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RIVISTA TELEMATICA DI STUDI SULLA MEMORIA FEMMINILE

Issue 17 – November 2011

Special Issue

**Engendering Migration and
Displacement in Developing
Countries: Focus China**

**Guest editors: Sofia Graziani
and Laura De Giorgi**

ISSN: 1824-4483



Dep n. 17

Novembre 2011

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Premessa

Bruna Bianchi

La nostra rivista, luogo di analisi e di riflessione sul tema dello sradicamento da un punto di vista di genere, nel corso degli anni ha via via affrontato le tematiche connesse alla deportazione, all'esilio, alle migrazioni da conflitto e allo spostamento forzato da "sviluppo".

Quest'ultimo tema, già trattato in più occasioni in passato (si veda il saggio di Serena Vicario *L'India, le grandi dighe, i profughi*, pubblicato nel numero 9 del settembre 2008 e la bibliografia a cura di Serena Tiepolato *Migrazioni forzate, asilo, integrazione e reintegrazione* nel numero 5/6 del dicembre 2006) è ora al centro di questo numero speciale dedicato alla Cina.

Lo studio delle cause e delle conseguenze dello sradicamento di milioni di persone avvenuto negli ultimi decenni – tuttora considerato da alcune teorie economiche e da ampi strati dell'opinione pubblica come il prezzo necessario dello sviluppo economico, il lato oscuro della crescita – è divenuto l'oggetto di un gran numero di studi e di una disciplina riconosciuta a livello accademico. Tra le prime istituzioni a dare rilievo alla questione delle migrazioni forzate e a promuovere la ricerca in questo settore è stata l'Università di Oxford presso il cui Dipartimento di International Development è sorto nel 1982 il Refugee Studies Centre.

Con questo numero la rivista ha voluto arricchire il panorama degli studi analizzando processi ancora assai poco noti che investono la vita delle donne. I saggi qui raccolti si dividono in due parti; nella prima parte David Turton, già direttore del Refugee Studies Centre di Oxford, e Lyla Mehta, ricercatrice presso l'Institute of Development Studies dell'Università del Sussex, fanno il punto degli studi e delle questioni teoriche di fondo e offrono alcune prospettive concettuali per interpretare le migrazioni interne da sviluppo dal punto di vista dell'intervento politico e di quello di genere.

Nei saggi raccolti nella seconda parte, curati e introdotti da Laura De Giorgi e Sofia Graziani, studiose di varie università straniere si interrogano sui caratteri e sulle conseguenze delle migrazioni interne sulle donne cinesi, ricostruiscono le loro esperienze di sfruttamento, povertà e deprivazione all'interno del progetto di modernizzazione dello stato.

Nel prossimo numero monografico, dedicato al tema dell'ecofemminismo, la rivista riprenderà molti dei temi che qui vengono affrontati e ospiterà, tra gli altri, contributi sulla realtà cinese e indiana, sulle critiche allo sviluppo avanzate dal pensiero femminista e darà conto delle proteste imponenti che si sono verificate negli ultimi anni in Africa, in Cina, in America Latina e in India e che hanno visto come protagoniste indiscusse le donne.

The politics of internal displacement and options for institutional reform

by

David Turton*

Abstract: The ‘global crisis’ of internal displacement became a key area of policy making for Northern states in the 1990s, when they saw themselves faced with a rising tide of asylum seekers and economic migrants fleeing from civil wars and ethnic violence. The institutional response to the perceived crisis, however, proved less than adequate for two main reasons. First, it focused on a series of ad hoc measures to improve ‘inter-agency collaboration’ rather than on radical reform of the humanitarian system; and second, the category ‘IDP’ lacks both a legal definition and a clearly identifiable empirical referent. Neither of these deficiencies has been corrected by the latest attempt to improve the coordination of humanitarian response activities, the so-called “cluster approach”, introduced in 2005. It is suggested that this situation has persisted because it suits the key players who decide on the rules of the game - donor states and international humanitarian agencies. In order to identify different options for radical reform, therefore, we need to begin from a Rawlsian “original position”, in which the political and institutional interests of states and humanitarian agencies are set on one side, and the rights of the displaced themselves are treated as paramount.

The term “internally displaced person”, or “IDP”, first appeared in the humanitarian literature in the late 1980s. During the following decade, a number of closely interrelated geopolitical events and processes came together to focus the attention of the international community – meaning the rich, industrialised northern states – on the “problem” of internal displacement in the developing world. It was during this decade that internal displacement became for these states a key area of policy making. I take it for granted that the policies and practices of states in relation to both the “refugee problem” and the “IDP problem” should not be seen as the response of an already existing and stable system of territorial states to an entirely external crisis. Rather, they should be seen as instruments of statecraft (Soguk 1999, pp. 9-14), enabling the territorial state system to reproduce itself as the dominant political organising principle of the modern world. Like refugees during the early twentieth century (Turton 2005, pp. 501-502), IDPs during the late twentieth century were as much the product of the developing nation-state system as they were of large-scale population movements, and the institutional

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arrangements that were put in place to deal with the perceived problem were as much constitutive of it as they were a response to it.

I begin by asking why preoccupation with the “global crisis” (Cohen and Deng 1998) of internal displacement is of such relatively recent origin. I then describe the institutional arrangements put in place to deal with the crisis since the appointment of the first Representative of the UN Secretary General on Internal Displacement in 1992. To the outsider at least, these arrangements look like a mish-mash of more or less ad hoc measures, designed to meet the needs and interests of the institutional and state actors rather than of the displaced themselves. Next, I describe some of the unintended and undesirable consequences of singling out “conflict generated” IDPs as a special category of vulnerable people. Finally, I consider various options for reforming the organisational structures through which the international community provides assistance and protection to both the internally and “externally” displaced. I conclude that one of these options is particularly worthy of consideration, on the grounds that it derives most obviously from an “original humanitarian position” in which the interests of the displaced are paramount¹.

The historical context

The main features of the historical conjuncture that made internal displacement such a “hot topic” in the 1990s may be grouped under three headings: (a) the end of the post-World War II bi-polar world order; (b) a dramatic increase in the number of asylum applications being made to the governments of Northern states in the early 1990s, and the accompanying phenomenon of “mixed flows”; and (c) the erosion of the concept of territorial sovereignty.

The end of the Cold War had at least three relevant consequences. First, there was no longer a strategic incentive for the once opposing powers to maintain high levels of political, economic and military support for their former client states. This led to a marked increase in internal war and state breakdown in the developing world, with millions of people being left stranded, within the borders of their own states but outside the effective protection or assistance of their own governments. According to Cohen and Deng (1998, p. 3), in 1997 20 million people were internally displaced by conflict worldwide. Since then the official estimates have continued to rise, reaching 27.1 million in 2009 (International Displacement Monitoring Centre 2010). Second, “humanitarian intervention” in the affairs of such states became a practical possibility, since the intervening powers no longer risked confrontation with a nuclear-armed superpower. And third, the main strategic consideration that had motivated Western states to accept refugees onto

¹ The argument presented in this article was first developed as part of my contribution to an evaluation of assistance to internally displaced persons in Afghanistan, carried out in 2004 on behalf of the Danish Ministry of International Development (DANIDA) and a number of European donor states (Marsden and Turton 2004; Borton et al. 2005).

their territories during the Cold War – the ideological battle with communism – no longer applied².

Just as asylum applicants were losing their political attractiveness to rich Northern states, so the numbers of those reaching these states from the South increased dramatically. Western European governments, for example, were faced with an increase in annual asylum applications from around 200,000 in 1989 to around 700,000 in 1992 (UNHCR 2000, pp. 156-58). This was the result, partly of improvements in transport and communication and partly of the protracted civil conflicts that erupted in various parts of the world during these years. But it also reflected the growing use being made by economic migrants of the “asylum route”, in order to get round the obstacles to legal migration that European states had been putting in place since the economic recession of the 1970s.

One consequence of these increased numbers and “mixed flows” was the imposition of ever stricter asylum controls by Northern states, which had the unintended consequence of encouraging the growth of an increasingly enterprising and effective global industry in trafficking and people smuggling. A second consequence was a re-focusing of the international refugee regime on containment rather than asylum – that is, on preventing refugee flows from occurring in the first place and, when they did occur, on confining refugees to their regions of origin (or protecting their “right to remain”) and ensuring that they returned to their home states as quickly as possible. In 1991, Sadako Ogata, the then High Commissioner for Refugees, famously predicted that the 1990s would be “the decade of voluntary repatriation” (Loescher 2000, p. 280). It was no coincidence, then, that this was also the decade during which the provision of assistance and protection to the internally displaced moved to the top of the international humanitarian agenda. Indeed, it is the view of at least one leading refugee lawyer, James Hathaway, that

the main impetus for official interest in the IDP category is the determination of powerful states to avoid refugee flows. Specifically, if those already “on the move” can be dealt with before they cross a border, governments on the outside can avoid legal obligations towards them (2007, p. 386).

The 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was firmly based on the assumption that the application of international law was strictly circumscribed by the principle of territorial sovereignty. This is why refugees are defined in the Convention as persons who are not only unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of their own state, but who are also outside the territorial jurisdiction of that state. According to Hathaway,

While it was increasingly accepted in the early 1950s that the world community had a legitimate right to set standards and scrutinize the human rights record of the various countries, it was unthinkable that refugee law would intervene in the territory of a state to protect citizens from their own government” (1991, quoted in Chimni 2000, pp. 400-401).

² The role of refugee policy as a weapon in the Cold War armoury of Western powers is illustrated by the fact that all but 925 of the 233,436 refugees admitted to the United States between 1956 and 1968 were from communist countries (Loescher 1993, p. 59).

The exclusion of the internally displaced from the 1951 Convention, then, was a matter of pragmatism, not principle.

What was unthinkable in the 1950s, however, had become distinctly thinkable by the 1990s. The key historical event that is widely credited with having put internal displacement at the forefront of international attention in the early 1990s was the intervention of the US and its allies in Northern Iraq in 1991 (Newland et al. 2003, pp. 16-17; Suhrke 2003, p. 15). In April of that year the UN Security Council passed resolution 688, calling on Iraq to allow immediate international humanitarian access to nearly a million displaced Kurds who had been prevented from crossing the border into Turkey. The resolution was interpreted by the US and its allies as authorization to intervene militarily to establish “security zones” for the Kurds, without the consent of the Iraqi government.

This action was made possible, of course, by the recent defeat of Iraq in the first Gulf War, and by the end of the bi-polar world order. But it also reflected the fact that the principle of territorial sovereignty had itself been coming under increasing pressure during the 1970s and 80s from two main sources. First, the globalisation of the world economy was making it increasingly difficult for states to control the financial, capital and trade flows that determined the well-being of their citizens. Second, the globalisation of human rights was encouraging a “popular” or “republican” interpretation of sovereignty, and the consequent notion that a state’s territorial sovereignty could be legitimately infringed if its government was violating the human rights of its citizens.

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, with its 1967 Protocol, was able to provide a “hard” legal framework for the international refugee regime, because it was firmly based on the principle of territorial sovereignty. The gradual chipping away at this principle, by the processes and events described above, opened the way for the international community to take a formal interest in the protection of those who were displaced within the borders of their own states. But sovereignty remains a highly sensitive issue, not least amongst the economically more vulnerable and politically weaker states of the South which are most likely to be affected by internal conflict. Predictably then, and as we shall see next, the international regime established in the 1990s for the protection of the internally displaced was much “softer” in its normative framework, and much less coherent and predictable in its institutional arrangements, than the regime established in the 1950s for the protection of refugees.

The institutional context

When Frances Deng, a former Sudanese diplomat and foreign minister, became the first Representative of the UN Secretary General on Internally Displaced Persons in 1992, one of his main tasks was to oversee the development of a legal framework for the protection of IDPs. This process was chaired by Walter Kälin, an international human rights lawyer³, and resulted in a set of thirty “Guiding

³ Kälin succeeded Deng as the Secretary General’s Representative on Internal Displacement in 2004.

Principles” which were presented to the UN in 1998. As their name implies, the principles are not binding. They were not negotiated by states but put together by a group of independent experts. Nor do they fill a legal gap in the protection of the rights of the internally displaced (Barutciski 1998). Rather, they combine various existing provisions of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, which relate to the protection of the internally displaced. The definition of internal displacement contained in the Guiding Principles, therefore, does not amount to a legal status and is open to a wide range of interpretations, depending on the particular circumstances of each case. Who then, is an internally displaced person?

In the language of everyday speech, the answer is obvious: anyone who has been forced to move, by whatever cause, from his or her home, and yet remains within the borders of his or her own country. In the Guiding Principles⁴, however, an internally displaced person is defined, “for the purposes of these Principles”, as someone who has been forced to move “*in particular*” by armed conflict, generalised violence, human rights violations and “natural or human-made disasters.” According to Roberta Cohen, one of the main architects and interpreters of the Principles, their “essential” purpose is to “help identify persons who should be of concern to the international community because they are basically in a refugee-like situation within their own country” (Cohen 1996, quoted by Chimni 2000, p. 407). The inclusion of people who have fled their homes because of natural disasters is meant to cater for cases where governments respond to such disasters in ways that discriminate against certain groups “on political or ethnic grounds or by violating their human rights in other ways” (Cohen 2000, p. 82).

The emphasis of the Guiding Principles definition, therefore, is not so much on displacement *per se*, nor even on the physical location of the displaced person within the borders of his or her own country, but on making sure that such a person is provided with the formal protection that comes from being a citizen of a particular state. This can be the only reason why the largest category of internally displaced people in the world today, forced resettlers, or those displaced by development projects, are not listed amongst those whom the Guiding Principles “particularly” refer to. For these are people who have been moved for the benefit of the wider community, in accordance with the domestic law of “*eminent domain*”, and who remain, theoretically at least, under the protection of the government which moved them⁵.

It follows that the Guiding Principles do not so much define internal displacement (which can be done easily enough, as above, in a single short sentence), as draw attention to the circumstances that make a large minority of internally displaced people of particular concern to the international community. It also follows that the label “IDP”, in so far as it is intended to reflect the letter and

⁴ http://www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/pub/idp_gp/idp.html

⁵ The most recent global estimate of people displaced every year by large-scale infrastructural development projects such as roads and dams is fifteen million, or three hundred million over the last twenty years (Cernea and Mathur 2008, p. 20).

spirit of the Guiding Principles, is not the acronym it appears to be. It is not a convenient shorthand for “internally displaced person”, but the name of a sub-category of internally displaced persons, made up of those who are, or should be, of interest to the international community because they are in a “refugee-like” situation.

So why not call them “internal refugees”? This would have two conceptual advantages. First, it would reflect the all important “refugee-like” situation of the people being referred to, thereby putting the emphasis on the fact that they are in need of international protection rather than that they are simply displaced within their own country. Second, it would make clear the rationale for not including in this category the largest single group of internally displaced persons world-wide, namely those displaced by development projects. But the logic which dictates the use of “displaced” rather than “refugee” for people who are in a “refugee-like” situation without having crossed an international border is a practical rather than a conceptual one. It has to do with a concern not to undermine the protection available to the refugee in international law. This makes “alienage”, the presence of the unprotected person outside his or her own country and therefore “uniquely within the protective ambit of the international community” (Hathaway 2007, p. 350), an essential element of the legal definition of a refugee. If the element of alienage were dropped from the definition, it is argued, there would be less pressure on states to meet their existing obligations to “external” refugees under international law, thus weakening the institution of asylum.

Distinguishing between “internally displaced persons” and “IDPs”, and treating the latter, in effect, as a sub-category of the former, can usefully clarify the vexed question, “When does displacement end?” (Mooney 2003). Phrased in this way, the question is not so much vexed as unanswerable, since the condition of being displaced, whether outside or inside one’s own country, is essentially a subjective one: there can be no external, objective criteria for determining when displacement has come to an end. The real (in the sense of answerable) question is “When does a displaced person cease to be of special concern to the international community?” Or, in the case of the internally displaced, “When does an internally displaced person cease to be an IDP”? The answer would seem to be clear. An internally displaced person ceases to be of concern to the international community, and therefore ceases to be an IDP, if and when the national authorities are able and willing to provide him or her with a “normal level of legal and physical protection” (Newland et al. 2003, p. 98). Deciding what a “normal” level of protection is, of course, and whether it is actually available to the population in question, will be a matter of weighing up the circumstances of each particular case – a process in which the affected population will ideally participate. But there seems no reason to insist that this protection must be available in the displaced person’s place of origin, even if he or she wishes to return there.

The appointment of Francis Deng as the Secretary General’s Representative on internal displacement in 1992 was only one of several steps taken by the UN in the early 1990s to improve the coordination of humanitarian assistance. These efforts continued and intensified throughout the decade, as a confusing (at least to the outsider) array of “focal points”, “reference points”, “senior advisors”, “special

coordinators”, “inter-agency committees” and “inter-agency networks” made their appearance. The need to find ways of improving the response of the UN system to the needs of the internally displaced was at the centre of this flurry of activity.

In 1991 the post of UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) had been created and an Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), with representatives from all operational intergovernmental agencies, had been set up with the aim of improving the coordination of emergency assistance. In the following year, not only was the post of Representative of the Secretary General (RSG) on Internally Displaced Persons established, but the Inter-Agency Standing Committee designated the Emergency Relief Coordinator as the UN “reference point” for IDPs. In 1993, in his first report to the UN Human Rights Commission, Francis Deng recommended the creation of a new UN agency, or the mandating of an existing one, to “cater more specifically to the needs of IDPs” (quoted in Newland et al. 2003, p. 22). Neither suggestion was taken up. Instead, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee committed itself firmly to what became known as “the collaborative approach”, under the overall coordination of the Emergency Relief Coordinator.

In 1997 the Emergency Relief Coordinator, as head of the newly created Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), was reaffirmed as the “focal point” for ensuring cooperation and collaboration between existing agencies in meeting the needs of IDPs. In 1998 a Senior IDP Advisor was appointed within UNOCHA to liaise with “focal points” in operational agencies. In 2000, a “Senior Inter-Agency Network on Internal Displacement” was set up to make proposals for further improvements in the institutional response to internal displacement. This followed a dramatic intervention by Richard Holbrooke, the then US Ambassador to the UN, who had used a session of the Security Council, in December 1999, to lambaste the UN for its reliance on inter-agency collaboration, rather than on the leadership of a dedicated organisation, to meet the needs of what he called “internal refugees”.

In April 2001 the final report of the “Special Coordinator” of the Senior Network on Internal Displacement concluded that inter-agency collaboration remained the best – or perhaps the only feasible – option for the UN in responding to the needs of the internally displaced. The result was the setting up of yet another non-operational body to monitor, review, identify gaps, advocate and make recommendations - the Internal Displacement Unit (re-named in 2004 the Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division (IDD)), which began its work, within UNOCHA, in January 2002. In 2003 the Division carried out two studies – a “Protection Survey” and an “IDP Response Matrix” – which found that “significant problems remained in the implementation of the collaborative response” (McNamara 2006, p. 9). An independent evaluation of the Division, carried out in September and October 2003, concluded that its activities up to then had “not amounted to positive change in how the UN responds to internal displacement” (Tanner and Stites 2004, p. 27).

There was wide agreement at this time that, despite determined efforts to improve the coordination of humanitarian assistance since the early 1990s, IDPs continued to fall between the gaps in the institutional mandates of the various agencies. Gill Loescher identified the failings of the “collaborative approach” as

unpredictability, operational delays, duplication of effort, the neglect of protection and insufficient support for “post conflict” development.

No UN agency can be counted on to respond automatically when there is a crisis involving massive internal displacement. Agencies choose the situations in which they will become involved in the light of their mandates, resources and interests [...]. This collaborative approach has often been constrained by delays, duplication of effort and programmes, neglect of protection issues, and insufficient support for reintegration and post-conflict development efforts [...] It is still the case that there exists only a weak and incoherent arrangement at the international level for internally displaced. (Loescher 2000, pp. 208-10)

A few years later, in commenting on new guidance issued by the Emergency Relief Coordinator “for developing an IDP response strategy”, Susan Martin wrote:

While a clear improvement in setting out the steps to be taken, the new plan still does not address a fundamental problem with the collaborative approach. No actor within the UN system has an obligation to respond to the assistance and protection needs of IDPs. The ERC has powers of persuasion that may, in many cases, encourage one or more agencies to offer its help to IDPs, but the ERC has no authority to order compliance. Nor does the ERC have funding to offer to make the decision to respond more appealing. As long as no UN body has the mandate and, hence, the obligation to assist and, more importantly protect IDPs, gaps are likely to remain (2004, p. 312).

At this point, then, thirteen years after the creation of the post of Emergency Relief Coordinator and the setting up of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, and twelve years after the appointment of a representative to the Secretary General on internal displacement, the “collaborative approach” was widely regarded as a failure. This recognition, coupled with the slowness and inadequacy of the international response to the crisis in Darfur, was one of the driving forces of a review of the humanitarian response system commissioned by the Emergency Relief Coordinator in late 2004.

The principal conclusion drawn from this review was that certain key areas, or “problem sectors” (MacNamara 2006, p. 9) of humanitarian activity should be assigned in advance to specific lead agencies, so that leadership of the humanitarian response in these areas would be both predictable and accountable to the affected populations. Nine areas of concern, now called ‘clusters’, were identified. These included three areas affecting “conflict-generated IDPs” for which UNHCR was designated the “cluster lead”: (a) camp coordination and management, (b) emergency shelter and (c) protection.

So now there was a new game in town, the “cluster approach”. This was essentially another sector-based coordination system, but this time with clearly designated lead-organisations. Since 2005, when the cluster approach was launched in the DRC, Liberia, Somalia and Uganda, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee has commissioned two evaluations of its performance. Both reported positively, but with notably faint praise, as can be seen from the following conclusion of the most recent of these evaluations.

The introduction of the cluster approach is an organizational change process that requires up-front investments and generates benefits over time. Five years into that process and based on largely qualitative evidence collected in six countries, the evaluation team concludes that these investments are beginning to pay off as the benefits generated by the cluster approach to date already slightly outweigh its costs and shortcomings (Streets et al. 2010, p. 10).

In view of the fact that lack of accountability had been one of the key failings of the humanitarian system which the cluster approach was intended to put right, it is also notable that,

the evaluation team found no evidence or examples of clusters actively promoting participatory or community-based approaches among their members [...] cluster work plans and strategies were in most cases not discussed with or validated by affected populations (Streets et al. 2010, p. 25).

And yet the changes introduced into the humanitarian response system in 2005 must be considered a bench mark in the evolution of the international response to the “global IDP crisis”. Now, for the first time, there was a UN agency that was committed to respond in a predictable way to the protection and assistance needs of “conflict generated” IDPs. This was, in effect, a highly belated response to Francis Deng’s recommendation, made in his first report on IDPs to the UN Human Rights Committee in 1993, that their protection should be made the responsibility of a new, or existing, UN agency. Whether that agency should have been the UNHCR is another matter. There is a clear potential conflict of interest between the UNHCR’s founding mandate to assist and protect those who have escaped from harm by crossing an international border, and its new commitment, under the “cluster approach”, to be the “first port of call” and “provider of last resort” for those who are displaced within the borders of their own state.

If “the main impetus for official interest in the IDP category is the determination of powerful states to avoid refugee flows” (Hathaway 2007, p. 386), then the designation of UNHCR as the “global lead” for IDP assistance and protection can only play into the hands of receiving states who wish to promote the alternative of “internal flight”. In short, how will UNHCR ensure that, by involving itself in IDP protection and assistance - a highly attractive option from the point of view of its own access to donor funds - it does not undermine the right of potential refugees to seek asylum? In a form of words which is predictably more obfuscating than clarifying, Erica Feller, UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, reflected this conundrum when she described UNHCR’s policy on IDPs as having “evolved from being one of ‘no, unless certain conditions are met’ to ‘yes, unless specific conditions arise’” (Feller 2008, p. 11). What these conditions are, or might become, has yet to be spelt out in detail, but one thing we can be sure of is that, in deciding whether to say “yes” or “no” to involvement in a particular IDP emergency, UNHCR will be under strong pressure to act in accordance with the interests of its donor states and with its own institutional and financial advantage.

The unintended consequences of focusing on IDPs

In the debate about how to improve the effectiveness of the international community’s response to IDP emergencies, the adequacy and usefulness of the IDP category itself has rarely been questioned. And yet not only does this concept lack a legal definition, but it also lacks a clearly identifiable empirical referent. Indeed, the Guiding Principles definition seems to have been deliberately formulated to

allow the concept to be extended, as required, to include virtually any form of displacement, provided only that it was contained within the borders of a single state. Before going on, therefore, to identify various options for radical institutional reform, beyond the mere improvement of inter-agency cooperation, it is worth considering some of the undesirable and unintended consequences that result from the use of the ill-defined IDP concept to separate out a special category of “people in need”, or “people of concern”.

Like all labels used for the purpose of regimenting large numbers of people, the IDP label is reductionist, in the sense that it reduces the diversity of individuals to a single characteristic, a characteristic, moreover, which they themselves would not normally use to identify themselves. This *homogenizing* and de-personalizing effect of the IDP label has obvious bureaucratic advantages for the labellers, but it can also mask huge differences in the social, economic and demographic characteristics of the labelled, as well as in the causes and consequences of their displacement. In other words, members of the IDP category may be internally divided along lines which are far more significant and meaningful to them than is the mere fact of being displaced. But does this really matter, when the overriding need is to provide assistance and protection to people in desperate and urgent need? I believe that it does, because it allows the “problem” of internal displacement to be presented in predominantly quantitative terms, as a simple matter of numbers, rather than in qualitative terms, as a matter of responding to the particular vulnerabilities, needs and aspirations of individuals and families.

A second possible undesirable consequence of the label is that it may contribute to the *stigmatizing* of IDPs as people out of place in their own country – people who do not belong where they are and do not have a right to stay there. This may not only help to create, or at least exacerbate, prejudice against them amongst the “host” population but it may also be used by the authorities to justify putting obstacles in the way of their local integration.

A third unintended consequence of the label is that it may promote and lend credence to the often politically convenient idea that people are “naturally” rooted in a single place of origin, and that the obvious, most desired and most “durable” solution to the situation of displacement is return to the place of origin. This *localising* effect of the IDP label is based on a false and simplistic understanding of the meaning of “home” in human social life and on a failure to appreciate that locality is not a given, a pre-existing stage upon which social activities are enacted, but a product of those activities. As Arjun Appadurai (1996) has cogently argued, human beings are always and everywhere – in refugee camps and urban slums as much as in the middle-class suburbs of big cities – engaged in a constant, if subconscious, process of what he calls “locality production”. This is literally an everyday activity which has the effect of producing a sense of place or “neighbourhood”, where meaningful social interaction is made possible by shared understandings and shared interpretations of action. Contrasting the concept of home, understood in this sense, with the concept of “homeland”, Xenos (1996, p. 243) writes that homes “can be made and remade wherever there is space for them”, whereas “Homelands are places that are unchanging and to which one must return no matter how hostile they may be to the returnee”.

The rationale for separating out the internally displaced from other vulnerable people is that they are, by definition, likely to be especially vulnerable. But they are also likely to be a highly heterogeneous population – economically as well as in other ways – and to be living amongst, or near, people who are at least as vulnerable as they are. Singling out IDPs as a special category of vulnerable and needy people, therefore, may have the effect of diverting attention from others who are in as much, or greater need, and creating tensions and antagonisms between those living in IDP camps and others. It may also divert attention from members of the IDPs' communities of origin, who may not have been able to move, partly because they did not have the necessary economic resources and social connections.

This *privileging* effect is the fourth unintended consequence of the IDP label. In a paper setting out a framework for the joint evaluation of assistance to IDPs for which the original version of this paper was written, Buchanan-Smith and colleagues (2003) suggest a way round this problem. It should be recognised, they write, that the reason for focusing on IDPs is not to grant them a privileged status, but to identify their numbers and whereabouts in order to ensure that their needs are not ignored. The trouble with this formulation is that it is difficult to tell the difference between, on the one hand, granting the internally displaced a privileged status and, on the other, singling them out from others who may be at least as vulnerable, to ensure that *their* needs are not ignored. It is not clear, therefore, how this suggested resolution can help in overcoming the disadvantages of treating IDPs as a subcategory of people in special need.

The combined effect of these different, but closely connected, unintended consequences of the IDP label is that the problem comes to be defined in quantitative terms: the more IDPs, the bigger the problem. “Solving” the IDP problem, therefore, comes to mean reducing the number of people officially included in this ambiguous category, rather than reducing vulnerability levels in the population at large. If it is assumed, furthermore, that what displaced people generally want is to return home, and that home is a specific geographical location, the problem becomes an even more narrowly focused and largely technical one – namely how to encourage as many as possible to return to their places of origin. We can add to this the sometimes less than subtle political pressures exerted by donor states and local authorities in favour of “return and reintegration”. Any agency which depends heavily on donor and host governments for its ability to maintain and reproduce itself will therefore have a powerful incentive to ensure that all the assistance it gives to IDPs is linked as directly as possible to return. In these circumstances, the line between “enabling” or, in the jargon used by the UNHCR, “facilitating” return, and deliberately encouraging it, must be very difficult to draw (Turton and Marsden 2002).

Reforming the system from an “original humanitarian position”

It is clear that efforts to deal with deficiencies in the provision of assistance and protection to IDPs, including the most recent “cluster approach”, have consisted overwhelmingly in a succession of measures designed to improve “inter-agency

collaboration”, rather than in radical reform. One must conclude that this is because the key players like it this way. For this is a game in which the rules are decided upon by the players, who include states and humanitarian organisations but not the displaced themselves, and in which the interests of the most powerful players tend to coincide with those of the weakest. One attraction of the “collaborative approach” for states was that it allowed them room for manoeuvre when it came to deciding which agencies to fund, up to what level and in which particular emergencies. The attraction for agencies was that, with no one agency having permanent responsibility for IDPs, they had the freedom and flexibility to compete, or not to compete, for a greater or lesser “market share”⁶ in each new IDP emergency. Perhaps the main potential benefit of the cluster approach, from the point of view of IDPs themselves, is that it should make this scramble for market share in every new emergency a thing of the past.

In order to identify different options for radical reform then, it is important not to start from ‘where we are now’, which is how humanitarian reform has been managed up to now, but from an imagined “original position” (Rawls 1971) in which the interests and prejudices of the institutional actors are set on one side.

[...] the original position is the appropriate initial status quo which insures that the fundamental agreements reached in it are fair [...] (p. 17) [...] We should insure [...] that particular inclinations and aspirations, and persons’ conceptions of their good do not affect the principles adopted. The aim is to rule out those principles that it would be rational to propose for acceptance [...] only if one knew certain things that are irrelevant from the stand point of justice [...] (p. 18) [...] One excludes the knowledge [...] which sets men at odds and allows them to be guided by their prejudices (p. 19).

We also need to recognise that governments and humanitarian agencies, like all social institutions, will attempt to use whatever system is put in place to advance their own interests. The system needs to be designed, therefore, with sufficient in-built checks and balances to ensure that opportunities for the players to put their political and institutional interests ahead of those whom they are officially serving are kept to a minimum.

