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# Focus China

## An Introduction

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by

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The idea of putting together a special issue on gendered migration in contemporary China has two sources. The most important reason has to do with the unprecedented scale of population movement that has taken place in the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a result of the structural changes brought about by the economic reforms over the last decades. Rural to urban migration is indeed one of the most striking social, demographic and economic phenomena in China today and its scope has aroused the concern of the central authorities as well as widespread discussion among the general public in recent years. The plight of internal migrants has also attracted increasing attention of scholars both within and outside China, generating a rich academic literature. The second reason stems from the increasing number of women, who make up the migrant population in major cities and rapidly industrializing coastal regions, and from the awareness that gender plays an important role in shaping migration experiences and dynamics. Thus, the purpose of this issue is to discuss some of the gender specific aspects of migration, taking up issues like welfare, cultural representation, social activism and prostitution, and also approaching State policies and legal responses.

Seen from a historical perspective, the huge proportions reached by internal migration in recent decades appears to be even more spectacular as it sharply contrasts with the geographical immobility that characterized the Mao era. In fact, a low level of urbanization accompanied China's industrialization process from the 1950s. This was the result of severe restrictions that were imposed over rural-urban

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migration for the purpose of a socialist development strategy that prioritized the accumulation and the construction of an urban industrial base through the channelling of the rural surplus into industry. Migration policies were shaped not only by the Soviet experience, but also and most importantly by China's own special registration system, the so-called "household registration system" or simply *hukou*, whose enforcement since 1958 made it possible to effectively control people's movement, preventing the urban migration typical of many industrializing countries (Solinger 1999a, pp. 32-36; Cheng and Selden 1994).

Under the *hukou* system every individual was tied to his or her place of permanent residence and was associated with either the *danwei* in urban areas or the communes in the countryside. The status of each individual was defined as either urban or rural, with his or her economic activity being classified as agricultural and non-agricultural. Urban residents enjoyed job security and a wide range of social benefits from which rural residents were excluded. By dividing the Chinese people into two categories (urban and rural), privileging the city (urban residents) over the countryside (rural residents) and denying access to the state distribution system for the majority of the rural population, the state created a deep rural-urban divide and a spatially defined new status hierarchy that would have long-term consequences for Chinese society.

It is worth mentioning here that the enforcement of the *hukou* system responded not only to a socialist development strategy prioritizing industrialization, but also to public security concerns (Mallee 2003, pp. 137-139). As such, the *hukou* was also a major tool used by the state to control specially targeted people (*zhongdian renkou*) and safeguard political order and social stability, a function that has retained its importance up to the present day (Wang 2004). Its socio-political control function reflects the Chinese state's conceptualization of internal migration as a public order issue which, as Flora Sapio denotes in this volume in relation to prostitution, remains a powerful undercurrent in the post-Mao official discourse.

Whereas in the Mao era migration from rural to urban areas was tightly controlled, a net flow did occur from urban to rural areas mainly propelled by ideological and political reasons. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s the rustication movement resettling urbanites in the countryside and involving not only cadres and intellectuals, but also and most prominently millions of urban educated youth, also contributed to declining urbanization levels (Bernstein 1977).

However, things started to change after the death of Mao Zedong. In the late 1970s, the new leadership launched an economic reform programme that brought about enormous socio-economic transformations, eroding many of the State's control systems. In the following years, the penetration of the market forces coupled with the State's explicit sanction of migration and adoption of a more flexible *hukou* policy, allowing rural residents to move legally into the cities albeit as temporary residents, led to an increase in the number of people leaving the countryside in search of better economic opportunities. Since then, large migrant populations have come to inhabit major cities and rapidly industrializing coastal regions (Chan and Zhang 1999; Solinger 1999b, pp. 223-228; Mallee 2003, pp. 140-143).

