

RURAL FEMALE MIGRANTS

RURAL FEMALE MIGRANTS IN BEIJING

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ABSTRACT: Many researchers conclude that the "liberation" of Chinese women since the 1950s allowed them the opportunity to work but that they have not been released from their traditional secondary status. I argue that the increased labor force participation has had important social, ideological and psychological consequences for women. In particular, attention must be paid to women's consciousness of their social status and their self-esteem. These issues are especially important among young women who migrate from rural areas to large cities in China. The paper illustrates this argument by discussing the lives of rural female migrants in Beijing in recent years. Through Chinese press reports and secondary data sources, the paper examines the employment and recreational activities of 329 rural female migrants in Beijing. The paper finds that these migrants not only pursue financial independence, but they also seek opportunities to continue their education and to learn self-employment skills.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies by Western scholars of the role of Chinese women in modern society have focused on claims that women's liberation in China has not emancipated women from their traditional secondary status, and that the ideology of gender equality in China has failed to liberate women from a patriarchal society.

I argue that, from a geographic perspective, the changing status of women in a certain place cannot be understood without investigating the historical, cultural, and social context of that place. I argue that the current status of Chinese women should be seen as a stage in a long historical process of women's liberation from the past to an as yet unrealized future in China. Although this process is not complete, there have been many positive social, ideological, and psychological consequences for Chinese women arising through their participation in the labor force in the last several decades.

In this paper, my argument about these positive consequences will be developed in the context of female migration from rural to urban areas since economic reforms were initiated in China in 1978. Through Chinese press reports and secondary data sources, I will examine the attitudes and thoughts of 329 rural female migrants about their employment and recreational activities in Beijing. The discussion of these migrants will indicate that contemporary Chinese women are aware of their role and status in society, and that they intend to participate in a process of changing their situation and social standing.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN CHINA

Chinese women had been silenced by a highly patriarchal society for thousands of years until early in the twentieth century. For centuries, Chinese women were confined to the domestic sphere, and excluded from public life. Chinese society followed the ideas of Confucius, who clearly defined a woman's subject status: "For all women there are the three obediences -- to father before marriage, to husband after marriage, and to son after the death of husband; and the four virtues -- morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work" (Wei 1989, 3).

A historical milestone for women's liberation followed the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Mao Zedong's well-known slogan set the standard for women's emancipation in a socialist China: "Men and women are equal. Women can hold half the sky." His standard has been a part of the nation's constitution since the early 1950s (Croll 1978, Neville 1979). As a consequence of this standard, the massive participation of women in the labor force, in both urban and rural areas, has not only been encouraged but has become compulsory. The involvement of women in economic production was emphasized as one precondition to achieve gender equality.

Economic reforms in China since 1978, with the intention of participating actively in the world market, have been reconstructing both rural and urban women's lives in ways that are positive and negative. Working outside the home is not compulsory for women any more (Lu 1993). On the other hand, the early 1980's saw a resurgence of female infanticide in the rural areas, and the appearance of discrimination against women in employment opportunities in cities (Wang 1992). These negative influences, which suggest a return to the past, have inspired scientific research and public debates, from within and without China, on what the social roles of Chinese women were, what they might be, and what they should be.

Since the early 1980s, Western feminists, enchanted with the prospect of women's liberation in China, have called for a need to rethink earlier feminist claims about gender equality (Broyelle 1980, Stancy 1983, Weinbaum 1978, Wolf 1985). In doing so, they have either totally denied that the Chinese experience has led to women's liberation or have tried to explain this experience from a Western frame of reference. For example, the gender discrimination in employment opportunities faced by Chinese urban women since the early 1980s was seen as resembling that in the United States after World War II, when women were sent back into the home after a period of wartime mobilization (Honig and Hershatter 1988). These Western scholars have overlooked or not fully appreciated the significance of the achievements of Chinese women that occurred in their own particular historical and cultural context. Furthermore, these Western approaches to analysis direct research attention about the status of women toward surface similarities among different societies at different times, rather than to an investigation of the striking contrasts between those societies and times.