We can construct such an original position by distinguishing between two categories of need – assistance (especially emergency relief) and protection – and two categories of displaced people – those who have crossed and those who have not crossed an international border. These distinctions combine to give us two intersecting axes, and four theoretically separate institutional mandates, namely protection for refugees, protection for the internally displaced, assistance for refugees and assistance for the internally displaced (Fig. 1).

The next step is to ask whether the needs of refugees and the internally displaced for assistance and protection would be addressed more effectively if two or more of these mandates were combined under the roof of a single agency. Let us begin with the refugee/IDP axis. Arguments for making a single agency responsible for refugees and IDPs are usually based on the undoubted similarities in their situations and experiences, the only difference often being that refugees

⁶ The term ‘market share’ was freely used in this context by staff at UNHCR’s Geneva HQ during discussions I had with them while preparing the original version of this paper in 2004.

happen to have crossed an international border. But, for those who take the opposite view, this difference is utterly fundamental. Because of its significance in international law, they argue, any blurring of the distinction between refugees and the internally displaced risks diluting the protection available to refugees and thus weakening the institution of asylum. The case has been made by Michael Barutciski as follows.

There is not one specific right found in the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees that could logically be applied to displaced persons who have not escaped their own country. The whole Convention is based on the notion of having fled one's country. That is the condition or situation that is being addressed: not displacement or human rights violations *per se*, but rather the fact of being stranded outside one's country without the formal protection that comes from being the national of a particular state. Given that people in this situation do not benefit from the rights that normally follow from citizenship in the host state, they have to be provided with some sort of international protection [...] That is what has historically been meant by the expression 'international protection' in the refugee context [...] It is not protection from human rights abuses so that the person does not have to flee in the first place (1998, p. 12).

On the specific issue of extending UNHCR's mandate to include the internally displaced, Guy Goodwin-Gill writes that,

UNHCR has no legal basis to protect internally displaced people, but must proceed by the consent of the sovereign state and any *de facto* fighting force exercising control over the territory in question....As soon as [it] accepts mandates from others, such as the UN Secretary General...it steps into a political minefield, replete with conflicts of interest, and must pay the political price; so too, unfortunately, must its principal constituency" (2000, p. 28).

Turning now to the protection/assistance axis, the argument for making the same agency responsible for both assistance and protection is usually based on the assumption that assistance activities can be a means – even a necessary means – of providing protection. The mere presence of a humanitarian organisation, the argument runs, can be a source of protection, while the provision of assistance may be the only way of gaining access to the population in need of protection. Those opposed to this view argue that an agency's protection activities, such as monitoring human rights abuses, may get overlooked, or under-emphasised, because they jeopardize its assistance activities. This is because "protection activities are often seen as political and therefore incompatible with the required neutrality of humanitarian aid" (Newland et al. 2003). Protection may also suffer because of the relative visibility of assistance activities and their apparent political neutrality, which makes funding them politically attractive to donors. Even dedicated protection agencies, therefore, may be strongly tempted to take on an increased assistance role, and then to justify this on the grounds that "you can't do protection without doing assistance".

Depending on the weight we give to these arguments, we can now identify the following options for organisational reform.

Option 1

If we are convinced that it is in the best interests of the displaced to keep a clear institutional separation not only between refugees and IDPs but also between

assistance and protection activities, we will recommend that each of the four mandates is made the responsibility of a different organisation (Fig. 1).

Option 2

If we are convinced that it is in the best interests of the displaced for one organisation to provide protection and assistance for both refugees and IDPs, we will recommend one organisation for all four mandates (Fig. 2). This, in essence, is the result of the decision to make UNHCR the “cluster lead” for providing assistance and protection to “conflict generated” IDPs. A more thorough-going version of this option, involving the creation of a new agency to replace UNHCR, was recently proposed by Susan Martin.

The consolidation of assistance and protection responsibilities for all forced migrants into a new organization – the UN High Commissioner for Forced Migrants (HCFM) – would significantly improve responses to forced migration. This agency would replace UNHCR. Its mandate would include refugees...as well as individuals internally and externally displaced because of repression, conflict, natural disasters, environmental degradation and development-induced displacement (2004, p. 314).

Making one agency responsible for all displaced people would certainly address the major failings of the collaborative approach, such as unpredictability, operational delays, competition for “market share” among different agencies, and duplication of effort. The danger with this proposal, however, is that it could take us – or rather, it could take the displaced – out of the frying pan and into the fire. The problem is not that it would result in a mammoth organisation, with enormous responsibilities, but that those responsibilities would be so varied as to be potentially in contradiction with each other. As Goodwin-Gill put it, in his comments, quoted above, on the advisability of extending UNHCR’s mandate to include IDPs, the organisation would be likely to find itself in a permanent “legal and political minefield”, with the displaced being the main losers.

Option 3

If we are convinced that it is in the best interests of the displaced to keep a clear institutional separation between refugees and IDPs, but to combine responsibility for assistance and protection, we will recommend two organisations, one to provide assistance and protection to refugees and one to provide assistance and protection to IDPs (Fig. 3).

Option 4

If we are convinced that it is in the best interests of the displaced to keep a clear institutional separation between assistance and protection, but to combine responsibility for refugees and IDPs, we will recommend two organisations, one to provide assistance to refugees and IDPs and the other to provide protection to refugees and IDPs (Fig. 4)

The above options are based on two assumptions: first that the arguments for and against keeping an institutional separation between refugees and IDPs apply with equal force to the provision of both protection and assistance; and second, that the arguments for and against separating assistance from protection apply with equal force to refugees and IDPs. The second assumption seems reasonable. But the first is open to question. This is because protection activities relate centrally to the difference in legal status between refugees and IDPs, while the assistance needs of the two categories are likely, in today's world, to be virtually identical. This leads to a final option that needs to be considered.

Option 5

If we are convinced that the argument for keeping a clear institutional separation between refugees and IDPs applies to protection but not to assistance; and if we are also convinced that it is an important rule of thumb to make different agencies responsible for protection and assistance, we will recommend three organisations, one providing protection to refugees, one providing protection to IDPs and one providing assistance to both (Fig. 5). This fits closely a proposal made by William Maley (2003), the purpose of which, however, was to address the protection needs of refugees, rather than the deficiencies of the collaborative approach to internal displacement.

Starting from the contention that "Refugee protection is in need of revival" (p. 319), Maley argues that the UNHCR should refocus its concerns on protection: "The Department of International Protection should be at the heart of the UNHCR, complemented by key staff from regional bureaus and a revitalized Centre for Documentation and Research" (p. 319). This would be accompanied by the creation of a new operational agency, based on the amalgamation of "chunks of both UNHCR and OCHA" (p. 320), which would have responsibility for the provision of assistance to both refugees and IDPs, including repatriation assistance. This new agency would represent the re-emergence of the old UN Disaster Relief Organisation (UNDRO). Maley gives it the name "United Nations Refugee and Disaster Organisation" (UNRDO), its crucial difference from UNDRO being that it would have its own field staff and operational capacity. The result of this refocusing of the UNHCR mandate on protection would favour the growth within it of "an organizational *culture* of protection", which is "unlikely to take hold in an organization with widely diverse and potentially conflicting priorities" (p. 321). This in turn would result in a more independent UNHCR, able "to act fearlessly to shame those states that violate their commitments under international refugee law and other relevant international instruments of which refugees may also be beneficiaries" (p. 321).

I am more inclined towards Maley's proposal than Martin's because it is more obviously rooted in an original position in which the rights and interests of the displaced themselves are treated as paramount. It is difficult to believe that reliance on ad hoc "inter-agency collaboration" would have been seriously contemplated as a desirable policy option if the debate about how best to provide protection and

assistance for the internally displaced had started out from such an original position.

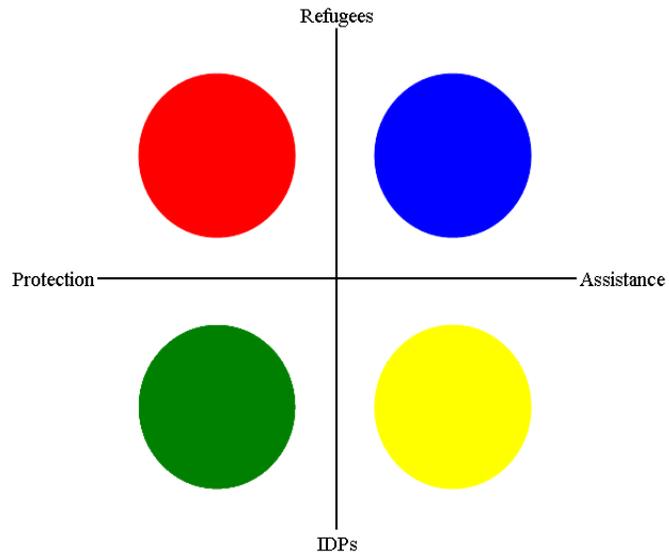


Figure 1: Four institutional mandates in the “original position”

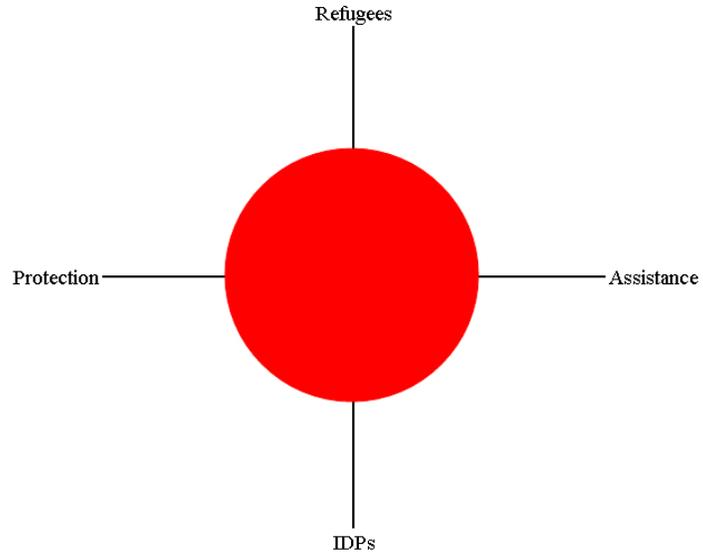


Figure 2: Option 2 - one organisation, four mandates.

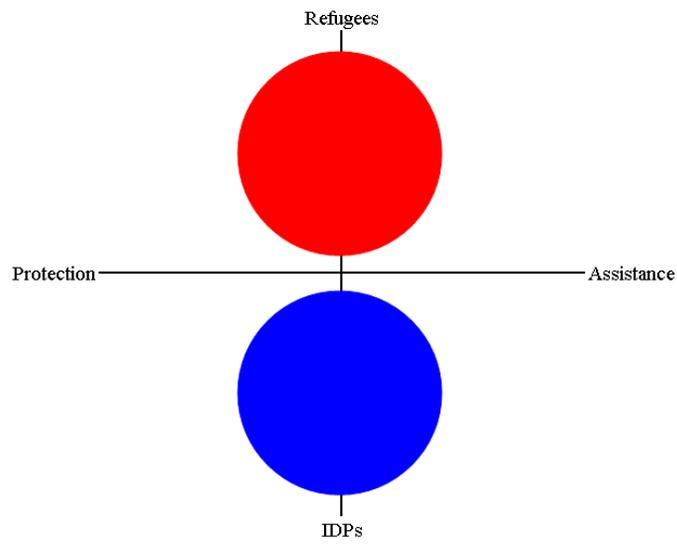


Figure 3: Option 3 – two organisations, one for refugees and one for IDPs.

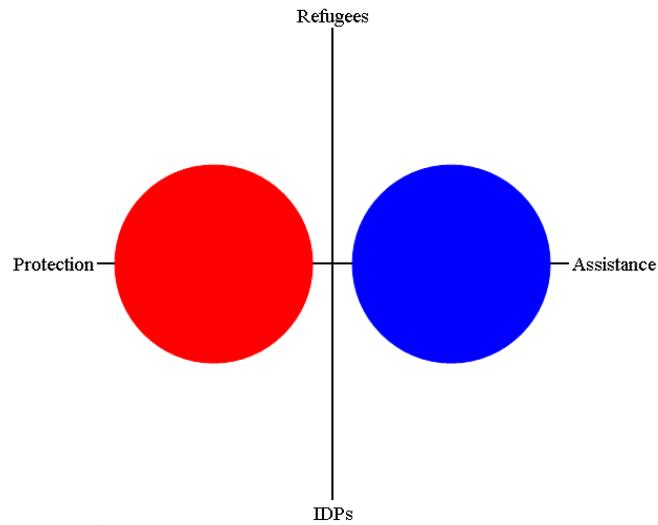


Figure 4: Option 4 – two organisations, one to provide protection to refugees and IDPs and one to provide assistance to refugees and IDPs.

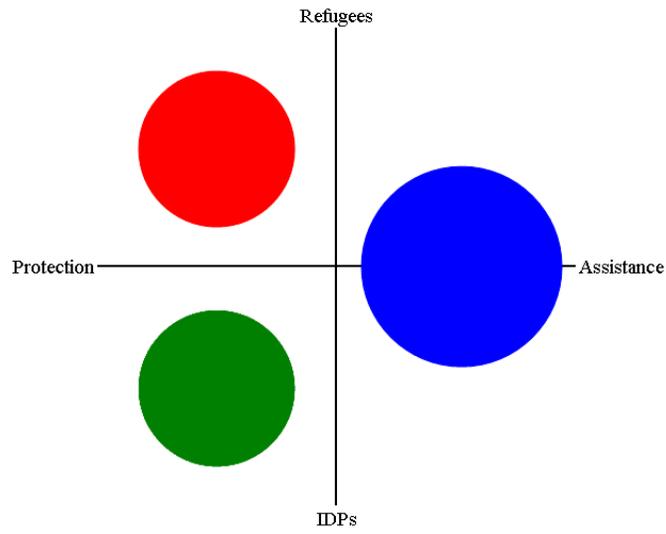


Figure 5: Option 5 – three organisations, one providing protection to refugees, one providing protection to IDPs and one providing assistance to both.

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The Settler and his Wife

Gender and the Politics of Displacement

by

*Lyla Mehta**

Abstract: This article offers conceptual and political perspectives on gender and development-induced displacement. By drawing on examples from India, China and other parts of the world, it shows how displaced women are often caught in a double bind with male and gender biases negatively affecting their lives and livelihoods. These often perpetuate gender inequality in terms of unequal resource allocation and distribution and also legitimize the silencing of women's interests. Furthermore, biases within state institutions, structures and policies also perpetuate societal inequalities. While in some cases, the social change brought about by displacement can lead to a radical reordering of social relations that challenge earlier gendered norms and restriction, in most cases, resettlement and rehabilitation (R and R) programmes have largely failed to make conscious efforts to minimize the loss and traumas encountered by displacement processes, let alone include equity considerations in their activities. In order to achieve gender justice, it is thus important to resort to emancipatory politics that can push for a greater realization of the rights of displaced people and for prior and informed consent.

“...Unlike the settlers, their wives and children are not given any specific task or counted as part of the holdings labour-force...”

(Tunkur Shamsul Bahrin n.d., p. 63.)

Introduction¹

Displacement due to development characterizes the lives of millions of people across the globe. Globalization with its accompanying acceleration of international capital flows and economic liberalization is likely to increase the number of projects that entail the forced displacement of marginal populations especially in

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¹ Some parts of this paper draw on Mehta and Srinivasan (2000) and Mehta (2009).

rising powers such as China and India. At the turn of the century, conservative estimates put this number down to about 10 million annually (Cernea 1997)². In the last 30 years China has witnessed tremendous market reforms, leading to urbanization, industrial and rapid economic growth at an average of about 9.8 per cent (Yang 2010). This growth has largely been driven by large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Three Gorges Project on the Yangtze River, which has emerged as both a symbol of China's technological progress but also of the dark sides of growth. Despite its impressive energy generation, it has completely transformed the Yangtze River, submerged 13 cities, 140 towns and 13,000 villages and displaced over a million people (Yang 2010).

Post-colonial development policy and planning has largely followed the utilitarian and Benthamian logic of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" (Rayner 2003). This has allowed for millions to be displaced in the interest of the "common good" (Roy 1999). In the 1950s, industrial and infrastructure projects were considered to be the path to development and projects such as large dams generating water and power were supposed to help most of the developing world "catch up with the West" and promote modernity. In India alone since independence in 1947, 21 to 50 million people or oustees have been displaced by large projects such as mines, dams and industrial complexes (Hemadri et al. 2000). Alone, the controversial dams on the Narmada River are set to displace about a million people. Until two decades ago, forced uprooting was considered to be the 'cost' of development due to overarching national interest. Even though China has followed a non-western trajectory concerning development, it has also embraced modernization paradigms. As James Scott (1998) notes, such high modernism and technical progress often leads to hegemonic planning that has excluded diverse perspectives and alternative paths to development as well as the agency of local people.

Thus, not surprisingly, resettlement schemes have led to impoverishment (Cernea various) and immiseration not only due to their top-down style of decision-making and the suppression of the ousted, but also due to the inability of resettlement schemes to rebuild lives and livelihoods. They have also often led to a decline in the standard of living of the displaced (Grabska and Mehta 2008; Scudder 2005). Relocation and resettlement are largely physical and economic initiatives, rehabilitation is more protracted and difficult, as it involves restoring a community's and individual's livelihood, income, dignity, well-being and the capacity to interact in the new environment as an equal (Scudder 2005 and Asif 2000). Thus, proper resettlement and rehabilitation rarely take place. Instead, resettlement planning has been a quasi-social engineering exercise where oustees

² Poor data exist on the numbers of persons affected by development-induced displacement throughout the world. Unlike with refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), there are no institutions or publications dedicated to tracking overall development-induced displacement, either at the global or national levels. Even the World Bank's 10 million a year figure largely focuses on those physically ousted from legally acquired land in order to make way for the planned project. This ignores other indirect forms of displacement (e.g. those living downstream from dam projects whose livelihoods and are usually adversely affected or those affected by natural resource extraction).

are often subject to control from project and health officials and have had little or no say in site selection or questions around land, grazing, water provision and so on (Asif 2000; Fernandes and Thukral 1989; Mehta and Punja 2006). They often lack the ability to participate as equal actors in compensation procedures, in determining solutions to the problems of resettlement, in protecting their human rights and in shaping development processes. Moreover, conventional resettlement planning does not question, per se, the rationale behind resettlement or indeed raise fundamental issues concerning pro-poor development and governance. Instead, as Morvaridi argues, “The bureaucratic system within which displacement is managed and the legislative definitions and practices that it adopts tend to work against local people and deny them rights to protect their economic and social wellbeing” (Morvaridi 2004, p. 720).

In recent years, protest activities on the part of displaced people and public actions have highlighted the painful and disastrous outcomes of past displacement and resettlement experiences and challenged the dominant paradigms concerning development-induced-displacement. India’s dynamic Save the Narmada Movement which has engaged in a 25-year struggle against the dams on the Narmada River is a good case in point. In China, Tang Fuzhen immolated herself due to forced displacement in November 2009. Also, *Xinfang* (letter of complaint) is a unique channel in China to seek justice from authorities in China. Protest against land acquisition due to involuntary resettlement is the second highest reason of complaint (Yang 2010). Thus, displacement arising due to ‘development’ or development-induced-displacement is one of the key areas of contentious politics in rising powers such as China and India. The issues at stake go well beyond the need to provide adequate compensation for land and just resettlement for those who are displaced to make way for development and industrial projects. Instead, the politics of displacement bring wider development paradigms into question, regarding how to balance the pains and gains of infrastructure development and how to address the disproportionate loss borne by the marginalized and the poor, especially by women and children.

This article offers conceptual and political perspectives on gender and development-induced displacement. It shows how displaced women are often caught in a double bind with male and gender biases negatively impacting on displaced women in two ways. One, the wide-spread nature of male biases in most societies help perpetuate gender inequality in terms of unequal resource allocation and distribution and also legitimize the silencing of women’s interests. Two, biases within state institutions, structures and policies help perpetuate these societal inequalities. This is the double bind that displaced women often find themselves in. While state policies and programmes could potentially remedy inherent gender biases found in the family and wider society, they have failed to do so in the case of resettlement programmes. Instead, official programmes have mostly exacerbated gender inequalities within displaced communities. Two caveats are in order before I proceed. One, women are not a homogenous entity and there are significant differences amongst women and amongst women and men due to age, class, ethnicity and so on. I also do not want to portray displaced women merely as passive victims of development-induced displacement, state policies and

patriarchal structures in their communities. In some cases, the social impacts of resettlement might lead to more egalitarian gender relations. For example, in a resettlement scheme in Zimbabwe, women tended to be less constrained by past kinship patterns and had better relations with their husbands (Koenig 1995). When resettlement takes place to less remote areas or towns, women may enjoy having more leisure time due to better access to basic services such as water, electricity and so on. Teenage boys and girls may benefit because the social control part of life before resettlement is largely absent with new rules of living and space defined (Grabska 2010). In some cases, social change brought about by displacement can lead to a radical reordering of social relations that challenge earlier gendered norms and restrictions and open up spaces for emancipatory gender politics (Manchanda 2004). Moreover, human beings are capable of tremendous resilience and can adjust to and act upon a wide range of changes. Thus, pains can become gains over a period of time due to people exercising agency in both periods of stress and periods of opportunity, as the wider migration literature indicates. Furthermore, some of the most dynamic resistance against displacement has been led by women³. Still, I would argue that resettlement and rehabilitation (R and R) programmes have largely failed to make conscious efforts to minimize the loss and traumas encountered by displacement processes, let alone include equity considerations in their activities. Thus, the gains of women and men upon resettlement have largely been due to their own grit and determination to make the best of their situation and not due to any forward-looking planning by state authorities. Finally, the pains of displacement are by no means only restricted to women. Thus, there is a need to look at the social relations between men and women, the gendered nature of roles and control over resources and how these change through displacement processes.

The article begins by locating gender in displacement debates and highlights how a gender lens helps challenge the logic of displacement. It then goes on to outline prevailing male and gender biases in displacement and resettlement, using examples from my own research in India and other empirical examples⁴. The article then examines how contemporary debates need to move beyond risk to embracing notions of rights and concludes with some thoughts on whether social and gender justice is at all possible in the context of development-induced-displacement.

Locating Gender

Women and children constitute the overwhelming majority of internally displaced people (Banerjee et al. 2005, p. 20). Moreover, female-headed households are high amongst displaced people. Despite the vast documentation on displacement and resettlement processes, national and international debates have remained largely ungendered. Project-affected communities continue to be

³ For examples in an Indian context, see Mehta (2009a).

⁴ Wherever possible I make reference to the Chinese context; however there seems to be a paucity of empirical material on gender and development-induced-displacement in China.

portrayed in a rather homogenous and undifferentiated way in local and state discourses. The massive changes in the division of labour, in negotiations within communities and households, in property rights and in access to and control over resources clearly affect men and women differently, requiring an analysis through the lens of gender. The malaise of gender-blindness is also found in policy related guidelines concerning resettlement, where the settler or oustee is unproblematically assumed to be male as is evident in the quote at the beginning of this article. This often occurs because women and children are not considered to be subjects in their own right due to discriminatory gender practices and biases that are prevalent across many parts of the developing world. Even when women and children are the focus of official policies and interventions, they are often ‘naturalized’ as passive or ‘infantilized’ (Manchanda 2004) and not endowed with agency. This is also reflected in official policy debates on resettlement that further reduce women’s status to second-class citizens.

Just as policy debates on displacement have been ungendered, so too have academic debates. Beyond the general recognition that women might suffer more than men in the course of the displacement process, there have not been systematic analyses of the gendered dimensions of forced displacement and resettlement processes apart from a few studies (Koenig 1995; Mehta and Srinivasan 2000; Mehta 2009a; Parasuraman 1993; Indra 1999; Colson 1999). But in the standard works on displacement and resettlement, references to gender have a rather add-on character (Cernea 1997; McDowell 1997). Thus, it is important to overcome the past invisibility of gender issues as well as raise awareness of how gender and social justice can be achieved in displacement and resettlement processes. In this context, the debate on displacement and resettlement needs to be located in wider debates of gender, social and power relations, rights, inheritance and socio-historical processes concerning ideology, patriarchal domination, discrimination, and the division of labour.

The gender lens also helps challenge the conventional logic of displacement by presenting alternative notions of accounting, budgeting, loss, resources, and development planning. Feminist analyses have helped to unpack the “taken-for-granted” in conventional social and economic analyses in development processes (Kabeer 1994; Elson 1998; Agarwal 1994). They have raised questions about who benefits and loses from development interventions, and how to unpack aggregate notions of the “common good.” They have also offered alternative perspectives on cost benefit analyses, well-being and welfare. As conventional understandings of these issues have largely ignored the differential impacts of development processes on men, women, children, or between rich, poor, powerful and powerless, they also neglect that the beneficiaries of projects have tended to be men. Gender scholars, by contrast, have long been concerned with issues of equity and distribution. Their primary concern has been to understand the root causes of gender gaps in the allocation of the benefits and costs of development, and in the distribution of resources. Gender analysts also point to how the costs of so-called projects are borne differently by women and men and that evaluation needs to be done in a way that goes beyond the monetary loss of land.

A gender perspective also challenges the equation of development with economic growth. Instead, gender analysts have shown that the drive towards growth should not detract from attempts at redistribution to meet the basic requirements of all (Kabeer 1994). Growth or development that proceeds in an unequal way cannot lead to social and economic justice for all women and men. For development to achieve equity goals, it must entail a process of redistribution whereby the costs and benefits are borne equally by men and women; by powerful and powerless groups. Such logic is also common amongst displacement scholars, especially from the 'movementist' rather than the managerialist tradition (Dwvevi 2002), who question the principles that justify displacement, rather than accept it as a necessary evil.

Thus, applying a gender lens to the issue of displacement is also useful in investigating power relations along various axes of difference and how this impacts on the displacement and marginalization of certain groups (e.g. the forced relocation of Tibetan herders in Tibet, Gansu, Qinghai to urban areas).

Male and Planners' Biases in Conceptualizing Displacement and R and R Processes

Resettlement, it is acknowledged, is a traumatic experience for most communities (Cernea 1997; Morse et al. 1992). "Resettlement involves a re-ordering of gender relations across a wide spectrum, but that re-ordering emerges from previous assumptions about gender and the gendered experience of those involved" (Colson 1999, p. 26). Both men and women experience disempowerment due to being uprooted. However, women are often at the receiving end of the transitions visited upon communities, especially in relation to the domestic sphere and the market. Thus, Colson argues: "When people are uprooted because their land is wanted for economic reasons usually associated with visions of national development, their multiple identities tend to disappear: they become ungendered, uprooted, and are dealt with as undifferentiated families or households" (1999, p. 25).

Usually, the project affected person (PAP) is conceived to be a male householder (Mehta and Srinivasan 2000). The male is thus considered to be a breadwinner and the woman a dependent and server. The Indian Land Acquisition Act explicitly states that:

If the 'person interested' is not available to receive the notice for acquisition then it may be handed over to, or served on, any other adult male member who resides with him. If no 'adult male' is present then the notice may be placed on the outer door of the house or in some conspicuous place in the office of the collector or court house, etc. In other words, if a notice is served on a woman, it is not legal (Thukral 1996, p. 1500).

This blatant neglect of women's citizenship rights in the law finds its way to actual resettlement practices. This partly stems from flawed notions of the family and household. Gender scholars have demonstrated that the household is *not* "a unit of congruent interests" (Agarwal 1994, p. 3) where resources are shared equitably by all its members. Hence, women's needs and interests require a specific priority focus in practice and policy for development to be truly gender-just. But

policy-makers tend to treat the household like a black box, instead of a site of both “conflict and co-operation” (Sen 1990) where diverging interests may exist amongst different household members according to age, gender and so on. There is also the assumption that benefits directed to men will automatically be transferred to all household members. There is a marked lack of recognition of the unequal nature of resource allocation within the household, be it around nutrition, health benefits or schooling, something that feminist scholars have been documenting for years. It is often considered that vesting land rights to women will break up the family (Agarwal 2002). Yet, clinging to the narrative of a unitary household succeeds in perpetuating gender injustice and discrimination and the failure to advocate rights for women (Agarwal 2002). Most national policies have, largely, drawn on a homogenous and undifferentiated notion of the family that lacks an explicit recognition of women’s needs, interests and rights and have failed to take on board the concern’s of civil society and others who have urged for gender-inclusive clauses and provisions (Mehta 2009a, b). Even the World Bank’s latest policy on resettlement and rehabilitation is shockingly gender blind (Clark 2009).

Another set of biases concerns the focus on formal arrangements of tenure and asset ownership for compensation. This can certainly disadvantage members from indigenous communities who are not entitled to compensation because they usually lack formal titles to land. Similarly, the neglect of assets such as river resources and access to CPRs often fails to compensate displaced people for their livelihood base. For the most part, policies and programmes neglect informal and non-encoded rights, assets and institutions. However, women largely have rights and control over resources in customary law or informal arrangements. For example, land rights can be both formal and governed by customary law (Berry 1987). Often women have rights to property, water and land in informal institutional arrangements that might be corroded by the creation of new formal institutions to govern land and water resources. Many newly created institutions might be male-dominated and might not enhance women’s bargaining power. This will further erode the, in some cases, minimal rights that women do enjoy within informal institutions, for example, women’s control over their income from forest resources (Mehta 2009a, b).

The lack of proper employment and productive activities can also bring about profound changes in social and gender relations. In the resettlement associated with the Manwan Dam in China, due to the loss of livelihoods and unemployment, young villagers were forced to leave their homes and entered into drug trafficking. Those who could not find work outside returned and brought back new habits such as violence, gambling. Women also fell victim to trafficking (Yang 2010). Finally, the planning, implementation and execution of resettlement, despite the rhetoric of participation and bottom-up planning, may not be extended to include women into the planning stages of projects, and that too, in culturally appropriate ways that do not antagonize their menfolk. Gender assumptions in communities also inhibit women from partaking in such activities that are bound to affect their lives in crucial ways. My research in India has shown a marked lack of consultation with women. This lack of consultation with women has led to several unanticipated

consequences for the overall family's well-being and health (e.g. the lack of attention paid to water and fuelwood by the male members who were consulted).

Gendered Experiences of Resettlement in the Kariba and Sardar Sarovar (Narmda) Projects

I now discuss two projects which have been extensively studied. The first is a 40-year study by Colson (1999) of the displacement of the Gwembe Tonga, which reveals significant changes. In 1956, Gwembe Tonga communities were displaced from the Gwembe Valley, in the Middle Zambezi Valley, to make way for the Kariba Dam, which was completed in 1958. Prior to 1956, Gwembe ethics emphasized a relatively egalitarian ideology (Colson 1999). Both women and men participated in social and domestic decision-making. Most women had control over land given to them by kin. Husbands were also expected to allocate land to wives who also worked on their husband's lands. Divorced women kept their own fields and lost allocated land. Men and women had separate granaries. The family used women's granaries for subsistence. Thus, equity was achieved due to men and women having their separate autonomous realms. Colson (1999) however cautions that women's social and economic mobility was restricted before resettlement. Social interaction was limited to the immediate community with little access to the market.