Migration flows during the reform period have been basically directed from rural to urban areas, from the interior to coastal provinces, from poorer to richer areas. Although substantial numbers of migrants are found in nearly every province of China, since the 1990s the so-called “floating population” (*liudong renkou*), that is people who live outside their own *hukou* registration place and thus without local household registration status in the destination areas, has become more concentrated in Shanghai and Beijing, as well as in the provinces of Guangdong and Zhejiang (Liang and Ma 2004, p. 480). In Beijing, for instance, 50.9 percent of floaters in 2008 come from the provinces of Hebei, Henan and Shandong, whereas in Shanghai 52.1 percent come from Anhui and Jiangsu provinces (Guojia renkou he jihua shengyu weiyuanhui liudong renkou fuwu guanli si 2010, p. 38).

Because of hidden numbers and discrepancies in the figures provided by scholars and governmental bureaucracies, it is difficult to estimate exactly the size of the “floating population”. Available data suggest that by the 1990s there was already a “floating population” of some 100 million in China (Solinger 1999a, p. 18). The 2000 census registered a total of about 144 million floaters, the majority consisting of rural residents moving to urban areas (Liang and Ma 2004, p. 475). According to the official figures released in 2010 by the National Bureau of Statistics, China’s migrant workers reached 229.8 million at the end of 2009. Moreover, with regard to the regional distribution, an increasing percentage of migrants directing towards central and western China has been noticed (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guojia tongjiju 2010).

In the last two decades the authorities’ efforts to control the flow to manageable levels, mainly due to fears of social chaos and the rise of criminality, have gone hand in hand with the awareness that migration has a positive impact on both urban and rural development, contributing to China’s transformation into a modern industrializing society. Much infrastructure and construction work in the cities has been done by migrants, the creation of the ‘new’ Beijing on the eve of 2008 Olympic Games being a prominent example. Meanwhile, migrants have begun to play an important role in the development and transformation of their places of origin: rural areas not only benefits from their remittances, but are also affected in terms of knowledge and new ideas as a result of migrants returning from cities (Murphy 2002).

This notwithstanding, the exclusionary measures of the *hukou* system still make rural migrants ‘outsiders’ in the urban areas since they lack the same entitlements as people with local registration status, no matter if they have obtained temporary residence permits. Despite the State’s attempts to reform and adjust the *hukou* system, it thus continues to differentiate the population’s life chances. The provision of permanent residence permits is still very limited and mainly granted to certain selected groups, such as the highly educated and the super rich. Hence, the majority of temporary migrants find themselves discriminated in the urban world: besides having no access to basic public social services, they are also vulnerable to various forms of abuses, such as wage exploitation occurring as a result of unfair and non-existent contracts, and detention (Chan and Buckingham 2008; Mallee 2003, pp. 144-152). Their legal position in the urban world remains very precarious

for most and the urban imaginary often associate them with urban overcrowding, violence, criminality and high fertility rates (Guang 2003, pp. 618-625).

While in the Mao era urban to rural population transfers were coerced and controlled by the State, in the reform period different factors have to be taken into account to understand the complex issue of migrants' agency. It is widely acknowledged that, with the exception of those displaced due to the construction of big infrastructural projects (the Three Gorges Dam being the most prominent example) (Padovani 2006; Laurans 2005) or demolition of old residential buildings for urban renewal, who may be considered as belonging to a broader group of forced resettlers or internal displacees due to development projects in the world today, the majority of rural migrants move in search of better prospects. Their choice to move to the cities is nonetheless shaped by a combination of factors and migration cannot be merely understood as a result of "push and pull" factors<sup>1</sup>, an approach which focuses upon economic factors and emphasizes the individual decision, regarding migration as a rational choice made after considering available options. In fact, as D. Solinger argues, in the Chinese context peasants' agency is somewhat bounded and peasants' options – when choices are being formulated – are very much the result of forces far beyond their reach. Thus, certain macro-factors (i.e. the political economy produced by State policies and the specific ecosystem of labour export provinces) as well as the role of social networks in the recruitment process work together to shape the peasants' "choices" about moving (Solinger 1999a, pp. 149-184). As such, internal migration cannot be merely attributed to individual agency and explained as a rational choice made by weighting costs and benefits.

