

MARGINALIZATION OR EMPOWERMENT? MIGRANT WOMEN IN CHINA

MARGINALIZATION OR EMPOWERMENT?  
RURAL MIGRANT WOMEN IN CHINA'S CHANGING POLITICAL ECONOMY

By  
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## ABSTRACT

The unprecedented economic growth and development in China over the past two decades has been as impressive as it has been daunting. Surpassing all expectations, China's GDP continues to grow at an average of 6 – 8 percent annually since 1999. However such growth has not been without consequences including: 1) increased migration; 2) the increased gap between rural and urban development; 3) and the changing place of women in the economy and society as they are among the number of those migrating. The changing political economy of China has increased the costal-interior, urban-rural as well as gendered economic inequalities while exposing the inadequacies of social and labour policies to accommodate the changing needs of Chinese citizens. As a result, the rural and migrant women who have traditionally been marginalized continue to be vulnerable to the forces of market reform and globalization. It is therefore the purpose of this thesis to show that while the changing political economy in China has afforded rural women an opportunity to enter the off-farm labour market with the hope of improved economic security, policy deficiencies continue to marginalize migrant rural women by categorically framing them as second-class citizens within the cities they move into.

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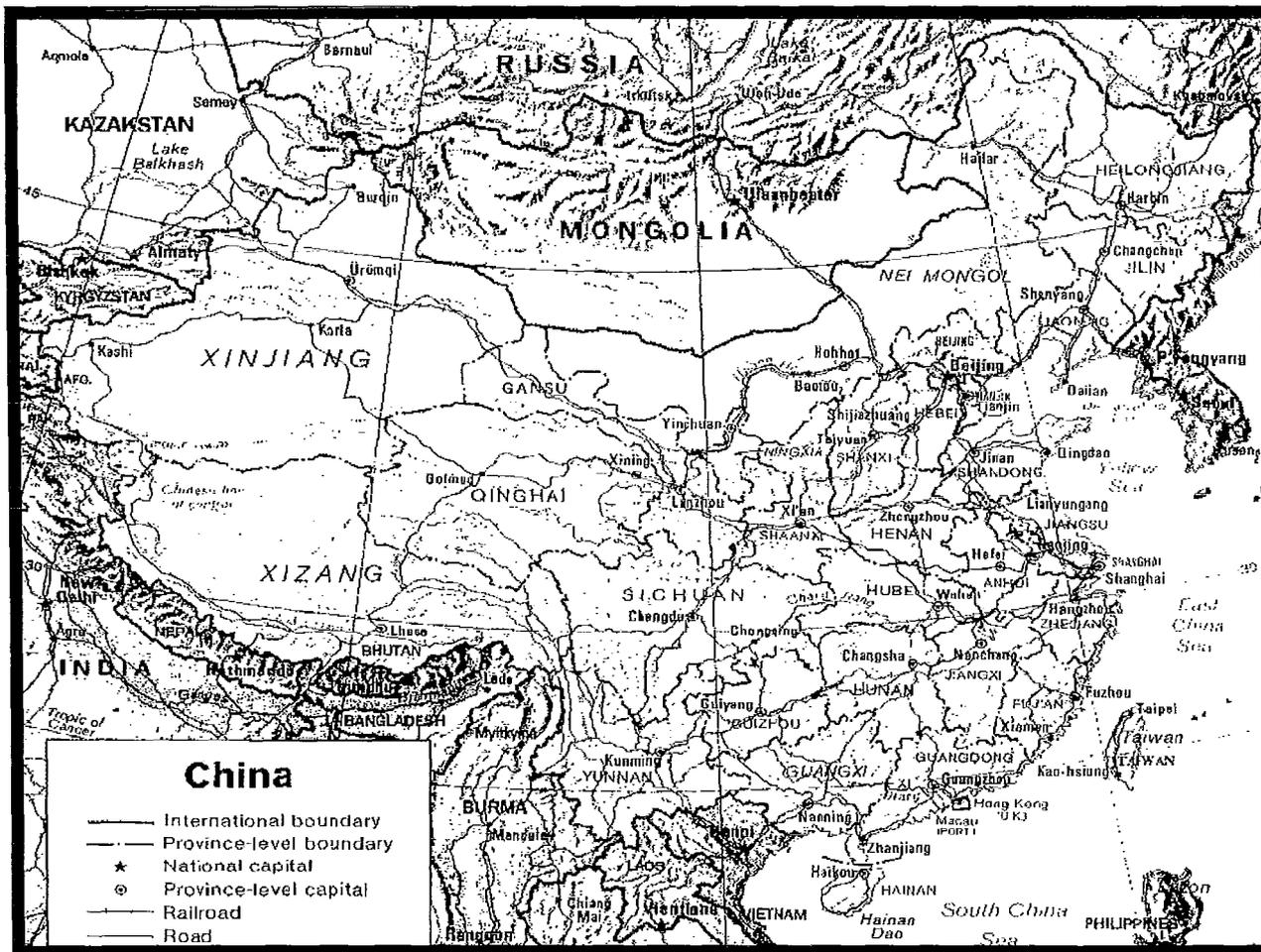
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Source: [http://www.cs.chalmers.se/~yzhang/presentation/01\\_China\\_map.jpg](http://www.cs.chalmers.se/~yzhang/presentation/01_China_map.jpg)

**CHAPTER ONE**

## INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented economic growth and development in China over the past two decades has been as impressive as it has been daunting. Surpassing all expectations, China's GDP grew at an average of almost 10 percent a year between 1978 and 1999, and an average of 6 – 8 percent since.<sup>1</sup> However such growth has not been without consequences including: 1) increased migration; 2) the increased gap between rural and urban development; 3) and the changing place of women in the economy and society as they are among the number of those migrating. The changing political economy of China has increased the costal-interior, urban-rural as well as gendered economic inequalities while exposing the inadequacies of social and labour policies to accommodate the changing needs of Chinese citizens. As a result, the rural and migrant women who have traditionally been marginalized continue to be vulnerable to the forces of market reform and globalization. It is therefore the purpose of this thesis to show that while the changing political economy in China has afforded rural women an opportunity to enter the off-farm labour market with the hope of improved economic security, policy deficiencies continue to marginalize migrant rural women by categorically framing them as second-class citizens within the cities they move into.

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<sup>1</sup> Joe C.B. Leung, "Social Welfare in China," in *East Asian Welfare Regimes in Transition: From Confucianism to Globalisation*, ed. Alan Walker and Chack-kie Wong (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2005), 49.

### **Migrants in China**

Migration and the redistribution of population have long been identified as important pieces of the equation to a country's economic growth and development. This is no less important to China and its evolving economy. Through intensive reforms and the restructuring of agriculture and economic planning over the past two and a half decades, the country has seen a significant shift of its population from the interior farmlands to coastal economic zones. Changes to the labour supply have been spurred on by the decollectivization of farmland, the closing of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and growing labour demands in the manufacturing industry in key coastal cities. Consequently the central government has recognized the need to redistribute its population to maximize the country's economic potential. The expanding urban economy resulting from China's entry into the global market has resulted in an increased demand for unskilled and cheap labour. As noted by many experts, most urbanites spurn the new jobs as they are usually temporary, offering no job security and very few, if any, welfare benefits. They are low status, physically demanding and carried out in poor working conditions. The lack of local interest to fill labour needs in new factories incited a rapid demand for migrant labourers who are willing to work cheaply and in poor working conditions. In this way, the push for labour migration can also be seen as a way to bolster government efforts to squelch growing discontent in the countryside over land reforms and rising rural unemployment rates.

The drive to fulfill growing labour demands in cities and defuse growing discontent in the countryside over declining household incomes and excess labour supply prompted the central government to relax the country's household registration system, also known as the *Hukou* (户口) system, imposed by the Mao government thirty years ago. *Hukous* are separated into agriculture and non-agriculture, and serve to record the location or place to which a person belongs, usually at birth.

The **hukou** system, introduced in 1958, is one of the social control/ administration set up on the basis of households, whose members, either in rural or urban areas, must register at the local public security office as a legal resident. After registration, the households are issued **hukou** certificates, in which all members of the family are listed in detail as legal residents, and they are thereby more closely controlled by the local street office in urban, or village committees in rural areas.<sup>2</sup>

As a method of population control, the *hukou* effectively segregates China's urban and rural labour market from each other by creating an 'invisible wall' of sorts.<sup>3</sup> Chan aptly describes the residential permit as an 'internal greencard' which entitles a person at his or her *hukou* location to employment opportunities and welfare.<sup>4</sup> It is extremely difficult to change from agricultural to non-agricultural *hukou*. This proves to be an enormous disadvantage to rural migrants, especially rural women, as the majority of urban jobs often list non-

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<sup>2</sup> Zhan Shaohua, "Rural Labour Migration in China: Challenges for Policies," *MOST-2 Policy Papers* 10, (France: UNESCO, 2005), 18.

<sup>3</sup> K. Chan, *Cities with Invisible Walls: Reinterpreting Urbanization in Post-1949 China*, (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), 260; quoted in Youqin Huang, "Gender, hukou, and the occupational attainment of female migrants in China (1985 – 1990)," *Environment and Planning A* 33 (2001).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

agricultural *hukou* as a requirement for employment. As Huang notes, according to government policies, attending college and joining the army are two main ways for people to change their residential status.<sup>5</sup> This effectively reduces the opportunity for rural women to change residential status as many never remain in school past the primary and at most secondary levels and most will not join the military.

The *hukou*, strictly enforced under Mao has gradually become more lenient since the mid 1980s<sup>6</sup>, allowing millions of citizens to move within the country to seek new employment opportunities. Between the periods of 1995 to 2000 alone, over 31 million Chinese were on the move throughout the country.<sup>7</sup> By 2003, the number of Chinese rural migrant labourers reached 114 million, of which, women accounted for about one-third.<sup>8</sup> While marriage may have accounted for a large percentage of migration by rural women in the past, a recent report shows that approximately 70 percent of migrant women are on the move for economic reasons today.<sup>9</sup>

In a traditionally patriarchal society, especially in rural areas, men have been the ones to migrate for better economic opportunities, leaving women behind to tend to family and farm. While some may argue that the increased

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>6</sup> 1984 is considered by most to a significant year as rural labourers were officially permitted to move to cities to seek employment or to run small businesses under Deng Xiaoping's economic policies (Zhan 2005, 18).