After resettlement in 1956, colonial authority systems recognized only men as chiefs, counsellors and headmen. The nature of gender relations within the community assigned the public sphere to men, which did not question this exclusively male representation of the community in the case of resettlement (Colson 1999). Women were traumatized by the move years after resettlement. They found it hard to accept unfamiliar surroundings, and decades after resettlement women still asked when the dam would be destroyed. Men saw the move as a political defeat because it represented a loss of face and powerlessness. Men tended to vent their frustrations on women and children. Incidence of domestic violence increased. Increased availability of alcohol had an influence on this. The rupture of social kinship structures meant that there were no social buffers to prevent domestic disputes. Women lost their bargaining power with the loss of a social set up to monitor domestic disputes and they also lost their land rights. Males were treated as heads of households (Colson 1999).

Gender assumptions of the colonial administration led to men being given compensation. Women received little in comparison. Thus, women lost out on land rights and property rights. Women's opinions on resettlement varied. Most preferred the old life because of the permanency of the river, land and kin. Younger women, however, enjoyed the increase in mobility, shops and availability of money and sense of belonging to a national community. Younger women had greater access to education, they saw increased income opportunities: land was no longer the sole means of livelihood. Thus, factors such as age played an important role in women's experience of resettlement. Colson's (1999) remarkable study offers a diachronic perspective with which to analyse the ways in which both men and women lose and benefit as a result of resettlement and the complex nature of social

change. As discussed previously, interventions were not targeted at women. Thus, in many cases, they lost realms of autonomy and control. Their gains, thus, are more of an incidental character than due to any planned form of intervention.

The Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP), described as “one of the most flawed projects” (Cernea 1999) will displace mainly *adivasi* (tribal) communities in the Narmada Valley constituting Tadvis, Vasavas, Bhils and Bhilalas and caste Hindu communities. Gender organization in these communities varies. However, while *adivasi* communities represent a relatively egalitarian gender organization compared with caste Hindu societies (CSS 1997; TISS 1997), none can be said to be entirely free of discrimination towards women. Based on a range of studies, including my own research, here I present the gendered dimensions of displacement and resettlement in the case of SSP.

Women's access to and control over resources have been severely curtailed by resettlement. Women do not have land rights in *adivasi* communities (most *adivasi* communities in the Narmada Valley are classified as 'encroachers' (Morse et al. 1992). However, they had usufructory rights and control over common property resources (Mehta 2009b). Their forest-based work gave them an independent income which was lost upon resettlement. Their role in the forest economy was not recognized. Major or adult daughters, widowed women with land records in the original villages were not compensated. Women's interests are seen as linked to the household and thus only men and major sons are being given land according to the Gujarat Resettlement and Rehabilitation policy. Additionally, loss of forests, river, forest produce, fuel, fodder and common property resources affected women in the resettlement sites. In tribal villages, women were involved in decision-making processes around the household and the farm. The monetized economy, which *adivasi* communities are unfamiliar with, had marginalized women from these spheres of autonomous control on the farm and the household. Many of them were no longer seen as 'productive'.

The fragmentation of the community led to a disruption of social cohesion, impacting women more severely than men. Isolation from kinship structures because of increased transportation costs led to increased insecurity and fear amongst women (Thukral 1996; Mehta 2009a and b). Tensions between the host community and the resettled communities often arising out of sloppy resettlement implementation, have often resulted in violence. For example, in one resettlement site in Maharashtra, in the ensuing hostility between the 'host' community and the resettling community a woman was killed in 1992 (TISS 1997). Increased availability of alcohol at sites has led to an erosion of household income and domestic security. Domestic drudgery seems to have decreased in some sites due to availability of hand-pumps, flour mills etc. (Mehta and Punja 2006). However, the women have completely lost the autonomy they had over water collection. The water quality is one of their biggest problems. They do not care for taps near the house where the water supply is irregular. They prefer to have access to clean, free-flowing water, i.e. the river.

In the early years, health seemed to have been severely affected because of changes in cropping patterns and the non-availability of adequate nutrition and water facilities (Mehta 2009a, b; Parasuraman 1993). The sex ratio in some of the

adivasi villages was higher than the Gujarat level (CSS 1997). However, at some sites, infant mortality rates seem to have shot up. Thirty per cent of the children born in the first six years of resettlement in Parveta died. At least five women lost all children in these years (Parasuraman 1993, p. 17). In Malu, I witnessed four babies dying due to lowered immunity in 2000. Perhaps this is why some women from Madhya Pradesh resettled in Gujarat told the Morse Committee that, “none of them would give birth [at resettlement site in Gujarat], but would, if at possible, have their babies at [original village]” (Morse et al. 1992, p. 197).

What do these two cases tell us? With respect to *access and control over resources*, both examples illustrate very clearly the ways in which gender roles are vulnerable to changes that work to the disadvantage of women. The other serious consequence of *gender imbalances* that shows up in these examples is the increase in domestic violence. A community in transition tends to victimize its least powerful constituents, thus violating their fundamental rights to a life of dignity and security. Policies tend to overlook such instances of human rights violation and the potentially harmful situation that can develop in resettlement sites. There are virtually no safeguards for women in such situations, especially when combined with the erosion of social support structures to negotiate on their behalf. The examples also highlight how displacement changes *gender relations*. In the Kariba case, women who had participated equally in decisions involving community and the household were ousted from these positions after resettlement. This can be attributed to gender blindness in the policy, which treated men as the heads of the households and community leaders. In sum, resettlement leads to dramatic changes in access to and control over resources and gender relations.

Gender and the Impoverishment Risks of Displacement

There is now a growing consensus in the literature on R and R that displacement processes lead to a decline in the stand of living of displaced people and also heightened impoverishment (McDowell 1997; Mathur and Marsden 1998; WCD 2000). As the vast literature on displacement has documented, this largely happens because the incomes and livelihoods of the displaced collapse. How does current displacement and resettlement research deal with the problems experienced by vulnerable groups in the course of displacement processes? The Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) model, developed by sociologist Michael Cernea, formerly at the World Bank, is the most ambitious and influential approach in displacement and resettlement research and has also been used in refugee studies. It shows how displacement goes hand in hand with physical, social and economic exclusion, which culminates in a broad range of impoverishment risks. Through the study of countless empirical studies, Cernea identified eight key risks. They are landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, increased morbidity, food insecurity, loss of access to common property, and social disarticulation (Cernea 1997, 1998 and 2000). Together these risks constitute the Impoverishment Risks Model. The basic idea is that if these risks are built into the planning process, they can be anticipated in advance and even minimized or mitigated through advance planning. His model is now widely used in resettlement

research and one of its aims is to help operationalize a just planning process around resettlement (Cernea 2000). For Cernea (2000) the risks are of high probability. If unheeded they will become a reality, but if anticipated and counteracted, they can be avoided. The model distinguishes between two phases. The first is the displacement phase when the aforementioned risks can be identified through risk analysis. The second is the resettlement phase where it is possible to mitigate or avoid the risks through targeted action. Thus, he also presents operational tools to mitigate the risks of displacement (Cernea 1997, 1998 and 2000) and the risks are followed by prescriptions. For example, avoid landlessness through land-based resettlement, joblessness through sound employment and so on.

The IRR framework highlights differential impacts and has a brief section in a paper (Cernea 2000) that refers to the differential risks encountered by sub-groups within a community such as the landless and women who encounter specific losses that might not be envisaged by policy-makers and planners and consequently suffer more severe impacts (Mathur 2009). Cernea (2000) acknowledges variances in risks content and intensity for women and other population categories such as the landless, children, indigenous populations and so on (p. 30). He also refers to the specific risks encountered by community sub groups such as craftsmen, artisans and others who might suffer specific losses (p. 26).

The IRR model intends to redress the inequities of forced displacement and achieve resettlement based on the principle of equity. However, I would argue that it does not go far enough in teasing out the dynamics of social differentiation amongst resettled populations, especially with respect to the reconstruction phase. Even this very important work fails to adequately incorporate gender concerns systematically. Firstly, despite the recognition of “differential impacts,” most of the analysis is based on assumptions of homogeneity that are apparent in the following sentence: “The model anticipates displacement’s major risks, explains the behavioural responses of displaced people, and can guide the reconstruction of displaced people’ livelihoods” (Cernea 1997, p. 1570). However, displaced women and men often have diverging and competing interests. Moreover, impoverishment risks impact differently on women and men and different groups will respond differently to risks. Also, the elimination of risks for one group may increase the vulnerability and risks of another group.

Take landlessness. Cernea rightly says that:

Expropriation of land removes the main foundation upon which people’s productive systems, commercial activities, and livelihoods are constructed. This is the principal form of decapitalisation and pauperisation of displaced people [...] Unless the land basis of people’s productive systems is reconstructed elsewhere, or replaced with steady income-generating employment, landlessness sets in and the affected families become impoverished (1998, p. 1572).

He cites numerous studies where landlessness increases and then incomes drop significantly and therefore advocates land-based re-establishment. This is a very important conclusion given the current tendency in official resettlement programmes to disregard the “land-for-land” principle. In my own research in western India I have seen that even though each project-affected family was officially granted five acres of land, the displaced people interviewed by me felt

that there had been a significant reduction in land assets. In their old homes, they had access to land with titles, so-called wasteland, forest land, deemed as illegally encroached by the state and riverbed land. On average, each family had about 18 acres of land (Mehta 2009b). Access to these diverse land systems was lost which contributed to people's impoverishment, and growing sense of ill-being cannot be captured by the term 'landless.' Thus, merely preventing the risk of landlessness through land-based relocation strategies (Cernea 1997, p. 1578) will not solve the problem of impoverishment. But this is precisely what the project officials claimed to be one of the strengths of the resettlement packages since from their point of view, many so-called landless had been given land. But they failed to understand that this land cannot provide displaced men and women the same nutritional intake, diversity of crops and risk-aversion strategies vis-à-vis drought as the land in the forest villages by the river did.

There is also the need to differentiate between women and men and how they perceive the risks of landlessness. In many indigenous communities women have their own plots of land in the forest, where they grow vegetables and spices. They often make all the cropping decisions and control the use of these crops, often largely for subsistence purposes. This gives them a level of autonomy in the household's production system. In the resettlement village, landlessness may entail insecurity than for men since the policy 'officially' makes men the beneficiaries and robs women of informal rights over land and forest resources. This can also increase the vulnerability of widows, divorced women and female-headed households who are not awarded any land (Mehta 2009b).

Minimizing the risks for some might increase the risks for others. Often, it is just adult sons who are endowed new land. Adult daughters receive nothing, thus increasing their vulnerability in the case of desertion or separation. Even married women face insecurity and risks, hitherto unknown. In the case of the Sardar Sarovar Project, a 35-year-old woman who had remarried feared that she would be denied rights to the land once her ailing husband died. Had the land ownership been independent or even joint, this insecurity would not have existed. Another woman, Rewaben, was widowed after moving to the resettlement village. During the transfer period, she was tricked into signing over her land into the name of her son, who threatened to throw her out of the house. She felt that struggles like this would not have occurred in the submergence villages because the monetary value placed on land was largely absent and because it was common for women to have control, if not own, resources from the forest and some plots of land. Resources were also not perceived to be so scarce. Thus, while adult sons may welcome being considered beneficiaries of the new compensation package, for many women, in particular widows or older women, this may mean greater risk. This calls for the need to unpack who bears more risks and how risk mitigation for some may increase the risks for others.

Another example concerns joblessness. Cernea rightly demonstrates that displacement leads to the loss of wage employment for landless labourers, small business owners and service workers in rural and urban contexts. Unemployment thus ensues after resettlement because displaced people are rarely absorbed in new projects; instead it is largely workers from outside (Cernea 1997). He also

demonstrates that this risk tends to be a long-term phenomenon. Cernea's "no job, give job" formula may not always work when one looks at the range of livelihood options that often available to both men and women in subsistence-based economies. In my research in India (Mehta 2009a, b) I found that women played a central role in the forest-based economy and had an independent source of income from the collection and processing of minor forest produce (e.g. gum, leaves, rope making, honey). The forest was also the generous provider of fuelwood, herbs and medicines. Thus, the range of livelihoods and income was diverse and not all were within the market realm. Moreover, the financial strain is greater due to the increases in expenditures. This cash crunch also contributes to a worsening of power relations within the household. As money has become more and more a symbol of power within the displaced society, it has increasingly been in control of the male members of the household (my research findings, and Dewyer and Bruce 1988). Since it is the men who largely go shopping, they increasingly have control over women's traditional decision-making realms around food and cooking.

This discussion points to the following. One, displaced people who lived in subsistence-oriented societies had a range of livelihood options that cannot be compensated by merely providing 're-employment.' Their livelihoods were instead linked to the land and the resource base that is now absent. 'Joblessness' also cannot capture the way reproductive and productive roles are fused in the household economy. Many of the roles that women play are essential to production, consumption and indeed to the general well-being of the household, but cannot be given a monetary or income value. Thus, many changes that occur are not picked up on by a pure economic analysis. For example, without strong gender analysis it is easy to ignore the importance of the subsistence based economy and women's critical role in it. It is thus necessary for the IRR model to acknowledge more strongly how some livelihoods (especially those of women) have non-material dimensions and how women's roles in production, consumption and reproduction are often ignored in both risk assessment and in the reconstruction phase.

Thus, despite the acknowledgement of "differential impacts" and the variances in risks content and intensity for women, the focus on gender tends to have an add-on character. In other words, it is not enough to have the odd paragraphs or lines that mention women or other vulnerable groups. For the analysis to have dynamism and truly address social and power relations, we need to differentiate between men and women and different social groups throughout, by teasing out both differential impacts and also be being partisan in suggesting remedies in the reconstruction phase. Critical issues such as local definitions of loss, inequities within the local communities, gender biases and power relations must be addressed. Furthermore, other pitfalls arise because the IRR has largely been designed as a planners' tool to guide the resettlement process. As other analysts have argued, it neither explicitly seeks local definitions of loss, ill-being or impoverishment (since these are already pre-defined in the model), nor does it fundamentally critique the processes of 'development' that justify the forced displacement of vulnerable groups (Dwivedi 2002; Morvaridi 2004). My analysis has also hopefully highlighted that risks and losses cannot be reduced to simple variables or causal relationships as put forward

in a positivist model (e.g. land for land; jobs for jobs). For one, jobs for many displaced women depend on the resource base (land) and they were not 'employed' in the true sense of the word. The multi-causal relations between land, livelihoods and identity and their links with overall well-being, thus, cannot be reduced to a model.

Interestingly enough, displaced people have never used this model to articulate their risks, rights and loss. Instead, they have resorted to resistance and protest. The IRR and conventional approaches to displacement and resettlement tend to locate the problem in terms of problem analysis and policy intervention, "allowing the dynamics of displacement and the political resistance to it to be evaded, especially the struggle over rights and in defence of 'place'..." (Morvaridi 2004, p. 737). Thus, the focus on impoverishment risks needs to be complemented by research and policy agendas that explicitly seek to protect and strengthen the rights of displaced people, especially women.

Is Gender Justice Possible in Processes of Forced Displacement and Resettlement?

One could argue that, since forced displacement leads to new social relations and changes in the allocation and distribution of resources, potentially there is the scope for inserting just and equitable patterns of resource allocation amongst women and men. These in turn could help undermine the cultural biases in a society that work against women. In this way, if designed sensitively, R and R programmes could contribute to gender justice, e.g. through investing land and water rights to women and the landless.

The World Bank Operation, Evaluation and Development (OED) department analysed projects in China's Sichuan and Hebei Provinces in the late 1990s and found that China had made some concerted efforts to explicitly seek women's participation at all levels: in the formulation of policy as well as in implementation (OED 1998). Authorities had acknowledged women's substantial roles in family decision-making processes and ensured that they were involved in resettlement planning. A national network of women's unions helped in identifying the needs of all the members of the community. Unlike most other projects in the world where the displaced are not adequately absorbed in the creation of new employment facilities, the workforce in several of the new factories established in the project areas comprised resettled women. This was possible, primarily because the state encouraged 'developmental' resettlement, which emphasized productive base rather than 'passive' compensation, and the fact that the land tenure system is based on collective ownership in China (OED 1998). However, even here, as elsewhere, older women have not been absorbed in the new economic order. Post-resettlement employment has absorbed large numbers of women in factories at equal pay (OED 1998). I have unfortunately not been able to locate more recent academic analyses on gender and displacement in China. However, gauging from recent reports of R and R around the Three Gorges and other projects and the problems encountered by those who express dissent and criticism, I am not sure

how generalisable this example is⁵. In fact, Probe International (2000) argues that both the World Bank and to some extent the World Commission on Dams has tended to portray China as a model of best practice in the area of involuntary resettlement. The Bank has waived its own guidelines in its work on resettlement in China and ignores the restrictive human rights environment. It has failed to use its own guideless to assess resettlement, instead relying on institutes attached to the Chinese government, rather than by critics of the government or NGOs within China (Probe International 2000).

With increasing land ‘deals’ or grabs on the part of powerful western as well as Indian and Chinese corporations in different parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, conflicts over displacement are bound to increase, leading to new questions concerning accountability. Chinese dam builders and financiers are also playing a key role on the global hydropower market with a bang and are taking on controversial projects in Burma and Sudan which had before been shunned by the international community and may not always be willing to embrace international guidelines and best practice (Bosshard 2010). There thus remain many unknowns and questions regarding social and gender justice around future large-scale interventions that entail displacement.

If R and R can ever be seen as a “development opportunity” (Mathur and Marsden 1998), and this in itself is questionable, it will need radical reconceptualization. This includes the need to avoid displacement and ensure that it is minimized. When it must take place it is important to include women as full beneficiaries of compensation and as independent or co-owners of land; make provisions for women’s livelihoods along with housing and employment; recognize and build on women’s informal rights in customary practices; avoid any violation of their rights; include strong gender analysis and gender sensitive data regarding the impacts of displacement; have special provisions to include the full participation of women in decision-making processes around displacement and resettlement and build strong safeguards to facilitate women’s access to compensation and any other benefits.

Gender justice can be achieved if there is a conscious effort to move towards emancipatory politics. However, most R and R programmes have ignored both the material and strategic interests of women. They also focus more on the risks of displaced people rather than their rights. But as people’s struggles against displacement show, displaced women and men resist forced displacement primarily because their rights to livelihood, information, shelter, participation, dignity, development etc. have been denied. Resistance movements all around the world against forced displacement are pushing for a greater realization of the rights of displaced people and for prior and informed consent. They and concerned academics and practitioners are asking why marginalization and gendered exclusion is permitted in the name of development, instead of allowing for inclusive development and the full citizenship of displaced women and men (where

⁵ The website by Probe International which focuses on different aspects of the Three Gorges Dam, includes a lot of commentaries from Chinese scholars, some of them write with pseudonyms, see <http://journal.probeinternational.org/three-gorges-probe/> [cited January 2011].

their civil and political rights as well as social and economic rights can flourish). It is thus important to rethink both ‘development’ and gender in the context of displacement debates and to challenge and reject dominant practices around development and displacement. Given that displacement is here to stay, not least due to the growing role of corporations in infrastructure development projects around the world and the desire for emerging powers such as China to achieve more and more economic growth through such projects, these are urgent concerns.

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Focus China

An Introduction

by

*Sofia Graziani and Laura De Giorgi**

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" factors¹, 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

¹ 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*², 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

² 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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Social Activism as a Response to Experienced Forced Migration in China

by

*Nora Sausmikat**

Abstract: This paper examines the roots for feminist social activism with special regard to biographical experiences. Starting with a clarification of central terms like civil society and voluntarism, I will dig deeper into the special female experience of the Cultural Revolution mass movements. Since many of the very first pioneers of the non-profit, non-governmental movement belong to a certain generation I will first analyse joint experiences and continue to filter the differences in the individual experiences. It will be shown how the experienced (forced) migration formed individual activism, social activism and academic careers. Exemplified by the life course, memories and reflection of protagonists of the feminist movement I will highlight the fundamental differences in the same respective generation. Doing this, it will be shown that there exists very different coping strategies and the direction of activism differs between raising the level of gender consciousness, organizing for mutual support or writing in order to foster public reflection.

The experience of forced displacement can form strong identities and loyalties which in turn can lead to powerful social movements. Social or political movements are simultaneously based on an “other” identity¹, and form new identities for themselves. For China, we can find many historical examples of organized resistance movements or social movements which originated in forced displacement or colonial oppression². On the other hand, forced displacement can

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¹ Sometimes even through internalized racial attitudes (Enwezor 2001, p. 11)

² Jun Jing (2006) described the long struggle of one whole village which was resettled during the 1960s and recovered by collective commemoration. The best example of resistance against “colonial oppressors” is perhaps the opposition movements during 1970 on Taiwan, which was led by

destroy the very essential sense of belonging and produces ethnic-cultural disintegration. It is well known and also discussed in this volume that displaced people have to struggle to integrate in the receiving areas, to adapt to local communities and most of the time do not manage to build up sustainable livelihoods.

In this paper, I will address the relationship between displacement and social activism. In particular, I will focus on post-Mao women's activism in China and analyse the socio-cultural and historical roots of this activism from a biographical perspective. I will argue that women who experienced the forced migration were especially sensitive to gender issues. Also, I will analyze the reasons why women started to organize themselves and what role the experience of state-induced mass migration played for their social activism.

I will argue that women non-party/non-state initiative³ first constituted out of their experiences during the Cultural Revolution (CR). There are two aspects which fostered their activism: one nurtured by memory, another by the need to survive. The term "culture of remembrance", which Assmann defines as a universal phenomenon and describes as "memory which founds communities" (Assman 1999, p. 30), does not necessarily have to found "nations", as in the case of Israel, but these "memory communities" can also function on a much smaller scale inside societies or "sub-communities". Additionally, the need to form self-help initiatives during the 1980s resulted from lessons learned during their 20s and the urgent need to challenge old state paradigms of women's liberation.

In a first step I would like to highlight the changes and recent developments concerning women's activism in China to explain the specifics of the "new Era" of women's activism. In a second step, I will characterize two prominent figures of these new female "pioneers". Finally, I will highlight the main common stigmas of this generation of women related to their forced migration. I would like to invite your comments and further discussion. My study nevertheless suffers from a non-representative sample and likely bias. For that reason arguments raised in this article are tentative and serve as material for further discussion.

Introduction

I have discussed elsewhere the influence of public discourses and current social status on the individual memory of women who experienced forced migration or participated in the mass migration movement of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In particular, I have shown how the memories of women who belong to the highly stereotyped and stigmatized generation of the so-called *Zhiqing-*

indigenous members of parliament. Other examples for resistance movements are the opposition movements which occurred among Tibetan and Uyghur' diasporas.

³ I do not want to repeat here the lengthy discussion on the correct use of Western terms like NGO or civil society in the Chinese context. For a short but detailed clarification of the terms NGO and grassroots organizations see Keech-Marx (2008, p. 175).

Generation⁴ are influenced by different parameters like public discourse, individual meaningful life (“Sinnstiftung”), their different status and “class background” during the Cultural Revolution and identity formation (Sausmikat 2000, 2002). It was shown, how dominant discourses as well as the commodification of memoirs of this specific generation forced women to adjust their narrated life stories to dominant master narratives and how they developed mechanisms to find space for non-mainstream memory. During the last 15 years, memory-, biography- and life course research has experienced a fascinating come back in the field of social and political transformation (Della Porta 1992; Blee 1996; Breckner 2000; Miethe and Roth 2000). Studying Post-war Estonia or Russian political thought, the biographical perspective on societies seems to find worldwide interest. These theories treat memory as a forming force for political consciousness and – analyzed with structural hermeneutic – as a mirror of social processes. On the other hand we experienced a renewed debate on the deficits of memory. It is argued that memory is constructing fake history and always serves individual interests (Singer 2005; Welzer 2005). Rather than perceiving memory as a “tape recorder” for history I see memory work as a constitutive process of a political identity formed through a complex intertwining of social processes, narrated life stories and discourses.

In this essay I will look at the action level. In particular I am interested in the biographical roots for social action and political identity. Different to approaches which focus on the travel of ideas or discourses into policies (Derichs, Heberer, Sausmikat 2004) I find it necessary to ask for the root of a political identity which forms political ideas. In an earlier essay I highlighted the relationship between political ideas and life stories and focused on the instrumental use of the term “generation” for legitimacy purposes (Sausmikat 2003). What I want to demonstrate here are the socio-psychological roots of social movements by referring on the agent-focused social movement theories (Miethe 1999; Roth 1997). It should be clear that there have been no social movements in China in terms of the New Social Movement Theory. But I look at these first women’s initiatives as the sprout of a later social movement. As Myra Marx Ferree has demonstrated, the biographical perspective can be very helpful for understanding the social movement agent as a *familied self*, which highlights especially the difference between men and women when it comes to political action (Marx Ferree 2000).

This paper is based on a variety of materials. Besides the interview material used for the analysis of Cultural Revolution memories, it uses findings of my research on the spillover effects of intellectual discourses on political change (Sausmikat 2006) as well as the extensive work on Civil Society in China (2006-2010). This article also draws on informal exchange with prominent representatives of the first wave of women’s activism⁵, and the material available from the two

⁴ The full term reads *Zhishi qingnian*, which means literally “youth with knowledge” and refers to educated youth between aged between 14 and 20 who were sent to the countryside for re-education during the Cultural Revolution.

⁵ Two recent examples are: Our EU-China Civil Society Forum organized a workshop in Vienna on women activism in 2009 (http://www.eu-china.net/german/Termine/2009.09.28_Social-Developments-in-China-and-Europe-an-exchange-of-experienc.html) as well as a panel focusing on

path-breaking meetings of the “Chinese Women Organizing” conferences held in July 1999 in Oxford (Hsiung, Jaschok, Milwertz with Chan 2001) and in 2010 in Beijing. Therefore, this paper is meant as a “thought in progress” presentation which does not claim to be based on representative empirical field research. It is the attempt to build a bridge between the new work done on the different generations of “civil society protagonists”, which is inspired by a political science perspective, and the work done in the more historically and sociological informed research on “political generations”.

A few qualifications are necessary before we explore the generation in question. This holds true in particular for the term “civil society”, which travelled globally and was adapted by China in a very local sense. Above that we shall briefly discuss the meaning of voluntarism, especially in connection with different phases and characters of the migration movement. Finally, the term “generation” will be critically revisited to be aware of all the different connotations and power-related concepts conveyed by this term.

Some clarification of terms

Civil society: There will be no detail discussion of the terms “civil society” or “NGOs” (Non-governmental organizations) in China⁶. Since – as mentioned above – there has been much written on the problematic adaption of civil society or NGO to the Chinese context, I just briefly summarize the main findings⁷. The old Hegelian understanding of a dichotomy between state and society influenced the European coining of the term. Sometimes it is used in the sense of Habermas, to a certain extent also Gramsci (highlighting public spheres between market and state which forms public opinion), sometimes in a communitarian sense (highlighting the solidarity and responsibility among social communities, today often associated with the welfare function of the “Third sector”) or for the highlighting of the core element of a free society, the protection of civil rights, including the right to form autonomous organizations (Dahrendorf, Toqueville). We know that the adaption of this term in China happened precisely when China entered the global community of market societies. During the internal struggles and social changes of the 1980s as well as the reception of the big changes in Eastern Europe after 1989, this term carried the danger of toppling the regime, but during the first half of the 1990s the state managed to regain control over the shoots of independent singular actions and the influx of foreign concepts. From 1995 onwards, Chinese civil society means – as Yu Keping highlights (Yu 2008) – a form of social management in partnership

women’s political participation and NGOs during the international conference “Women and politics in Asia: A Springboard for Democracy?”, Hildesheim 2009.

⁶ This I have done extensively in Sausmikat (2010).

⁷ This summary naturally carries a strong bias – similar to the one Jonathan Unger openly admits when categorizing civil society definitions into three types: the Hegelian influenced neo-liberal type (highlighting free market society, of minority usage), the democratization type (which he judges as being tautological and of minority usage) and the “most prevalent conceptualization” focusing on the autonomous organizations (Unger 2008, pp. 2-3).

with state authorities. For our purpose here, which is to analyze the connection between women's activism and experienced migration, it serves much better to focus on social change and movements. Social movement theory interprets social movement as integral part of social change. Raschke defines social movement as "a mobilizing actor which aims for fundamental social change, tries to avoid it or reverse it with the help of different forms of action and organizations" (Raschke 1991, p. 32). The new era of women's activism after the Cultural Revolution will be analyzed as a result of social and political change. The transformation created room for activism which is rooted in certain biographical experience⁸.

Voluntarism and "forced migration": In Chinese history the term "voluntarism" was and is a very tricky construction. Especially when turning to state-induced mass movements under totalitarian rule "voluntarism" becomes a euphemism for forced submission. During the Cultural Revolution, one tenth of the city youth – people between 14 and 21 years old – were resettled in the rural areas. This movement from the very beginning always carried two aspects: one of being a hero, one of being the punished enemy. This mass movement was pretty well prepared with some "model resettlers" already propagated four years before the mass resettlement movement. Nevertheless, it makes a fundamental difference if the women went to the countryside because they belonged to the group of deportees 1966/67 or because they tried to upgrade their bad class background by showing their willingness for revolutionary sacrifice, or believed in a certain military mission. The migration policies had different phases before and after the top-down order of the 1968 mass movement.

Different phases of the rustication movement: Throughout the years 1964-1979 the urban-rural resettlement (or rustication) movement carried the different aspects of being an urban economic readjustment program, a "rural modernization program", an ideological re-education, and forced migration (which officially is not part of the rustication). Briefly, we can state that there were different phases of the migration movement: 1962-1968, 1968-1971/73, 1973-1979.