### **Gendered patterns in China's internal migration**

Rural-to-urban migration in China is by no means a male phenomenon as women make up a high proportion of the large migrant population in the cities and industrially developed regions. Nationally, women comprised between one-third to one-half of all internal migrants during the 1990s (Jacka and Gaetano 2004, p. 21; Tan 2004, p. 248; Liang and Chen 2004, p. 423). This is confirmed by a recent government-sponsored research report on China's migrant population according to which women made up 49.6 percent of the floating population in 2008 (Guojia renkou he jihua shengyu weiyuanhui liudong renkou fuwu guanli si 2010, p. 37)

The literature on China's rural-urban migration has long neglected women, basically describing internal migrants as gender neutral, even though women constitute a high proportion of the migrant population. As a matter of fact, Lyla Mehta denotes in this volume that policy as well as academic debates related to internally displaced people in the developing world have been largely un-gendered and references to gender have merely had an add-on character.

In recent years, however, increasing academic attention has been devoted to gender and its impact on migration patterns and experiences. Assuming that

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<sup>1</sup> Push factors: rural poverty, surplus of labour, scarcity of land; pull factors: urban demand for cheap labour, hope of higher incomes, better prospects.

women's experience as migrants is likely to alter their position in society and affect social relations more generally, studies on the gendered dimensions of China's internal migration have increasingly looked at how gender shapes the experiences and consequences of migrations, raising important insights into relationship between women's migration and socio-cultural change, and more precisely into how rural women's migration affect gender relations, women's identities and aspirations as well as gender ideologies in both urban and rural areas (for instance Davin 2005; Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Jacka 2006).

This stream of literature also reflects an increasing attention to the study of the subject from the perspective of female migrants themselves, a trend that has proved to be of interest not only to the academic community but also to the wider public as the recent widely circulated and best selling publication on the lives and stories of factory girls in Dongguan by Leslie T. Chang has shown (Chang 2008).

Women comprise the majority of young migrants from Anhui and Sichuan provinces, the latter being one of the major sending areas of young women going to work in the export-oriented industries of south-east China (Jacka and Gaetano 2004; Davin 1996, p. 25). In the Pearl River Delta (Guangdong province), the most dynamic coastal economic areas in China and a major manufacturing centre of the world, conditions have particularly favoured the development of a female migration stream as the massive influx of foreign capital, resulting from the government preferential policies since the early 1980s, increased the demand of cheap labour and brought about new employment opportunities (Tan 2000). Here, *dagongmei*<sup>2</sup>, as single young rural women working in urban waged labor are referred to in daily speech, make up the majority of workers in the production assembly line in foreign-invested enterprises where state labour protection and worker benefit are more difficult to enforce (Jacka and Gaetano 2004, p. 21). In Dongguan, a booming industrial city in the Pearl River Delta, of 4.13 million temporary migrant workers employed in the city's factories in 2004, around 3 million were female. They receive low pay, work long hours in extremely arduous conditions and live in the factory dormitories (China Labour Bulletin 2006, p. 5). Ethnographic accounts have focused on the experiences of these women drawn into capitalist production of multinational corporations in southern China. Researchers have addressed the nexus between gender politics and labor discipline and have showed that, while female migrant factory workers are no longer under direct familial patriarchal control, once in the cities they find themselves under work regimes that involve various new forms of gender hierarchies and controls (Lee 1998; Pun 1999, 2007).

