that inspire it should be understood in the context of the household. In rural China, as in other Asian societies, the migration of one household member may represent a bid by the whole household to diversify its economic activity and improve its lot. Family ties and a sense of reciprocal obligations underpin the system. Migrants use family money to migrate and they are expected to remit money so that when they are successful, the whole household benefits. A successful migrant is able to earn more than he or she would do at home and remits sums significant enough to improve the household standard of living. Gulati (1993) has shown that in Kerala women whose men have migrated own more and better clothes and jewellery than other women. The most obvious sign of migrant wealth in China is new housing financed by remittances, but money from the earnings of migrants is also used to pay for consumer goods, dowries, bride price and education. Female migrants acquire a higher status in the family because of their remittances.

It should be noted that here I am talking about the majority. Greater prosperity is not the unvarying result of migration. Investments sometimes fail and migration is a high-risk business. Migrants may be unable to find work, or may fall sick or may fail to remit money for other reasons. In such cases, their families and dependants in the sending areas will obviously suffer.

MIGRATION AND FEMALE AUTONOMY

In addition to impact on work and income, migration has other less tangible effects on women. Female migrants are profoundly affected by their experiences. Once in the destination areas, they live very different lives from their rural sisters and come under the influence of the urban culture. If they return to the villages they bring with them different expectations of women’s roles and marital relations, higher demands of living standards and housing and greater aspirations for their children. Their knowledge and savings may enable them to set up small enterprises or find new ways to make money. Historically, urbanisation brings about enormous changes in the roles and lives of women. These changes can filter down to the rural areas if urban-rural relations are close enough but will not do so if the city and the countryside operate as independent worlds. In the Maoist era, the city and countryside were isolated from each other to a considerable extent. The development of circulatory migration in which migrants go backwards and forwards between their homes and the destination areas has contributed to the breaking down of this isolation.

It is sometimes argued that migration promotes female autonomy (Chant, 1992; Davin, 1997; Gulati, 1993). No individual has complete autonomy within the family-based society of rural China, but some women certainly gain increased independence through migration. Mobility separates family members and thus disrupts the day-to-day functioning of the family power structure in which authority is conferred by age
and sex. Women left behind in the rural areas may become de facto heads of households. There are limits to their independence. Some still live with their in-laws and most are expected to consult their absent husbands or his relatives about major decisions. Nonetheless the change is a real one. Women begin to deal with village officials directly and with matters such as work, household spending and children’s education. They are pushed into contact with the modern world by the need to cash money orders or open savings accounts at post offices and banks. Women’s literacy becomes valued more highly as they engage in such activities and as they need to write to absent members of the household.

Young women who migrate alone take decisions for themselves that in the past would have been shared with family members. They receive individual earnings and work out their own budgets. They buy money orders, use savings accounts and write letters. They decide for themselves what to eat and what to wear. They associate with new acquaintances who are neither relatives nor fellow villagers. For young rural women who formerly met few strangers and were closely controlled by senior family members, the change is dramatic.

Of course some such women may just be exchanging one form of authority for another, less personal one. Social concern about the idea of young women workers living out of reach of family control results in various attempts to impose substitute controls on them. The factory dormitory is used by employers to reassure parents that their daughters have secure accommodation, that they are properly overseen and will be looked after. The communal sleeping and living accommodation restricts young women workers as does the strictly enforced curfew. The dormitory system also reinforces the dependence of young female workers on their employers, a situation that many employers exploit. As Caroline Hoy has observed, ‘with many young women literally locked into factories and dormitories, bound by contracts, their wages remitted to families sometimes hundreds of kilometres away and used for the promotion of the family and individual family members other than themselves, we should not assume that growing numbers of women in the migrant labour force are always associated with a growing sense of autonomy and independence’ (Hoy, 1996: 355).

The many reports of very young women working extremely long hours in terrible conditions in China’s new industries and various reports of tragic deaths of such workers when fires destroy jerry built workplaces or dormitories make it impossible to idealise their growing industrial experience as a liberating process (Knox, 1997). Yet the voices of these workers themselves bear witness to the fact that many of them do feel that they are more confident and self-aware. Women interviewed by Heather Zhang in foreign-owned industries in the northern city of Tianjin insisted that the experience of migration had tempered them, improved their abilities and independence and had given them the chance to see more of the world, to read more and to improve their literacy (Zhang, 1997: 5–20). Some were even prepared to fight their employers for shorter working hours and better conditions and to enlist the help of outside agencies such as the Women’s Federation in this struggle. They were proud that they had found jobs and managed their own lives in the cities. They harboured non-traditional ambitions and aspirations for their future. Some hoped to
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marry well and settle in the city while others planned to use their savings to set up businesses in the countryside. One spoke of becoming a ‘career-minded woman’, or *nuqiangren* (literally ‘strong woman’).

Migration may even be used by women to buy themselves out of a situation in which they are unhappy. In 1994 I interviewed a woman at the Chengdu Railway Station who was on her way back from Sichuan village to a manufacturing job. She had got into an arranged marriage several years earlier, which had turned out badly. She did not get on with her husband but did not want to upset her father by leaving. When her father died she decided on divorcing her husband. Her husband kept their son but demanded that she pay a large sum to cover the expenses of bringing him up. She then went to Shenzhen in order to raise the money but had decided that her life there was not bad and that she would stay until she had saved enough to make a better life for herself back home (fieldwork notes, 1994). Another woman I encountered in Beijing was working as a maid. She had decided to split with her husband because he had been beating her. He, however, said that he would agree to the divorce only on the condition that she paid him a considerable sum of money. She was, in effect, buying him off.