<sup>7</sup> C. Cindy Fan, "Interprovincial Migration, Population Redistribution, and Regional Development in China: 1990 and 2000 Census Comparisons," *The Professional Geographer* 57.2 (2005): 299.

<sup>8</sup> Zhan Shaohua (2005), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

responsibility of agricultural work on women is empowering such that their work becomes more visible, feminist researchers argue that women have not gained any ground since those who are left behind on farms are more active in agriculture for the simple reason that agriculture is now considered a marginal economic sector.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the majority of migrant women are moving for economic reasons seems to indicate some dissatisfaction either on an economic level or social level to being left behind. However, the same debate then arises out of their migration. Are rural women really better off when they enter the off farm labour market? On the one hand, migrant women are now earning wages, something that they have not been able to do as stay-at-home wives or family agricultural workers. While most migrants do send money to support families at home, some of that money will stay with the woman as disposable income. On the other hand, women are faced with the same dilemma in the cities as they did on the farms such that migrant women are pulled or, in some case, pushed into marginal economic sectors once again. In addition to having to work in tertiary positions in factories or in the service industry, migrant women continue to be more vulnerable to a multitude of risks, from sexual harassment to being fired to being cheated of their wages.

Governments have yet to find equitable solutions to handle the influx of migrants into key cities. While it would be inappropriate to make light of the

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<sup>10</sup> Xiang Biao, "How Far are the left-behind left behind? A preliminary study in rural China," *Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, Working Paper 12*, (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2005) 10.

work and social conditions that rural male migrants are subject to, female migrants are subject to even more vulnerable conditions. Although, the central government has stepped up efforts to better integrate the migrant population into the cities since 2003, most policies and legislation enacted have been difficult to enforce and are essentially gender blind. This is not to say the Chinese government is not committed to addressing the gender issues affecting migrant women in the country but greater efforts are needed to reconcile current and future labour, social and economic policies on paper with active policy implementation and enforcement.

### **Women in China**

The Chinese government has, on several occasions, stated that women play an important role in the country's economic development process. Following Mao's declaration that "women hold up half the sky", the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Labor Law of the PRC, and the Law of the PRC on Safeguarding Women's Rights and Interests<sup>11</sup> all contain provisions for safeguarding women's right to employment. The government has also reaffirmed its commitment to protecting the rights of women in the workplace as a signatory of the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This is sometimes referred to as the Women's Act.

<sup>12</sup> China first ratified the Convention in 1980. China has since submitted 3 reports: 1985, 1989 and 1997.

During its Ninth Five Year Plan (1996-2000), the Communist Party introduced The Programme for the Development of Chinese Women. The Programme stresses the need for solving the new problems facing Chinese women in the course of reform, liberalization and the establishment of a socialist market-economy structure. It sets out eleven objectives to be met by the end of the twentieth century with respect to women's political participation, employment, labour protection, education, health care, poverty alleviation and rights of the person. Some of the priority areas highlighted for development include the need to improve women's talents and abilities as a whole and increase their participation in development while emphasizing the importance of helping women in remote, poor and ethnic minority-inhabited areas, and protecting the special interests of young girls and elderly or disabled women<sup>13</sup>.

The Chinese government has also reportedly pushed for the education and training of rural women. The literacy campaign, dating back to the 1950s, aims to reduce the number of illiterate women by organizing night and winter schools. Agricultural knowledge and skills are always on the curricula of these schools. Since the introduction of the program, the Chinese government claims that more than 120 million rural women have since participated in this campaign, with more than 90 million of them having learned one or two production skills.<sup>14</sup> In 2000,

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *Country Report: China (Combined 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Periodic Reports)*, (New York: UNDAW, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1997) <http://ods-dds-nv.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N97/183/09/PDF/N9718309.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed 14 November 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

the government reports that more than 20 million women have learned how to read and write; claiming that the literacy campaign has done much to enhance the role of women in agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, sideline occupations and fishery and has made them a key force in rural development.<sup>15</sup>

However despite these efforts, research has demonstrated that rural women and migrant women are poorer and more isolated and marginalized than other groups within Chinese society. The Chinese government itself also acknowledges this discrepancy:

China is a developing country, hampered by its level of economic and social development as well as by traditional attitudes. In real life, Chinese women's equal rights to political participation, employment and education as well as in marriage and family life have yet to be fully realized. Disrespect for and discrimination against women, and even violations of their rights and interests, are not uncommon, and the overall talents and abilities of China's women also need further improvement.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the government's public proclamation to support women and the legal documents to do so, the problem that remains is the lack of mechanisms at the provincial and local levels to implement or reinforce any of the stated rights. Women's issues and concerns in rural areas have reportedly been placed on the back burner for the sake of "more pressing needs" such as land reforms or production reforms.<sup>17</sup> According to state statistics, women account for 41.2

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Beaver, Hou Lihui, Wang Xue, "Rural Chinese Women: Two Faces of Economic Reform," *Modern China* 21.2 (April 1995): 208.

percent of the rural labour force in agriculture and rural enterprises in 1997.<sup>18</sup> As of 2000, women make up 70 per cent of the workforce in crop farming and animal husbandry, between one third to one half of the 14 million rural service personnel and 40 per cent of the employees in rural and township enterprises.<sup>19</sup>

However, while current statistics released by the China Statistics Bureau indicate an increase in female participation in the off farm workforce, higher rural female literacy rates and an improved knowledge in skills and trade, evidence would suggest that rural women have continued to be marginalized under China's developing socialist market economy. There continue to be gender inequalities within the division of labour as rural women are pegged into tertiary positions. As a result of this, there appears to be an increasing number of rural women migrating into cities or industrially developed regions along the east coast in search of more secure and higher paying jobs.<sup>20</sup> The 2000 census put the total number of rural women migrants to 26 million.<sup>21</sup> By 2003, the estimated number of rural migrant women reached 37 million.<sup>22</sup> Most of these women come from underdeveloped inland provinces and poor rural villages. Unfortunately, not all

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<sup>18</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "Women in Agriculture, Environment and Rural Production: Fact Sheet China," <http://www.fao.org/sd/WPdirect/WPre0107.htm> (accessed 05 November 2004).

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *Country Report: China*, (New York: United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1997) <http://ods-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N97/183/09/PDF/N9718309.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed 14 November 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Although, social factors also contribute to the increasing number of rural migrant workers, economics still play a major role in a rural women's decision to leave home.

<sup>21</sup> Tan Shen, "Leaving Home and Coming Back: Experience of Rural Migrant Women," in *Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun and Shirley L. Mow (New York: The Feminist Press, 2004), 248.

<sup>22</sup> Zhan Shaohua (2005), 21.

rural migrants will find better or more secure jobs as these women continue to face similar discrimination resulting not only from gendered discrimination but also from social/ class based discrimination. A high percentage of women continue to face occupational hazards, low wages, and poorly enforced labour regulations in urban workplaces and factories.<sup>23</sup> A large number of rural women from poorer areas have reportedly entered the informal sector.<sup>24</sup>

While the rural-urban labour migration of women has steadily increased over the past decade with the growth of the economy, the central government has been slow to respond to the socio-economic issues that come with this trend. Existing institutional structures are unable to accommodate the increasing levels of mobility. Policies have been made to protect the rights of rural migrants and even to promote rural labour migration.<sup>25</sup> But there remain serious challenges for the government to address the economic disparity between locals and emigrants as well as the social segmentation perpetuated by that disparity. Although the relaxed *hukou* system has allowed a freer flow of migrants into cities, the household registration system still links residency with formal employment and social welfare. Without local hukou registration, migrants then have limited access to local schools, citywide welfare programs, state sector jobs, and the housing distribution system.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Tan Shen (2004), 256.

<sup>25</sup> Zhan Shaohua (2005), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Wu Weiping, *Labour Mobility in China: A Review of the Program Redressing Discrimination against Labour Migrants 1997 – 2001*. (Beijing, The Ford Foundation, 2001), 61.

According to researchers in China, the vulnerability of migrant workers is most obvious in the highly segmented urban labour markets, where the majority of migrants are restricted to jobs that are undesirable to the local population but are necessary for the functioning of the economy.<sup>27</sup> Housing remains difficult to obtain by migrant workers and migrant children are restricted to sub-quality education as there continues to be explicit and implicit barriers against their enrollment in urban public schools.<sup>28</sup> The segregation of migrants and their children from local communities reflect a much larger question of citizenship within China and the problems this creates. This type of social exclusion perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty and alienation. In addition to the social stratification, migrant women are also burdened with vulnerabilities such as sexual harassment, being the first to get laid off during job cuts, and minimal to zero access to gender specific health services.

This research is important because China is currently at a crossroads. With a population of over 1.3 billion people, an expanding economy and a demographic transition within its key urban centres, future urban and rural standards of living depend on the growing population of migrant women and their families. Poverty reduction, access to health and social services, access to legal aid as well as better access for migrant children to quality education is paramount to the well-being of migrant women and the Chinese society as a whole. Ignoring

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Dr. Zheng Guizhen, Director of the Institute for Research on Gender and Development at Fudan University in Shanghai (15 November 2005). Similar findings were reported in Wu Weiping's report to the Ford Foundation.

<sup>28</sup> Zheng interview.

recommendations by local and international NGO groups for gender sensitive economic and social policies will be catastrophic in the long run. Migrant women and their off-spring will remain in a vicious cycle where they are seen and treated as second-class citizens and are socially, economically and politically ostracized by their peers. This group of women will continue to be segregated and discriminated against within society and in labour markets. Migrant women will continue to work in second-class and tertiary jobs, receive less than average wages, and will remain vulnerable to the ill-effects of the changing political economy. More migrant women and girls may fall through the cracks of society and end up in undesirable occupations such as prostitution.