Generally speaking, women migrants tend to be concentrated in special economic zones/areas and coastal cities where there is already a large migrant population, while the destinations of male migrants tend to be more dispersed, with migration covering a wider area. This has been partially explained by considering that women are more likely to rely on social networks, which play an important

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<sup>2</sup> It is a new gendered term, literally meaning "working sisters", that refers to young, unmarried rural women and connotes the lowest status of the urban workforce (see Pun 1999, pp. 2-3; 2004, pp. 151-152)

role in channelling migration streams to certain destinations and directing migrants to specific jobs (Fan 2004, pp. 181-195; Tan 2004, p. 248). Moreover, migrant rural women are usually younger and less often married than men, and are concentrated in certain sectors of the economy. They are employed as workers in assembly line factories of China's new export processing industries, but are also found in large proportion in the service sector, working as shop assistants, waitresses, small traders, sex workers and domestic maids in large cities. It is worth noting here that domestic work has long been the entry job for rural women in major big cities (Solinger 1999a, pp. 223-225; Zheng 2003, p. 176; Jacka 1997, pp. 171-175). According to a study of migrants working in the domestic service in Beijing, this occupation is chosen upon first migrating to the city because of its convenience, as it requires no significant initial capital expense and prior work experience, but also because it is considered "safe" due to its location within the domestic sphere (Gaetano 2004, p. 53).

Men and women not only find different occupations in the cities, but their motivations also differ somewhat as women tend to move in higher percentage than men in order to join their spouse and relatives who have gone before them (Roberts 2002). Besides migration for the purpose of marriage, which represents an important phenomenon in recent years and often involves women's desire to achieve social and economic mobility (Fan and Huang 1998; Fan and Li 2002; Tan and Short 2004; Bossen 2007), most women migrate to the cities to look for a job and earn money to help family and their brothers. However, single young women – who are reported to outnumber married female migrants – tend to perceive labour migration as a way to seek economic independence and personal development as well as a chance to see the outside world (Tan 2004, p. 249; Jacka 2006, p. 134). For some of them, migration can be liberating as it is a way to escape boredom and traditional lives in the villages as well as to evade unwanted engagement and early marriages (Lou et al. 2004, pp. 217-219; Beynon 2004; Pun 2005, chap. 2). As such, studies have suggested that personal motivations play a greater role in determining young women's decision to leave the countryside (Beynon 2004; Gaetano 2004). However, their decision to leave may pose women in conflict with their family as it contrasts with social norms and expectations still prevalent in the rural areas.

Finally, women risk being tricked into prostitution or sold as wives and, in addition to the forms of discrimination that migrants generally suffer in the city, they may also face sexual exploitation, discrimination and abuse. Moreover, rural women's livelihood tends to be less secure than men, as they have a higher risk of losing effective access to their land in rural areas upon migration (De la Rupelle, Deng, Li and Vendryes 2008). The crucial issue of the relationship between gender, migration and land-use rights, which is complicated by the endurance of traditional values and practices that discriminate against women, has also captured the attention of the civil society, leading to calls for protection of migrant women's land rights and a recent report of investigation (Wu 2010).

The essays collected here concern a wide range of topics related to women migrants in contemporary China and they confirm that erasure of gender issues from the analysis today hinders a thorough understanding of the social, political

and cultural significance of migration and rural-urban relations in China. However, they also suggest that, as we touch upon some of the most fundamental problems concerning China's present and future, we are due to discover how women migrants play a relevant role, even if in many instances it cannot be so evident.

Nora Sausmikat's and Flora Sapio's contributions, while different in the chosen topics and methodology, put the issue of women migrants in historical perspective, showing also how the legacy of Maoist policies on people's mobility (urban-rural and rural-urban respectively) represents a significant factor in considering the relation between gender and migration.

Sausmikat's paper is an analysis of how urban-rural migration of educated women during the Maoist era permitted the emergence of a generation of women activists in post-Mao China whose main concern is rural and migrant women's rights and welfare. The experience of migration by these two generations of women was substantially different due to the diversity of political and ideological context as well to their different educational and social backgrounds. However, for several women of the first generation of young intellectuals who moved from cities to villages pushed by ideological concerns in the Maoist era's "rustication" movement, the displacement derived from migration opened the way to social activism not only in Party and State organizations but also outside the State, in newly established women's organizations. Their shared memories of the misogyny and violence suffered during the State-induced migration during the Cultural Revolution are an important factor in propelling these women's sensitivity and attention to gender issues in contemporary China and in helping to build a network among official organizations and non-governmental ones, even if many bottom-up initiatives were often doomed to failure. Their effort helped to incorporate concerns about gender equality, with special reference to women poverty in the countryside and in migration, in the public and governmental agenda in China.