Where migrant women are employed as maids, the phenomenon of the employer replacing the authority of the family is even clearer than in the case of factory workers. A maid’s free time is likely to be very limited, there is a curfew and her employers may even ask her where she spends any time off. Some even expect to have a say in what programmes she watches on television or what she wears. Interestingly, many young women are now trying to escape the servitude that tends to go with co-residence with their employers. Maids who rent rooms from peasants on the edges of cities and hire themselves out to clean or cook in urban homes at an hourly rate are challenging not only the custom that servants should live in and work full-time for one family, but the whole authority relationship that went with that custom. They have to pay for their food and accommodation, but they earn much more than they would if they worked for a single family and enjoy much greater personal freedom. They cease to be on duty all the time and their employers lose the paternalistic power to supervise their lives.

Migration challenges traditional gender roles and the family hierarchy. Like all social change it also causes new social tensions and great stress in individual relationships. Family separations cause sadness and regret and may cause considerable disturbances for children. Parents whose son has migrated may try to assert their authority over their daughter-in-law. If she is insufficiently submissive, it results in family quarrels. Women may miss their husbands while they are away but may also resent the loss of independence when their husbands come back to the village. Women migrants have many readjustments to make when they return. They may regret their lost independence, miss the bustle of the city or struggle to re-accustom themselves to the standards of hygiene in the village. A researcher working in rural Anhui found that girls who came back after working as maids in Beijing especially disliked the village latrines (Wan, 1992). Remittances too are a potential area of conflict. To whom should a money draft be sent? For example, should a young married man
address it to his parents or his wife? When the money is cashed, who decides how it should be spent?\(^1\) Family conflict is one of the various costs of migration in contemporary China. Its positive role is that it contributes to a shift in family structures and gender roles, which still constitute a barrier to improving women’s status in rural China.

**MIGRANTS AND PROSTITUTION**

The connection between migration and prostitution is worth considering. The greater population mobility of the 1980s brought a large transient population to the cities where they lived side by side with people far more prosperous than they were. Although the vast majority of people in China have become much better off since the economic reforms, the widening income differentials have made relative poverty a highly relevant concept. If rural migrants find jobs they may earn much more than they would in their villages, but they earn less than urban residents whose urban status qualifies them for better paid permanent employment. Understandably, migrants search for ways to maximise their incomes. Female migrants who work long hours in industry or domestic service for comparatively small wages may well be tempted by sex work which could bring them a month’s salary in two or three nights. A majority of the prostitutes cite economic motives for their involvement in prostitution (Hershatter, 1997: 403). Interestingly, prostitutes in contemporary China resemble other rural migrants in that they tend to see their work as temporary, a sacrifice made in order to amass enough money to realise an ambition. They speak, for example, of saving up to buy a taxi licence or a small business, finding a good husband and leading a happy life (ibid.: 254). For young rural women without formal qualifications who are stuck in poorly paid work, prostitution must appear a quick way to achieve such aspirations.

As prostitution is not legal, it is necessary to provide the activity with at least a small amount of camouflage. Sex is offered in hotels, taxis, coffee shops, karaoke roadside halts, railway stations and open spaces like parks. High priced prostitutes whose customers are foreign or overseas Chinese businessmen operate out of hotels and charge enormous sums for a single encounter. At the bottom of the scale are women who sell sex to ordinary men, often themselves transients or people like truck drivers whose work involves travelling. A rural migrant would neither have the means nor the knowledge to dress in the way that would gain her entry to a high class hotel. Rural migrants are likely to work in the cheapest hotels and karaoke bars, at wayside halts or simply on the street.

Population mobility and the reappearance of prostitution are also associated with the development of trafficking in women. Some young women are tricked into travelling far from their homes on the promise of a job or a good husband only to have the agent who has ‘helped’ them in fact force them into prostitution when they

\(^1\) For a detailed discussion of similar tensions among the families of migrants in Kerala state in India, see Gulati (1993).
reach their destination (Zhuang, 1993: 33–50). Other women are knowingly sold into prostitution by their families or abducted and taken to work in the sex trade in some big city.

There is considerable official concern at the reappearance of prostitution in China. It is considered to be a sign of moral decadence and harmful to China's international image. However, attempts to suppress it meet with little success. High-class prostitutes earn enough to pay off both the officials and the police. Not only are their activities often tolerated, they may also receive active protection. The Public Security Bureau and the People's Liberation Army both own karaoke bars where prostitutes operate.

Prostitutes are often detained and sent to re-education centres. In 1992, about 50,000 prostitutes were held in 113 institutions. It is the poorer prostitutes, often migrants, catering to lower class customers and lacking money and influence who are most likely to be detained. Migrants, like other prostitutes, probably have to deal with demands for pay-offs from the police, but are doubly vulnerable because they lack residential rights and can be compulsorily returned to their native places.

The re-emergence of prostitution is part of the development of a complex marketised society in China. Greater population mobility is part of that development. Even if migrants are disproportionately involved in prostitution, migration cannot be blamed for its re-emergence. The demand for prostitutes would exist without the phenomenon of migration, and sex work is lucrative enough to draw in even urban women with regular jobs.

CONCLUSION

Women have hugely varying experiences of migration. For some young women migrants it may be a liberating experience that widens their experiences or their options in life. Others may be forced by migration into a health-destroying regime of long hours of exhausting work in dangerous conditions. Women who are left behind in the villages may suffer loneliness or grief at the departure of their husbands, but may gain in independence and confidence. They are likely to benefit financially from money sent back to them. At a structural level, I would like to argue that migration is likely to be of advantage to women. Women are disadvantaged in the traditional rural society by interlinked factors such as a patrilineal family, a patrilocal marriage, the sexual division of labour, access to land and son preference. In challenging the traditional structures that constrict women and in giving rural people a knowledge of other ways of living, migration offers women the possibility of negotiating more choices for themselves and having more power over their own lives.

REFERENCES


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