Another serious factor to consider is migrant women's health. Current health policies and programs are gender blind. These policies often fail to take into account the increased vulnerability of migrant women due to their subverted position in society as women and as migrants. Currently there are too few programs and services available that specifically target migrant women so to alleviate the economic burden and uncertainty of obtaining health care in the cities. Without proper access to health care and education, the potential decline in women's reproductive health and worse yet, an exponential increase in communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS is very much a reality. While there are existing policies and programs to create awareness and educate high risk groups such as sex workers on HIV/AIDS, most migrant women and children are left uninformed therefore increasing their vulnerability to potential infection. In

addition to the health concerns, migrant children also run into the risk of becoming the new generation of urban underclass as a result of being undereducated and therefore unemployable. The increasingly fluid population from rural to urban has serious social implications for family structures that will be discussed in future sections.

### **Methodology**

This thesis will engage in an historical comparison of local labour markets between the periods of 1995 to 2005. Some of the larger communities I was able to observe while in China include Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Ningbo. Due to limited time and resources, my field research focussed on these four cities because they are four of the faster growing economies in China. Through the information collected in the field, these cities have also been identified as some of the current primary destination sites outside of Guangdong province for rural migrants seeking employment. Beijing, Shanghai and Tainjin have all seen positive net flows of migration into its municipal borders since the late 1980s with Ningbo recently joining their ranks.

Beijing, the capital city of the People's Republic of China, is the political and cultural Mecca of that country. According to statistics on the local government website,

Beijing is a major city with the greatest development of the tertiary industry with 62.2% of the total GDP devoting to the tertiary industry....Beijing has a fully integrated industrial structure. It has to date nearly 23,800 industrial enterprises,

covering fields of electronics, machinery, chemicals, light industry, textile and car manufacturing. Among all the enterprises, there are 4, 551 state-owned ones, with annual sales of over five million Yuan (nearly 602,409.64 U.S. dollars). High tech and modern manufacturing industries have become the leading forces of Beijing's industrial growth. Total value added of the industrial sector of Beijing achieved 87.47 billion Yuan (approximately 10.54 billion U.S. dollars) in 2002.<sup>29</sup>

Beijing has a population of over 13.82 million people with a positive net migration flow of 1.7 million<sup>30</sup> between the periods of 1995 – 2000.<sup>31</sup> As the nation's capital, Beijing has some of the best resources and tools available to tackle the gender and migrant issues raised by policy advocates, researchers and concerned citizens. Beijing is an ideal case study because it is one of the few cities that has witnessed positive migration over the past fifteen-twenty years. The city has had more time to examine and respond to the migrant situation and address the issues faced by migrant women. Beijing seems to be more sensitive to pressure from international aid agencies and local interest groups advocating for policy changes including those concerning the health and welfare of migrant women. To their credit, local officials have responded to the call for change and Beijing is now home to a great outreach and support program specifically targeting rural migrant women. The rural women's magazine *Rural Women Knowing All* provides counselling and advocacy to reduce the incidence of rural female suicide. With the support of the Ford Foundation and the All China

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<sup>29</sup> Government of Beijing, "Invest in Beijing," 2005, [internet]; available from <http://www.bjinvest.gov.cn/english/Entering/200511/t69778.htm> (assessed 02 February 2006).

<sup>30</sup> According to the National Bureau of Statistics and China Statistical Yearbooks, there were 1.8 million people migrating into Beijing and only 174, 000 moving out from 1995 to 2000.

<sup>31</sup> C. Cindy Fan (2005), 300.

Women's Federation the magazine has evolved to include a rural women's migrant support centre, *Migrant Women's Club*, skills training programs for female workers and capacity building for rural microfinance experiments.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, this program has not yet been replicated in any other city.

Tianjin, located just southeast of Beijing, has long been considered Beijing's gateway to the Yellow Sea. The five main industries in Tianjin include the manufacturing of 1) automobiles; 2) machinery and equipment; 3) microelectronics and telecommunications equipment; 4) marine chemical and petroleum chemical industry; and 5) quality steel tube and rolled steel. While the city has developed at a slower pace compared to Beijing, central authorities have been keen on turning Tianjin into the manufacturing and high-tech hotbed of northern China. TEDA, Tianjin Economic-Technological Development Area, was even listed by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) as one of the most dynamic areas of China together with Shanghai-Pudong in 2005. In addition to TEDA, there are 4 other development zones located in Dongli District and Wuqing County, Jinghai County and Ninghe County and a Port Free Trade Zone. As the city of 10 million plus<sup>33</sup> continues to attract investment dollars into its growing economy, the municipality will also continue to draw migrant workers including those already working in other special economic zones. However, it remains unclear what impact the growing

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<sup>32</sup> Wu Weiping (2001), 84.

<sup>33</sup> 2001 numbers from the English People's Daily website. *People's Daily*, [internet]; available from <http://english.people.com.cn/data/province/tianjin.html> (accessed 02 February 2006).

manufacturing industry has on the migrant women and what measures the local and central government will take to protect these women. It is one of the issues that this research will pursue in latter chapters.

Shanghai, a city of over 16 million people as of 2001, is slowly taking over Hong Kong's role as the financial capital of China. While Beijing is the political centre of the country, Shanghai is undoubtedly the economic heart of China. Industries in Shanghai include textile manufacturing and manufacturing of consumer goods such as electronic assembly equipment, watches, cameras, radios, fountain pens, glassware, leather goods, stationery products, and hardware. The chemical and petrochemical industries serve as a basis for the production of plastics, synthetic fibres, and other products.<sup>34</sup> Due to its booming economy, Shanghai has seen the country's greatest inflow of migrants from 1995 to 2000. Approximately 2.1 million people moved into the municipality in five short years. However, there remain huge cultural, economic and social gaps between the urban population and rural emigrants. Nowhere else is there more glitz and glamour on the mainland than in Shanghai and nowhere else is the rural-urban divide as great. While this division is clearly a by-product of policy deficiencies, it is also rooted in the local class culture of Shanghai. It has been observed that Shanghai residents tend to be more class conscious and that has filtered into how local residents, including local officials and policy makers, view migrants as being sub-par. Until local officials and policy makers can get past the local-

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<sup>34</sup> English People's Daily, "Shanghai," *People's Daily*, [internet]; available from <http://english.people.com.cn/data/province/Shanghai.html> (accessed 02 February 2006).

migrant divide, migrant women would be hard pressed to get appropriate social and economic support needed to improve their wellbeing and livelihood. The number of migrant women entering the city, the gaping economic and social disparity between the locals and the migrants as well as the reluctance by local officials and residents to accept migrants is a cause for concern that needs to be addressed.

Located in the middle of China's coastline and in the southern part of the Yangtze Delta, Ningbo is one of China's coastal cities open to the outside world. With a population of 5.3 million people, Ningbo enjoys privileged rights of economic management at the provincial level. The Ningbo Economic and Technological Development Zone, approved by the State Council in 1994, is one of the biggest development zones in China. The city is also home to one-third of the domestic clothing manufacturing industry. Ningbo is the fourth city chosen for this research because of its economic significance in Zhejiang Province. Zhejiang is considered one of the fastest growing provinces in China over the last decade and has attracted over 2.7 million migrants from 1995 – 2000.<sup>35</sup> The reason for choosing a city in Zhejiang province as a case study rests not only on the fact that Zhejiang is one of the first provinces to engage in economic reforms and has a diverse economy but also because the province has become somewhat of a model for development and economic reform for the rest of the country.

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<sup>35</sup> C. Cindy Fan (2005), 300.

Therefore, how migrant women fare within this model of economic growth and development will resonate in other provinces and cities.

This thesis focuses on the local labour markets in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Ningbo for three specific reasons. Firstly, China is a vast country. As the third largest country in the world, its land mass covers 9.6 million square kilometres, has common borders with 15 different countries and is home to 56 nationalities and even more languages. The regional disparity between east to west, north to south is great, making it difficult to generalize economic growth, social policies and political interests. Also, due to its size and diversity, the economic development of each province/ city has progressed at different rates. Therefore, it would be difficult to engage in a general analysis of how economic policies have affected rural women throughout the country as a whole. It would be more productive to apply my research question to specific cities and then draw on lessons learned from each for policy recommendations. However, I recognize the limitations to this approach and how observations made in one setting may not hold true in other cities. This has perhaps been one of the common drawbacks associated with any type of research on China.

Secondly, the regulation and implementation of policies as prescribed by the Chinese Communist Party varies from province to province and from locale to locale. By narrowing my research to these cases within a specified region, I will be able to analyze the manner in which national laws and programs have been implemented at the local level, or not, and their impact on local women over time.

Even though Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai are all municipalities under the direct command of the central government, each city seems to have different interpretations and differing local policies to deal with migrant women.

Thirdly, I will be taking into consideration not only the effects of economic policies on women but also each city's cultural and political influence as well. The culture within each city or village is as diverse as the number of dialects within China. How each city accepts or translates national policies and laws seems to be dependent on how local residents view themselves with respect to the rest of the country. This will help analyze the social stratification that has framed migrant women as second-class citizens in all four case studies chosen.

It was my original intention to conduct research in rural communities so to identify the push-pull factors integrating rural women into both the agrarian and urban economies while analyzing the types of local policies those communities use to protect rural female labourers. However, the scope of the research required was beyond the time and space allowed for this project. I have instead decided to narrow down my research to focus on the factors causing rural women to migrate and the policies affecting them after they enter into urban cities. Traditionally, women have remained on the farms while their male counterparts participate in off-farm employment, nevertheless, recent studies show that an increasing number of migrant women are also entering the off-farm labour market. The growing number of rural women migrating from farm to urban centres lead to some interesting questions and serious policy challenges for the central,

provincial and local governments. Since this topic has only become of interest to researchers and policy makers in recent years, there is still a lack of sufficient research on why women continue to be marginalized in the cities: are there sufficient policies at all levels of government to address this new urban-rural social phenomenon? what type of mechanisms are in place to address the changing needs of migrant women in the cities? what social policies and networks are made available to these women to assist with their transition into urban life? These are all questions that this paper will attempt to answer.

The first phase of this research was conducted primarily through a literature review and documentary research. Due to my chosen combination of theoretical framework, much of the literature retrieved is from the fields of political economy, geography, sociology, health and citizenship. Books, journal articles and government publications were retrieved through the McMaster Library and other post-secondary institutions. Additional journal articles and publications including the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Labor Law of the PRC, and the Law of the PRC on Safeguarding Women's Rights and Interests, were retrieved through extensive searches on the World Wide Web.