1) Between 1962 and 1968, resettlement became a centralized policy under the new commissioner Tan Zhenlin who was at the same time responsible for agricultural planning. There was no official order that urban teenagers had to be resettled (and re-educated by peasants). The aspect of force and punishment during that time mainly focussed on unemployed, uneducated and bad classes or people with "political problems". The aspect of heroism was pushed by the policy of anti-corruption and re-education of rural cadres (*siqing*) which was not genuinely Maoist but on the contrary was more representative of the Dengist group. Model resettlers were propagated who were meant to mobilize the masses. These figures still left room to believe that by moving to the remote areas these youth would "follow the revolution", "educate" the peasants (Qu Zhe) or stay in touch with the state through state subsidies (Xing Yanzi). Xing was first propagated in summer 1960 with the slogan "to go there where the party needs you most" (*dao dang zui*

⁸ For a more detailed elaboration on the interconnection between transformation and biography especially for the former German Democratic Republic or the former Soviet Union see Miethe and Roth (2000).

xuyao de difang qu). Xing deeply influenced the generation born between 1947 and 1952 – especially women. Even shortly after the great rural famine with approximately 30 million deaths⁹ the reading of Xing Yanzi's self sacrifices became duty lecture for schools after 1962. It was even propagated that the urban youth could free the countryside from hunger and protect China's border against aggression coming from the Soviet Union just by relying on the power of believing in socialism (Lieberthal 1993, p. 115)¹⁰. Nevertheless, paroles like Zhou Enlai's "embrace revolution and support production" (*zhua geming cu shengchan*)¹¹, which was meant to de-radicalise the violent struggles, also included the reduction of urban population and the stabilization of urban economy. With the radicalization of the Cultural Revolution and the violent clashes of Red Guards among each other and with the authorities, resettlement practice also became radicalized and some extreme forms of violent deportation took place (Barnouin 1993, p. 98). Until today it is a taboo to reflect on the deportations of class enemy's at the end of 1966 and the beginning 1967. Nearly unnoticed an announcement of the middle school no. four (the school of the famous 1989 activist Fang Lizhi) on the 24th August 1966 became the starting signal of a nation-wide campaign to deport class enemies and return urban citizens with rural backgrounds. The definition of the categories for class enemy varied during this "cleansing of class ranks". These deportations were jointly organized by police stations (*paichusuo*) and registration authorities (*juweihui*). Here it was declared, that all "rich peasants, counter revolutionaries and bad elements, which sneaked into the cities, are ordered to return to their hometown and be reeducated through labor before 10th of September. If they resist their residences will be sealed and they will be immediately forced to obey"¹². Many of these people already lived in the cities for two generations. Until the end of September, only in Beijing there had already been 84,000 "bad elements" deported¹³. Usually, the deportations were accompanied by fierce violence, sometimes these people – no matter if old people or children – just got murdered (Liu 1987, pp. 25-27; Barnouin, Yu 1993, p. 98). These deportations are absurd if we think about the pressure put on young relatives of class enemies who felt very humiliated when they had to fight to be allowed to take part in the patriotic revolutionary resettlement movement after 1968. From 1968 to 1971, most of power abuses, especially concerning young girls, were covered by the doctrine to become re-educated by the peasants.

⁹ Currently, there is a debate going on among China scientists on the number of excess death between 1959 and 1961. The established number of 30 million has been challenged – some vote for more, other for less. Because its not the topic here we will not get engaged in this discussion.

¹⁰ *Zhinong* or *Wunong* (support agricultural production) and *Zhi bian* (strengthen border regions) became early synonyms for resettlement policies.

¹¹ Zhou became famous for this parole just because many associated him as the only one who really cared for the economy. But after 1967, this parole was used to block the returning youth and send them back to the countryside (Sausmikat 2001, pp. 101-107).

¹² See *Red Guards Publications*, Center of Chinese Research Materials, Association of Research and Libraries. Washington 1975, Bd. 19, 6069. Quoted in Xiao (1996/97, p. 41). Also so called "rightists" were subsumed under the category of bad elements (Chan et al. 1985, p. 270).

¹³ Barnouin and Yu mention the number of 85,198 people (Barnouin, Yu 1993, p. 98).

2) 1968-1971/73: It was the proclamation in the “Renmin Ribao” (People’s Daily) of 22 of December, 1968, which first ordered all young people in the cities to turn resettlement into a mass movement. From August to December, mass mobilization of volunteers prepared the mass migration. This mass migration of urban teenagers into the underdeveloped hinterland and border regions mobilized some 17 million young people between 1968 and 1976. Some of the so-called *Zhiqing* – educated youth – were motivated by excessive idealism, some became snared in Mao Zedong’s personality cult and armed with a heroic thirst for action, others were pressured by various subtle forms of coercion. As a rule, they were no older than 20, and most of them came to spend their entire youth performing hard physical labor in the countryside. Under the parole “We also have two hands to work and do not need to stay in the cities and create chaos (*women ye you liangzhi shou, bu zai chengshi li chi naofan*) combined with Mao citations, the resettlement inherited the aspect of forced migration. Today, those who call themselves *Laosanjie*¹⁴ aim to emphasize that they went to the countryside voluntarily thus showing strong commitment to “change the backwardness of the hinterland”. Since during the 1990s it became an established taboo to mention the rebellious aspect of the *Zhiqing* generation (which would focus on the Red Guard past) – especially after 1989 – the *Laosanjie* identity were especially chosen in order to identify with the positive propagated image.

3) After 1971 – after the death of Lin Biao – and especially after the reopening of schools some had the chance to return to the cities as “worker-, peasant-, soldier”-student (*gongnongbing*). Also, the resettlement conference of 1973 condemned for the first time the rape and torture that occurred in the name of the re-education doctrine. After 1979, and especially after 1986, interpretations and discussion about the legitimacy of that mass movement were stopped (also because of the massive return of youth) and a positive evaluation of the policies dominated henceforth. The movement was split from the historical period of the Cultural Revolution and was announced as a “patriotic movement” with roots dating back long before the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

Also, conditions in the receiving areas as well as the possibilities to return changed throughout the 1960s and 1970s. It is therefore important to keep in mind that it makes a difference if women had the chance to work in army reconstruction corps (*jianshe bingtuan*), being sent to remote production units (*renmin gongshe*) or were displaced in individual farmer households (*fensan chadui*). Zhou Enlai’s argued already back in 1963 for the *fensan chadui* because it was much cheaper than the settlement in military farms. This form of resettlement was definitely the most cruel one – especially for women. The film by Joan Cheng¹⁵ “*Xiuxiu*”

¹⁴ *Laosanjie* translates into “old three school classes” and refers to the high school graduates of the classes 1966-68 who were the main target of the rustication mass movement during the Cultural Revolution. Often they also belonged to the group of Red Guards.

¹⁵ “*Xiuxiu*” was first shown on 22.2.1998 during the international film festival in Berlin. It is based on the book of the Shanghai writer Yan Geling. Yan (*1956) who grew up in Chengdu, went to dance in the army at the age of 12. In an interview with the author Yan said, that most of the suicides of female *Zhiqing* in the countryside were motivated by the lost dignity after being raped. Yan Geling herself did not had to participate in the mass migration because her brothers participated.

describes very clearly the suicidal atmosphere of the fensan chadui. I will not go into detail here since much has been written on these differences already (Bernstein 1977; Scharping 1981; Chan 1985; Liu 1987; Mitsuyuki and Selden 1988/89; Liu 1995, 1998; Shi and He 1994, 1995; Jiang and Ashley 2000; Sausmikat 2001; Yang 2000). Women with bad class backgrounds or no *guanxi* (protecting networks) to powerful people were displaced to peasant households, where they were expected to “unite” with the peasants and adapt to misogynist practices. Therefore, the women did not really have had a choice – their choices depended very much on their family background. When women met in gender advocacy projects some 20 years after their fierce struggle during the Cultural Revolution, questions of being a victim or culprit sometimes occurred to be neutralized by being committed to the female cause. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that “migration” during the Cultural Revolution always carried a certain degree of force.

Generation: Many scholars on China apply the term generation without differentiation. They speak of the “Cultural Revolution (CR) generation”, but this does not mean that the same historical background produces a somehow homogeneous political mainstream, since groups never been homogeneous, neither during the CR nor afterwards. But the common ground is the historical stimulus, or the “need for interpretation” of a certain experienced reality, the “generation as an actuality”. Karl Mannheim pointed out that we have to differ between people of the same age cohort and people which are influenced by the same historical event. His term “generation as an actuality” describes different “forms of the *intellectuals and social response to an historical stimulus* experienced by all in common” (Mannheim 1928/1952, p. 304). Li Cheng highlighted the importance to distinguish between political elite generation and political generation (Li 2000, pp. 1-40)¹⁶. The so-called Fourth Generation of leadership (which is said to be represented by Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, amongst others) is defined as the “CR generation”, but Li argued that there are many subgroups inside this generation.

Therefore this term confronts two dangers: it is a political term which shall justify certain legitimacy for political power, and it brings with it the danger of ideological generalizations. Especially the members of the so-called *Zhiqing* or *Laosanjie* were highly exploited by the government during the 1990s. Some critics see already in the use of the term “generation” a power propaganda which tries to mobilize people to cultivate communist ethics and support a certain power elite¹⁷. As a result, we may observe that defining generations is not only the business of social scientists but also of politicians. It is closely linked to concepts of legitimacy and claims to power. The book by the well-known author Yang Fan *The Third Generation of the People’s Republic of China* (1991) was written, according to the foreword, to re-establish the moral legitimacy of the “Third generation of leadership” after the Tiananmen massacre.

Having said this we can use this concept for looking at the women who experienced the big resettlement program during the Cultural Revolution by

¹⁶ Li defined the Fourth Generation of leaders as born between 1941-1956.

¹⁷ Zilin Dong in Wang (1995, pp. 172-181).

keeping in mind the importance of same historical stimulus, the differentiation in subgroups, and the danger of becoming used for political and ideological reasons. Keeping this in mind it will become clear throughout the article why this generation is especially sensitive for the danger of “being used” by political power.

The beginning of a new era of women’s activism – 1980s and 1990s

The following summary will highlight some core characteristics of the new Chinese women’s activism which were led by a certain generation of women¹⁸. For a better understanding the main actors in the field of women’s activism will be introduced.

These women often had to compromise and cooperate with high level authorities in order to get permission to organize. Not-Governmental Organization as a term itself was not known at that time – but in fact these first initiatives correspond much more to the meaning of NGOs as groups getting organized to raise awareness than later NGOs which are more located in third sector economies. Nevertheless, Diana Fu very clearly analyzed the process in which some of the women’s organizations are bent to the party “cage” of discourse when trying to “give women” (especially migrants) a voice (Fu 2009, pp. 527-561). Some women were able to accept this compromise, others were not. Nevertheless we have to keep in mind that the umbrella-function of the National Women’s Federation and the integration of NGOs into the state body not always meant restriction of their authority or independency. The process of institutionalization of women’s initiatives in the long run meant a tremendous change for women.

1 Elite activism – The root for the new women’s activism of the 1980s lies in a rebellion against anachronistic ideology. The establishment of feminist studies in China – as in most of the socialist countries – had to face the same task: the struggle with the taboo to put gender or sex above the category of class. But during the reform period, the changes in the role of the state in relation to the economy and society did make it increasingly difficult for state-derived feminism to steer an upward path for women¹⁹. It was pointed out clearly by National Women’s Federation cadres, that old theories have to be renewed by paying attention to the new realities. Inside the framework of Marxism, it was encouraged to develop new approaches. Very quickly, the establishment of organizations outside the state framework (i.e. by the well-known women scholar Li Xiaojiang²⁰) challenged the official representation body for women, the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF). These developments were paralleled by the challenge of the orthodox-Marxian paradigm of class category. During the time of the hot discussions on

¹⁸ Generation is used in the sense of Karl Mannheim and corresponds with age cohorts of people born between 1948-1953.

¹⁹ For the examination of the changing role of the ACWF see Howell (2002, pp. 43-56).

²⁰ Li tried to develop her own approach to “(Chinese) Marxist women studies“ and from 1984 onwards organized some conferences and informal meetings at the Zhengzhou university which challenged the notion of the already finished liberation process of women in socialist China (Sausmikát 1995, Spakowski 1996).

Marxist humanism in 1983, women tried to develop different interpretations of the relationship between Marxism and women studies²¹. Especially during the “Second national conference on women studies theory” in 1986, it was encouraged to break taboos and criticize orthodox views. Some scholars argued that Marxism and women studies did not have anything in common, others saw women studies as a fundamentally new science and others designed Marxist women studies to develop a Marxism liberation theory (Interview of the author with Li Jingzhi, member of *Fulian*, 17.5.1993, Beijing; Du 2001, p. 145). The ACWF occupied a hybrid position towards indigenization, because on the one hand they tried to integrate women’s liberation theory into the new reform policy and highlighted women’s contributions to the economic reform process, on the other hand they had to look for a new theoretical approach to explain the gender inequity during the reform process. Without exploring the structural roots of gender inequity and revising Marxist analysis, the remaining possibility for exploring inequity was to focus on defects and weaknesses of women themselves.

This rise of academic rebellion was accompanied by the establishment of the first non-state women initiatives. They were very important for the overall development of equality in a society, where social inequalities grew rapidly with the implementation of market economy. They were also important for gender lobbying, self help, emancipation, awareness raising, and practical help in all areas of life. Therefore, they pioneered a new era in Chinese political history and played a crucial role for the emergence of participatory spaces in the China of the 1980s and 1990s.

The women who started these initiatives all had experienced the Cultural Revolution and most of them the displacements and migration to the hinterland. One of the first established initiatives was the *Non-governmental women studies research association* (led by Li Xiaojiang, Zhengzhou 1985, *Funü yanjiu minjian tuanti*) (Sausmikat 1995). Other followed: The *Shaanxi Women’s Marriage and Family Research Association* in 1986 (led by Gao Xiaoxian), the *Jinglun Family Center* (a hotline for victims of domestic violence and legal problems (founded by Chen Yiyun in 1988), the *Beijing women’s studies center’s hotline* (1991, a hotline for women who have difficulties in coping with the fast economic and social change, later called “MAPLE”) (Sausmikat 2001, *Nüxing yanjiu* 1992, pp. 22-23, Croll 1995, pp. 173-174), the *Forum for Rural Women* in 1993 (Xie Lihua, former journalist, *Nongjia nü baishitong*) or the *Club for Female Migrants (Dagongmei zhi jia)* – initiated by the same group of activists. Also, the first hotline for homosexuals started during the first half of the 1990s. During these years, women tried to organize outside the state framework. The very first starting point of the non-state initiatives was a clear bottom-up initiative to fight for the right to openly name gender inequalities. Since there were no external donors the initiatives could rely only on the urban university resources.

²¹ It is remarkable that in one of the first post-Cultural Revolution conferences, organized by the journal *Women of China* in 1984, the most prominent protagonist for reforming Marxism in order to promote democracy in China, the high ranking cadre, Yu Guanyuan, was the keynote speaker.

2 Self-help initiatives – Many self-help initiatives started, such as telephone hotlines, which were also affiliated mostly with universities and served as early organizing and networking method. They were targeted at psychological and practical counselling, focussed on topics such as health (but also female suicide) (Gao 2001, pp. 196-197), family conflicts, divorce, domestic violence and employment or educational training, especially for female migrants (or returned *zhiqing*). In fact they were the immediate reaction to the swelling migrants in the cities – they addressed problems women who formerly were sent down to the countryside could understand very easily. In the beginning, the MAPLE centre did not rely on state institutions like the Women’s Federation or the Youth League which managed to organize 3000 Hotlines by 2004. MAPLE started to work with a staff of 12 volunteers, and by 2000, there were already more than 100 women working in more than 5 different hotlines.

3 The UN conference converted state institutions into non-profit organizations (NPOs) and helped the state to regain control over non-state movements – Inside China, the influence of the Beijing conference on Chinese women is judged very diverse. Many saw overwhelmingly positive effects and benefits (Liu 2001, pp. 141-157; Zhang 2001, pp. 159-179; Spakowski 2005, pp. 47-65). The NGO-Forum of the World conference enabled Chinese women to interact with international women NGOs without leaving the country, fostered knowledge exchange, awareness raising and produced manifold co-operations. The Forum marked the beginning of much more independence from the state through foreign donorship. By the end of the 1990s, there should have been around 2000 women’s associations (Jin 2001, p. 131). After the UN conference, the founding of women’s groups was approved by the authorities without larger complications – all kinds of female associations were established (of women judges, women prosecutors, and women doctors).

Other criticise this event strongly – among them one of the pioneers of the first non-state initiatives of the 1980s. Li Xiaojiang interpreted the whole event as a huge propaganda event for a government which until that specific date ignored gender inequalities (Li 1996, pp. 97-99). For her, the conference marked a fundamental turning point for the development of women’s activism in China. It can even be argued that the UN conference did not strengthen but weakened independent groups.

In fact, this conference had tremendous impact on bottom-up movements. Since that conference, the National Women’s Federation named itself the “biggest NPO of the world”. Lipinski (2006) interprets this proclamation as a method to address the new task of the former mass organization. Since the Federation was challenged with the task of establishing itself as a modern organization which represents the interests of all Chinese women it was necessary to conquer the NGO realm of women’s organizations. Simultaneously, they wanted to become a responsible “partner of the international development cooperation” (Lipinski 2006, p. 8). Very quickly, the National Women’s Federation became an umbrella organization which pressed for reforms on the legal side (the first law entirely devoted to women’s rights dates from 1991) and simultaneously tried to redefine itself as the protector for “informal and more vulnerable new social organizations” (Croll 2001, p. 35).

4 Limited success for women NPOs – Today, 15 years later, hopes and projections of Chinese women associations have vanished. With the overall “strong hand” on any kind of Civil Society Organization also women NGOs have felt the growing control of the state. Only some of the early initiatives have grown enormously and opened up several new initiatives. One example is Xie Lihua’s NGO “Rural women knowing all”. Besides a journal for female migrants this project managed to establish several small side projects aimed at the empowerment of women: micro finance projects, projects for rising literacy rates and migrant initiatives. Also, a direct outcome of the NGO-forum of the UN conference was the women’s media watch network, initiated again by Xie Lihua and organized by her colleagues Feng Yuan and Guo Yanqiu. This network was one of the rare networks fully obligated to gender awareness-raising. They publicized many judicial cases which evidenced the existence of the misogynist attitudes in the Chinese society as well as in the political and social structures. Six years later, in 2001, Xie and her colleagues founded the “Cultural Development Centre for Rural Women”. Today, they have 43 full-time staff, in 2005 they managed to mobilize 2.5 Million Yuan (or US\$313.000). Another example of successful expansion is the Legal Counselling Centre at Beijing University, which takes a leading position in channelling new laws in favour of women.

5 State as the dominant facilitator in the field – Cooperation with the All-China Women’s Federation very often provided the necessary resources for the start-up. Nevertheless, the fact that the Federation itself is officially accepted as an NPO makes it especially difficult to speak of “independent women NPOs” in China. The old capacity building approach of the 1980s to “improve the quality of the women” (*tigao suzhi*²²) has not really changed until today. The governmental investments in the rural health and educational sector have had a strong effect in improving women’s status, but only in regions which were categorized as “very poor”. In most other regions the basic fight for survival provides an argument for further postponing gender sensitive policies.

Biographical experience and social activism

Keeping in mind this development, we can argue that the pioneering non-state women organizations are built on two pillars: university activities to challenge the states’ monopoly on defining liberation and self-help agencies for women who had a migration background. When women began to organize they had just returned from a long and bitter journey to revolution. As elaborated above, the term “generation” has to be used carefully. The women in question were “born” in the same “historical location”, which was characterized by a non-democratic, political environment. The social and political transformations planned by Mao and his followers were meant to be a concern of *several generations*. They learned many lessons important for their future life course. Two should be highlighted here (based on biographical interviews conducted between 1995-2001):

²² On the usage of the term *suzhi* as instrument of propaganda see especially Spakowski (2005, pp. 465-481).

1. They learned not to trust party propaganda. This is especially true for women who first believed in the revolutionary course and later experienced a kind of awakening by facing harsh realities. These people were chosen to become the “new vanguard of revolution”. They were engaged in the factional fights in the cities and later on were ordered to settle down in the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants. Young girls and women who arrived in the countryside just a few years after the big famine often had to realize that their arrival did not mean help but more burden and hunger for them. Also the death of Lin Biao in 1971 led to a widespread disillusionment among the Mao-believers. Later on, some of them even realized how they had been misused as political instruments by the elite in power. Moreover, after years of Spartan life in the countryside, these women suddenly found themselves in a society where femininity was again reemphasized, not only as a result of the rise of the consumer society but also because the government had decided to rehabilitate motherhood and housework as “typically female” occupations.

2. They learned how to fight for survival. Many women experienced deprivation, rape, punishment of all kinds, and humiliation by forced marriages. Even before forced migration and the start of mass migration, forced marriages were the reason why many of the female patriotic volunteers returned to the cities very quickly. During the 1980s they again had to fight humiliating stereotypes and criminalization. The term *zhiqing* even became a curse word. Again, many experienced sexual exploitation when they looked for ways to leave the wilderness. In the early 1980s, the National Women’s Federation even called for a stop of violence against women. Nevertheless, members of this generation reject to reflect on this aspect (and criticise movies like the above mentioned “Xiuxiu”) because they do not want to become stigmatized²³.

As mentioned above, it is not my ambition to generalize the experience of a whole generation of women. In my former publications I described in detail the different reflections which are either based in different biographical experiences or in the different strategies to cope with the present. The two “lessons learned” mentioned here just pinpoint two extremes on the continuum of chances to integrate their experiences into a changing society which only accepted a limited space for the diversity of experiences. When the main message the propaganda machine produces focuses on the “third generation of revolutionaries” who fought for the modernization of the country, the highly controversial character (Red Guard/ *Zhiqing*) as well as the gender aspect (oppression of sex identities) and the deportation belonged to the sensitive part of remembering.

A crucial question therefore was if they could re-enter urban society – either by mobilizing “social capital” (or resources) or by integrating into the highly advertised group of revolutionaries. Generally speaking, identification as a “victim” or an agent of history determined the initial move to become active. We will see in the case studies which fields of action were chosen by whom. How did

²³ Some interviewees even described the complicated return procedures as much more difficult and traumatic than their rustication. More detailed discussion on the stereotypes can be found in Sausmikat 2002.

women behave who strongly identified with state-propagated generation collective of *Laosanjie*? How do women organize who were strongly traumatized by violence and had no possibility to integrate into the collective of heroes? How do women organize who managed to build up a career inside the system and later were identified as culprit? We cannot address here the complexity of questions – but we will make a first attempt.

The women who first became active after the Cultural Revolution started as an elite closed circle. During the 1980s, they were confronted with a fierce struggle to return to the cities, find a job, and make a living. As we have learned above, most of the first women's organisations focussed on rural issues or started as hotlines, especially for women migrating to the cities. Most of these actions were genuinely established by these women. As a very first attempt to categorize the different political actions of women who belong to the same generation we can identify three different kinds of actions:

- Women with former powerful ties in the political hierarchy managed to establish their own women's organization (Li Xiaojiang, Xie Lihua)
- Women who started to form any kind of collective to survive in the cities (collective self-help initiatives)
- Women who integrated their personal displacement experiences into their professions (writers, researchers).

Let us examine each action individually.

1) The two protagonists Li Xiaojiang (born 1951) and Xie Lihua (born 1952) perhaps represent two antagonistic directions of becoming active. If we examine the career of both women we can depict certain leadership qualities: both managed to become group leaders in the countryside. But here the similarities already end. Li grew up in an urban academic environment within a leading cadre family with connection to the US. Xie was born in the countryside and suffered from being the second daughter of a relatively poor peasant family in Shandong, having to subordinate to her younger brother.

Also, both belonged to very different class categories. Whereas Li managed to escape the destiny of "black classes" by strategically using her family networks, Xie was not under pressure to whitewash her class background. She became a Red Guard leader in her secondary school, did not participate in the mass migration movement and went to the countryside as a member of the army. Li's father was paraded in the streets by young Red Guards humiliated by the cap and a placard around his neck identifying him as enemy of the revolution. Xie went to the *jianshe bingtuan* – to the reconstruction army camps in South Yunnan – a much better choice compared to the displacement of urban youth to remote individual farmer s households. Li "was assigned to settle down in the rural areas", as she herself wrote (Li 1994, p. 110), and tried to steel herself to show she would become as strong and powerful as men. Finally she managed to become a production team leader.

During the Cultural Revolution both made the crucial experience which finally led them to become leaders for the women movement. Both had to cope with the task of behaving like men and even be tougher than them. Both wanted to be strong and "never shed tears" (Li 1994, p. 110) while enduring hardship, physical torturous work or deprivation.

What did they do in the 1980s?

Both began their careers in the first half of the 1980s. Whereas Li belonged to the first batch of students in 1978 and managed to teach at Zhengzhou University since 1982, Xie returned to the city in 1984, part time went to university, part time worked as a reporter for the party magazine *Women's Daily* (*funü ribao*). Li was very quickly promoted to the position of assistant professor in the university her parents belonged to.

These two women had a very different approach to women's liberation: Whereas Xie belongs to the group of women who think "strategically"²⁴ and closely cooperated with the Women's Federation (in fact Xie was part of them), Li after a few attempts very early rejected cooperation. Xie believed in the necessity to first liberate the rural women which meant to educate them. Li's departure was the superstructure (*Überbau*). She established her own women's research institute to challenge fundamental assumption of the party state and criticised the socialist "top-down" liberation by the party. Whereas Xie very easily could integrate in the dominant discourse of the generation as "the backbone of the country" because they "modernized" the country, Li refused to integrate in any kind of mainstream debate. In a way Xie's chosen path confirms some of my former findings on the powerful attraction to belong to the patriotic collective of "modernizers". Especially women who narrated their life as being ruled by the strong identification with the former revolutionary movement and who managed to gain access to powerful positions during the 1970s demonstrated the belief of being chosen to help the hinterland and deliver development aid (Sausmikat 2001, p. 272-276). Xie left the *Women's Daily* and in 1993 established her own magazine *Rural women knowing all* (*nongjia nü baishitong*), which also was administered under the umbrella of the Federation. In the first edition²⁵ she declared that the aim of that publication is "to raise the ability for competition of rural women" which again corresponds with the Federation's aim to raise the "*suzhil* quality" of women for competing in the market²⁶.

Xie tried to establish a voice or a lobby for rural women and her approach very much resembles classical capacity building and development aid. This magazine, as well as the numerous follow-up projects (including a training centre for rural women, migrants club, and research on female suicides), were a big success and are still very much welcomed by the huge target group of rural women and female migrants. In 2005, Xie even was proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize. Her association perfectly fits into the so-called "second type" of Chinese civil society organizations, characterized by Kang Xiaogang as follows: limited preferential treatment in taxation, large gap between the supply of and demand for NGO services, resources primarily come from overseas, mobilization top-down intervention to improve human welfare, cooperation with local governments and international NGOs (Kang 2001). Ironically, Xie as a former Red Guard, is training

²⁴ For a more detailed elaboration on that *celüexing*/strategic, see Hsiung et al. (2001, pp. 11-12).

²⁵ First edition of *Nong jia nü baishi tong* (1993), p. 64.

²⁶ The national campaign "Double study, double competition (*shuangxue, shuangbi*)" had already started in 1989 (Zheng 1996, pp. 3-10).

today rural women to become village heads. In some cases the top-down design of bringing rural women in leading political positions collided with the intrinsic need of the selected women. The top-down measures to ensure or enforce participation do not always meet the needs of young rural women (Liu 2008).

Li as a pioneer of the women's movement cared very much about gender identity questions and the agency question. In her view it was necessary to awaken the women and foster a self-liberation of women who experienced top-down liberation. She mainly engaged in the challenging of socialist emancipation theories and linked the development of women's studies in China directly with the experiences of her generation. In her view, women of the older generation received a good education but had to suffer from realization of their abilities because of the "Great Leap Forward". The younger generation (she does not specify cohorts) sees women's emancipation as something given and lack social commitment. The generation "in between" – her generation – had suffered from the Cultural Revolution, getting no formal education, and when married again being absolutely dependent on the husband. Several historical antagonisms can be found in this generation, as she said (Li 1988, p. 26). Following this argument she declared that this would be the reason why this generation would be the "backbone of the socialist construction" – a statement very typical for many of my interviewees (Li 1988, p. 26). But – we have to keep in mind that these statements were products of their time – made at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. The debate developed from more historical or political topics like women's lib movement or marriage and family to more fundamental questions of systematic renewal of society (Frick 1995, pp. 11-42). Later on, she widened her argument and became one of the most powerful advocates for "localized" women studies. She not only being a critic of the UN-world conference on women but additionally looking for creating a specific "Chinese feminism" which perceives women's studies in China only as part of the more encompassing "study of humanity" (*renxue*) (Spakowski 2011, p. 40).

Therefore, she neither integrated in the modernization paradigm for this generation nor cooperated with existing state bodies for women's issues. Li represents all the women who were not willing to integrate into the mainstream propaganda of the 1990s and therefore were marginalized inside the women's movement. Nevertheless, after experiencing confrontation not only with the Federation, the state and the international community, she again relied on the same strategies which rescued her before – her specific *guanxi*. With the help of old networks she managed to open up her own "independent" research centre in Dalian.

Both life courses have been strongly influenced and characterized by the gender identification question resulting from their resettlement experiences. But perhaps stronger have been the lessons learned in the relationship with state authorities. Both leading women activists exemplify two ways how to arrange with the new post-revolutionary setting. Whereas Li developed a kind of "self-strengthening" psychology which later on also influenced her concept of a "Chinese feminism" becoming a powerful counterpart of Western feminism, Xie managed to smoothly integrate in mainstream discourses and develop her own modernization path for

women. Both strategies also reflect in a broader sense the political discussion in the intellectual elite how to arrange with the Western forces.

2) Many women who first got active in the hotlines were also women who formerly were displaced to the countryside and later managed to return into the cities. Their first motive was to help women with common destinies as well as other migrant women. In 1991, the Beijing women's studies centre hotline – later MAPLE – was set up for women who couldn't cope with the adaption to the city life or who needed other psychological help (Sausmikat 1993, p. 58). They tried to “assist women especially under the age of 30 who are captured between tradition and new chances” and to support “independent decisions” for developing strong self consciousness (Interviews 1994; Croll 1995, pp. 173-174). Also, Xie Lihua's “Dagongmei's home” claimed to empower migrant women. Other women's NGOs which started as hotlines were the Jinglun Family Centre (founded 1988 by Prof. Chen Yiyun) and the Legal Counselling Centre for Women and Children in Yunnan/ Xishuangbanna.

For many who sought help it was important to know that the association was not linked to the National Women's Federation. For the customers, the atmosphere of trust was essential, often they wanted to remain anonymous and be sure that their conversation will not be controlled by state organs. Only under these conditions, an individual private space without social or moral constraints could have been opened. In 1994, Long Sihai, the former director of the Legal Counselling Centre for Women and Children in Xishuangbanna (Yunnan), told me for example that women who wanted to get divorced (a major problem for women who originally came from the cities and wanted to return) can get moral support, practical advice and psychological help whereas the Women's Federation office clerks would criticize these women for their failed marriage. Therefore, people like Ms Deng who worked for MAPLE, consciously decided to work for a non-state organization.

Ms Deng²⁷ was one of the women I interviewed over a period of three years. She is the daughter of a cadre who was condemned during the first month of the Cultural Revolution. She belonged to the “black classes” and the group of deportees 1966, suffered from public humiliations. Even more drastically than in the case of Li she was openly humiliated together with her mother, paraded through the streets with a poster around the neck and the yin-yang haircut. She was deported to the countryside, raped and rescued herself by marrying a handicapped peasant. For her, the displacement was identical with a deadly peril, living in a city meant protection of her womanhood. In order to return to the city she divorced and married again in the city. But this marriage also did not last, later she married a third time. Her daughter is from her first husband. For Ms Deng the pure physical humiliation as a woman is reigning her memory – she is narrating her life from the position of a “true victim” – somebody who beyond any doubt can claim to belong to the groups of the victims. Ci Jiwei explained “...the body is ever sensitive to pain, and pain dictates its own laws of memory and forgetfulness” (Ci 1994, p. 97). The activity in the newly established hotline centre in Beijing gave her a strong

²⁷ Name changed.

sense of belonging and self-consciousness, where she – as she said – had the feeling that she was able to advocate the women’s concern. At that time, these concerns were quite conservative speaking from a European standpoint. She was proud to exhibit her sense for aesthetics, to openly advertise femininity, to show motherly love, or to speak about marriage frustration. But for China, this new “femininity” showed that these women managed to cope with the new urban city life and represented models for new market society modern women.