With the practice and ideology of gender equality in place for several decades, contemporary women in China have different attitudes regarding their status as compared to those of earlier generations and to those of women in other countries without such practices. Studies of rural women in the urban milieu can provide a window to examine the nature and significance of the social, ideological, and psychological changes of women's status in China.

FEMALE MIGRATION FROM RURAL TO URBAN AREAS IN CHINA

Given the context of economic and social changes in China in recent years, rural-urban migration has become an important component of urban growth. Although Chinese officials still know little about the extent and character of population movements at a national level, a recent survey showed that the total number of temporary migrants in Beijing had passed the one-million mark by December 1986 (Goldstein and Goldstein 1991). Most big cities in China have undergone a similar influx of migrants (Huang 1985).

Within the migration streams from rural areas to cities, female migrants have dominated some of the employment opportunities in cities, especially as workers in households (Goldstein and Goldstein 1991). Although this phenomenon has been identified in some surveys, few researchers have addressed the migration issue in China from a gender perspective.

Despite the lack of research in China, female migration in other developing countries has been an important category of analysis in migration research (Fawcett et al. 1984). In studies of female

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migrants, their condition has been defined as that of a "triple burden" or "triple oppression" at the levels of class, gender and family hierarchies (Phizacklea 1983, Radcliffe 1989). For instance, Radcliffe (1990) in her research on female migrants in Peru, revealed that female migrants working as domestic servants were suppressed in the employer's patriarchal families. Such studies suggest that female migrants in the Third World countries are passive about their situations and that they keep silent about conditions in urban milieu.

Experiences in China, with institutionalized equality and access to paid employment, assumedly place Chinese women in an exceptional position as compared with female migrants in other developing countries. In China, women migrating from rural to urban areas have already enjoyed many of the conditions that are regarded as the consequences of the changing status of women in other parts of the world. Therefore, the experience of these Chinese women is distinctly different from that of migrants in other countries.

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Although there is little research dealing with the issue of rural migrants in Chinese cities, many reports concerning rural migrants in Beijing have appeared in the newspapers and some academic journals, and a few of them have focused on female migrants. A survey (Sun 1993) conducted in Beijing in 1993 on the attitudes of female migrants to their urban lives is the basis for my analysis of rural female migrants. The author provided a general report about the results of the survey in an issue of *Women' Studies* (Chinese text) in 1993, including data in three tables (Table 1, Table 2, Table 3).

Table 1. Household assistance required by employers at different ages

services\ages	20-25	26-30	31-40	41-50	51-55	56-60	>60
household duties	0	9	16	2	4	9	62
	0	5.4%	9.3%	1.2%	2.4%	5.4%	36.9%
take care infants	3	27	18	3	9	3	11
	1.8%	16.1%	10.7%	1.8%	5.4%	1.8%	6.6%
take care children		1	2				1
		0.6%	1.2%				0.6%
send children to school			1				1
			0.6%				0.6%
nursing agings			3		1	3	24
			1.8%		0.6%	1.8%	14.3%
nursing the sick			1		1	1	3
			0.6%		0.6%	0.6%	1.8%
others						1	1
						0.6%	0.6%
total	3	37	41	6	15	17	103

Table 2. Monthly income of service employees

Monthly income	Occupation			
	domestic attendants numbers / %	restaurant attendants numbers / %	shop assistants numbers / %	total number / %
< 50 Yan	23 / 13.37		2 / 2.2	25 / 7.60
51-100 Yan	142 / 82.56	24 / 36.36	11 / 12.09	177 / 53.80
101-150 Yan	7 / 4.07	28 / 42.42	8 / 8.79	43 / 13.07
150-200 Yan		11 / 16.67	14 / 15.38	25 / 7.6
201-250 Yan		1 / 1.52	18 / 19.78	19 / 5.78
> 250 Yan		2 / 3.03	38 / 41.76	40 / 12.16
Total	172	66	91	329