The second phase of the research was conducted in China. I was able to compliment my documentary research with actual fieldwork in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Ningbo from October 29, 2005 to November 25, 2005. The field

research was broken down into three parts: document retrieval, interviews with key informants and observations.

Documents retrieved in China included reports and publications from various local and international NGO groups including the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the Ford Foundation and the Women's Migrant Club in Beijing. Other key documents retrieved include the newly revised women's law and studies and reports conducted by local researchers and academics. Most documents retrieved during this exercise were published in English. However, there were a few that were published in Chinese.

Interviews with key informants were carried out in accordance with the guidelines and conditions set out by the McMaster Ethics Board. Key informants interviewed include staff at UNIFEM, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Migrant Women's Club, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), policy makers, academics and the owner, supervisor and workers in a factory located in Tianjin. Overall nineteen individuals were interviewed through formal channels in four cities (phone or in person): three from UN agencies (Beijing), two from other international donors including The Ford Foundation and CIDA (Beijing), three from the ACWF (Beijing, Shanghai and Ningbo), three academics (Beijing and Shanghai), one factory owner, one factory manager and five factory workers (Wuqin County, Tianjin). Requests for phone or in-person interviews were declined by Oxfam

Hong Kong in Beijing as well as the Poverty Reduction Office of the State Council. However, both provided written responses to my inquiries via e-mail. Several additional interviews were carried out on an informal basis through the cities. Informal interviewees included service industry workers such as masseuses at a local spa, waitresses at local restaurants and taxi drivers. Most formal and all informal interviews took place without being electronically recorded. The one recorded interview was conducted in Chinese and has been transcribed into English. All other interviews were recorded on pen and paper either during the interview or immediately afterwards.

Observations were conducted in each of the chosen case studies. This exercise was conducted in open public space such as on streets, in markets, employment centres, restaurants, hotels and one factory. Ideally more observations would be conducted at multiple factories in each of the case studies. However due to difficulties gaining permission to access factories in Ningbo, I was only able to engage in observations in one mid-size factory in Tianjin. The American-backed factory produces non-woven materials such as medical masks and coverall suits. The factory employs approximately 250 workers and is currently looking to expand. All the workers on the factory floor during my visit were women. 80% of those workers were local residents and were middle aged women. 20% of the women were migrants and were in their early to late twenties. According to the owner, he purposely selected middle-aged local women so that there would be less of a turnover due to pregnancy and marriage. He believed this

particular demographic would provide the factory with a stable and steady workforce.

The final and third phase of this research was to physically map out labour market and statistical data as well as the results obtained through my field research. Data examined included changes in demographics, migration patterns, labour market statistics and socio-economic indicators such as health and education. This exercise was used to identify the key patterns and issues that require further elaboration and analysis. Information used in this mapping exercise is extracted from information made available by international, national and local sources such as the China's National Statistics Bureau, the ILO and UNAIDS.

### **Pointing Forward**

The following chapters will delve into the complicated relationship and tensions between rural women and society in China. Chapter Two will examine the theoretical frameworks chosen for this thesis and how it will add to our understanding of where rural women have been, where they are now and where they should be within China's changing political economy. Chapter Three is a historical section that will briefly explore the roots of inequality faced by China's rural population including rural women in modern China. Chapter Four is a narrative to examine the explicit and implicit tensions within modern China affecting and preventing the empowerment of female migrant labour including

issues of availability and access to education and social and health services in their destination sites. Chapter Five looks at current government policies and the impact of those policies on rural and migrant women. Chapter 6 wraps up this discussion with concluding remarks.



**CHAPTER TWO**

## THEORY THROUGH A GENDERED LENS

*Work cannot be understood without examining how gender is embedded in all social relations.*<sup>36</sup>

The exclusion of the marginalized, such as women, from traditional discussions of the political economy is nothing new. Fused with strong patriarchal norms and a dichotomized citizenship structure, an engagement of traditional political economy discourse effectively strips rural and migrant women in China of any and all agency. Women are more central to China's political economy than ever before; however, their exclusion and devaluation from cultural and economic analysis within traditional discourse continues to imprison women on the sidelines despite their growing involvement in the political economy. Therefore as a critical alternative to mainstream discourse, feminist political economy (FPE) theory defies the rigidity and exclusivity of classical and neo-classical perspectives by opening up space to include dialogue with those on the margins.

Feminist political economy attempts to introduce women as new actors or issues to document the under representation or the manner of participation by women in traditional areas of politics and economics.<sup>37</sup> Being less rigid with its disciplinary boundaries, it can be argued that feminist political economy acts as a

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<sup>36</sup> Spike Peterson, "How (the Meaning of) Gender Matters in Political Economy," *New Political Economy* 10.4 (2005): 499; Torry D. Dickson & Robert K. Schaeffer, *Fast Forward: Work, Gender, and Protest in a Changing World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 23.

<sup>37</sup> Sandra Whitworth, "Theory and Exclusion: Gender, Masculinity and International Political Economy," in *Political Economy and the Changing Global Order*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. Richard Stubbs and Geoffrey Underhill (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93.

‘synthesis’ of diverse intellectual standpoints.<sup>38</sup> Feminists tend to favour heterogeneity versus a single paradigm therefore drawing on a variety of approaches such as Marxian and social economics.<sup>39</sup> Feminist political economy provides space to incorporate other disciplines and perspectives into its analytical framework through the examination of gender with class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and nationality. As such, in an attempt to better understand the role of rural women within China’s evolving political economy, this research has been framed through a seemingly eclectic but complementary set of perspectives from feminist political economy, labour segmentation theory and citizenship theory.

This chapter will start off by further examining the merits of a feminist political economy framework, but not before exploring first the historical undertones that have excluded women from political, economic and social discourse in China for centuries. Following that, I will then investigate how labour segmentation and citizenship theories add texture and depth to our understanding of the current condition of rural and migrant women in China. This combination of perspectives will help deconstruct and reconstruct the complexities of gender and socio-economic relations within China and the impact of those relations on rural women and their integration into work and society.

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<sup>38</sup> Ellen Mutari and Heather Boushey, “Introduction: The Development of Feminist Political Economy,” in *Gender and Political Economy: Incorporating Diversity into Theory and Policy*, ed. Ellen Mutari, Heather Boushey and Willian Fraher IV (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 3 – 4.

<sup>39</sup> Spike Peterson (2005), 504.

### Confucianism – Root of Chinese Patriarchy

In the case of China, patriarchal tendencies under Confucian ideologies have dominated social and moral philosophy in the country since the 5<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.<sup>40</sup> Confucian ideals have normalized patriarchal practices and are, therefore, often the starting focal point for much feminist critique in China as well as in other Asian countries. In her research, anthropologist Elisabeth Croll discovers that gender biases start at the birth of a child within Chinese culture. Prestige and stature have been and continue to be linked to sons whereas the birth of a daughter is often perceived to be a disappointment as well as a loss of economic and social<sup>41</sup> opportunity. China's one-child policy, instituted in 1980, exacerbates this overvaluing of sons and undervaluing of daughters.<sup>42</sup> The Book of Songs (1000 – 700 B.C.), considered one of the most authentic sources depicting social life in ancient China, records and promotes the unequal treatment likely to be displayed to son and daughters from the moment of birth:<sup>43</sup>

When a son is born  
Let him sleep on the bed,  
Clothe him with fine clothes  
And give him jade to play with  
How lovely his cry is!  
May he grow up to ear crimson  
And be the lord of the clan and the tribe.

When a girl is born,  
Let her sleep on the ground.  
Wrap her in common wrappings,  
And give her broken tiles for playthings.  
May she have no faults, no merit of her own  
May she well attend to food and wine  
And bring no discredit to her parents.

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<sup>40</sup> Lijun Yuan, *Reconceiving Women's Equality in China: A Critical Examination of Models of Sex Equality*. (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 1.

<sup>41</sup> The loss of economic opportunity is perceived with the birth of a daughter because she will eventually leave her natal home and family for her husbands. Traditional Chinese families often commodify women as an object to be lost or gained by way of marriage – lose a daughter or gain a daughter-in-law. The social loss is associated with patriarchal lineage. Since the family name is passed through sons, the birth of a daughter under the current one-child policy would mean that the family line dies with the daughter.

<sup>42</sup> Elisabeth Croll, *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 71.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

This poem, written thousands of years ago, continues to be reflective of the gendered hierarchies that exist implicitly and explicitly within social and economic relationships within China. Confucian code of beliefs and conducts are also a product of ancient Chinese cosmology that assumes the universe is composed of two dichotomous life forces: ‘yin’ the female and ‘yang’ the male.<sup>44</sup> As Croll explains, “originally conceived as interacting, equal and complementary, these divisions were soon arranged in a hierarchical relationship; with ‘yin’ elements in time coming to stand for all that was negative and inferior in the universe.”<sup>45</sup>

Although women’s place within Chinese society has seen some improvements over the past two decades, more so in urban centres than in the rural countryside<sup>46</sup>, Confucian traditions continue to be infused within social relations between men and women. These traditions have in effect normalized the gendered division of labour and lower wages and insecure employment experienced by women as China continues down its chosen path of economic development and becomes further integrated into the global political economy and current global restructuring activities. However, the intersection of Confucianism, social relations and work is only one dimension of the story that requires additional analysis. This discussion of Confucianism underpins the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> I recognize that with this statement and observation I am perpetuating the assumption of the urban-rural dichotomy where everything urban is seen as more modern, developed and critical. In contrast to this, the rural countryside is viewed and understood as traditional, underdeveloped and backward economically, politically and socially.

importance of taking into account the social and cultural practices and/or ideas that oppress and disempower women. It also allows us to understand the long history and deep cultural embeddedness of inequality in China. Yet, inequality and oppression are not static and are taking new forms as China's economy industrializes and as women are pushed and pulled into playing a more active role in the economy.