Another aspect was the new “memory collective” which can be established through these hotlines. Similar to Guo Xiaoxian’s Shaanxi hotline or the early Legal Counselling Centre of Guo Jianmei, women found a new familiarity and home among these women of their generation. Since they created a link between the urban and the rural communities by giving advice also to many former *Zhiqing* who did not manage to return to the cities, they represented a powerful force which united past and present.

3) During the 1990s, the migration experience was also integrated into the individual professions of women of this generation. This was especially the case within the academies and in literature. One example is the research project on “School education for rural girls in the Northwestern areas”. This project was organised by the Beijing University Women’s Research Centre, the Chinese Foundation for the Development of Children and Youth and the Research Centre for Development. One of the core initiators of that project belonged to the group of girls who believed in the revolutionary mass movement, participated in the “big exchange of revolutionary ideas” (*da chuanlian*) and together with her schoolmates went to the countryside to settle down in the remote area. The most suffering part for her had been to stop school education. Having experienced this restriction, and after being contacted by others who felt the need to care for the women in the region where they formerly were sent to, she felt obliged to commit herself for that cause. She stated: “Once you manage to provide national school education for all girls, this will be the solution for all women problems in the backward areas” (Zang 1994, p. 46). More recent examples include research projects of formerly *Zhiqing* women dealing with female workers rights and the situation of migrant workers, political participation of women (Li Huiying), the feminization of agricultural labour (Zuo 2005) or the sexual division of labour (Jin 2002, 2006). Some of these women even analyse the period of the Cultural Revolution under gender aspects (like Jin Yihong, Zuo Jiping). There are several other women who cannot all be mentioned here.

In literature, it was much more complicated. As Emily Honig already pointed out the first half of the 1990s saw the birth of the memoir literature type which coincided with the explosion of sex literature – “how to do it, with whom it is appropriate, and at what age it is acceptable” (Honig 2003, pp. 143-175). This produced – to use Honig’s words – a “sexing of the Cultural Revolution” where personal testimonies and reflections produced sexual histories. This observation may be only half-true because not all literature which was available in the West was also available for the Chinese readership in mainland China. Nevertheless, female writers of that generation already during the 1980s started to write about sex and sexuality. Many of the first pioneer female writers of that generation

rejected to be labelled as “feminist” because they wanted to be seen as writers and not as writing on behalf of a certain interest group, or, as Zhang Kangkang put it, felt that this term was pathological²⁸. Since there was a strong tendency to break with traditional taboos concerning sexuality and oppression of women in the countryside, critics felt that this literature was putting a strong bias on this generation. There was also the critique that the “wound literature” or “reportage literature” of the 1980s creates the false image of women of this generation. Others were afraid that their readership would suffer or narrow down from this labeling. Nevertheless, one of these writers, Lu Xing'er²⁹, became well known as representing the “feminist literature” because she focused very early on topics like love, marriage, and sexuality of the female migrated youth (Leung 1994, p. 134; Sheng 1995, p. 838). She addressed problems of abortion, the difficulty of women who experienced forced migration to develop emotional empathy, and the specific characteristics of female intellectuals of this generation. She describes the typical crises of women of this generation: divorce and/or marriage for returning to the cities, fight for education, difficulties to combine the old “fighter/ soldier” identification with motherly duties and the lost of belief in happiness (Lu 1987a, Lu 1987b).

The other side of the coin was the stigmatization of women of this generation by their male counterparts. *Zhiqing* women became tragic heroes and were used as an “excuse” for this exploited generation. Similar to the Hitler children soldiers of the German *Flakhelfer* generation (born between 1926-30), who were described as tragic heroes of blind patriotism by German memoir literature³⁰, women protagonists of the *Zhiqing* generation were martyrs of the “good cause of patriotism”. Psychologically, they served a “healing patriotism”³¹. These tragic heroes were bare of any kind of personality and navigated directly into a useless death. Kong Jiasheng is an example: His women heroes were directed by the purpose to highlight tragedy and heroism. Female heroism is clearly distinguished from male heroism: “I believe women can endure hunger and cold better than men. Another factor in my thinking was that women symbolize the power to continue the human race”³². The “moral integrity” of these women was characterized in their endurance of hardship and deprivation (*zhidao chiku*) and their distinction as obedient and loyal work force. Women of this generation criticized this stigmatization and highlighted their responsibility towards their children and the

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of the term “women’s literature” (*nüxing wenxue*) see Sausmikat (1995, pp. 169-175). Around the mid 1990s it was agreed that this term could be applied to all literature written by women (Sheng et al. 1995, pp. 803-854).

²⁹ Lu Xing'er (1949-2004), sister of Lu Tianming, left her hometown Shanghai in 1968 and in 1978 managed to move to Beijing and study at the central academy of drama (Leung 1994, pp. 133-143).

³⁰ Bude (1987, p. 196ff) analysed the development of German memoir literature as well as sociological research on the *Flakhelfer* generation. This generation was commanded to the “suicide mission” shortly before the loss of the war during their youth.

³¹ This is following the interpretation of Lucian W. Pye and Anne Thurston (Pye 1986, p. 606).

³² Kong Jiasheng in Leung (1994, p. 77).

future generations. They want to hand down their ambition and stamina³³. This generation is highly stigmatized and misused by official propaganda.

Only before this background it is perspicuous that many female writers of the so-called “new realism” want to portray the “average women as counter-image to the well-merchandized heroes and to portray female protagonists who do not fit into stereotyped images³⁴.

Conclusion

Remembering is understanding (Today, we are threatened by losing the existence of history itself, as far as it can be understood and therefore be remembered, Hannah Arendt, 1951)

On the 26th of March 2011 all member of the sent-down youth generation must have felt like returning to Cultural Revolutionary times: cadres in Chongqing were ordered to “go down to the countryside” to “work, live and eat” together with the peasants. The quick rising of the Maoist camp in the party consists of many people belonging to the sent-down youth generation. Even the next president Xi Jinping belongs to that generation – at the age of 15 he was sent down from Beijing to the province of Shaanxi to perform hard manual labor.

This message reminds us of the power of “memory collectives”. How can these old Cultural Revolutionary slogans find their way into the highly modernized China of the year 2011? Why do these policies still bear so much attraction? This time, people who formerly were sent-down are the ones who now send-down.

If we turn to the social activism of women of this generation we have analyzed a distinctive relation between the biographical experience and the level of action. Being part of a generation which is strongly influenced in its youth by experiences of political hysteria and mass migration can form collective bonds in very different directions. Here we only have highlighted three levels of action which are triggered by the experience of involuntarily migration as well as mass migration: mobilize to raise the level of gender consciousness, organize for mutual support, write and research for public reflection.

The Cultural Revolution with its misogynist practices and the mass migration policies both formed a specific affinity for Chinese women to be sensitive for gender discrimination. Therefore, they developed a strong need to become active as long as they sensed the political space and the necessary resources for any kind of activism. Mostly it started out as self-help but later on developed as empowering networks for mutual support. Finally, public reflection on this highly stigmatized group led to defence actions of women who want to counterbalance stigmatization. Again, many feel obliged to reproduce the lessons they learned for the younger generation.

³³ Title of the special edition of the *Zhongguo Funü* 1994, No. 1-12.

³⁴ One example is the writer Chi Li (born in 1957), who created the figure of Lala in *You are like a river* (*Ni shi yi tiao he*, 1991). This woman is neither soft nor motherly, nor devotional and altruistic (Müller 1996, pp. 164-65). Chi Li herself went to the countryside in 1974 and was discriminated against because of the bad class background of her father who was labeled a “rightist” (Sheng et al. eds. 1995, pp. 1000-1010).

One specifically interesting aspect discussed here is the relationship between biographically formed political consciousness and the relationship with the nation-state or party authorities. These women managed to become independent idea or knowledge entrepreneurs of their own cause which has its roots in a fundamental scepticism towards state-led movements, especially concerning women's liberation.

Wei Shiqin directly links the new era of women's movement to the experiences made during the Cultural Revolution. For her, the most important lesson learned during these years was to enable women to independently earn their own living and which in her view is the most important accomplishment for the integration of women into the modernization process (Wei 1995, p. 196). Wei rejects any explanation which uses the argument of efficiency to lay off women during times of economic crisis. For her, this kind of argument is based on the same mistaken logic which was the root for the mass migration movement: "During the Cultural Revolution, aims like equal rights, full employment and sufficient food were substituted by personality cult, privileges of political status, the big social gap between the "five red elements" and the "nine black elements", and the forced migration of students, civil clerks, academics, men and women with their children, who had to hunger and do useless sometimes destructive work. (...) The alleged antagonism between women's employment and efficiency actually do not exist" (Wei 1995, p. 195).

This quote once again highlights the importance to reconnect personal experiences and policy programs related to gender policies. If we lean back and try to summarize the developments in women activism throughout the past 20-25 years we clearly can depict the integration of most of the women NGOs into the overall trend to subsume non-governmental organizations into the third sector welfare, development and poverty alleviation programs. The 2009 anthology of *Chinese women NGOs* edited by Gao Xiaoxian (Shaanxi research association for women and family) and Xie Lihua wants to put emphasis on the fact that mature and premature women NGOs have to alliance and learn from each other in order to promote gender equality (Gao, Xie 2009). Gao Xiaoxian highlighted that the characteristics of contemporary women's movement in China is among other to make use of the resources in the existing system and push for the incorporation of feminist issues into the mainstream discourse (like building a harmonious society and construct a new socialist countryside)³⁵.

This also reflects the urgency of policies dealing with the increasing impoverishment of especially the female population in China. The most recent international symposium "Chinese women organizing: Looking back, looking forward" in July 2010 in Beijing put a clear emphasis on rural women and migrants as well as on the discussion and display of activities concerning ethnic minorities.

³⁵http://www.eu-china.net/web/cms/upload/pdf/nachrichten/2010_05_13_wien_29092009_xiaoxian_gao.pdf, [cited 20.11.2010].

Simultaneously, networking and the state-of-the-art concerning the implementation of Gender studies into the curricula still was very high on the agenda.

Therefore, the current dominant women NGOs do fit very well in the states program to “establish a harmonious society” and fulfil their social welfare function. The critical phase of the WAD conferences (women in development) seems to be concluded³⁶.

As analysed above this direction of activism is led by women who learned how to compromise and think pragmatically. Fundamental questions important for effective gender equality like deprivation of rights, no equal access to land rights or corrupt economic or political practices are usually not tackled. These dominant voices are accompanied by the group of rebellious women who do not shy away from confrontations. They fight for clearly defined bottom-up approaches. Only very few of the earlier bottom-up initiatives managed to survive. One sad example is the Centre for Women’s Law Studies and Legal Services, which recently got shot down but continues to work under different label. True independence from the state only possible with strong alliances – the example of Li Xiaojiang’s long enduring fight for setting up independent institutions has shown that. Therefore, on the level of mobilization for gender awareness we find two poles of incorporated non-confrontative and confrontative initiatives. The success of these initiatives will again rely on the ability to meet biographical experiences of the generations to come.

Finally, this generation of women can be claimed to give rise to a new era of women activism in China by developing their own different coping strategies to their experienced of state-induced migration.

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³⁶ Zhang Naihua was the first who fostered the introduction of the WAD perspective. Later, Du Fangqin, Jin Yihong, Liu Bohong and other followed (Du 1993; Jin, Liu 1998).

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Prostitution and Migration in China

From Rehabilitation to Retribution

by

*Flora Sapio**

Abstract: Prostituted women are involved in the exchange between sex and money on one hand, and in the uncontrolled movement of people on the other. As a marginalized sub-group of women, and migrants, they are a paradigmatic figure of those who can pollute the social body, and disrupt a normative order, whereby each person should keep a well-defined place in society, both figuratively and literally. Due to these facts, prostitutes were and are still viewed with a substantial ambiguity. Prostitution in China is not considered criminal conduct but, regardless of the actual circumstances that led them to engage in commercial sex, sex workers can be detained administratively. PRC scholarship has discussed the concept of forced migration as it relates to international law, and prostitution has never been primarily perceived as a form of forced migration. However, ideas about the movement of persons, its voluntariness or lack thereof, have played a certain role in dictating the PRC response to sex work. Over time, welfarist and rehabilitative policies have been replaced by a punitive and vengeance-oriented approach. This article outlines early PRC approaches to prostitution and offers some speculations as to the reasons for their gradual shift.

Prostituted women are a marginalized sub-group of women, and a marginalized sub-group of migrants. Their lives are placed at the intersection of two precise phenomena: the exchange between sex and money on one hand, and the uncontrolled movement of people in large numbers on the other. Therefore, they were and still are a paradigmatic figure of those compelled to leave their place of residence. In the People's Republic of China (PRC), prostitution has never been primarily perceived as forced migration, a concept discussed for the most part by

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PRC scholarship in international law. However, ideas about the movement of persons, its voluntariness or lack thereof, have played a certain role in dictating the response to sex work.

This article describes how legal measures used on prostitution and internal migration have changed over time, moving from the domain of public welfare to that of public security. Two distinct periods can be identified in this respect. A first, and significantly shorter, period began in pre-Communist China and ended around the mid-1950s. During and soon after the civil war, prostitutes were conceived as belonging to the broader group of those displaced by war, famine or natural disasters. The fact they may have been victims of inland trafficking or have embarked upon prostitution to escape utter poverty was openly acknowledged. These variables induced the adoption of welfarist and rehabilitative policies, as prostituted women were first and foremost represented as victims.

Since the late 1950s, the partial success of anti-prostitution campaigns prompted a punitive and vengeance-oriented approach to sex work, whereby prostituted women came to be conceived as deviants. At the same time, restrictions on internal migration were posed, and detention on grounds of internal migration was introduced. After 1978, a rise in prostitution occurred, and the phenomenon was in part linked to internal migration. Migration and prostitution may have been forced upon women by poverty, internal trafficking or a combination of both. These considerations did not cause a reversal of responses adopted in the second half of the 1950s. Engagement in sex work and internal migration were mostly attributed to individual agency, which justified a revival of Mao-era punitive measures and their further entrenchment. As a consequence, prostitutes became a target of different forms of administrative detentive punishment.

Discourses on prostitution have considerably evolved since then, but this subgroup of migrants, be they Chinese or foreign nationals, continues to be viewed with a substantial ambiguity. Prostitution is not regarded as criminal conduct, but prostituted women can be detained administratively regardless of the actual circumstances that drove them to sex work. The balance between protecting the rights of these women, safeguarding public health, maintaining public order and managing migration flows is clearly tilted in favour of the latter.

The first section of this article outlines early approaches to prostitution. Next, I describe the process whereby welfarist measures adopted in the 1950s evolved to administrative detention. A third section compares police responses to prostitution by Chinese women versus prostitution by foreign women. I conclude by offering some speculations on the possible causes of such a shift in response. An in-depth analysis of the broader factors that prompted an increasing punitiveness, as well as an examination of law enforcement campaigns, are beyond the questions addressed in this special issue of “Deportees, Exiles and Refugees”.

The bestowal of rights

Long lines of malnourished people pushing carts loaded with all of their belongings were not an infrequent sight in war-ridden China, where armed conflicts, poverty or epidemics could be stronger than a person’s will to remain in

their home region. Hordes of displaced persons had already swarmed the cities and countryside at times of war and famine, so their existence was by no means a novelty. Nor were they conceived as forced migrants. In the 1940s, this concept had not yet emerged, whether in China or in Europe. Also, while it is true that they were fleeing war or famine, the internally displaced were holders of Chinese citizenship, who remained within the borders of what formally was still China. The solution devised by Communist base area governments to the problem of internal displacement was fraught by a built-in contradiction. Even though the concept of forced migration as such was not adopted by the Communists, contradictions displayed by their policy choices mirrored those that could be observed decades later, in different contexts.

The single biggest ambiguity concerned the category of citizenship, something that obviously still shapes the way migrants are thought of. This category became unusable in practice, because the internally displaced were Chinese citizens indeed. However, citizenship was not a sufficient criterion to decide who could lawfully reside in base areas. A migrant's condition of displacement and destitution did not automatically mean that he or she was entitled to obtain relief. Refugees were virtually made into non-citizens, and left without any protection.

Another significant inconsistency in the way displacees were perceived consisted in attributing agency to them. So-called wanderers (*youmin*) and refugees (*nanmin*) were defined as "people from outside the border area". Their migration to base areas was attributed to their "difficulties living in their place of origin without means of livelihood", a situation caused by natural disasters, war, or persecutions suffered due to their political stance. In short, these persons had no other choice but to move to a more hospitable place. Even so, the prevailing legal fiction was that vagrants and refugees had "*voluntarily migrate[d]*" to base areas (Shanganning Bianqu Zhengfu 1943, art. 2).

These two incongruities led to the drawing of a binary distinction between ethnically and nationally homogeneous persons. In turn, this distinction can be considered as an original feature of early Communist approaches to internal displacement, and more generally to social and political problems (Dutton 2005). Wanderers and refugees constituted an extremely variegated group, which may have included unwanted or even dangerous elements. Disguised among resistance fighters and peasant families, there may have been spies, as well as those who during their period of displacement had eked out a living by pilfering, begging, soothsaying and other similar means (Xibeiju 1941, p. 127). The latter were included in two sub-categories: vagrants (*youmin*) and loafers (*erliuzi*). Women who made a living by providing sexual services in exchange for money or commodities were considered as members of either sub-group of displacees (Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Zhengzhi Xueyuan Dangshi Jiaojiushi, n.d., p. 75). That displacees were "ordinary people (...) embedded in a particular social, political and historical context" (Turton 2003, p. 15) was taken into account. Nevertheless, such considerations did not always work in the displacee's interest.

Prostitutes instantiated destitution, and in this respect they were among those groups favored by CCP policies. However, Communists were averse to their social environment. Due to their trade, prostituted women came into contact with a high

number of men belonging to the most diverse milieus. Thus, they had ample opportunities to acquire information about Communist forces, and perhaps pass them on to the enemy. Besides, they could easily infiltrate women's organizations, slowing climbing their ranks (Jiluyu Bianqu Dangshi Gongzuo zu Bangongshi, Zhonggong Hebeishengwei Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui 1988, pp. 536-556). Prostituted women were inherently dangerous elements, which could have been used to disrupt Communist base areas from the inside. Such a danger was not just political: commercial sex facilitated the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Zhonggong Daliangshi Jinzhouqu Dangweishi Bangongshi 1990, pp. 154-155), which could have weakened combat forces and sapped their morale. The economic systems of base areas sustained themselves mostly through the production of tangible goods, and the presence of prostitution placed an obvious burden on the war economy. Exactly as diviners and usurers did, through their occupation prostitutes just moved money around, without creating any new wealth, that is without producing what could be eaten, drunk, worn, lived in or fired at the enemy. Aside from not engaging in productive occupations, prostitutes also had to support those living off them, be they their families or their pimps. All these costs indirectly weighed on hard-labouring peasants and fighters.

In principle, such representations would have been sufficient to either refuse admittance to prostitutes or to expel them from base areas. The discursive strategies and normative values adopted by the Chinese Communist Party, however, induced a will to change prostitutes' social environment, as aversive as it may have been. A prostitute's act of migrating to a base area may have been depicted as voluntary. However, engagement in sex work was constructed as being *involuntary*. Prostitutes were seen as victims of a society premised on income and gender inequality, and the blame for espionage, STDs and prostitutes' unwillingness to take part in production was thus obliquely placed on wealthier social strata. Sex work was considered an unavoidable consequence of those social polarizations that had resulted – for instance – in the sale of women by families driven to absolute poverty. Otherwise, women may have accepted the offer of a seemingly legitimate occupation only to find themselves cheated, abducted and forced into prostitution. If prostitutes were indeed a vulnerable group, they were not the naïve women portrayed in early Communist discourse (Hershatter 1997). Exactly as missionaries, Westerners and the Nationalist government had done before them, the CCP was using a similar set of discursive devices to shape its own subjects and put them to its preferred use.

In the spatial order of Western concessions and Chinese cities, prostitutes had occupied a marginal place, both figuratively and physically. Making a virtue out of necessity, the Communists saw that they were “potentially productive” (Gil and Anderson 1998, p. 131) members of society. Their ‘redemption’ could have also enlarged the party's consensus base. To fulfil their potential, prostitutes needed in the first place to be moved from the margins of society to its core. Therefore, when the moment came to decide who could be allowed in base areas, become a ‘citizen’ and enjoy those rights that came with ‘citizenship’, prostitutes were counted in, given political rights (Shaanxisheng Dang'anguan, Shaanxisheng Shehui Kexueyuan 1986, pp. 415-416), and a second chance too. Their inclusion in the

new order of base areas could be achieved only through their elimination. Migrants could be simply resettled. However, before they could enjoy a life as ‘full citizens’, prostitutes had to become different persons. They needed rehabilitation, as in New China there would be no place for the sexual exploitation of women.

1. Rehabilitation

The commitment to eradicating commercial sex was nothing new. The very same goal had been shared by the Nationalist government, as it constituted an obliged passage along the road to modernity. To reach this goal, both the Nationalists and Communists devised a set of similar legal or quasi-legal institutions.

Under the Nationalist government, rehabilitation of prostitutes went through their registration, compulsory medical testing, arrest and – at least in theory – internment in rehabilitation institutions before they could return to society (Henriot 2001, p. 319). The Nationalists were not seriously committed to eliminating or even reducing prostitution, and on the whole this task had been a marginal component of their criminal policy (Henriot 2001, p. 332). That the PRC placed a greater weight on the issue did not mean that this entity had a higher moral stance than Republican China. In Republican China, prostitution had been a source of revenue. In the PRC, the involvement of organized criminal groups in sex work was seen as a source of political instability, as gangs were rightly or wrongly seen as politically hostile, and linked to foreign espionage organs. The political assassinations that punctuated the first year of the PRC (Dutton 2005) made it clear that all promiscuous places where terrorists may have hidden – brothels included – had to be checked or closed down. Methodologies adopted by the Nationalists were not given up.

As displacees underwent resettlement, prostitutes were instead rounded up, subject to compulsory medical testing, and interned. However, until the mid-1950s the rationale behind these measures was rehabilitative. Surely, prostitutes’ stay in foster homes (*shourong jiaoyangyuan*) amounted to being deprived of freedom. Internment was adopted not only to reform them, but also because after the closure of brothels they had no place where to go. During and after their rehabilitation prostitutes were given an opportunity to recount the story of how they entered or were forced into the trade. They had a chance to tell how it felt to be a prostitute, reflect upon the harm traffickers and pimps had done to them, and describe how their behaviour may have affected society. Most importantly, they could express their hope in a brighter future, and make a plan to change.

All of this took place at struggle sessions (*douzhenghui*), in which prostitutes and the community were meant to hold traffickers and brothel owners accountable for their actions, or at quieter meetings (*zuotanhui*) held among prostituted women. Such dialogues between prostitutes and pimps were not spontaneous. Like actors in a play, prostitutes performed their role of women who fled a childhood of serfdom or a state of utter destitution only to fall into the proverbial fire pit of sex work. Traffickers, pimps and madams – whom they now could openly accuse – presented themselves as exploiters. Neither prostitutes nor their Mas and Pas could depart

from the script and speak words of their own (Hershatter 1997). The entire operation was however orchestrated to facilitate prostitutes' inclusion in the community. Deviating from expected behaviours would have meant refusing an offer to regain a 'normal' life. Such an approach to rehabilitation was highly normativist, and meant to protect the state and society from harms connected to prostitution, namely drug addiction, syphilis, crime, compulsive gambling and espionage (Zhongyang Gong'anbu 1950). However, the plight and material needs of these women were also taken into account. While traffickers, pimps and certain customers were made a target of administrative or criminal punishment, prostitutes were helped reunite with their families, their marriages were arranged or they were given an occupation.

In the early 1950s, prostitutes were no longer regarded as a sub-population of refugees. The end of the civil war allowed a gradual resettlement of this group, and also the adoption of policies specifically targeted at prostitution. At this point in time, the conceptual category of *nanmin* did not cover 'women who engaged in prostitution', and consequently the two groups were conceived of as independent entities. Both groups however were still regarded as recipients of welfare.

2. Campaigns

Endeavours to rehabilitate prostitution took place gradually because, by their own admission, the Communists did not have sufficient information about the cities they came to rule, and they were also plagued by a shortage in police forces. Even so, between 21 and 22 November 1949, Beijing municipality managed to close down 224 brothels in a massive twenty-four hour police operation. To ensure a similar success, other cities had to take a more realistic approach and reduce pleasure houses to a minimum, before launching local campaigns. As a first step, brothels were licensed and prostitutes were registered. The fact that such operations were performed by the police signalled that the issue of prostitution was now conceived in terms of public order, and posed the risk that, sooner or later, the regime's benevolent stance on the problem may have changed. In fact, police investigations revealed that a number of women were migrants, or had started to work in houses of prostitution after escaping natural disasters, war or famine (Zhu 1999, p. 176). At the time this circumstance was not considered relevant (Zhonggong Beipingshi 1949). A nexus between forced migration and prostitution may have been important in the 1940s, but now prostitutes were no longer conceived as a sub-population of refugees because anti-prostitution campaigns focussed on brothels, and hence on residential prostitutes. The authorities were aware of the existence of a number of unregistered and highly mobile prostitutes, but this subgroup was not the initial focus of campaigns. This choice was justified in terms of feasibility. "Prostitution is a social problem that cannot be definitely solved at once", authorities in Beijing acknowledged, "therefore we have decided to concentrate efforts on dealing with visible prostitutes, and hidden prostitutes shall be dealt with separately" (Zhonggong Beipingshi 1949).

The number of registered prostitutes was easier to calculate, as the police had been collecting data about them for some time, estimating that in Shanghai alone

women engaged in sex work numbered between 50,000 and 100,000 (Ditmore 2006, p. 438). Unregistered prostitutes were obviously more difficult to spot. The strategy adopted by Beijing, it was recommended, should have been considered, but could not be mechanically adopted in cities where conditions were quite different. (Zhongyang Gong'anbu 1950). A consequence of such a gradualist and localist approach was that enforcement drives were launched at different times in different cities. Obviously the word – and rumours – about the closure of brothels spread among sex workers, and it is difficult not to imagine they would not try and anticipate police moves by going into hiding or even fleeing to other cities. This is what, for instance, happened in Shanghai. The initial dual focus on both registered and unregistered prostitutes had not led to the expected result, so by the end of 1951, more than two years after the campaign's launch, raids of unregistered prostitutes began taking place (Cong and Chen 1993, pp. 14-30). A loosely similar pattern has been reported for other urban centres. In Xi'an the campaign initially targeted registered prostitutes, while it was suggested that unregistered ones be eliminated gradually at a later stage (Liu 1993, p. 122). In Canton, enforcement campaigns were conducted in close succession, signalling that eliminating hidden prostitutes required a longer time and greater attention (Guan, Wang and Fu 1993, p. 31). In Wuhan, three entire years were necessary to tackle hidden prostitution, as the trade 'never entirely stopped' and even witnessed a rise (Zhang, Tang et al. 1993, p. 147). The closure of brothels led to a rise in hidden prostitution in Qingdao too (Lan 1993, p. 156). There are signs that Fuzhou (Wang and Guo 1993, p. 101) and Kunming (Lu and Sun 1993, p. 182) coped with the same problems, as hidden prostitutes were being discovered as late as December 1955. As admitted by the Tianjin government, the limited capacity of rehabilitation institutions made it impossible to adopt this measure for all prostitutes at the same time. Moreover, "once prostitutes were liberated, there was an insufficient knowledge of their situation after they changed employment, and there were no clear regulations on dealing with covert prostitution" (Han 1993, p. 65). Campaigns wiped out "institutionalized forms of commercial sex" (Jeffreys 2004, p. 165), but the same observation cannot be made with regard to non-institutionalised or hidden prostitution (Henriot 2001, Hershatter 1997, Biddulph 2007). This form of sex work persisted, albeit to an extent not yet known. And it did so after foster homes were being closed or reconverted, and registered prostitutes were being found an occupation. Unregistered ones were subsumed in the social body as they were unreformed women, who could wander from city to city.

The Shift

By targeting pleasure houses, early campaigns had focussed on forms of prostitution which were objectively easier to detect. So-called 'hidden prostitution' was never really eradicated. The gap between the results anticipated for anti-prostitution campaigns and their actual outcomes could and was justified by referring to such structural constraints. As responsibility for designing and implementing crack-down on pleasure houses rested with executive organs, and the police in particular, public security organs enjoyed a position of privilege in

producing discourse on prostitution. A first result was a subtle shift in the way in which prostituted women were conceived. At the end of the 1950-1954 campaign, the persistence of commercial sex was not attributed to destitution, but to a rejection of the normative system whereby women ought to have made a living through means other than prostitution. The resilience of prostitution was thus attributed to women's refusal of revolutionary moral values. Representing prostituted women as deviating from acceptable behaviour induced their removal from the sphere of social welfare and their inclusion in the sphere of public order management. Commercial sex thus found its place in the gray area of deviant behaviours that did not rise to the level of criminal conducts. Soon after these campaigns, prostitution was explicitly considered as behaviour susceptible of causing "harm [to] social order, obstruct production, and easily propagate or harbour counter-revolutionaries and other bad elements" (Shaanxisheng Renmin Weiyuanhui 1956). Prostituted women were also lumped together with so-called hooligans.

A reference to hooligans had first appeared in documents issued by the State Council, who in 1950 had defined vagrants and migrants as

Workers, peasants and other people who before liberation were oppressed and exploited by the reactionary government, landlords and compradores, lost their occupation and land, and have been living mostly on illegitimate ways for more than three consecutive years. They are customarily referred to as hooligans (*liumang*) (Zhengwuyuan 1951)

Living mostly on illegitimate ways referred to living on "theft, robbery, swindling, beggary or *prostitution* and other illegitimate income" (Zhengwuyuan 1951). This provision was nothing new. Very similar conceptions of vagrants and migrants already existed in base areas. The rationale behind them was not punitive. The State Council definition was meant to be used exclusively in allocating requisitioned land to members of disadvantaged groups. This definition, however, was adopted by provincial governments towards the end of anti-prostitution campaign, to single out those who refused social inclusion, preferring instead to live on expedients.