Flora Sapio has investigated how the link between prostitution and migration has been conceptualized from the establishment of the People's Republic through an analysis of the legal and administrative measures taken by the Chinese Communist Party to deal with prostitutes. Since female migrants from rural areas constitute most of the women employed in the sex market in urban China, they represent an important topic in studying gender displacement. Actually official attitude towards prostitutes, as embodied in the State policies, has reflected the shifts in government's approaches towards migration in time. Prostitutes were considered victims of social and economic injustice before 1949, and since most were migrants from villages could be assimilated to refugees; consequently in the first years of the People's Republic they should be integrated into the new socialist society after re-education. However, their position has later substantially changed, since both migration and prostitution were considered as personal choices of the women, and not induced by structural reasons. Under Mao both the choice to move from the countryside to the city and to work in the sex market were at odds with ideological orthodoxy. Since the late 1970s, in the reform era, although restrictions on migration from rural areas to cities have been relaxed, migrants' prostitution has continued to be seen mostly as a public security concern requiring punitive measures. In sum, ideological and political concerns have for a long time hindered

alternative readings of the phenomenon as a consequence of women trafficking, rural poverty and abduction, obscuring the weight of gender inequality in its emergence.

State policies, and especially the Chinese government's difficulty in establishing a universal welfare system, are an important factor in shaping women's experience of migration. With respect to this, Ellen Judd's contribution is especially relevant. Her main research does not concern specifically gender, but access to health service by the rural migrants in the city. Difficulty in receiving health care, even in case of serious illness, is due both to economic reasons – low income level of most rural workers prevent them from gaining access to the increasing expensive medical services – and to structural reasons – since in China, the provision of health services is, in most cases, linked to formal residence; only in few localities, have partial programs been developed to offer basic health insurance to migrants. In this context, the care for elderly and ill people is a responsibility of the family network, where actually women represent the first providers of care. Migration increases the toll on migrant women, who find themselves at the intersection between the duty to fulfill traditional obligations towards family members, who still live in the countryside, and the need to go on making a living in urban context in order to support their family in the village.

Judd's research identifies a special group of women migrants, that is middle-aged women who work especially as maidservants for affluent and middle class families in the city, as a key-group in this context. These women carry most of the burden of care and assistance when their relatives fall ill, often travelling from city to village with the risk of losing their job, of debt and poverty. Their contribution is fundamental, since the family network represents the only welfare insurance rural people can afford. In this perspective, since economic reforms have weakened State capacity and engagement in providing welfare to rural and urban residents, the experience of migration does not alter gender identity nor does it offer a significant opportunity to free women of their traditional roles, but it increases their burden as the primary providers of care in family and society.

Finally, Jaguscik's contribution to this special issue offers a thorough analysis of how migrant women's experience, body and psychology are represented. As said above, the *dagongmei*, the young female worker, is the symbol of gendered migration in contemporary China. Assuming that the representation of *dagongmei* is entangled with the two most important narrations of Chinese development, urbanization and industrialization, Jaguscik argues that mainstream, un-official and popular media, although with different communication strategies and narratives, converge in offering a representation of the "working sister" coming from rural areas that, erasing gender and class inequalities in public discourse, seems intended to appease the potentially hostile impact of rural "others" to urban dwellers's eyes. While well-known modes of representing women are recognizable in these narrations, according to Jaguscik, the media representation of rural *dagongmei*'s agency is functional to the logic of global capitalism that pervades contemporary Chinese urban society and the State's modernization project.

As Lyla Mehta has argued, migration and displacement could potentially offer an opportunity to address the inequality of resource and power allocation amongst



women and men. This could be true also in contemporary China; as rural migration is changing the face of Chinese society and economy, its impact on women's condition represents an important test. However, it seems that if migration has opened new spaces of action and new freedom for women, issues relating to social justice and civil rights are still waiting for an institutional and political response.

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