### **Feminist Political Economy (FPE)**

Women and feminised others<sup>47</sup> constitute the vast majority of the world's population, as well as the vast majority of the poor, less skilled, insecure, informalised and flexibilised workers; and the global economy absolutely depends on the work they do. Yet their work is variously paid, underpaid, trivialized, denigrated, obscured and uncounted: it is devalorised.<sup>48</sup>

Feminist scholars have demonstrated that “gender operates at various levels at which it intersects with class, ethnicity, race, nationality, and sexuality to produce and reproduce an intricate web of inequalities between and among men and women.”<sup>49</sup> However, constructed under western hegemonic masculinity, traditional political economy paradigms not only neglect to take gender, race and class into account, but instead reinforce gendered and racial inequalities. These inequalities under neo-liberal practices have reinforced patriarchal norms and

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<sup>47</sup> Peterson's feminised 'others' include migrants, marginalized populations, 'unskilled' workers, the urban underclass and developing countries.

<sup>48</sup> Spike Peterson (2005), 508.

<sup>49</sup> Marianne H. Marchand and Anne S. Runyan, “Introduction: Feminist sightings of global restructuring: conceptualization and reconceptualization,” in *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances*, ed. Marianne H. Marchand and Anne S. Runyan (New York: Routledge, 2000), 8.

naturalized a certain hierarchy that continues to silence those on the margins by defining key segments of the population, most notably women and children, as supplementary or devalued workers.<sup>50</sup>

The resurgence of critical political economic theories in the 1990s have included a growing body of literature that combines political economy with feminist analysis. As political economies continue to shift, change and restructure so too do the roles of actors within those economies. It is therefore necessary to gain a clear understanding of the structures that characterize our society and the changing social, political and economic roles of individual actors, such as women, that define and are confined by those structures.<sup>51</sup> Although, women have played an integral role in the political economy they have largely remained invisible due to the androcentric bias that has dominated traditional political economy discourse. It is now more important than ever to open up space to include women within the political economy discourse as they are becoming a growing part of the local and global economies. Therefore, of the frameworks available, feminist political economy is best suited for this analysis.

The decision to frame this discussion with a feminist political economy perspective is because it “aims to understand gendered social, political and economic structures and to explain women’s largely subordinate role within those

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<sup>50</sup> Mary Beth Mills, “Gender and Inequality in the Global Labor Force,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32, (2003): 43.

<sup>51</sup> Joanne Cook and Jennifer Roberts, “Towards a Gendered Political Economy,” in *Towards a Gendered Political Economy*, ed. Joanne Cook, Jennifer Roberts, and Georgina Waylen (New York: St. Martin’s Press Inc, 2000), 3.

structures.”<sup>52</sup> No longer is it just enough to add women but also, as Peterson notes, to expand the investigation of relationships between women’s and men’s identities, activities and inequalities of power. By making women empirically visible, the early feminist project “inserts actual (embodied women) in our picture of economic reality, exposes how women and men are differently engaged with and affected by political economy, and reveals women as agents and activists, as well as victims of violence and the poorest of the poor.”<sup>53</sup> However, the understanding of gender through empiricism is limited in its ability to move beyond the dichotomy of men and women and, therefore, requires us to understand gender analytically. By deploying gender analytically we can argue that “the denigration of the feminine pervades language and culture, with systemic effects on how we ‘take for granted’ (normalise/ depoliticise) the *devaluation of feminised bodies, identities and activities.*”<sup>54</sup> Incorporating gender as an analytical tool allows us to expose the operating hierarchical institutional structures, social practices and cultural values that underpin identities and policies.

As a structural feature of social life, gender pervades language, which shapes how we identify, think, and communicate. It structures divisions of power and authority, which determine whose voices and experiences dominate culturally and coercively. And it structures division of labour, which determine what counts as work, who does what kind of work, and how difference kinds of work are valorized.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>53</sup> Spike Peterson (2005), 501.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 507.

<sup>55</sup> V. Spike Peterson, *A Critical Rewriting of Global Political Economy – Integrated reproductive, productive and virtual economies.* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 31.

In the case of China, social practices and cultural values affecting identities include Confucianism and patriarchy and hierarchical institutional structures include her household registration system that will be discussed further in latter chapters.

As stated above, Confucianism patriarchal values are deeply embedded in the social practices. Patriarchal norms are of particular concern to western feminist scholars such that they normalize the notion of hierarchical ideologies and masculine hegemony. This normalization of gendered hierarchies results in the privileging of that which is understood as masculine and devaluing of anything antonymous of that. This can be seen in the “distinction between public and private spheres and the relegation of the latter to the former,”<sup>56</sup> where public sphere is understood to be masculine and private is feminine. This public/ private divide under neo-classical economics is never challenged as women are assumed to be “subsumed within the private sphere and it is men who become the heads of households and who are individuals who enter the market.”<sup>57</sup> The family, household and the work such as childcare and unpaid household labour are not quantified within neo-classical economics. Value is placed solely on work completed in the public sphere normalizing the masculine identity associated with paid labour and feminizing and devalorizing women’s position within the economy. Women’s labour, is seen not only as cheap but socially and

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<sup>56</sup> Marianne H. Marchand and Anne S. Runyan (2000), 12.

<sup>57</sup> Georgina Waylen, “Gendered Political Economy and Feminist Analysis,” in *Towards a Gendered Political Economy*, ed. Joanne Cook, Jennifer Roberts, and Georgina Waylen (New York: St. Martin’s Press Inc, 2000), 19.

economically worthless, and therefore less worthy of equitable pay and treatment.<sup>58</sup> Adding to this, Spike Peterson notes that in gender political economy,

feminists have exposed how men dominate the practice of and knowledge production about ‘economics’; how women’s domestic, reproductive and caring labour is deemed marginal to male-defined production and analyses of it; how orthodox models and methods presuppose male-dominated activities (paid work, the formal economy) and masculinised characteristics (autonomous, objective, rational, instrumental, competitive). As a corollary, ‘women’s work’ and feminised qualities – in whatever sphere – are devalued: deemed ‘economically irrelevant, characterized as subjective, ‘natural’ and unskilled, and typically unpaid.<sup>59</sup>

The undervaluation of women’s reproductive work is duly noted by feminists scholars such as Peterson and Waylen who stress the need to analyze the reproductive as well as the productive economy and the links between the two.

### **Labour Market Segmentation Theory**

The dichotomy between public and private within the gendered division of labour is further explained under labour segmentation theory which examines the economic marginalization of women, lower classes and ethnic minorities.<sup>60</sup>

Labour market segmentation theory provides a way of understanding the gender inequalities operating in labour market processes, often using many of the same concepts found in the feminist political economy literature.

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<sup>58</sup> Mary Beth Mills (2003), 43.

<sup>59</sup> Spike Peterson (2005), 500.

<sup>60</sup> Harald Bauder, “Culture in the labor market: segmentation theory and perspectives of place,” *Progress in Human Geography* 25.1 (2001): 37.

Labour segmentation theory suggests that jobs and labour are divided into segments determined on the basis of broad social categories. Early segmentation theory developed by Doeringer and Piore in 1971 argues that labour markets are divided into primary and secondary sectors. The primary sector contains better jobs that offer high wages and secure employment. “Formal skill levels in this sector are high and production processes technologically advanced” and jobs are usually occupied by white, prime-aged males.<sup>61</sup> The secondary sector by contrast contains jobs with low wages, poor working conditions and in which the threat of unemployment is constant. Jobs in this sector are usually filled by ethnic minority workers, women, disabled, and young people.<sup>62</sup>

This dualist model was elaborated on by radical/ Marxists theorists who identified labour segmentation strategies “as a capitalist control system” – segmentation becomes necessary as a result of more routinized production techniques that saw the workforce become more deskilled.<sup>63</sup> Labour segments are further fragmented from Doeringer and Piore’s dualist model as post-Keynesian theorists identify segmentation within the primary and secondary sectors. Third generation segmentation theorists take into consideration both the institutional and social influences affecting labour arguing that segmentation takes place in labour demand, labour supply and via institutional constraints set by the state such

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<sup>61</sup> Jamie Peck, *Work-place: The Social Regulation of Labour Markets*. (New York: Guildford Press, 1996), 51.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

as “the structure of welfare provisions and its eligibility rules...[and] the structure and emphases of the education and training system.”<sup>64</sup>

The incorporation of labour market segmentation theory into this framework is necessary so as to tie together the gendered inequalities unveiled within the feminist political economy literature and the social and structural inequalities exposed within the discussion of citizenship. Labour market segmentation theory allows us to see that rural and migrant women are segmented into light manufacturing, tertiary, domestic help, service jobs and any work that is considered dangerous, dirty and unwanted by urbanites. Furthermore, labour market segmentation theory explains and reaffirms the institutional and social influences that subdivide rural and migrant women into specific sectors of the Chinese labour market.

The focus of my research on female migrants from rural to urban areas underscores the importance of taking into account space and place. Therefore, some of the more applicable work within segmentation theory for this analysis can be found within the discipline of human and economic geography. Drawing on the multi-causal explanation of labour market segmentation theory, human geographers not only examine the segmentation of demand, supply and division of labour but also the social nature of labour -- the relationship between culture, place and segmentation. Human geographers recognize that labour markets exist

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 61.

in a “wider context of interlocking policies, practices and institutions that reproduce social inequalities.”<sup>65</sup>

### **Citizenship**

Causal explanations of labour segmentation theory recognize that class, ethnicity and gender differences not only feed into processes of cultural identification and differentiation but intersect with the production of place-based symbols, meanings and expressions that shape work roles and employment expectations.<sup>66</sup> As with labour segmentation theory which seeks to fill in the gaps to explain how labour markets are segmented, critical perspectives within political economy studies have forced a much needed debate on the validity and shortcomings of main stream, traditional paradigms about the role of women within the political economy. Feminism opposes the status quo imposed by neo-classical ideologies by protesting against prevailing gender-based power structures and against accepted societal norms and values concerning women and men.<sup>67</sup>

As noted above, the feminist perspective is important to this research project because it provides an alternative to the status-quo by adding gender, class, race and ethnicity into the debate. However, what is often omitted from the feminist political economy critique is an analysis that takes into consideration the importance of political, social, and economic rights of individuals and the

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<sup>65</sup> Harald Bauder (2001), 39.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>67</sup> Sandra Whitworth (2000), Spike Peterson (2005).

construction of their identities within the political economy. This is important for rural and migrant women in China as their rights and access (or exclusion of access) to resources and services is place-based and contingent on their citizenship status between rural and urban. As such, citizenship theory is included within this framework to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the construction of identities through institutional structures and the sociocultural process of subject formation. Citizenship theory will also highlight the substantive exclusion of women as citizens through a historical assessment of the private/ public divide within rural Chinese communities leading to the subsequent marginalization they face as a result of formal exclusions in the cities.<sup>68</sup>

In recent years, questions regarding place-based identities have become significant with increased labour mobility as a result of globalization and global restructuring. As a result of which, citizenship, identified not just as having the right to carry a passport, but also as the relationship between the individual, state and society, has become a popular subject of debate both nationally and internationally.<sup>69</sup>

Citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed. There is no universal principal that determines what those rights and duties shall be, but societies in which citizenship is a developing institution create an image of an ideal citizenship against which

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<sup>68</sup> As defined by Ruth Lister, formal citizenship is “the legal status of membership of a state, as symbolized by possession of a passport” and substantive citizenship is “enjoyment of the rights and obligations associate with membership and sometimes simply legal residence” (2000, 98).