In 1953, the Shanxi Civil Affairs Bureau defined 'vagrants' exactly as it had been done three years earlier, as

[...] those who for three consecutive years have been living mostly on illegitimate means, vagrants (including bandits, beggars, hooligans, *prostitutes* and so on) are those who make their living mostly by theft, robbery, swindling, beggary, gambling or *prostitution* and other illegitimate income (Shanxisheng Renmin Zhengfu Minzhengting 1953)

Both prostituted women and 'vagrants' rose to attention as posing threats to public order, and it was soon pointed out that their behaviour had to be corrected through such means as deprivation of freedom and productive labour (Luo 1954, p. 217). The earlier nexus between prostituted women and vagrants was re-established, but under a scenario in which both groups had become a target of police measures. In fact, certain public security bureaus began counting prostitutes in statistics on offenders (Ruan 2008, p. 163). Elsewhere, prostitutes were included among those who "do not labour, or live on illegitimate ways, harm social order [in ways] *not sufficient for criminal punishment*" (Jiangxisheng Minzhengting 1956),

or detained even after 1956 (Han 1993, p. 69), the year when rehabilitation measures had ended (Dutton 2005, p. 155). An eventual step in the transition towards retribution came in the late 1950s, as legislation on public security offences came into effect. Even before this date, public security organs had been allowed to use the 1943 Police Offence Law (Wang 2009) to identify and punish prostitution, as well as other deviant behaviours. This piece of Nationalist legislation was compatible with the Communists' attitude towards prostitution. It considered prostitution an administrative offence against morality (*fengsu*), which suited both the PRC discourse on commercial sex and the views whereby prostitution did not actually constitute a crime. Illicit sexual acts (*jiansu anchang*) were punished rather mildly, with a maximum of seven days administrative detention (*juliu*), a fine of no more than 50 yuan or forced labour (Weijing fafa, art. 64). The Police Offence Law did not challenge existing institutional arrangements. In fact, the Law centred investigative, "judicial" and enforcement powers in public security organs, exactly as happened in the PRC. Besides, it provided a model the nineteen-year-old Liu Shipu would consult to finalize the draft of the Security Administration Punishment Regulations (SAPR) (Wang 2009). SAPR entered into force on 22 October 1957, listing the sale of sex (*maiyin*) and clandestine prostitution (*anchang*) among those behaviours disrupting public order. These conducts were made punishable by a maximum of ten days' administrative detention (*juliu*), a fine of no more than twenty Yuan Renminbi or a police warning (Quanguo Renda Changweihui 1957, art. 5 (8)). Article 30 of SAPR furthermore allowed to sentence recidivists to re-education through labour. Two months' earlier, prostitutes had been targeted for re-education through labour, using a definition similar to the one the State Council had used in 1950 on migrants:

The following categories of persons need to be sheltered to undergo re-education through labour: [Those] without a legitimate occupation, [those who] commit acts of hooliganism, or commit acts of theft, swindling not subject to criminal responsibility, [those who] violate the administration of public security and are not reformed after repeated education (Guowuyuan 1957).

A punitive turn had taken place, which reflected an ambiguous conception of prostitutes as victims whose existence was nonetheless harmful to public order. A second similar group was internal migrants.

1. Internal migration

Restrictions on internal migration began taking shape in 1953 with the motivation that urban centres could not receive large numbers of rural migrants whose labour force was needed in the countryside, both to fulfil economic planning and to provide raw materials for industrial uses as well as individual consumption (Zhengwuyuan 1953). An interesting phenomenon was the reference to rural migrants as a collective entity: the 'blind flow' (*mangliu*). Clearly, the use of this term made migrants' individual histories disappear, and represented them as threatening elements, who may have submerged cities at any time. Within four years, detention and deportation measures targeted to internal migrants were introduced (Cohen 1968, p. 251). Substantively, 'shelter and deportation'

(*shourong qiansong*) was a form of administrative detention used on those who migrated to urban centres (Neiwubu *et al.* 1963) without an entitlement to urban residential status. The need to sustain economic development by keeping each worker in his or her own place flew in the face of citizenship and the rights that came with it. As Chinese nationals, internal migrants should have enjoyed a right to freedom of movement (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Xianfa, art. 35), freedom of the person (36) and equality before the law (33). Regulations on residence, however, limited their chances to move to urban centres, where they could have enjoyed a better life. Their condition of clandestinity was thus constructed by law. As the allocation of jobs, food rations, education, medical care, housing etc. was linked to residential status, unlawful residents could have easily been driven to poverty and/or homelessness. There was but a short step between this condition and being regarded as a vagrant, who therefore had to be detained and deported to his place of residence. As the power to request the adoption of shelter and deportation belonged to civil affairs organs, enforcement of this measure by the police took place in the absence of any formal accusations, review by a prosecutor and judicial remedies¹. Those imperfect procedural guarantees that were still granted to criminal suspects would be denied to migrants until 2003 (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Xingshi Susongfa 1996, art. 12), when shelter and deportation was abolished.

From the 1950s to the 1980s and beyond, migration was considered a source of social instability and a hotbed of criminality. If first-time migrants were just deported, a second attempt to migrate to cities was to be punished by re-education through labour (Gong'anbu 1981, art. 3(3)). The carelessly simple logic that led to this legal response, that is considering migrants as criminogenic elements, remained unchanged for almost thirty years. A similar trend took place in the case of prostitution.

2. Deportation

Waves of migration had occurred in China due to such push factors as famines, and pull factors as economic development. After 1978, such a pull factor induced an increase in prostitution, with estimates ranging from one to ten million sex workers (Ebenstein and Jennings 2009, p. 84), most of whom moved from poorer inland areas to wealthier coastal cities, (Huang and Lin 1990, pp. 60-63) where they would live without a residence certificate. The earlier link between prostitution and migration came once more to attention, but with a significant difference. This time, both migration and prostitution were represented as a choice: “prostitutes are normally all volunteers (*ziyuan*)” (Yan and Gang 1990, p. 8). The rationale of their choice, the prevailing discourses held, lied in moral bankruptcy and the irresistible lure of wealth experienced by these women, most of whom were found to be unemployed (Da 1990). These and similar representations emerged in a context where the concept of forced migration as it is debated today was virtually unknown. These women – the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party

¹ At least until 1990, the year when the Administrative Litigation Law went into effect.

held – were different from those who had practiced prostitution for reasons stronger than their will. Their decision was rather prompted by hedonism, idleness and a love for a decadent and corrupted lifestyle (Zhonggong Zhongyang Bangongting, Guowuyuan Bangongting 1987). Attributing the resurgence of prostitution to individual qualities easily led to the adoption of retributive measures. After all, policies and regulations dating back to the 1950s were the only available means to respond to the problem of prostitution as it emerged at the onset of the reform era.

Slowly, re-education centres to be used on prostitutes began reopening, and administrative detention measures were revived under the name of ‘shelter and education’ (*shourong jiaoyu*). Until the late 1980s, this measure was adopted by the police on an informal basis, in the absence of any regulatory framework, to induce behavioural compliance on the part of prostitutes and avoid recidivism. More substantial changes came in the 1990s. Shelter and education centres established autonomously by provinces came to be regulated by the State Council (Guowuyuan 1993). More importantly, practices until then enacted in the absence of a clear regulatory basis were rationalized, until ‘shelter and education’ became an intermediate punishment between fines and short-term administrative detention on one hand, re-education through labour and criminal punishment on the other (Quangguo Renda Changweihui Fazhi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui Xingfashi 1991, p. 1)². In fact, the Ministry of Public Security had pointed out that shelter and education applied to prostitutes whose acts did not meet the threshold of re-education through labour (Gong’anbu 1989, art. 4; Gong’anbu 1990, art. 1(4)), particularly if they were affected by STDs. The revival of shelter and education allowed to subject prostitutes to various forms of punishments, which could have taken place in more or less short succession. Prostitutes could be detained on public security charges for an initial period of fifteen days. Recidivists could be ‘sentenced’ by the police to a maximum term of two years shelter and education, and to a further term of three years re-education through labour if they did not mend their ways.

Prostitutes were not just the targets of these forms of administrative detention – detention measures used on illegal migrants applied to them, too. Prostitutes’ inclusion in the scope of targets of deportation took place in 1981 (Gong’anbu 1981, Guangzhoushi Renmin Zhengfu 1982). It was argued that they were not residents of those provinces where they lived. These three measures should have worked in close succession. More specifically, prostitutes had to be first deported to their place of residence, then ‘sentenced’ to shelter and education, and then to re-education through labour in case of recidivism.

To add insult to injury, these women could be criminally punished, even though the provision of commercial sex was never considered a criminal conduct. In 1987 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council recommended that recidivist prostitutes be punished for the crime of hooliganism, *if they spread sexually transmitted diseases*:

² For a detailed discussion of this measure see Biddulph 2007.

Prostitutes and those who visit prostitutes, who after repeated education do not reform themselves, disrupt public order or have a sexually transmitted disease and harm people's health by prostitution and whoring and constitute the crime of hooliganism are to be sentenced for the crime of hooliganism (Zhonggong Zhongyang Bangongting, Guowuyuan Bangongting 1987).

Some provinces went as far as mandating criminal prosecution for repeated recidivists:

Those committing one of the following acts are to be criminally prosecuted in accordance with the law: [...] continuing to prostitute or to visit prostitutes after the completion of a term of re-education through labour [decided] because of prostitution or whoring (Guizhousheng 1988, art. 3).

Provisions on hooliganism were notoriously broad and vague. Their interpretation had been constructed as to cover various sexual behaviours, none of which corresponded to prostitution (Zuigao Renmin Fayuan, Zuigao Renmin Jianchayuan 1984). The addition of the spread of sexually transmitted diseases may have seemed a marginal development. What on the surface may have been an uninteresting issue, in reality signalled that political power was dictating what prostitutes had to be accused of, encroaching upon the role of public prosecutors and the police as well. Soon, the first reform era campaign against prostitution was launched at the behest of the CCP (Biddulph 2007, p. 137).

Chinese and foreign prostitutes

Representations of prostitution did not make any distinction between migrant and resident prostitutes on one hand, and foreign prostitutes on the other. Such a distinction was however embodied by the law, which allowed a more lenient treatment of lawful residents who prostituted. Habitual prostitutes who had a legitimate occupation could receive a police warning, a cease and desist order, be sentenced to a maximum term of fifteen days of administrative detention or fined (Gong'anbu 1981, art. 3(1); Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Zhi'an Guanli Chufa Tiaoli 1986, art. 30). Those who prostituted occasionally, who hence presumably did not draw their entire income from prostitution, were on the other hand exempted from sanctions (Gong'anbu 1981, art. 3(4)). Shelter and education, and then re-education through labour could be used on both habitual or occasional prostitutes in case of recidivism or repeated recidivism. However, these women already had a stable source of income, and in their case leaving prostitution would have been easier than if they had been unemployed.

The case of the unemployed was clearly more difficult, and they were at a greater risk of recidivism and repeated recidivism. All prostitutes were given an opportunity to give up prostitution before re-education could be adopted on them. But to the unemployed and the migrant, this opportunity seemed more theoretical than real. In the early 1980s, labour was still allocated by the state. Being unemployed in a socialist system testified not to idleness or laziness, but to the state and collective sectors' inability to create or maintain a sufficient level of occupation. The administrative allocation of jobs meant that finding a legitimate employment to keep oneself out of prostitution was not easy. Persuasion alone

could not produce job opportunities for these women. Recidivism, and possibly re-education to labour, looked as their likeliest future. The case of those who were trafficked or coerced into prostitution was more difficult, as it underscored the limits of administrative detention, a measure clearly insufficient to address the nexus between prostitution and organized criminal groups.

Such a nexus became even more difficult to address, if one considers the response adopted towards victims of trafficking who were forced into prostitution. Beginning from the early 1980s, foreign prostitutes reappeared in China, and their presence witnessed an increase in the 1990s, posing a conundrum. While their activities were not considered legal, their involvement in prostitution could not be represented as voluntary, as it had been in the case of Chinese sex workers because, by admission of the State Council, foreign prostitutes were trafficked into China (State Council 2007). In principle, victims of trafficking should have been sheltered for education, too, and subject to re-education through labour in case of recidivism. If the Ministry of Public Security mandated that they be “dealt with severely” (*yansu chuli*) (Gong’anbu 1981, art. 4), it subsequently derogated from its own provisions and endorsed the practice whereby “shelter and education is not used on foreigners” (Gong’anbu 1992). In the mid-1980s, forced medical examinations and compulsory medical treatment were mandated on both Chinese and foreign prostitutes, with the difference that foreign prostitutes who were found out to be carriers of HIV/AIDS or other STDs had to be issued an expulsion order (*qiangling chujing*) (Zhonggong Zhongyang Bangongting, Guowuyuan Bangongting 1987, art. 2). The use of this safety measure was very soon extended to all foreign prostitutes, regardless of the results of medical examination. At least in theory, they had to be fined, served with an expulsion order (*xianling chujing*) (Beijingshi Zhengfu, Beijingshi Gong’anju 1985, art. 8), and be furthermore blacklisted (Gong’anbu 1989, art. 1(5)). These measures had to be used also on those women who resided in China illegally. They, too, had to be deported. If their identity was not clear, public security organs had the possibility to detain them for investigation (*juliu shencha*) or order their supervised residence (*jianshi juzhu*) (Quanguo Renda Changweihui 1985, art. 27; Gong’anbu 2001). What is worse, they could not always enjoy the status of refugees. Already in the 1990s, the Ministry of Public Security mandated that foreigners residing in China illegally should be deported on the grounds that United Nations bodies could not interfere in internal affairs. Deportation applied to all foreigners, but only “in principle” (Gong’anbu 1992), thus posing a possibility to make an exception to relevant norms. Decisions pertinent to concrete cases had to be made by provincial level public security organs, while cases that may have had an impact on the PRC’s diplomatic relations were to be decided by the Ministry of Public Security (Gong’anbu 2008). Deportation has indeed been used on a number of illegal immigrants to China (Zhu 2005), who recently have been the target of *ad hoc* local campaigns (Bai 2010). There also exist oblique references to the fact this measure may have been used also on victims of trafficking (Zhongxinshe 2003).

This response involves substantial continuities with the past, as well as elements of novelty. Administrative detention (*juliu*), expulsion (*xianling chujing*) and

deportation (*quzhu chujing*) were introduced in 1964 to counter illegal immigration (Guowuyuan 1964, art. 13). They obviously targeted those behaviours violating immigration law. Prostitution was a different conduct and as such was outside of the scope of expulsion and deportation. In the 1980s, however, these measures were extended to foreigners who prostituted because, in a striking parallel with those Chinese citizens who moved to cities, they were considered primarily as illegal migrants.

Legal reform, a process credited with limiting the state's power and advancing rights protection, has not caused a reversal in the regulatory response to prostitution. All those procedural guarantees provided by the Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure Law do not yet extend to prostitutes, because their behaviour does not constitute a criminal offence. Leaving out prostitution from the scope of proscribed behaviours has not meant abandoning the punitive approach devised in the Mao era. The abolition of shelter and deportation in 2003, and the recent introduction of more lenient controls on prostitution (Jeffreys 2010) have not yet changed the vengeance-oriented approach, whereby prostitutes are regarded as active agents of infections and other social malaises. The use of shelter and education has until today been plagued with problems, ranging from the use of fines in place of administrative detention to the insufficient capacity of shelter and education centres *vis à vis* the number of prostitutes, and their substantial ineffectiveness in curbing recidivism and preventing the spread of sexual diseases (Tucker, Xin and Sapio 2009). These problems should be considered as mismatches between expected and actual policy outcomes. As such, they are likely to induce further changes in the regulatory regime of prostitution, particularly as a more sophisticated policy to curb prostitution is emerging. While women are still the target of punitive measures, greater attention is being paid to such phenomena as trafficking, abduction and the sale of women, activities that can often involve organized criminal groups.

Closing remarks

This article has described how the response to prostitution in the PRC has evolved from rehabilitative to punitive. Such a shift in response can be attributed to the partial success of early anti-prostitution campaigns, and the early involvement of public security organs in controlling sex work. In the first few years of the PRC, the response to prostitution involved elements of rehabilitation, more than retribution. Measures adopted in the 1950s had the aim to foster a greater inclusion of prostituted women, yet from the mid-to-late 1950s a slow transition towards retribution could be observed. Foster homes were reopened under the guise of detention centres. Nationalist legislation was used to model PRC legislation on public security. Coupled with re-education measures adopted before 1949, this process of adaptation accelerated the adoption of punitive measures. The trend towards punitiveness peaked in the early 1990s, when administrative detention measures were rationalized, provided with a regulatory basis and adopted on a national scale. Legal institutions originally conceived to rescue prostituted women have thus produced an opposite effect, generating their continuing exclusion.

The key shift in the regulatory response to prostitution is in part related to migration. At those times when migrants were seen under a more favourable light, prostituted women were made a target of rehabilitative and on the whole more lenient policies. The tightening of controls of internal migration, enacted between the mid-1950s and abolished only in 2003, reinforced this retributive stance. Considerations that the rural work-force was needed if economic development was to be sustained over the long term induced a gradual relaxation of restrictions on internal migration beginning from the early 1990s. Parallel to this trend, measures to control prostitution have been enforced in a more lenient way, and prostitution seems to be mostly ‘controlled’ through the use of fines. In the meantime more sophisticated discourses on prostitution, as well as policies addressing its linkages to organized crime have emerged. But, no substantial change in regulatory trends can thus far be observed, and this sub-group of migrants is still a target of punitive measures. The fact that most prostituted women are unemployed migrants, who furthermore possess a low educational level, has not been sufficient to induce an approach based on prostitutes’ inclusion in society through rehabilitation. Nor have their needs as migrants been taken into account, because migration was and is still conceived as an act involving active agency.

Prostituted women were treated more benevolently insofar as their displacement could be constructed as having been caused by something else than domestic policies, and by something stronger than their individual wills. As long as its existence could be attributed to enemy classes, prostitution was not regarded as a quasi-criminal behaviour but as a form of exploitation and victimization. After early campaigns, this conception lost much of its force, due to the continuing presence of clandestine prostitution. This phenomenon meant that campaign targets could not be achieved as smoothly as had been expected, and that measures to control prostitution may have actually been producing prostitution. The shift in regulation took place precisely at this point. Migration and engagement in sex work were attributed to individual choices. Individuals with their stories and life paths were replaced by the abstract figures of the “seller of obscenity” (*maiyin*), or the “floater” (*mangliu*). Shaped by regulatory norms, these abstract definitions allowed an easier but also a simpler conceptualization of behaviours to be targeted. They left out other variables, such as the actual circumstances that led women to prostitution, and the opportunities they may have concretely enjoyed after deportation of re-education through labour.

Conceptions of prostitutes prevailing in the 1980s, which portrayed these women as being lured to cities by their conscious will to adopt a decadent lifestyle, induced continuity with earlier approaches. Prostitution, on the other hand, could not be eliminated in a fortnight, and in a sense the gaps and unintended results of policies adopted in the 1950s were still visible. These considerations led to a rationalization of existing punitive measures, something credited with inducing their more efficient enforcement. The fact that prostitution persisted throughout the 1990s in spite of the adoption of a continuum of detention measures induced a consciousness that motives other than prostitutes’ supposed greed were at play. Far more sophisticated discourses have emerged in relation to HIV/AIDS prevention. Also, the nexus between prostitution, trafficking and organized crime is being

addressed, which is leading to a renewed consciousness that population movements and prostitution cannot automatically be attributed to individual agency. The existence of administrative detention has become an object of contention, and the legalization of prostitution has been advocated. In the meantime, the lax enforcement of controls of prostitution has led to the phenomenon being ‘governed’ mostly through the use of fines. The periodic forging, severing and re-forging of conceptual links between prostitution and migration could thus be regarded as one of the factors leading to subtle, gradual adjustments in responses to coerced migration as well as involuntary engagement in sex work.

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The Spectre of Illness

Experiences and Perspectives of Rural Migrant Women in China's Urban Centres

by

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Abstract: China's contemporary economic dynamism is driven by the movement of as many as 200,000,000 women and men from China's countryside to work in its urban and coastal areas. Their labour provides the basis for China's wealth, while they continue to remain substantively and structurally excluded from enjoying the prosperity they generate. Since 2003, China has begun to address this and other profound social disparities by initiating a series of social programs, including a national initiative since 2008 (with earlier precursors) to build a health system designed to provide basic, accessible health care for all by 2020. This paper explores how rural-urban migrants, who largely fall between urban and emergent rural health care systems, are working to care for the health and wellbeing of themselves and their translocal families on the eve and in the early days of these initiatives. The research reported here derives from initial results in a multi-year field research project in the political economy of care. In-depth interviews were conducted with members of fifty migrant families in a major coastal urban centre in late 2009 and with members of twenty migrant families in a major west China urban centre in the summer of 2010, systematically exploring their experiences with and narratives of familial health care needs and practices since 2007. This research attends to the emergent policy framework but departs primarily from the perspectives and words of women and men migrants addressing the health care needs of themselves and their families in circumstances of social dislocation and high mobility. The present paper focuses specifically on selected clusters of mature women caregivers addressing long-term challenges of familial health care through a gendered perspective that renders caregiving visible and central to the human condition. Understanding the health and health care realities for China's migrant workers cannot be directly or only read from policy but is better seen from the perspective and experiences of migrants facing concrete health issues and working to use all available resources to respond to them through the course of each illness.

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“I am afraid of nothing, except getting ill”. This phrase was spoken often by migrant women and men telling of their lives in urban China in 2009 and 2010. It may be heard both as a statement of strength and courage in facing the rigours of migrant labour, and as the identification of a pivotal danger in their lives.

China’s dramatic economic growth of recent years has been driven by the work of tens of millions of rural workers such as these, who have migrated to urban and coastal areas to create China’s new wealth, and who remain structurally excluded from its benefits. The often extreme disparities and disadvantages suffered by vast numbers of rural residents and a large proportion of those who migrate have generated widespread concern and social unrest. These have led to new policies in this century intended to provide increased security and social stability as part of a project of creating a scientifically designed harmonious society (*hexie shehui*). Addressing the life and death matter of health care has appeared prominently in this agenda.

In these pages, I will trace the background of contemporary migrant labour from China’s countryside to its cities and coastal regions, and the social and political configurations that underlie access to health and health care for migrants and their translocal families. Emergent policies and practices of health care provision and access for rural and migrant people will be reviewed, drawing on the experiences and perspectives of rural women migrants in a coastal and an inland city. The focus will be on an overlooked and largely invisible segment of this workforce – the middle-aged women in the formal and informal service sectors who provide essential care for their own families and the families of more privileged urban others.

Migration

Contemporary China is dramatically marked by the magnitude and by the structure of its population of rural-urban migrant workers (*nongmingong*). While human mobility and labour migration may be seen as typical of human vitality and current economic opportunity, the present formulation in China is distinctive as the product of a policy change in 1992, marked by Deng Xiaoping’s Tour of the South. Prior to that time, China had since 1949 had policies and programs for development and social transformation that affected both rural and urban China but that retained the overwhelming majority of the rural population in the countryside. Rural China generated disproportionate amounts of capital accumulation for the cities and for the country as a whole, but most of the rural population worked in the countryside. This was so even after 1975 when increased diversification of the rural economy and the mushrooming of rural township and village enterprises created impressive economic growth in the countryside and the nation. The subsequent national collapse of these enterprises, with as many as one million closing in 1990, and the redirection of economic development toward cities and coastal areas created a base for drawing rural workers away from their homes to often distant workplaces (Judd 2010).

The relation between countryside and city had since 1958 been structured by a bifurcated household registration system (*hukou*) that identified everyone as a member of a household that was either agricultural or non-agricultural and that was tied to a specific locality. Agricultural households were grouped into localized corporate collectives (production teams or brigades within communes) with limited entitlements to land, to work on land and to the product of this work. The non-agricultural households were similarly linked with specific towns or cities, where their members had rights to urban employment and to a wide range of entitlements including subsidized housing, education, and food. It was unquestionably more beneficial to hold non-agricultural registration and the barrier between the two statuses was maintained in both policy and practice. This remained the case even after reform-era dissolution of rural collectives and the restructuring of state-owned enterprises. Household registration was not only a difference carried over from a two-tier socialist past, but was also intentionally maintained into the post-1992 era as a mechanism for controlling rural-urban population movement and for managing the human dimension of economic development. Rural people were needed and recruited for work in the cities – but could be largely excluded from urban status and entitlements through the mechanism of household registration. The bifurcate household registration system generates an exceptionally dramatic barrier restricting the rural migrant workers who create enormous wealth for China from access to the status and entitlements that many (but not all) designated urban people can enjoy.

Despite this barrier, rural people have left their homes in massive numbers since 1992. By the turn of the millennium estimates of the size of the migrant population – difficult both to define and to count – were in the vicinity of 150,000,000 (Zhang 2006, pp. 37-38) persons at any given time, and may now approach 200,000,000¹. Considering the circular and seasonal nature of the work and patterns of rotation of migration among household members, the actual number of people engaged in migrant labour at some point during any one year is much higher. The number involved within a few years or closely affected by migrant labour within their own household is larger still. Indeed, in the three west China communities I studied from 2002 to 2005 nearly every household was directly or indirectly affected by migration (Judd 2010). In these almost wholly agricultural communities with at most 1 *mu* (=1/6 acre) of arable land per person, migration was a pressing necessity and a household commonly required substantial remittances (roughly RMB 6,000 per year) from at least one migrant worker to meet its cash expenses. In these circumstances, people were leaving out of economic necessity and taking whatever work could be found. A rural mother and her migrant daughter might readily be in tears together on a long-distance telephone call over the daughter's hard work and misery. Limited education and skill meant that very many of these migrants were selling fruit and newspapers on the street, working in shoe factories, or labouring as cleaners and other service staff. A much smaller number had the education or skill to be economically more successful and even to cross over to non-agricultural status through higher education or through the ability to purchase an urban home at

¹ On the complexities of defining and enumerating the migrant population see Chan (2009)

a price that created eligibility for non-agricultural registration. While it is important to recognize that migration has provided a minority with opportunities for upward mobility and perhaps more with opportunities to broaden horizons and explore the world, the migration experience for the majority of rural migrant workers has been triggered by pressing need and experienced as hard work on the far side of a wall of exclusion. In addition to the economic disadvantages entailed in their work and incomes, as this barrier presently operates much of its salience and force derives from differential entitlement to education, health and pensions.

The Study

The research reported here consists of initial results in a multi-year field research project in the political economy of care, exploring how rural-urban migrants care for the health of themselves and their translocal kin in circumstances of social dislocation and high mobility. The study explores how migrants use diverse resources from family and wider kin, available market channels and especially newly emergent (as well as residual and continuing) public health care systems. The study is collecting narrative accounts of recent instances of significant health care needs (primarily since 2007) and of how each instance is addressed by migrants, in order to care for themselves and for family members either with them in their migrant location or remaining in the countryside. In November and December 2009, members of fifty migrant families in a major coastal urban centre were interviewed and in June and July of 2010 members of twenty migrant families in a major west China urban centre were interviewed. In both locations those interviewed were rural-urban migrants holding agricultural household registration in the two west China provinces where field investigation in rural sending communities had been conducted from 2002 to 2005, Sichuan and Chongqing.

Initial recruitment was sought through the networks of local contacts and each participant was asked to recommend further participants, which many did. The resulting sample has both wide diversity and clusters of connected households. The diversity provides the sample with a range of coverage (of economic level, occupation, family ties, access to health care resources and health care needs) and each cluster is a nexus of depth providing multiple positioning on shared experiences around a particular theme (of bereavement, elder care, health care access, and health insurance claims). Participants were prescreened for recent individual or familial experience of health care needs and the sample intentionally excluded younger workers (except as additional family members) and focused on the middle-aged persons who commonly carry primary responsibility for family health care. Young migrant workers often provide significant economic resources to provide care, but it is more commonly their parents who are actively managing the health care of themselves and their families. A focus on this middle generation has proved highly fruitful for adding attention to critical portions of the migrant population outside the more visible milieu of factory workers and entrepreneurs.

All available adults were interviewed in each family and the interviews were conducted in their homes, if possible, or occasionally in or near workplaces. For

each family two kinds of data were collected. The first consisted of systematic data on family membership, relationships and locations of work and residence, and on the access of each member to public and private health and related insurance or benefit programs (worker's compensation, pension, life insurance) and whether these had been used. The second consisted of narratives of major instances of family need for health care. The narratives were collected in a semi-structured manner, and often allowed for additional exploration of specific issues. Efforts were made to ensure that in each case the interviews elicited specifics about the health care need; its process of identification and the history of steps taken to address it, including medical care, hospitalization, medication, personal care and other health-related measures; the human, material, financial and knowledge resources mobilized; financial and familial implications of the health care issue and its resolution; and the outcome and assessments of the outcome.

An Emergent Health Care Regime

As labour migration mushroomed in China after 1992, rural people embarked on their near and distant travels with little remaining of the socialist era collective social programs, and with none that were portable. Cooperative health care, which had been brought to the countryside as the collective era proceeded, had been lost when the collectives were dismantled in the rural economic reform of the 1980s (Wang 2009). There were some residual elements remaining in the form of basic public health provisions and in the form of paramedics ("barefoot doctors"; *chijiao yisheng*) who had been trained earlier to provide basic medical care and midwifery services. These were no longer provided with any public support when the collective channel for that disappeared, but the trained personnel remained and some continued to work on a fee-for-service basis, as did some traditional healers in various forms of Chinese and herbal medicine.

In response to a widespread and urgent sense of social injustice as the disparities between growing affluence and remaining absolute poverty became increasingly jarring by 2003 (O'Brien and Li 2006, Lee 2007), there was a series of steps taken to reduce the disadvantages faced by the rural population, including abolition of rural taxes and levies and some income transfers, most notably a "grain subsidy" (*liangshi butie*) that provided an incentive and income support for agricultural land holders. Health was a major concern, especially as market provision of health care made it unaffordable for the poorer rural residents, resulting in households being forced into poverty by a serious illness of any member, and in people suffering disability, ill health and premature death when unable to meet health care costs (Li 2008). National policy moved toward a plan to provide basic and affordable health care throughout the country by 2020 (Chen 2008), with gradual work toward this goal in test sites from 2005 and wider application shortly thereafter. These programs share a broad national vision and framework of state subsidy, but are locally based and tied to local financing, with the key level located at the county. This results in a program designed to promote health care provision at the local level throughout rural China, reaching down to the level of town and township health hospitals (the level below the county).

Migrants remain predominantly and problematically within the realm of the rural health care system in their officially registered localities – no matter how far away they may be – with two exceptions. The minority of migrants who cross over to non-agricultural registration lose access to the rural system and potentially gain access to urban health care as they are incorporated into the urban population. There have also begun to be programs specifically for migrants who are in relatively stable long-term employment with larger and more established employers, although these programs so far reach relatively few.