Table 3. Spare-time activities of female migrants

Activities	Education				
	illiterates school (23) number %	semi- school (15) number %	elementary school (114) number %	middle (160) number %	high (17) number %
watch TV	14 60.9	8 53.3	70 61.4	86 53.8	8 47.1
play poker	1 4.4		4 3.5	5 3.1	1 5.9
reading	12 52.2	9 60.0	63 55.3	107 66.9	9 52.9
entertainment	3 13.1	5 33.3	29 25.4	39 24.4	4 23.5
dating	1 4.4	0 0	4 3.5	3 1.9	1 5.8
studying	3 13.1	2 13.3	21 18.4	32 20.0	3 17.7
others	2 8.7	3 20.0	10 8.8	10 6.3	1 5.9

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As many reporters have pointed out, since modernization became a common concept in the late 1970s in China, urban citizens have been increasingly willing and able to free themselves from the burden of housework. Because housework in China is still very labor-intensive and time-consuming, many economically average or above average urban families have begun to hire live-in servants to assist with childcare, cooking, and shopping. Table 1 shows the domestic service requirements demanded by 222 urban citizens of various ages interviewed in the survey (Sun 1993).

In the survey, domestic service is the major type of employment of the female migrants. As Table 2 shows, the salaries of domestic servants were relatively low, around from 50 to 100 Yan per month, while restaurant servants made between 100 and 200 Yan per month, and shop assistants between 150 and 250 Yan. Although they might have received much higher pay in other types of employment, the female domestic servants surveyed claimed that seeking economic opportunities was not the only motivation to migrate. They intended to look for employment opportunities in the homes of the citizens who were intellectuals and who were thus able to provide them with time and help in gaining knowledge (Sun 1993, Liang 1994, Shou 1994).

This motivation to gain knowledge increases with the level of the woman's education. Among the 114 women with elementary education (35 percent of those surveyed), 55 percent hoped to spend their spare time reading newspapers and books (Table 3). Some women with a high school education, 5 percent of the total, claimed directly that their motivation to work as domestic servants in Beijing was to take advantage of the good opportunities for education in the city, in order to be able to enter college in the future.

This survey, combined with other reports, tells us another intriguing story through questions related to female migrants' attitudes to the status differences between employer and employee. It appears that female migrants in the survey did not take their status difference relative to their employers for granted, and that they were very aware of respect being accorded them by their employers. They consciously required an equal relationship with their employer. For instance, among 329 migrants in the survey, 105 (31 percent) could get payments for medical bills from employers, either because they asked or because the employer offered them.

THE IMPLICATION OF THE SECONDARY SOURCES

We have to agree that Chinese-fashion socialism failed to do many things that it promised, including completely liberating women from a traditionally patriarchal society. However, we should not overlook the progress in terms of gender equality in China, and especially the implications and consequences of women's participation in the labor force in the last several decades. Contemporary women's attitudes to self-esteem and self-improvement reflect the historical transition of women's status from the old to the new.

It seems that rural female migrants in China do not accept social roles and class differences as their fate, as natural and as normal. They are aware that their condition can be changed. In other words, Chinese women were exposed to the ideology of gender equality and access to paid employment; therefore, this exposure places them in an exceptional position compared with migrant women in other developing countries.

This paper argues that Western scholars have failed to paint a holistic picture of the full range of the impacts and consequences of women's liberation in an albeit failed socialist society. They have interpreted women's liberation in China through their knowledge of women's movements in Western societies. It is inappropriate to evaluate the voices and actions of Chinese women without

taking into account their unique historical, cultural, and ideological context.

This paper illustrates this argument by discussing the lives of rural female migrants in Beijing. Although further evidence for the argument is limited by the lack of first hand data, the paper suggests that female migrants not only pursue financial independence, but that they also seek opportunities to continue their education and to learn self-employment skills. These female migrants, especially those working as domestic servants, also fight for and expect respect and equality.

Although feminist scholars in many disciplines call for incorporating the language of "space" and "place" in studies, most research on gender issues address change over time rather than space (Monk 1994). Geographers who consider place as a fundamental category of analysis should play a major role in providing insights about differences of women between places. Gender relations in China, with their unique patterns and processes, have a great potential as a research agenda in geography. The author hopes that detailed study will be done concerning the lives of female migrants in Chinese cities in particular, and the status of women in contemporary China in general.

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