<sup>69</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, “Women, Citizenship and Difference,” *Feminist Review* 57 (1997), 4.

achievement can be measured and towards which aspiration can be directed. – T.H. Marshall, 1950<sup>70</sup>

Theorist T.H. Marshall has provided researchers with an analytical framework from which to discuss citizenship as a “multi-tier construct, which applies to people’s membership in a variety of collectives – local, ethnic, national and trans-national.”<sup>71</sup> Citizenship is defined by Marshall as formal membership in a community rather than to the state. Marshall’s understanding of citizenship becomes an important starting point to our analysis such that increased mobility within state borders has left migrants of Chinese nationality out in the cold. Migrant labourers emigrating to different cities and provinces within national boundaries are in essence disconnected from both their original and their destination communities. The only communities migrants end up associating with are other migrant groups. However, this becomes problematic when the membership of these individuals is neither recognized nor accepted by other collectives and thereby depoliticizing the civil, political and social rights and obligations to and of them. Such is the case of migrants in China. Without formal urban residence status, migrants are not under the jurisdiction of the city in which they have moved to. Migrants are stripped of their political or social rights and obligations such as participating in local elections, health and education services, usually afforded to urban residents. What this suggests is that social class and its system of inequalities is a strong antithesis to citizenship. “Class

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<sup>70</sup> T.H. Marshall, “Citizenship and Social Class,” in *Citizenship and Social Class: Pluto Perspectives* ed. T.H. Marshall and Tom Bottomore (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 18.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

differences are not established and defined by laws and customs of the society, but emerge from the interplay of a variety of factors related to the institutions of property and education and the structure of the national economy”<sup>72</sup> However, this is merely a starting point for our analysis as Marshall’s theory fails to account for the gendered nature of citizenship.

Feminist scholars such as Nira-Yuval Davis, argue that comparative study of citizenship should consider the issue of women’s citizenship not only by contrast to that of men, “but also in relation to women’s affiliation to dominant or subordinate groups, their ethnicity, origin and urban or rural resistance.”<sup>73</sup> Moreover the concept of citizenship itself is seen as problematic such that there continues to be a lack of agency for those who are marginalized to find efficient ways of securing the political, economic and social rights that are privy to ‘citizens’ and be able to hold institutions (the state) and other organizations accountable.<sup>74</sup> This means that women need to establish positive political identification. In other words, they need to see themselves as political subjects that can affect change rather than as second-class citizens.<sup>75</sup> Resonating with my earlier discussion calling for the need to politicize the private sphere, one way to increase women’s political agency is to challenge the “disproportionate

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>74</sup> Caroline Sweetman, “Editorial,” in *Gender, Development, and Citizenship*, ed. Caroline Sweetman (Oxfam, 2004), 7.

<sup>75</sup> Rian Voet, *Feminism and Citizenship*. (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 99.

assignment of unpaid caring labour to women, which deprives women of the time and energy to participate fully in citizen's distinctive activities.”<sup>76</sup>

The need to politicize the private sphere so it and the work carried out by women in the homes and as care givers becomes visible should not confine the notion of citizenship to just the public or political spheres. As Friedman notes, “The citizenship practices of the public and political spheres are themselves related to the conditions in other social spheres such as those of family and civil society.”<sup>77</sup> The context of this discussion must account for how the public and the political spheres intersect with the social sphere. This will be developed in my thesis through an analysis of women's historical role within the rural economy, the state controlled household registration system and their intersection with patriarchal norms and gendered inequalities. This will in effect open up space for discussion of women and citizenship in China within the cultural context. Unlike much of the existing literature on citizenship, women and feminism, this thesis does not question the notion of citizenship as a result of mobility through transnational borders. Rather, the issue of citizenship must be examined within national Chinese borders and how relationships within and between ‘communities’ undermine migrant women's place in society and in the Chinese labour market.

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<sup>76</sup> Alison M. Jaggard, “Arenas of Citizenship: Civil Society, the State, and the Global Order,” in *Women and Citizenship*, ed. Marilyn Friedman (New York, Oxford, 2005), 94; Ruth Lister, “Inclusion/ Exclusion: the Janus Face of Citizenship,” in *Towards a Gendered Political Economy*, ed. Joanne Cook, Jennifer Roberts, and Georgina Waylen (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc, 2000), 99.

<sup>77</sup> Marilyn Friedman, “Introduction,” in *Women and Citizenship*, ed. Marilyn Friedman (New York, Oxford, 2005), 4.

## **Conclusion**

The combination of feminist perspectives on political economy, citizenship theory and labour market segmentation theory has been selected to frame the economic, political and social realities of migrants, and more importantly, rural migrant women's place within China. I will highlight the gendered and class-based inequalities and subsequent barriers faced by rural women through the incorporation of gender as an analytical tool within the feminist political economy perspective. This will allow us to expose the operating hierarchical institutional structures, social practices and cultural values that underpin identities and policies in China. The framing of how citizenship is defined within national borders as dictated by political and institutional structures will further explain the way in which social identities are formed and discriminate against rural migrant women. As described by Cook and Roberts, the exclusion of women from full citizenship is embedded within social structures such as labour markets,<sup>78</sup> thereby demanding the inclusion of a labour segmentation theory to illuminate the tensions behind rural migrant women and the labour market in China.

Discourse on rural women's integration into the Chinese political economy cannot and should not be limited to dissecting the dichotomous relationship between the masculine and feminine. Rather, we need to include in our discussions how gender operates at various levels to produce and reproduce

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<sup>78</sup> Joanne Cook and Jennifer Roberts (2000), 8.

inequalities between and among men and women; how cultural identifications intersect with the production of place-based symbols to shape work roles; and how social interactions and acceptance between the individual and the community and between communities shape a person's political, cultural and socio-economic identity. In short, contrary to traditional paradigms that insist on the separation of the object from the subject, the political from the economic and both of those from the social, this thesis will show that the political and economic, are in fact, very much embedded in the social.



**CHAPTER THREE**

## **ROOTS OF INEQUALITY**

Gender, migration and labour segmentation is best understood when contextualized within the political and socio-economic environment under examination. Therefore, this section will briefly explore the roots of the inequality faced by China's rural population and, more specifically, rural women in modern China. The following will examine the historical context of the political, social and economic underpinnings of gendered inequalities within Chinese society. It will demonstrate that despite early attempts at egalitarianism by the Chinese Communist party, the realities of socialist economic development is biased in favour of urban over rural and male over female. The socio-economic and gendered inequalities have only worsened with economic liberalization and China's integration into the global market. The objective of this section is to provide some level of understanding regarding the source of inequality rural migrant women face within the current Chinese labour market.

Gender relations within early Chinese Communist Party policies were inconsistent at best. Mao's push for China to become economically and politically self-sufficient resulted in various policy choices that were contradictory to his egalitarian beliefs; leaving rural women with a false sense of liberty. Under Deng Xiaopings's economic reforms the unequal development between coastal economic zones and the interior farming communities exacerbated the growing gap between the cities and the countryside and the relationship between men and women. From President Jiang Zemin (1993–2003)

to President Hu Jintao (2003 – present), the economy has continued to flourish as China ploughs its way into global power status. However, despite impressive economic growth and social progress, the country is suffering from serious growing pains. A liberalized economy demands not only a freer flow of goods and capital but also a fluid labour supply. As a result of this, the Chinese government has relaxed various regulations to increase the mobility of its citizens. Some of the policies implemented to accommodate the liberalized economy include the dismantling of infrastructure such as state owned enterprises and the *hukou* registration system resulting in a decrease of public and social services. This move coincides with the acknowledgement that with shrinking farmland and reduced agricultural output, the rising rural labour surplus needs to be used more efficiently. The requirement for more efficient labour provides an opportunity for members of rural families to seek work in local off-farm industries or urban cities to supplement farming incomes. However, the state has neither the means nor the proper policies in place to address the needs of its increasingly mobile rural population.

The Chinese political economy has undoubtedly witnessed dramatic changes over the past half century. The transition from Mao's rigorous state planned economy to Deng's Socialism with Chinese Characteristics<sup>79</sup> to the current state of market economy exhibits a dynamic tableau of economic and social change in the PRC since its birth. Breaking from traditional norms and

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<sup>79</sup> Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (具有中国特色的社会主义, *juyou Zhongguo tese de shehui zhuyi*) is the official term for China's mixed economy.

practices of feudal or ‘Old China’ (pre-1949), the ‘New China’ (post-1949) under Mao was reflective of a Soviet-type of economic system which saw the collectivization of agriculture and the centralization of production units. Gone are the days where land belonged to a handful of landlords and men constituted the main labour force on the farms while women were relegated to supplementary jobs at home such as housework, raising poultry, and weaving.<sup>80</sup> Instead through a series of reforms, all land and means of production eventually became collectivized under the state and citizens, both men and women, were encouraged to actively participate in the socialist cooperative economy. Agricultural and industrial output was dictated by central planners who decided who produced what and how much with the main objective of achieving economic growth.

From a gender perspective, the 1950s saw a significant departure from traditional gender relations in the public sphere. Under the ‘Old China’ women were subject to the four authorities of the feudal-patriarchal system: political, clan, religious and male authority.<sup>81</sup> Women were merely viewed as “appendages of men and tools to carry on the family tree”<sup>82</sup> and as a result women remained subservient to male authority from birth to death – her father before marriage, her husband after marriage and her son after her husband’s death.<sup>83</sup> Although women worked all year round under the feudal system, women’s labour was not

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<sup>80</sup> All-China Women’s Federation, “The impact of economic development on rural women in China,” A report of the United Nations University Household, Gender and Age Project (Tokyo: United Nations, 1993), 1.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 1; Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng, “Introduction,” in *Chinese Women and Their Cultural and Network Capitals*, ed. Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2004), 5.