Consequently the key for access to health care for the overwhelming majority of migrants, and especially for those with marginal and poorly remunerated work, is the emerging program for rural health care. The New Rural Cooperative Medical System (*xin nongcun hezuo yiliao zhidu*, commonly shortened to *xinnonghe*), as it is known nationally, is a highly ambitious and important social program that is critical to the national goal of basic health care for all by 2020. Within shared national parameters, it is a set of locally based systems that enroll rural residents on a voluntary but actively encouraged and subsidized basis. Each officially registered rural resident (including migrants) is eligible to join, but households must join as a unit, in that all household members who hold agricultural residence at a given place join together. Joining initially required payment of RMB10/person/year (RMB1=USD.15=€.11), and now generally RMB20/person/year, which is collected for the household around the time of spring festival when some members may return home, although registration and payment may be done on their behalf by relatives in their home rural community. This charge is low enough that there is now a high rate of registration and payment (exceeding 90%), although the amount in the fund is so small that it does not provide for a high level of coverage. Those who make no claims in a year may be provided (depending on local regulations) with a yearly amount of RMB40, which can be used toward medicine or health costs not otherwise covered. However, the main purpose is to provide partial economic relief for more serious illnesses that typically (but again, this varies) require at least three days stay at the township hospital. The coverage then will still only be for a proportion of the cost and will be subject to a ceiling. In general, this may facilitate greater use of local health care facilities, although there is widespread preference for avoiding medical care and for self-medicating, practices which are encouraged by the deductibles that must be paid prior to receiving almost any coverage through this system.

Each county has its own specific plans, regulations and rates of reimbursement for *xinnonghe*, but one instance from rural Chongqing may serve as a useful illustration, especially as its regulations are readily available online (Chongqingshi shuangqiaoqu renmin zhengfu bangongshi 2008). While the regulations specify financial sustainability and limitations, they also present a positive picture in some important respects. For instance, combined financial resources per person were set as RMB10 from household enrolment fees, RMB40 from the central government, RMB30 from Chongqing City (provincial level) and RMB10 from the district (county level). The major anticipated expense of hospitalization at an approved (*dingdian*) hospital was to be reimbursed at a rate of 65% for a town(ship) level hospital (with a RMB50 deductible), 50% at the county level hospital (with a

RMB200 deductible) and 25% at a city level hospital (with a RMB1,000 deductible), with a total maximum across all categories of hospital of RMB30,000. Care for nine chronic illnesses was also specified as eligible for reimbursement at a level of 50% up to RMB500/year, provided there was pre-authorization and treatment at an approved hospital (hospitals in China provide outpatient as well as inpatient services).

Each county level system varies, but all share the feature that the highest rate of reimbursement is within the township level and where the care involves inpatient care in the township hospital, with lower rates of reimbursement at the county level hospital and lower still at the prefectural level or city level hospital. There is commonly no provision for reimbursement of expenses incurred elsewhere, although in some cases receipts may be taken to the migrants' official rural home for a low level of reimbursement, contingent upon local approval. In addition, there is beginning to be a system of designated hospitals that can serve migrants within the limited framework of the *xinnonghe* in locations where there are concentrations of migrants from a given province. There is very limited provision for medicine costs. There is no provision for home care, which is a major issue for the many migrants who are contributing to the support and care of aging parents, even when these are in the countryside.

This is a fluid system and one which is rapidly being extended and receiving steadily increasing financial support, with resulting increases in reimbursements provided for health care expenses, although these remain very limited (Han and Luo 2007, Weishengbu 2007). This system is especially difficult to access on the part of rural-urban migrants, who are located outside the better-funded provisions of urban workers (where those are covered). The experiences of the seventy families in the present study to date show widespread attempts to use the *xinnonghe*, albeit with limited success, and very considerable failure to access care effectively in urban work locations, primarily due to barriers of cost.

The limited access of rural-urban migrants to health care while working in cities where designated urban residents may have access to superior health care plans has resulted in more recent measures to introduce plans for health care for migrant workers². These plans are mandated and regulated by local governments where the migrants work and implemented through their workplaces. They are relatively comprehensive programs for regular health care coverage and for catastrophic health care coverage. They may be part of a package that also includes a pension provision. Workplaces that provide such coverage will also have coverage for work-related injury, as do some workplaces that do not offer health or health and pension packages. This initiative is an important step in reducing disparities between urban workers and rural migrant workers, but is not yet widely available and, where offered, migrant workers quite commonly opt out or cash out their benefits where and when this is possible. Both published reports and the interview data in this study show considerable reluctance to enroll in these programs (Shi and Zhang 2007, Hesketh et al. 2008). The chief reasons appear to be related to the relatively high deductions from wages that are required to fund these, together with

² For example, see the leading case of Guangzhou (Fei Guangzhoushi 2009).

widespread lack of clarity about what is being provided in return for these deductions and restrictions on portability. This potentially positive initiative is neither widely available or, where available, fully utilized.

The consequences of this overall picture are complex and uneven, as each health care situation has its own unique features and each family has its particular situation of eligibility or enrolment in specific local programs. In addition, health status and health care access are both fluid and only partly known at each stage of a care process. Understanding the emergent health and health care realities for China's migrant workers cannot be directly or only read from policy, constantly improving as it is, but is better seen from the perspective and experiences of migrants facing health issues and attempting to use available resources to respond to them through the course of each illness.

“We Are All Relatives”/“I Look After Everything Myself”

One of the clusters of migrants interviewed in this project consisted of a set of related women making livelihoods for themselves and their families through a patchwork of hourly domestic work (mostly cooking and cleaning) for professional and middle-class households in a coastal metropolis. The typical hourly wage was RMB8-10/hour, but could be as low as RMB7.1/hour and employers might try to reduce the wage further by asking for “2 1/2 hours” (rather than 3 hours) to save themselves a small amount. Hourly workers such as these would work for several households and could make around RMB1,000/month, below the level of most factory workers or even regularly employed cleaners, but enough to support a very basic level of accommodation and food.

As Liu Dajie, the first woman encountered in this set, quickly emphasized – “we are all relatives” – she was part of a network of relatives. This network was her small immediate community, consisting of a number of women tied through marriage to related men, and so coming from a common marital village through patrilocal residence (Judd 2008). The women key to the present discussion are the widows of two brothers, living a short walk from each other and each renting small shared rooms together or contiguous with their own adult children (and their families) and the wives of their husbands' nephews. The older women had come to work here through a chain of introductions, as common for migrants, and had later brought their adult children here to work, although some of these had gone to other urban centres in search of better opportunities.

Liu Dajie was in her forties when we met and had already worked as an hourly domestic worker for over ten years, since 1999. Unlike the usual model of young school-leavers migrating to the city as rural surplus labour working in urban factories, Liu Dajie had followed her sister-in-law to the city as soon as her two children were old enough to manage without her in the countryside. This was not an easy choice, in the absence of grandparents to provide care, but was an economic necessity for the family. Shortly after she was established, her husband joined her to work in the city as a guard and then as a construction worker, for wages approximating her own.

In 2007, Liu Dajie's husband was pressed by his daughter and wife to get medical attention for his ill health, a step migrants are loath to take in light of both cost and the prospect of devastating diagnosis. He was diagnosed in a coastal hospital as having liver cancer and he and his wife went to the leading hospital in their home province for a second opinion. He spent some days in this hospital for further tests, with the result that the cancer diagnosis was confirmed. The doctors there declined to treat him, as his cancer was already terminal (a much too common story heard from migrants in this study) and the family could not afford treatment that would not save his life. The family returned with him to his rural home. His wife and daughter left their jobs and cared for him there, with some support from the township hospital, and he died three months later. The family spent all their savings, sold possessions and went into debt for his care during his final illness. The family had been enrolled in the *xinnonghe* since it began in their locality in 2006, but they were not reimbursed for care in the city hospitals or for home care, but only for a portion of the township hospital costs. At the time of the interview in late 2009, his widow was still working to repay money she had borrowed from relatives, and the *xinnonghe* was not viewed in this family as having been useful, although they continued to be enrolled in it.

After her husband's death, Liu Dajie returned to work in the city, as this was necessary for her economic support. She intends to remain there as long as she can work and then to return to her rural marital home. Although she does not know who is working her household's small amount of land and has no knowledge of the grain subsidy to which it entitles her family, she assumes that she will be able to return and support herself from the land. Despite her confidence on this point, indications that widows are not always able to retain land in their marital communities give grounds for concern (Judd 2007). It is certain, however, that she will not be remaining in the coastal city past her working years as the cost of living in the cities is too high to permit migrants to remain there unless employed. Employability for domestic workers disappears not long after a woman reaches fifty years of age.

Liu Dajie's sister-in-law (*saози*), Lin Dajie, had a somewhat similar but more unusual history of care for her husband, who passed away in 2008. She was the relative who had introduced Liu Dajie to work in the coastal city, having herself come there two years earlier, in 1997, similarly bringing her husband slightly later and leaving her three young teen and preteen children to care for themselves. Her husband initially became ill in 2003, diagnosed with high blood pressure in the coastal city. On a visit to his rural family in 2004, he had a stroke and became paralyzed. After one month of care in the countryside, his wife concluded that it was economically necessary for her to take him to the city where she would be able both to work and to care for him. This was an unusual decision, as ill family members are more commonly cared for in the countryside, but this requires that someone be available there to provide care. Lin Dajie had an exceptionally demanding and painful period of caring for her husband under these difficult conditions. She received some help from relatives, although the time demands meant that help from her nephew's wife had to be reimbursed, even though there was no source of public support to cover this cost. His three brief hospitalizations

in the coastal city were also not covered. Even with his wife's continued work this resulted in heavy expenses and family debt. When his condition worsened in 2008, she took him to their rural home for his final illness and he passed away a few months later. The *xinnonghe*, in which his family was enrolled from 2006, covered a portion of this final care only. Lin Dajie was herself ill throughout this period with an intestinal ailment she declined to have treated during her husband's illness and for which she sought affordable township treatment and inexpensive medication only later. Lin Dajie spoke powerfully and emotionally of these years, with repeated emphasis – "I look after everything myself" – that she was the source of her husband's care through these years. The toll on her had been heavy and she had been left still hard-working and strong, but fearful of illness and the prospect of death it carries.

The world of rural migrants in urban China is directly dependent on the immediate labour of the migrants, both for income and for essential care. This is especially so for those at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, who lack significant property or savings. In such a situation, every family member's contribution is critical, and the loss of each contributor places a severe strain on the wellbeing of the family. In this case, multiple illnesses (another cancer death, two children with disabilities and a minor illness) in this moderately sized network of relatives added demands on all and reduced the extent of assistance available in each instance. Even migrants with relatives close at hand and helping could feel as if they were dealing with the situation on their own.

It is widely observed in rural China that middle-aged and older women provide essential care for children, the elderly, the ill and the disabled, as well as domestic labour for their households, usually in combination with income-generating agricultural or animal husbandry work on small plots and courtyard space. When a middle-aged woman is called upon to migrate to the city to provide cash income, her household and often closely related households (of parents, parents-in-law and also of siblings who share in elder care) face a major loss of essential care. This is so even without serious illness, but that circumstance is virtually certain to occur within a family at various times. The care demands are accentuated by the lack of public home care and by requirements for familial personal care on a full-time basis for anyone hospitalized (unless able to care for him/herself). Extraordinary pressures are placed on those middle-aged women who leave the countryside to work in the cities — where they are very commonly underpaid providers of care that lightens the burden on more privileged urban dwellers.

When migrants face illness in the cities, they may readily purchase medicines or consult health care providers working in the pharmacies that dot migrant neighbourhoods, but are unlikely to attend clinics in urban hospitals unless they are very ill and often then only if pressed to do so by a family member. The high costs produced by the fee-for-service funding basis of hospitals and the spatially limited *xinnonghe* coverage for such visits in the cities (and only partial coverage in the countryside) result in delays and avoidance of diagnosis, as evident in these cases, that make successful medical treatment difficult or impossible.

Such care as is possible may nevertheless be financially catastrophic for the family, even where care is sought in the rural home or home province. As in these

cases, most commonly the only public resources available for migrants are the rural health care system and the *xinnonghe*, both of which are harder to access adequately from a distance. This decreases the level of remuneration and may require family members to leave their work to accompany and care for a gravely ill patient in the more affordable rural location.

The issue of illness is serious for everyone, but looms especially large for migrants in posing exceptional challenges for medical and for financial resolution. The challenges arise in the first instance from the localized spatial structure of health care provision for rural migrants. They also arise from at least partially understandable restrictions on coverage, necessary as they are to ensure sustainability of the present cooperative funding mechanism, and the consequent exclusion of so much of necessary care from eligibility for remuneration.

The situation faced by women such as Liu Dajie and Lin Dajie may be understood more completely by complementing their histories of care with slightly different experiences from additional cases in the sample, and two further clusters emerge as particularly relevant.

Elder Care

In the inland urban field site, this study benefited from the inclusion of a loose cluster of older women (most in their fifties) who were providing live-in elder care in middle-class and professional homes. Their insights can be further augmented by reference to some of the numerous instances of migrants arranging distant care for their own parents and parents-in-law in both the coastal and the inland sites.

The migrant women who were providing live-in elder care were each placing themselves in an anomalous and at least potentially conflicted situation. Each of these women was spatially and in diverse ways socially distanced from her family in order to do this work. At the very least, she would be living separately even if her family were in the same city. All but one reported that their parents and parents-in-law were deceased, so that they could not be construed as leaving their own filial obligations. But there were still complex tensions involving the unavoidable distancing from ties of kinship and care that their work and living arrangements entailed, for women of their generation are often key to care of spouses and both younger and older generations. One of these women's narratives underlined the extent of this in her long-term involvement with the care of her husband's older brother, a man whose frail health had made him unmarriageable. Further decline of his health in the past three years had resulted in near-blindness and multiple hospitalizations. As a destitute man without children he had at this point become a "five-guarantee" household, which meant he was supported through local government at a very basic level, which is a recourse not available to the rural elderly who do have children. Nevertheless, this man's younger brother and sister-in-law visited him, and provided some personal care and supplemental medications.

Care for the elderly is a pervasive issue since it is defined as a responsibility of the children; public supports in the countryside are presently very limited and rarely extend beyond the modest provisions of the *xinnonghe*. Of the 132 cases of

recent family illness elicited in this study to date, 59 involved illnesses of elderly family members. Migrants remain members of translocal families defined primarily as rural and strive to care for elderly family members in the countryside, especially when ill, at the same time as working elsewhere to support themselves and provide for their children. Members of the senior generation lighten the load by working until advanced ages, looking after themselves and very commonly declining medical care, especially when it seems non-essential, unlikely to be definitively helpful, or expensive.

The gamut of elder care the migrants report giving is very broad. It extends from the extreme of a migrant woman leaving her family in the city while she returned to the countryside to care for her mother who was living with paralysis and dementia through her final five years, to the other extreme of people reporting that they give very little care or support. Between these extremes, there are commonly cases of migrants returning at times of serious illness to provide personal care and emotional support. Where a specific intervention might be useful, there are cases of hospitalization and surgery, such as removal of a kidney or resolving a gastric obstruction, and the *xinnonghe* is now available to help with these costs. There is commonly also some attention to medication for chronic illnesses such as diabetes and high blood pressure. However, ailments considered part of aging may not be actively treated, including loss of sight, hearing or mobility. Major interventions, as for cancer, are rarely reported for elderly rural people. Much of the practical concern is for devising ways to provide the personal care required by long-term frailty and untreated or undertreated infirmities.

Apart from the direct problem of illness and limited personal and public medical and financial resources, the income-related pressures to work away create spatial problems, exacerbated by the regulatory barriers to portability of health care and the greater cost of accommodation and food in the city. The result is that the elderly are almost always cared for wholly in the countryside when ill, although in a minority of cases they may come temporarily to the city seeking a medical solution they could not find in the countryside. This is most likely to involve medical consultation for a diagnosis or recommendation of treatment and medication, followed by return to the countryside.

Travel to the countryside for the serious illnesses of parents is normative and relatively common, even when it may require terminating employment. Long-term direct personal care of ill parents is more difficult due to problems of lost income and conflicting family obligations in the city. The generation now elderly may, however, have several children who can share care. This may be done directly, as in rotating trips of a month or more to the parent's bedside, or may involve hiring care locally. Migrants working away may hire a relative remaining in the countryside as a substitute for staying in person for a prolonged period when it is their turn in the family rotation of elder care. In one family, children had pooled resources to hire an elderly bachelor (a poor man without family) in their father's village to be his dedicated caregiver. Several families described exceptional efforts to ensure prolonged care, while there were also cases where children and daughters-in-law were less willing or able to do so, and where the rural elderly were facing illness on their own. In a single case, the families of brothers working

in stable long-term employment in the inland city site had brought their frail father to live in a home for the aged in their city shortly before he had a stroke. The home is a residence rather than a personal care home and they still need to resolve his medical problems and care, but are able to do so in proximity.

Elder care is an important issue and a moral imperative within the Chinese framework of filial piety. Migrant work generates greater financial resources for families, but does so under very demanding circumstances. Discourses of rural “surplus labour” hide the extent to which truly essential labour is being drained from the countryside, especially as much of it is the socially invisible and unpaid work of care commonly performed by women (and also performed by men, especially as sons and husbands). Current improvements to rural health care will, as they are extended, increasingly address the direct medical aspects of this problem; eventually the rural pension plan just beginning to be offered will help further. At present, the rural health system appears only modestly helpful with procedures and reimbursement for relatively treatable and mid-range medical problems. Deductibles discourage regular checkups or early treatment that could provide timely diagnosis and treatment, and limitations in remuneration levels mean that it is not yet adequate for catastrophic care. The exclusion of personal care from the system, while comprehensible, is a major limitation, and one that has especially serious consequences for migrants and their families.

Health Care Plans for Migrants

A major recent response to the issue of migrant health care has been the creation of programs to provide a comprehensive benefits package, including health provisions, for migrant workers through their employers. This currently reaches only a portion of migrant workers with relatively stable formal employment with a fairly large employer. There were nine families in the coastal sample and three in the inland sample who had family members with some access to this package (dependents are not eligible for coverage), and a larger number who had some coverage for workplace injury. In addition, there was a highly diverse range of purchases of private insurance in several categories – major illness, accidental death and disability and life insurance – on an individual or family basis. While the private purchases show emerging interest in selective insurance, and this is a means through which some form of safety net was potentially available (although not affordable) for Liu Dajie, Lin Dajie and their families, matching insurance and risk in an appropriate and effective manner is difficult and probabilistic. The more comprehensive publicly mandated packages offer greater security, but do not appear to be widely used, apart for the small amounts carried on health cards and accessible for minor expenses. Indeed, the most common observation of those few enrolled in the comprehensive public package was complaint about the high level of deduction from wages (for example, in the case of one cleaner, RMB150/month from a pay of RMB1200/month). Where workers were able to opt out of coverage, either at the point of enrolment or at year-end for extra funds to take home at spring festival, I was told that this was a common choice. From a policy and equity perspective, the comprehensive public package is

a positive step, but it is difficult for many migrant workers to afford or to choose. The largest difficulty is with the pension component which, while including a contribution of as much as 2/3 from the employer, requires 15 years of stable employment in one place, as the pensions are not portable. This is a challenge given the insecurity of employment and the geographical mobility of many workers; it is especially difficult for women workers who are highly vulnerable to discretionary lay off, at 55 or even 50 years of age.

The sole case in these samples of clear-cut eligibility and use of the publicly mandated migrant health package was that of a young mother of two school age children who worked in a domestic garment factory in the inland city. She had surgery to remove a benign growth on her liver that had been found in a factory checkup. She was recovering well and was being cared for by her brother's wife who lived in the apartment above her. In this instance the system appeared to have worked well for her, and she was satisfied with it. Coverage such as this could have made a decisive difference in the case of the husbands of Liu Dajie or Lin Dajie or in cases of early heart disease that were also encountered in this study. With warning, heart and other major diseases can be treated at a rural home and at least partly covered there, which reduces the cost and increases accessibility. In the case of a woman cleaner of about forty in the distant coastal site, her situation was too urgent for travel and her family – already dealing with recent illnesses and losses on both sides of the family – went deep in debt for her medical treatment. She expects her pacemaker to require replacement within a few years and that the cost may be more than she is willing to incur.

The route to a more comprehensive system is being mapped, but the path is narrow and strewn with obstacles, especially for migrant workers in China's cities. Among the most severe obstacles are those of strictly localized eligibility and benefits; deductibles, limited reimbursement and the exclusion of many costs as ineligible; and lack of provision or reimbursement for home care.

In this study I had originally sought to explore the workings of the new health care systems and how migrants could access them. I planned to do so by interviewing and recruiting assistance from migrants who were of an age to be familiar with the issues and who were actively managing family health care. This research has inadvertently led beyond the original framework and toward engagement with an unmarked and largely invisible migration of middle-aged women caregivers from the countryside to the city, and the redistribution of their caregiving. Existing systems of health care provision set limits and leave enormous unmet needs which these women substantively resolve. Looking at these needs and limits as they directly affect the health of the women and their family members reveals terrible demands and losses, and this is only the most apparent element. There is a larger picture of a gendered political economy that draws women away from life and caregiving in their own homes, families and communities and systematically appropriates their caring, while leaving their own prospects for care precarious.

Acknowledgements

The research reported here has been generously supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Global Political Economy Program of the University of Manitoba. Documentary and field assistance has been provided by: Song Pianpian, Alesa Sutherland, Zhang Feng, Zhang Ke, Zhang Ting, Zhao Jun, and Zhou Yao. I am especially grateful to the participants who provided their experiences and insights and to all those who facilitated the field research in both sites.

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Cultural Representation and Self-Representation of *Dagongmei* in Contemporary China

by

Justyna Jaguscik *

Abstract: In the 1980s, working women migrant labourers, known as the *dagongmei* or “working sisters,” emerged as an object of interest in popular films and television dramas. These initial visual representations have since been reiterated in sequels adjusted to fit best the current rhetoric of the party-state. Concurrent to the mass media is the less-widespread phenomenon of labourer’s literature (*dagong wenxue*), through which we can read the *dagongmei*’s own (self-) representations. Eventually, after the Millennium the number of scientific publications on the *dagongmei* topic has also increased significantly. Bringing these different media together, this paper thematizes the aporias of *dagongmei*’s (self-) representations and scrutinizes various acts of utterance, asking what they mean in terms of class and gender subjectivity. I argue that for blue-collar women, becoming part of the popular media culture does not necessarily lead to the emergence of novel mass subject identifications. It can be regarded much more as a strategy of appeasement of the rural “other” based upon the idea of a high modern, highly flexible subjectivity that does not really offer much more agency than the possibility of smoother adjustment to the logic of global capitalism.

“The scream was too powerful, and with its boundless referential power, it shrieked into the symbolic world and nullified any of the claims of that world. It came, furthermore, directly from the body of a subaltern [...], from a specific human being struggling to live out her life: from a *dagongmei*, a displaced yet resistant subject living in contemporary China” (Pun 2000, p. 534).

Thus wrote the anthropologist Ngai Pun¹ about the process of tracing the trajectory of Yan’s repetitive nightmarish dreams, climaxing in a piercing scream. Yan is conventionally understood to be a *dagongmei*²; in Ngai Pun’s own

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¹ The article was originally published in Chinese in the year 1999 (Pun 1999a).

² The term *dagongmei* refers to women migrant laborers from the countryside, mostly translated into English as “working sisters” (Jacka 1998, p. 44; Pun 1999b, p. 2).

translation, a “working daughter” (Pun 2000, p. 2). Departing from Gayatri Spivak’s reinterpretation of the term “subaltern” (Spivak 1988, pp. 271-313) in the influential essay *Can the subaltern speak?* in her search for the possibility of working women’s minor genre of resistance, Pun tried to get to grips with a feasible politics of articulation and self-representation of the subaltern working sister’s corporeality.

More than ten years later, my intent is to question the aesthetics and politics of cultural representation of *dagongmei* in contemporary mainland China. In this paper, besides brushing the surface of current discourses in social sciences or literary criticism, and recent China Central Television (CCTV) productions, I focus on a popular talk show’s *Xinli fangtan* (Psychological interview), a special edition dedicated to migrant workers’ daily dilemmas. Thematizing the aporias of subaltern representation and self-representation, I will view these various acts of utterance and silence with deeper scrutiny, asking what they mean in terms of gender.

***Dagongmei* goes pop**

It was in the middle of the 1980s that the working sisters emerged on television screens as main protagonists and as a grouped object of interests in popular films and television dramas³. Since their very first visual representations delivered by a few plots, they have been reiterated or replayed in sequels adjusted to fit best the current discourses and rhetoric. However, considering filmic representations of *dagongmei*, we can generally point to two relatively unchanged prototypical characters – that of a *xiao baomu* (young nursemaid) and of a *nü dagongzhe* (temporary female factory worker). They belong to different settings that background two great mutually entangled narrations of contemporary China – that of urbanization and industrialization.

Internal conflicts in urban tales originate from the tension existing between binary oppositions upon which the stereotypical plot is constructed: rural space (*xiangcun*) versus urban space (*chengshi*), accompanied by being ignorant (*yumei*) versus being cultivated and civilized (*wenming*).

The young maid portrayed in these dramas is most likely a secondary school graduate in her early twenties, pure and innocent, willing to work hard in order to climb up the social ladder and support her family in the countryside. Coming from a backward remote village, she is ignorant of the social etiquette taken for granted by the wealthy city families by whom she is employed. Ways of overcoming mutual misunderstandings and various conflicts emerging between the worker and metropolitan families are an important part of the story’s foreseeable development toward a harmonious happy ending, as granted for those who accept the codes of proper behavior inscribed into their social roles. Such was the case in *Ezi* (1988) and its various reenactments are still to be traced until the present.

³ See, for example, the movies *Huangshan laide guniang* (A girl from Huangshan Mountains) 1983, *Ezi* (Ezi) 1988, and the TV drama *Wailaimei* (Outsider sisters: Young women from elsewhere working temporary in the city) 1991.

An emblematic example of a novel variation of this genre might be the latest *xiao baomu* drama *Wo meili de rensheng* (My beautiful life)⁴ aired in July and August 2010 on CCTV Channel 1 in the evening primetime. The noticeable modification in the main plot line is the appearance of a generational conflict between the main protagonist Wang Xiaozao and her prospective mother-in-law, the elderly Wu Qiaobao. In this way, the TV drama highlights the fact that the continuing economic reforms in China have already nourished a second generation of migrants that differs somewhat from the older one in terms of their shared values and desires⁵.

My beautiful life follows the organizational patterns of its prototypes with the binary conflicts of the urban-rural axes and it similarly belongs to “genres of integration”⁶ (Schatz 1981, p. 29). It is an appealing combination of strategies for success that merge to form the figure of the young migrant woman. On the personal level, she eventually manages to win over the old, bad tempered and sometimes tyrannical Wu Qiaobao by means of conforming to the rules of the traditional virtue *xiao* (filial piety). It is her flawless performance as a filial daughter serving the old lady to the utmost of her abilities and swallowing bitterness (*ku*) every day without uttering a word which eventually enables the happy ending; the exogamic marriage in terms of social stratification as her fiancé is a university graduate. Moreover, she climbs up the social ladder and manages to change her status to that of an entrepreneur by establishing a small maid agency in the city of Shanghai. Metamorphosis into a fulfilled, self-made urban citizen is completed. Interestingly, the heroine of the urbanization tale manages to combine the traditional Confucian female virtues of being a filial daughter-in-law and diligent wife at home with those of a modern woman engaged in an ongoing process of professional education and self-development. She carries this double burden with a happy smile on her face⁷.

As such, Wang Xiaozao is not to be seen as a high modern figure of transgression of the traditional female virtues enforced by the Confucian canon. Again, similarly to the criticized Maoist model of women’s liberation, the

⁴ The TV drama was directed by Wang Jun, and produced by the Beijing Hualu Baina Film & TV Co.

⁵ These younger cohorts of China’s so called floating population (*liudong renkou*) are referred to in Chinese social sciences as *xin shengdai nongmingong* (new generation of migrant workers) who are supposed to be between 16 and 30 years old. Recent sociological works published in mainland China emphasize the younger generation’s inclination to enhanced consumption and to investments in various self-development strategies such as education services offered in the cities. Nor is it less important that most of them have never engaged in agricultural work at home (Pun 2003, pp. 469-492; Tang 2009, pp. 102-107).

⁶ The “genre of integration” is defined through an ideologically stable, civilized setting, a couple or collective hero (e.g. family)’s internalized conflict is expressed through emotions, the resolution through embrace (love), thematically it typically deals with a couple’s or family’s integration into the wider community and with the process of resolving their personal antagonisms, it stresses community co-operation (Schatz 1981, pp. 29-36).

⁷ As a role model she is contrasted with the urban better-off daughters, a group portrayed with an ironic, slightly critical touch and blamed for being spoiled and not able to deal with difficulties. The discursive production of the migrant and middle class-ness as staged in TV productions is an intertwined process of reinventing and renaming the social structure.

contemporary proposed one is no less full of tension. Traditional expectations according to true female virtues still value chastity, filial piety, carrying for others or engagement in self-cultivation. From a narrow perspective, *My Beautiful Life* might be regarded as nothing more than a contemporary reenactment of the practice of taking a young girl as a bride-servant by the prospective mother-in-law. The woman's presence in the family structure is subjected to the cultural imperatives of filial piety and continuity of lineage, but it varies from the traditional narrative as it is enriched by the concept of free, platonic, love. Today although she has her own name and sometimes a business of her own, marriage and children remain the definitive markers of womanhood. Her task in society is to maintain proper relations with significant others – mother-in-law, husband, followed by her own parents, and by urban strangers – who all occupy higher status position than the rural newcomer. Otherwise she is in danger of remaining spiritually homeless, displaced from her rural homeland and never recognized at home by the urbanite.

Being prototypical for the second type of the *dagongmei* medial representation, the tales of industrialization, the early TV drama, *Sisters from Outside* (1991)⁸, deals with only one focal construction sight of China's emerging modern capitalistic order; an electronics factory within the confines of the Shenzhen Economic Zone in Guangdong province. In the first episode, a group of women accompanied by two young men leaves the northern countryside setting off for a long exhausting journey to the newly created industrial holy land in the South. Standing behind the fence of a modern, Hong Kong-managed toy factory, wearing their once blue, now worn out jackets, these rustic "workers-to-be" (Pun 1999b, p. 3) are confronted with the view of a group of young women marching out from the factory in bright sunlight. All of them wear light blue, spick-and-span working uniforms and carry colorful parasols. The contrast of the two group's appearance fuels the desires of the rural newcomers to transform themselves into *dagongmei* and *dagongzai*⁹.

Not everyone, however, will make it in this drama. As the cynical young Hong Kong supervisor proudly announces, laboratory tests proved that for this kind of advanced technology and automatic assembly line, female workers are preferred. Laborers are recruited due to the gender criterion and women are favored for their inborn essential skills and abilities¹⁰. In the factory boss's own words:

⁸ Directed by Cheng Hao, produced by the local Guangzhou Television, and showed nationwide by CCTV in 1992 the TV drama gained great popularity becoming a widely discussed issue. On 15th March 1992 the Guangdong Province section of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences together with the literary journal *Dangdai Wentan Bao* (Journal of Contemporary Literary Circles) organized a symposium on the topic "*Sisters from Outside*" and *Labor's Literary Phenomenon*. Director Cheng Hao was one of the invited key speakers.

⁹ The male equivalent of *dagongmei*, *zai* means "son".

¹⁰ This quotation corresponds well with Aihwa Ong's remarks regarding the international creation of "natural" attributes of the female workforce: "Bureaucrats in developing countries were quick to appeal to biology to woo foreign investments while gaining acceptance at home for the creation of a female industrial force" (Ong 1991, p. 290).

What every girl is asked for are the qualities (*suzhi*) of being an attentive careful worker. There is no demand for physical strength and courage. You just need to perform the same moves for thousands of times every day. Laboratory tests prove that these skills are the ones of the female sex.

What might have previously been regarded as standing for women's inferiority, transforms into characteristics welcomed and favored in the process of modernization. The femininity of the newcomers will be made visible by their adaptation to the urban style, as after spending merely a short time in the factory, their unfashionable appearance is displaced by face powder and lipstick.

Temporality is ascribed to the *dagongmei*'s working experience, which may be perceived as a rite of passage, as it influences their social status in the two communities they are related to – the rural homeland and the urban, manufacturing environment. In the former, they move from adolescence to a more independent semi-adult status, which can only be fully attained by marriage, and as paid workers supporting their families back home. In the latter, they function as underprivileged, vulnerable migrants, as subalterns. In this TV drama, four main female protagonists stand for different possible options for dealing with burdensome factory chores. However, finally all of them leave the surrounding narrative space of the factory, which serves as a temporary whereabouts for the young rural female. Interestingly, only one of them returns to the countryside for good, and in the case of the other ones, prospective migration decisions ensue¹¹. This might be the reason for the ongoing popularity of this TV drama, as it takes account of the indefinite character of migration, regardless of being forced or intended or caught somewhere between these two. The statement seems to be gaining in importance in contemporary China, where migrations appear in various forms from economic to “autonomic” (Boutang 1986, p. 38) ones.

These are few of numerous examples of filmic representations of the *dagongmei* produced for a wide national audience. In terms of gender, an affirmation of traditional female virtues, such as being submissive, obedient, tender, loyal, and filial, contrast with the stress of high modern virtues internal to the self-development paradigm of Giddens's “high modernity” (Giddens 1991, pp. 10-35). The figure of the *dagongmei* represents an identity-project, a desire for maturity in enigmatic, gargantuan terms and a laborious evolution for which the woman herself is solely responsible. If she fails, there is no one to blame but herself for not being eager enough to raise her law rural *suzhi*/quality¹² through learning, self-investment, and eventually adjusting herself to the codes of urban behavior. Those who are ambitious and patient enough to incorporate the ready-made success strategies and master the transgression of their rural heritage will be finally

¹¹ Striking tension is noticeable between the rural and urban communities expectations towards the *dagongmei* and their own life projects: “The new arrivals to the city [...] commonly believed that they would be there for only a few years at most, after which they would return to the countryside to marry and to work either in agriculture, local industry, or, ideally, at their own business. This was not necessarily what they actively wished for, but something that they saw as more or less inevitable or unavoidable” (Jacka 1998, pp. 68-69).

¹² For more on *suzhi* as a significant motive of the floating population discourse see Yan (2003, pp. 493-523), Anagnost (2004, pp. 189-208) and Jacka (2006, pp. 64-67).

rewarded with the gesture of an urban citizen giving them a helpful hand. Those who go astray must necessarily return uncivilized, or they are shown as developing a deviant self by enhancing their law *suzhi*/quality and ultimately transforming themselves into desperate, spectral beings left alone in the hunting ground of the city and the urban imaginary – robbers, plunderers, and sex workers.

The working woman's script

Until now, the most widely accessible channel for speaking with their own voices has been provided for “working sisters”, and indeed brothers, by the printed media. With the rapid development of the Internet, another important space for vocalization and spectacularity has recently emerged. The aforementioned TV dramas proposed representations of *dagongmei* invented for the needs of the most popular and still most strategic actor in the Chinese media industry, videlicet television and its audience.

In the popular press, the floating population remains one of the “hot topics”. Various regional and national newspapers build a cacophonous arena in which migrant groups are the subject of discussion, but moreover any displaced individuals are sporadically invited to deliver their own acts of utterance. An important platform for migrant women's self-articulation, the journal “Nongjianü baishitong” (Rural Women Knowing All), emerged in 1993. Since its inception, nearly every issue has included a number of letters and articles devoted to the experiences of rural women working in urban areas, mainly Beijing. Typical tactics for the portrayal of working sisters including their autobiographical narratives have been described at length by Tamara Jacka (1998, 2000, 2006). She pointed to the victimization of rural migrant women as a most common mode of representation shared by the mainstream media (Jacka 2000, p. 4). Today, alongside a growing community of netizens in China, an important shift of focus to the Internet agora is taking place. In this virtual space of articulation and visualization, an ongoing sexualization of the *dagongmei*'s body exposed to the anonymous voyeuristic gaze of the internaut, can be observed¹³.

“Nongjia baishitong”, apace with other papers and magazines dedicated to the *dagongmei* topic, are most commonly published with the support of non-governmental organizations and foreign funds¹⁴. They provide a valuable forum for rural women to speak for themselves, even if they cannot yet reach a public comparable to that of the nationwide media. Nevertheless, they counterbalance the mainstream narrative of rural women as passive, helpless victims¹⁵.

¹³ A quick search on *dagongmei* using China's most popular search engine Baidu returns article headlines referring to “rape”, “abortion”, “mistresses” (*ernai*), and “escorts” (*sanpeiniü* – these women entertain men in restaurants, bars and nightclubs, and sometimes provide sexual services).

¹⁴ Another example was *Sweet Words among Sisters*, a magazine of stories written mainly by migrant workers from Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta, distributed to factory workers free of charge by the Chinese Working Women Network. Two issues of the journal are available online from: <http://www.cwwn.org/eng/main.html>.

¹⁵ I do not intend to argue for an “authentic” self-representation of the migrant women that could be juxtaposed in opposition to the “fabricated” representation present in mass media. Representation has

Not as widespread as texts delivered by the mass media, but nonetheless important for the topic of self-representation, is the laborer's literary phenomenon (*dagong wenxue*), which is also discussed by literary critics under the label of *diceng wenxue* (blue-collar literature). Since the publication of the very first workers novel in the year 1984¹⁶, works classified as laborer's literature (Yang 2009, p. 378) appeared in literary journals, especially those edited in the Pearl River Delta. It was not before 2005 that it became a hot and controversial issue widely discussed in literary and academic circles¹⁷.

One of the most famous working poets, *dagongmei* Zheng Xiaoqiong has made herself a name publishing lyrics, short stories and essays in such renowned literary journals as "Renmin Wenxue" (People's Literature) and "Shikan" (Poetry Periodical). Belonging to the post-eighties migrant generation, she left Sichuan in 2001 to start her working sister career at the Guandong Province's assembly lines. In 2007, she won the "Liqun Literature Award" from the authoritative "People's Literature". That fact coupled with her refusal to participate in the Dongguang Literature Association attracted unprecedented media attention. Zheng Xiaoqiong, however, escaped celebrity status by narrating herself as a Pearl River Delta *dagongmei*¹⁸. The plain laconic language of her lyrics in which she refers to two familiar landscapes of hers – that of a rural origin and that of an industrial everyday – might be compared to the disturbing scream pitching itself in the darkness of the night elaborated on in Pun's essay, as they both raise questions about these parts of *dagongmei*'s life that are hidden from view behind the factory and dormitory walls. These two acts of speech, the unconscious nightmarish vocalization and lyrical expression, might be reflected on in terms of the rhetoric of human pain:

Pain reigns in her dried throat, reins under her white bandage, pain reigns
 over her truncated finger, pain controls her eyesight, pain controls
 her perspectives, pain suppresses her silent sobering

a mediated character, the evaluation of its meaning and truth cannot be reduced to a simple identification of the speaker's location (Alcoff 1991, p. 17). Insofar I agree with Jacka (2000) that "[...] migrant women's representation of their own experiences and desires, and the messages that they incorporate in their stories, are far from being unaffected by dominant discourses. Rather [...] they challenge some aspects of dominant discourses and reproduce others".

¹⁶ Lin Jian's, *Shenye, Haibian you yi ge ren* (Dark night, there is somebody on the seaside) appeared in the third number of the magazine *Tequ Wenxue* (Literature of the Special Economic Zone).

¹⁷ Introduction into these debates is beyond the scope of this essay. The discussion is linked to the ongoing redefinition and problematization of the "class" term in contemporary China on the one hand (due to this reason I am not translating *diceng wenxue* as working-class or proletarian literature) and to the discussed attribution of "authenticity" and moral superiority of this genre above the intellectual writing. The controversy between Qian Wenliang and Zhang Qinghua provides a good example (Qian 2007; Zhang 2005, 2008).

¹⁸ In 2009 for the second time in her life she made her way to Beijing on the invitation of a popular TV talk show *Lu Yu You Yue* (Lu Yu has an appointment). Her appearance could be seen as a suitable example of an honest and simple (*laoshi*), "not knowing how to talk" (Jacka 2006, p. 19) rural women. Available from <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/glhs4IQoAGk/> (cited 21 Dec 2010).

pain reigns over her ...

There is nobody who could relieve her from physical, mental, actual, prospect

pain

The machinery cannot, the boss cannot, the newspaper cannot

Even that fragile 'Labor Law' cannot either (Zheng 2005)¹⁹

Although the poet seems to be overcome by a deep sense of fatality and their lyrics do not reflect an active desire to change existing relation, they explicitly deal with the unfairness of the relation between a *dagongmei* and the rest of the world. Even if she bears no hope for transgression of this globally sanctioned factory worker's lot, Zheng Xiaoqiong insists on her right to speak as a "witness": "The script is weak and feeble, but I'm telling myself that a testimony must be left, I'm the witness of these happenings [...]" (Zheng 2005, p. B 11).

In some characteristics, her writing seems to fulfill similar functions to that attributed to the women's script; it is a culturally accepted code for the expression of feminine endurance (McLaren 1996, pp. 400, 411). Furthermore, it is not only an individual act of speech as it stands for the *dagongmei*'s collectivity. Zheng Xiaoqiong documents the processes of annihilation of the self, dismemberment of the body, and the disassembling of the working sister(s)²⁰:

[...] what remains is a kind of harmed dignity, after being harmed for a long time we stay in our numbness, in this state of apathy we gradually conform to it, while getting used I little by little abandon the scream of resistance I once bared. I gradually become a part of the assembly line (Zheng 2007)²¹.

Her writing dangerously supplements and subverts two great mutually entangled narrations of "rising China" in the global world order – that of urbanization and industrialization.

Through the periscope of Mr. Science

After the Millennium, an increase in the number of scientific publications elaborating on the *dagongmei* topic can be observed. Much qualitative and quantitative research has been conducted in the Chinese social sciences concerning this phenomenon. Here I choose to focus on two books²² recently edited under the

¹⁹ Translation mine.

²⁰ As such Zheng Xiaoqiong's writing corresponds well to the category of working-class literature rethought by Perera (2008, p. 4): "Women's texts of nonrevolutionary socialism, however, present us with new figures and concepts for thinking unorganized resistance, everyday experience, and the shape of ethical within globalization".

²¹ Translation mine.

²² Cai Li, Yuan Liping, eds., *Shenzhen Nü Laowugong Hunlian Zhuangkuang Yanjiu* (The Investigation of Migrant Workwomen's Love & Marriage Status in Shenzhen), Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, Beijing 2008; Qian Minhui, Tian Yurong, eds., *Zhongguo Nüxing Xingwei de*

auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences that complement and mirror some popular discourses on working sisters in an interesting manner. Both of them deliver valuable empirical material, as they include extensive fragments of in-depth interviews with migrant workers conducted in the area of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. Nevertheless, this “raw material” has been selected by the editors who focus on the topics of dating, sexual behavior, marriage, childbearing, gender roles and problems of the living-apart-together migrant families.

Qian Minhui and Tian Yurong, in their publication *The Cultural Interpretation of Chinese Women's Destiny* first propose a brief statistical introduction of the *dagongmei* topic, to focus on only few selected problems – that of cross-border marriages with Hong Kong citizens, mistresses (*ernai*) and sexual workers. Central to their analysis are the *dagongmeis'* young and beautiful bodies, described as their only capital on which they can genuinely rely in the hostile city. This entrepreneurialization of the body might follow the above-mentioned different trajectories: that of marriage, informal relationship or prostitution. For forms not connected to marriage, the editors choose the classification *linglei shenhuo fangshi* (alternative, behind the mainstream lifestyles). In this publication, there is a noticeable shift from discourses extensively elaborating upon the victimization of the rural migrant (Jacka 2000, p. 4) towards a notion of agency, even if the so-called rational choices are condemned as immoral. This paradigmatic evolution makes itself visible when editors point out the fact that few of the interviewed women knew prior to leaving the countryside about the character of activities they would most probably be involved in the Pearl River Delta (Qian and Tian 2009, p. 212). Despite that fact that the migrant women in the city of Shenzhen are portrayed as having a low *suzhi* quality in terms of education, cultural and social background, as “subaltern” as they are, they are yet far from being silent. In their acts of speech, they similarly rely on the corporeal capital as in the example of a HIV-seropositive sex worker who infects her clients in an act of taking vengeance. These high modern Erinyes born on the “dumping site of globalization” (Bauman 2004, p. 63) haunt the mainstream society that is blamed by the authors of this publication for overseeing the structural causes of their condition that are the household registration system, economic disparities between rural and urban areas, or exploitation by global capital.

Without the intention of stripping this publication of its social importance, it is nonetheless to be mentioned that in concentrating mainly upon the sexualized, abject body (Butler 1993, pp. 188, 231, 240), it mirrors and empowers popular media coverings on the destabilizing, harassing effects of the floating population. Women are objectified and consumed by the urban audience and the moods of representation could be described in Rey Chow's words:

[t]he representation of subalterns shares a major characteristic with pornographic writing in the sense that it depends on a certain objectification and specularization of the ‘other’ [...] Both ‘subaltern’ writing and pornographic writing invest their fantasy in breaking the limits of propriety. [...] If the excitement of pornography can be described as something like ‘the

Wenhua Shiye (The Cultural Interpretation of Chinese Women's Destiny), Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, Beijing 2009.

dirty, the better', then the excitement of subaltern-representation may be described as something like 'the more socially deprived, the better' (1994, pp. 243-244).

In the second publication, *The Investigation of Migrant Workwomen's Love & Marriage Status in Shenzhen*, broad fragments of interviews with working sisters are included. These have been strategically selected, assembled, and editorialized with a scientific commentary, or authoritative meta-narrative, promoting traditional values and female virtues. Premarital sexual intercourse is treated together with the topic of abortion, and cohabitation does not, as a rule, lead to a happy marriage. The best behavior and self-management as an example for migrant women to follow is to conform to moral codes that stress chastity and filial piety. At odds with the above-mentioned publication, these narratives are chains of individual choices made in a social vacuum.

Talk or show – gender and class erasure as politics of representation

In the final part of this paper, I would like to analyze a special edition of a popular talk show *Xinli fangtan* (Psychological interview) featuring *dagongmei* as guests in detail. The program was shown in summer 2009. Occasional references to the previously mentioned examples of *dagongmei's* representation and self-representation in order to reflect the scope and genuine complexity of the floating population discourse will be made.

The talk show as a television genre debuted in China in 1996 with *Shi hua shi shuo* (Tell it like it is) (Berry and Zhu 2009, p. 74). Together with the first daytime documentary news magazine show on CCTV in 1993 called *Dongfang shikong* (Oriental horizon), it marked the beginning of a new era in Chinese television – that of diversification and liberalization. CCTV Channel 12 had its premiere in the year 2005. As a part of the CCTV network, it was created as a channel focused on law and society. On the Chinese language web site, the mission statement of the channel consists of three key words: “citizens” (*gongmin*), “justice” (*gongzheng*), and “public good” (*gongyi*)²³.

Psychological Interview has been shown daily on CCTV Channel 12 and it is advertised as the first nationwide program with a psychological profile in which psychological cases are replayed and discussed with invited experts. Its aim is introduced in terms of providing psychological services to the people plagued by high modern fears and anxieties, such as a lack of stability, social insecurity, changes in interpersonal relations and the loosening of family ties²⁴. The form of the talk show is nevertheless far from innovative. It conforms to the previously described conventional patterns (Zhong 1998, p. 98) shaping this format on CCTV: the host (TV journalist A Guo) is addressed as “*zhuchiren*” and she is the main person responsible for communicating the message to the audience. Three guest speakers are titled “experts”, being a lawyer, a psychologist and a journalist, and

²³ Official website of CCTV Channel 12 available from <http://www.cctv.com/homepage/profile/12/index.shtml> [cited 7 December 2010].

²⁴ More information can be found on the program's official website available from <http://news.cntv.cn/program/xinlifangtan/shouye/index.shtml> [cited 10 December 2010].

are invited to showcase their professional expertise and prestige. However, the chairperson remains the one controlling the utterances to be delivered and the judgments to be made. Invited *dagongmei* seem to play the role of pupils in a teacher-centered classroom.

Working sisters from the Beijing based Migrant Women's Club (*Dagongmei zhijia*) were the guests invited to appear in a special edition of the program showed on 10th July 2009²⁵. The title of this show was *Our Home – the Migrant Women's Club*²⁶, so the viewer's attention was supposed to focus primarily on a space created for women in the floating population. The Migrant Women's Club was established in 1996 by the staff of the periodical devoted to rural women "Nongjianü" (Rural Women). The club's director and chief editor of the magazine is Xie Lihua, a well-known activist and deputy editor of the All China Women's Federation²⁷ daily newspaper, "China Women's News". In the *Psychological Interview*, she is seated in one row with the working sisters on the side on the studio audience. However, she is also addressed as "laoshi" (teacher, professor) and asked to comment on one of the *dagongmei* personality and behavior. This staging marks her ambivalent status previously thematized by Jacka: "These individuals [Xie Lihua and Li Tao, a journalist] are outstanding in their dedication to women in the floating population, but both their socioeconomic status and their attitudes set them apart from the 'floaters' themselves" (2006, p. 60). The introduction of the character of the Beijing NGO in the talk show itself also seems ambivalent. On the one hand, it is repeatedly referred to as the home (*jia*) of the *dagongmei*, an almost Foucaultian "heterotopic" space that gives them a real sense of belonging. On the other hand, it is presented as an almost totalitarian institution, akin to a school or re-education establishment, in that rural women are trained in skills that are viewed from above as being necessarily inscribed into the project of a harmonious society.

The host of *Psychological Interview*, A Guo, is responsible for the narrative structure of the whole show and provides the form for the utterance to be delivered. This can be divided into stories (*gushi*) narrated by two *dagongmei* invited to the television studio. The third story of a male migrant worker, retold in a short documentary, contrasts sharply with the two women's emphatically modest appearance. Narratives delivered by the "authentic" *dagongmei* Gao Daohong and Fang Qingxia are supplemented with comments from the invited experts alongside the host's extensive remarks, as A Guo is also retelling the working sisters' stories in large fragments. The last format brought up in this show is what makes it exceptional on Chinese television; the psychodrama in which the conflict situations are recreated and analyzed by separating the involved person's emotions and

²⁵ It is available online from http://www.56.com/w32/play_album-aid-7603736_vid-NDQ4MzQ3ODU.html [cited 22 December 2010].

²⁶ This NGO and migrant subject positions constructed and promoted through the *Rural Women* in the decade 1993-2002 were examined in detail by Tamara Jacka (2006).

²⁷ All China Women's Federation, established in March 1949, is a mass organization supported by the Communist Party of China, dedicated to the objectives of representing and safeguarding rights and interests of women and promoting gender equality.

dispositions is quintessentially innovative. The most important part of this play is the process of naming the feelings of the participants involved.

At this place two short introductory remarks referring to the meaning of biographical tales in China and to the conceptualization of social change through language seem to be of importance. Examples delivered by migrant workers who appeared in *Psychological Interview* could be seen as a contemporary answer to the two-millennia-long tradition of female life-story narratives originating from famous *lienüzhuan* (biographies of exemplary women). According to Judge “[b]iography – both female and male – functioned in the Confucian cultural tradition not only as a means of commemoration but, more important, as a technology of the self” (2008, p. 11). Individuals were expected to improve themselves while following the outstanding examples of diverse paragons of virtue, and also contemporary – paragons of beauty or paragons of labor relations.

The emphasis placed on the process of acquiring the right names for one’s emotions and feelings recalls in the Chinese cultural context the powerful Confucian concept of *zhengming* – the rectification of names. According to this process, it is of great importance to have the right name and the right language, due to the fact that: “The performative force of language entails the consequence that to interpret the world through language is to impel it towards a certain realization, to make it known in a certain way” (Hall and Ames 1987, pp. 268-269). Naming, according to Confucius (Legge 1959, p. 298), is a way to make a certain reality proper – that is, to make it real. As the act of naming itself is not hierarchical, in *Psychological Interview* it becomes such due to the fact that it is first performed by the invited experts. Retelling of their life stories does not grant *dagongmei* a greater access to power as there are using the vocabulary coming from above; it is much more a tool of assuring the already established symbolical hegemony.

In all the above-mentioned TV formats, two significant strands of narration stand in opposition: that of violence *versus* nonviolent modes of communication, and that of naivety and immaturity *versus* adulthood. Consequently, the overall topic of program might be circumscribed as the teaching of proper communication strategies. In their narrations, the women retell their *dagongmei* experience of leaving the rural environment as a process of self-development in the course of which important skills have been achieved. They have been acquired due to their own efforts backed up by the professional training provided for them by the Working Women’s Club. A certain trajectory can be traced in these stories: from a sense of inferiority and a lack of confidence to eloquence and a sense of self-worth. What is stressed many times during the program is that, on the one hand, the one responsible for the process of self-education is the migrant herself, but on the other hand, this cannot be accomplished without an impulse coming from outside. That is what enables the rural woman to abandon her “dumbness”, something all guests invited to the program succeed in, as they express themselves fluently in flawless Mandarin. It seems that the long-term involvement in the Working Women’s Club’s activities genuinely helped these women to overcome their sense of inferiority and improve their abilities to speak out or talk back. They self-confidently talk not only about their individual experiences, but also sporadically refer to the whole collective of migrant workers, which they believe themselves to

represent. In their eyes, this collective is glued together by the shared experience of the hardship they face in the city (*dajia chulai dagong dou shi bu rongyide*).

Gao Daohong uses these words to criticize a male migrant worker boss introduced in this sort of documentary, for his improper violent behavior. A desperate migrant worker whose insistence on having his loan paid had been turned down by his boss, and who eventually seeing no way out, injured his employer in a violently escalating argument and is the one to be blamed for his lack of communication skills. Gao repeatedly reassures the host and the audience that this accident should not have happened. Again, the *dagongmei* represents here the “good” migrant worker. Jacka (1998) mentioned in her work that “working sisters” are constructed as the less violent, disturbing “other” and are more likely to be tolerated by the urban society than their “working brothers”. The visual representation of the male migrant in this television show sharply contrasts with that of the clean, neat *dagongmei*, as it is accompanied by aggressive loud music, the visual montage is hasty, and the former migrant worker is portrayed as an imprisoned criminal. It produces a feeling of anxiety, making visible the “dark” side and hidden dangers connected to the flow of immature, naive, aggressive and savage individuals into the urban area. This attitude towards the migrant other is not novel. It is enough to recall Dai Jinhua’s statements referring to erasure of the class struggle vocabulary from contemporary discourse in China that has taken place since the 1990s, simultaneous to the construction of the “rural” inimical “other”:

The abandonment of the actuality of the class phenomenon and of its discourse continuously stands for the cultural practice adapted by the Chinese intellectual and their historical choice of ‘saying farewell to the revolution’. On the contrary, in the course of the emergence of the bubble economy, the special development of the cities and the consecutive liquidation of barriers in the process of structural transformation in China, some of the acute social contradictions, and especially these threatening urban residents, like escalating metropolitan violence, have been articulated in a way similar to that of articulating class conflicts and stereotypes [but today] they are aimed at ‘non-urban outsiders’. They make the emergence of hostility public (Dai 1999, p. 22).

At this point, a question arises concerning these acts of speech and subject-positions. It is rather thought-provoking that in a television show dedicated to the topic of female migrant workers, no attention is paid to the significance of gender as an institutionalized basis for discrimination in rural and urban communities. The marginalization of *dagongmei* as women is not mentioned, it is understood as a weakness or inferiority within *dagongmei* and their male counterparts *dagongzai* themselves. Although the women left their hometowns ten or more years ago and subsequently belong to the older generation of *dagongmei*, not a word is uttered pertaining to problems connected with migrant families, children or women’s health and social care. Conflict situations analyzed and performed in the psychodramas without exception refer to the lack of ability to communicate smoothly with employers that originates from the migrant worker’s naivety and inferiority complex. The generous help from the Working Women’s Club is introduced as an act of rescuing and uplifting the willing to cooperate migrant being from the state immaturity into enlightened adulthood. The background of structural inequalities acting on the floating population phenomenon persists

unspoken and the *dagongmei* is presented in a social vacuum, in which the Working Women's Club is the only hope. The other might be the International Labor Organization, as is mentioned by one of the invited guests, the law professor Liu Minghui from Peking University. The problem of law protection of the *dagongmei* is discussed on the international level, a fact that might be connected to the latent conviction that it is the globalized capital that is in the first place responsible for injustice and exploitation at the working place in China. Former class struggle is reenacted in national or patriotic terms; the state-party (Wang 2009, pp. 9-10) is not the one to be blamed.

Furthermore, it is interesting to analyze the separate acts of speech delivered in the course of the whole program to answer the question: who is the *dagongmei* talking to? Comments delivered by the host and guest leave no doubts that the audience is imagined as a middle-class collective. Surprisingly, the *dagongmei* are not the ones for whom the television show has been made. They are repeatedly referred to as "they", whereas guest and host talk about themselves using the personal pronoun "we". While the community of potential employees speaks, one of the experts utters that the responsibility of the "we"- group is to "help them to increase their professional pride" (*bangzhu tamen zengzhang zhiye zihaogan*). As *dagongmei* reflect themselves in their stories as of being extremely naive, uncertain and plagued by a deep sense of inferiority while coming to the city, the task of the more enlightened citizens is to assist and support them in the process of transformation of their almost raw corporeal and psychical material into a real, mature city *dagongmei*. The dangerous, lower class supplement (Chow 1994, p. 248) is to be pacified in a process of enlightening guidance, otherwise it might conclude in a violent explosion that is shown in the short documentary.

Conclusion

It is striking how many questions and doubts are raised by this short television program together with the aforementioned various cultural, self-representations of *dagongmei*. In *Psychological Interview* simple doubts about the featured guests' acts of utterance can be connected to the uncertainty concerning who the speaker is and to whom he/she speaks. "We", the audience, watch the *dagongmei* retell her life story and the mode of narration remains the one of a "Bildungsroman", as it follows a clear trajectory, that of maturation. It seems that the creation of a harmonious working environment is paramount, an interest that is analogically shared by the employer-to-be, who can learn more from this television show about the rural "syndrome" with its inherent symptoms embodied in the newcomer, such as an inferiority complex, not being able to talk and naivety, to mention but a few. The wealthy urban citizens are naturally interested in maintaining proper working relations, at least in order to protect themselves from the potentially violent 'other'. No other authority is mentioned, no "fragile Labor law", therefore citizens are left alone with the responsibility of shaping their mutual relationship in the big family (*da jiating*), as society is referred to.

Is the *dagongmei* nothing more than a token, an exotic or sometimes erotic supplement, as it could be argued? She does not very often seem to speak in "her

own words”, despite being part of the ongoing *dagongmei* discourse as well. Could her individual acts of speech be emancipatory, to quote Zygmunt Bauman:

Chat-shows are public lessons in an as-yet-unborn-but-about-to-be-born-language. They offer the words which may be used to ‘name the problem’ – to express, in publicly legible ways, what has been so far ineffable and would remain so if not for that offer. [...]

[Chat shows] render the unspeakable speakable, the shameful decent, and transform the ugly secret into a matter of pride. To an important degree, they are rites of exorcism – and very effective ones (2000, p. 69).

These individual acts of exorcising the former rural immature self do not, in my opinion, alter the fact that social injustice is being reproduced. Becoming part of the media and pop culture does not contribute to an increase and diversification of potential protest strategies. It can be regarded much more as a strategy of appeasement of the rural “other” based upon the idea of a high modern, more flexible subjectivity that does not really offer much more agency than the possibility of smoother adjustment to the flexible logic of global capitalism.

The cultural representation of *dagongmei* accompanies the process of transformation in contemporary China. To better understand the fascination with the female migrant worker, one might regard it as a continuation of previous tendencies, as “the fascination with characters from the lower class is as familiar one in modern Chinese literature” (Chow 1994, p. 245). Women invited to the special edition of the *Psychological Interview* fit very well into a scheme of representation described further by Rey Chow:

Where a lower-class person’s conduct may, in fact, threaten to overthrow the moral structure that holds a society together, literature often makes her part of the very support, the very boundary of that structure, by glorifying her. Central to such glorification in the case of lower-class women is a prohibition of their sexuality. We thus have countless women characters who are ‘admirable’ because they live their lives as self-sacrificing motherly servants with little sexuality and subjectivity (1994, p. 245).

The above-mentioned and analyzed cultural representations of *dagongmei* position her either as the sacred, asexual maid dedicated to her wealthy city family and employer, or as a sexually desired abject-body. That means that a familiar pattern of representing the feminine emerges anew from the surface of the contemporary discourses. In sentimental rhetoric, identified since Brecht as fitting the taste of the quasi middle-class, the “woman” is designed as a victim. Conversely, even if she seemingly transforms into a modern flexible subject with the sense of agency, as it is staged in some of the aforementioned examples, the newly constructed representation of the female laborer still remains a disciplining one, not powerful enough to jeopardize the traditional patriarchal world order. Rather the opposite happens, as Ngai Pun states: “Benefiting from ideas of the modern women movement capital won access to the free [female] laborers’ labor-power, coevally; taking advantages of the oppression of young unmarried women in patriarchy it reinforces its exploitation and control over the working sisters” (2008, p. 11). Thus, *dagongmei*’s body and psychology are presented on a personal level, while her specifically gendered and class-related problems remain relatively silent in the fissure between these two familiar modes of representation. The

“imagineering” (Pun 2003, p. 471) power of diverse ideological apparatus for creating new values, desires, and role models to follow offers a modern *dagongmei* representation and simultaneously expects the young displaced female worker to submit willingly to the project of reassembling themselves according to the demands of the flexible logic of global capitalism, expectations inscribed into the project of the harmonious society and last but not least, to commodified sexual images. The “working sister” equals a socially constructed projection surface, neither representing nor being represented, but rather damned to “embody” the representation itself. The same statement could be made about images of women attached to different discourses throughout the course of history.

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