<sup>82</sup> All-China Women’s Federation (1993), 1.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

recognized by society. A woman was seen as a financial, political and social dependent of the men in her life. It was only after the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949 that women were really able to wade into the public labour process and become income earners.

Mao's sympathy towards the oppressed women under the former feudal system is reflected in the Party policies as early as the 1930s to the late-1970s. Following Marxist analysis that class exploitation was the origin of women's oppression as expressed by Engels:

The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between men and women in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincided with that of the female sex by male;<sup>84</sup>

It was argued by Engels that women's liberation is dependent on their involvement in non-domestic production and the reduction of their domestic workload.<sup>85</sup> Records show that Mao concurred with Engels by identifying women as the "most oppressed group under feudal China, the most in need of revolution, and the most reliable in the Chinese revolution during the wars and the socialist construction after a new China was established in 1949."<sup>86</sup> It was under this assumption that Mao advocated for the promotion of gender equality within Party policy during the early years of the Communist regime. This was best exemplified in Party slogans such as "Women hold up half the sky!" and "Women

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<sup>84</sup> Frederick Engels, "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State"; quoted in Lijun Yuan's *Reconceiving Women's Equality in China* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 55.

<sup>85</sup> Tamara Jacka, *Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in an Era of Reform*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>86</sup> Lijun Yuan (2005), 52.

can do everything men can!” and policies targeting the incorporation of women into the collective economy. Many would argue that without Mao’s push for gender equality, women would not have been able to enter the public sphere to seek economic independence and political equality given the deeply ingrained patriarchal practices and norms within Chinese society.<sup>87</sup>

Yet, despite these early efforts by the Communist Party to establish an egalitarian China, there continued to be serious shortcomings with how rural citizens and women were seen and treated within society. Rural citizens, who previously had little or no land, were to receive their equal share of the pie. However, economic and social policies from 1950 - 1976 demonstrated a clear bias for urban China over the countryside as the stringent household registration system restricted rural access to jobs, services and goods. In the countryside, peasants were, in theory, suppose to receive equal pay for equal work regardless of sex and age. Workers were assigned points for the work completed each day and were then paid according to the work points they earned. However, the points did not always accurately reflect the quality or quantity of work completed, nor was the assignment of work points really equal.<sup>88</sup> It is well documented that women often accumulated less work points than men for the completion of identical tasks resulting in unequal pay for equal work.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> All-China Women’s Federation, “The impact of economic development,” 2.

<sup>89</sup> Huaiyin Li, “Life Cycle, Labour Remuneration, and Gender Inequality in a China Agrarian Collective,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 32.2 (April 2005), 284-288. Some researches show that points are allocated differently because of the nature of the work done. Men were usually assigned more laborious tasks that women were unlikely able to complete. However, in instances

In the All China Women's Federation report on "The impact of economic development on rural women in China," researchers note that: "Vestiges of feudal ideas prevented the implementation of the principle of equal pay for equal work between the sexes. After working a full day, men usually got ten working point while women got eight."<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, women were faced with the double-burden of working long hours in the field along side their male counterparts and afterwards were responsible for all chores inside the home as well. Domestic housework continued to fall under the responsibility of women without redress or remittance. Essentially, the value of women's work remained less than men's because "patriarchal structures defined the work performed by women as *nei* (inside) and hence categorically worth fewer work points than the work performed by men which was deemed *wai* (outside)."<sup>91</sup> Tamara Jacka argues that this gender division of labour between 'inside' and 'outside' was largely ignored under Mao's leadership and that rather than addressing the problem during reform efforts such as The Great Leap Forward<sup>92</sup>, CCP policies during the Mao era actually created a lowered opinion of 'inside' work and, hence, reinforced the devaluation and subordination of women.

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where both sexes were given the same task and number of hours worked, many women still received less than work points than men.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid; Yan Hairong, "Spectralization of the rural: Reinterpreting the labour mobility of rural young women in post-Mao China," *American Ethnologist* 30.4 (2003): 581.

<sup>91</sup> Yan Hairong (2003), 581.

<sup>92</sup> The Great Leap Forward was the development strategy put forth by Mao Zedong between 1958-1961 and was predicated on his belief that China needed to be self-reliant and self-sustaining. The Great Leap saw modern, large-scale urban-centred heavy industry receiving the greatest proportion of investments and the development of the agricultural section via the mass mobilization of rural labour for work in the fields, on large scale construction and water control projects, and in local, small-scale industries.

CCP gender policies were also inconsistent between rural and urban areas. Due to high rates of unemployment in urban areas at the time of the party's accession into power and well into the 1950s, the housewife's role as a server to those who participated directly in production was glorified over non-domestic work.<sup>93</sup> This completely contradicted the earlier publicized notion that the precondition for women's liberation was their participation in non-domestic production. In her research, Jacka further notes that the pattern of CCP gender policies corresponds to shifts between 'left' and 'right' economic and political strategies: "The years 1949 – 1952, 1957 – 1960, and 1966-1978 were periods in which strong efforts were made to increase the number of women in non-domestic production, while the years between 1953 and 1957, and between 1961 and 1965, and the period following reforms in 1978, were periods in which women's participation in non-domestic production was de-emphasised."<sup>94</sup> While unemployment was not a problem in rural areas and a greater attempt was made to integrate rural women into non-domestic labour, especially during the Great Leap Forward, urban gender policies were carried over into rural campaigns. For example, attempts were made by the Women's Federation in the 1950s to improve the image of the housewife. Therefore, a 'five good'<sup>95</sup> family campaign

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<sup>93</sup> Tamara Jacka (1997), 31.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> The "five good" family campaign was first mounted in 1956 when the Women's Federation published a series of articles entitled 'How housewives can serve socialism' in the *New Women of China* [Xin Zhongguo Funü] magazine. The campaign was set up to reward families in which women contributed to socialism by uniting with neighbourhood families for mutual aid; doing domestic work well; educate children well; encouraging the family in production, study and work; and working well themselves. (Jacka, 1997, 31).

to keep women contained within the domestic sphere was mounted in the countryside as simultaneous campaigns were taking place in urban areas.<sup>96</sup>

Feminist researchers such as Tani Barlow and Yan Hairong have argued that China's revolution did not deliver gender equality. Rather, the "Revolution restituted women inside the state (and thus by *synecdochic* logic, inside family) under Maoist inscription."<sup>97</sup> So in effect, instead of emancipating women from oppression as Mao had presumably envisioned, the Revolution actually shifted women's oppression from under the family to under the state. Intrinsic patriarchal values and structures continued to exist despite calls for gender quality. These underlying values and norms continue to affect the gendered division of labour in rural settings and the undervaluation of women's work since the establishment of 'New China'. Evans adds to this by noting that evidence has demonstrated the fallacies of classical Marxist formula which assumes that women's participation in 'social labour' was the key to women's emancipation. She argues that there are clearly contradictions "between the promise by socialists that women would be liberated by proletarian revolution and the realities of women's continued social and economic subordination to men."<sup>98</sup> In China, the

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Tani Barlow, "Theorizing Women: Funu, Guojia, Jaiting [Chinese women, Chinese State, Chinese Family]," *Genders* 10: 132; quoted in Yan Hairong's "Spectralization of the rural: Reinterpreting the labour mobility of rural young women in post-Mao China," *American Ethnologist* 30.4 (2003), 581.

<sup>98</sup> Harriet Evans, "The Language of Liberation: Gender and Jiefang in early Chinese Communist Party Discourse," *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 3 (1999) [internet]; available from [http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/back\\_issues/harriet.html](http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/back_issues/harriet.html) (accessed 10 February 2006).

entry of women into the labour force did not significantly alter the “customary domestic division of responsibilities.”<sup>99</sup>

Gender aside, other researchers argue that economic policies starting from Mao’s regime shortchanged agriculture and peasants as efforts to develop the country always favoured urban producers over their rural counterparts during industrialization.<sup>100</sup> Following the former Soviet style of development, the Chinese economic plan also focused seriously on developing heavy industries over agricultural output creating a dualistic economy and labour market where urban industries are privileged over rural agriculture.

The state-collective dualism characterized Chinese economic structure, but in addition it created a status distinction between privileged state workers and their deprived collective counterparts – its Western analogy is labour market dualism in capitalist economies.<sup>101</sup>

Although one recognizes the importance and need to manage the flow of a population the size of China’s, Mao’s method of control proved to have lasting negative effects on both rural peasants and women. The introduction of the stringent household registration regulations, also known as the *hukou* system, effectively cut off the rural peasant from the urban residents and reinforced already existing rural-urban divides. Since the household registration bound citizens to their place of birth for their lifetime this meant that rural peasants were trapped in collective farming and cut off from many urban privileges such as

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Jean C. Oi, “Two Decades of Rural Reform in China: An Overview and Assessment,” *The China Quarterly* 159 (September 1999): 616.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

compulsory education, quality schools, health care and public housing.<sup>102</sup> As previously noted, the opportunity to alter one's *hukou* is extremely limited. Government regulations state specifically that the only way an agricultural *hukou* holder can switch to a non-agriculture *hukou* is by joining the army or by going to university. Both options further limit the opportunity for women to improve their positions in life as a career in the military has and is still dominated by men and traditional patriarchal values privilege sons over daughters where education is concerned.<sup>103</sup> Without the social safety net afforded to peasants like their urban counterparts with state or collective sector jobs,<sup>104</sup> many rural residents have spent their life in poverty.

While early decollectivization efforts under Deng Xiaoping saw a more diversified economy in the later 1970s, it was not until the mid-1980s that the rural industry became the fastest growing sector in the entire economy.<sup>105</sup> Under Deng's reform policies, rural and urban economies were both decollectivized and commodified. "More than 200 million peasants were lifted from extreme poverty by government procurement price increases, free market development and new

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<sup>102</sup> Yanjie Bian, "Chinese Social Stratification and Social Mobility," *Annual Review of Sociology* 21 (2002): 93.

<sup>103</sup> Most rural families with limited economic resources will privilege sons with an education over daughters. According to news reports in 2003, of the 2 million children that drop out of school every year, seven out of ten are girls.

<sup>104</sup> According to the State Statistical Bureau of China in 1998, state workers, accounted for 78% of urban work force by 1978. It was widely known that these workers were provided with "iron rice bowls" of lifelong employment and a wide range of insurance and welfare benefits unavailable to collective workers.

<sup>105</sup> Jean C. Oi (1999), 616. Oi notes that by the mid-1980s, agriculture grew and the household production system was firmly in place. The household production system includes a combination of family farming as well such handmade goods such as woven textiles, baskets, etc.

income opportunities.”<sup>106</sup> Household farming was restored and with the exception of key crops such as cotton and grains, farm outputs began to be traded relatively freely on the markets.<sup>107</sup> As opposed to Mao’s closed and self-reliant economy that would yield high growth rates Deng opened the Chinese economy to foreign trade and investments.<sup>108</sup> Deng’s socialist economy with Chinese characteristics saw growth rates that exceeded at least 1.5 times the average annual growth rate of Mao’s regime.<sup>109</sup>

From a Western perspective, Chinese economic success is nothing short of a wonder and miracle. As Dernberger notes in a special issue of the *China Quarterly - The People’s Republic of China After 50 Years*’:

When I began my serious study of China’s economy in the early 1950s, Western economists were preoccupied with a single question, “how are they ever going to feed all those Chinese?” Today, after 50 years in power, we must respect and even admire not only their ability to feed a population that has more than doubled in size, but also to provide the Chinese consumer with watches, washing machines, sewing machines, colour television sets, and tape and video recorders. A small, but significant and rapidly expanding, share of China’s consumers is using mobile phones, computers and even private cars.<sup>110</sup>

And how rapidly the economy continues to grow and change! From 1978 to 2001, China’s average annual growth rate of GDP per capita was 8.1 percent,

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid; Scott, Rozelle, Albert, Park, Vincent, Benzinger and Changqing Ren, “Targeted poverty investments and economy growth in China,” *World Development* 26.12 (December 1998): 2137–51.

<sup>107</sup> Robert F. Dernberger, “The People’s Republic of China at 50: The Economy,” *The China Quarterly* 159 (September 1999): 606.

<sup>108</sup> When I say opened up the Chinese economy to foreign investments, I mean that the “opening” was still managed and limited to the Special Economic Zones in key cities and provinces.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 610.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 606.

and its rate of industrial growth was 11.5 per cent.<sup>111</sup> China's exports grew from US\$18.1 billion in 1978 to over US\$266 billion in 2001.<sup>112</sup> China is now considered one of the top export manufacturers in the world producing everything from textiles to fruit to coal and steel to electronic goods. It is also the largest production base for a wide range of household appliances. In 2001, 96 million electric fans, 60 million cameras, 25 million mobile phones, 14 million household refrigerators and 14 million washing machines were produced.<sup>113</sup>

Since Dernberger's observations in 1999, the country's GDP has grown from 8,206.8 billion Yuan<sup>114</sup> (1999) to 18,232.1 billion Yuan (2005).<sup>115</sup> As disposable income increases with a growing middle class, Chinese consumers are able to afford more than just watches and washing machines. In 2004, the total retail sales of consumer goods reached 5,395.0 billion Yuan, an increase of 13.3 percent from the previous year.<sup>116</sup> According to the China State Automobile Industry Associate, over 2 million passenger cars were sold in China in 2004, representing a jump of more than 80% over previous years.<sup>117</sup> This trend is expected to continue with an average annual rate of 15% growth in car ownership.

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<sup>111</sup> Peter Nolan, *Transforming China: Globalization, Transition and Development* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> The official currency for the People's Republic of China is known as the Yuan. The Yuan is also sometimes referred to as the RMB (ren min bi, the people's money).

<sup>115</sup> Chinability, "GDP Growth 1952 – 2005," [internet]; available from <http://www.chinability.com/GDP.htm> (accessed 01 September 2006).

<sup>116</sup> China.org, "China Statistic Data: Stable and Rapid Development of the National Economy in 2004," [internet]; available from <http://www.china.org.cn/e-company/05-02-20/page041202.htm> (retrieved Mar 10, 2006).

<sup>117</sup> McDonald's Corporation, "First McDonald's Drive-Thru Opens in China," McDonalds Press Release, 12 October 2005, [internet]; available from [http://www.rmhc.org/corp/news/corppr/2005/CPR\\_12102005.html](http://www.rmhc.org/corp/news/corppr/2005/CPR_12102005.html) (accessed 25 April 2005).

Most recently, business groups forecast an estimated number of 440 million cell phone users in China for 2006.

However, despite annual economic improvements, China, the world's most populous country with a population of 1.3 billion, has set its poverty line at an annual per-capita income of 668 Yuan (81 US dollars)<sup>118</sup>, well under the international benchmark of US \$1 a day. In 2005 Li Xueju, the Minister of Civil Affairs, approximated that 26.1 million Chinese people still live in abject poverty in rural areas and 22 million urban residents live on minimum living allowance.<sup>119</sup> There are still another 49 million rural people with an annual per-capita income of less than 924 Yuan (112 US dollars).<sup>120</sup> Of the 26.1 million Chinese living in abject poverty, 12 million of them are women.<sup>121</sup>

The poverty of rural peasants is not a new phenomenon but was certainly accentuated under Deng Xiaoping's economic policies. The introduction of the 'production responsibility systems'<sup>122</sup> resulted in an increased inequality between

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<sup>118</sup> Abacus Consulting Services, "China Economy- China Economic Statistics (July 4 – 10, 2005)," Abacus Consulting Services and Los Angeles, [internet]; available from <http://chinese-school.net/firms.com/China-economic-statistics.html> (accessed 15 February 2006).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> All statistics and numbers quoted in this website are allegedly informed by official sources such as the China Statistics Bureau.

<sup>121</sup> Xinhua, "Rural Chinese women living in abject poverty reduced to 12m," accessed through *China Development Gateway*, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/chinagate/doc/2006-04/13/content\\_567133.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/chinagate/doc/2006-04/13/content_567133.htm) (accessed 24 April 2006). However, these stats do not specify whether or not the annual per capita income includes the remittance from migrant workers abroad. The reports seem to contradict the increasing flow of rural population into urban centres. In light of recent uprisings in rural townships in southeastern China over economic and land policies, and statistics showing that in spite of a growing economy, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen.

<sup>122</sup> Best described by Tamara Jacka, the 'production responsibility system' was a family/ group farming initiative introduced to improve production incentives by linking production with remuneration more closely. Further more, this system allowed for contracting output to the group "in which the production team signed a contract with a remuneration for a particular piece of work.

rural and urban workers, between families and between individuals. The noted income inequality between men and women during this period is significant as rural women were less likely than men to find jobs in industry and other areas of wage employment. A survey conducted in 1991 found that 32.7 percent of rural wives earned a monthly income of 50 Yuan or less, and 65.2 percent earned 100 Yuan or less. In contrast, only 8.6 percent of rural husbands earned 50 Yuan or less and 33.5 percent earned 100 Yuan or less.<sup>123</sup>

Although poverty levels have decreased over the past several years, shrinking arable farmland and restructuring of state-owned and town-village enterprises has created a burgeoning surplus of labour in the countryside and a growing concern over rural unemployment. In situations such as this, women have traditionally been the first ones to withdraw from the public sphere into domestic work, often not by choice, while men pursue other economic opportunities. This was certainly the practice advocated by the early CCP regimes, as discussed earlier. However recent statistics show a growing trend whereby women and girls are more likely to venture out to neighbouring counties and cities for work than men. According to the 2000 census, 52.3 percent of migrants were women. The majority, of the migrant population are young adults between the ages of 15 – 39 years old. The female migrants within this age category account for 75.3 percent of the total female migrant population, 6.1

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Accounting, planning, control of tools and draught animals, irrigation and capital construction projects continued to be the production teams' responsibility, but the internal distribution of work points among its members was undertaken by the group." (Jacka 1997, 43)

<sup>123</sup> Tamara Jacka (1997), 49-50.

percent higher than male migrants of the same age category.<sup>124</sup> Several of the migrant women I spoke with during my field research mentioned that the opportunity for females to find a job is now much higher than for men in the cities due to a growing demand for service labour.

A growing service sector and continued expansion of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) has increased demands in recent years for migrant female workers over their male counterparts who are usually confined to work in the construction industry. These findings corroborate those of Tamara Jacka who notes in 2000 that:

Nationally, some one-third of all rural migrants are women, “but in some places, especially in the export-oriented Special Economy Zones of Southern China, they comprise more than 70 per cent of the migrant workforce. Male migrants from the countryside now dominate the construction industry across China, whilst rural migrant women are the backbone of the workforce in the textile industry and in the manufacturing industries of the SEZs, and also dominate domestic service, waitressing and prostitution.”<sup>125</sup>

Of particular concern to this trend is the growing number of children under 15 who are on the move as well. The question that arises from this is whether the 11 percent of migrant children (14 years and under) are moving with their parents or are they moving alone in 2000.<sup>126</sup> The 11 percent of migrant children recorded

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<sup>124</sup> Department of Population, Social, Science and Technology, National Bureau of Statistics, “Women and Men in China: Facts and Figures 2004,” (China Statistics Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>125</sup> Tamara Jacka, “My Life as a Migrant Worker: women in Rural-Urban Migration in Contemporary China,” *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 4 (September 2000) [internet]; [http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersection/issue4/tamara\\_intro.html](http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersection/issue4/tamara_intro.html) (accessed 10 February 2006).

<sup>126</sup> Department of Population, Social, Science and Technology, National Bureau of Statistics (2004), 15.

in 2000 is significant because in the five years since, the number of migrant children has continued to grow. Although the official working age is 16 under the Labour Law of the People's Republic of China, there is undoubtedly a large number of child labourers throughout the country working on the farms, in factories and even within the service industries.<sup>127</sup> Of those migrant children accounted for in the 2000 census, 47 percent of the 11 percent are girls. This then poses questions of whether or not female migrants, both young and old, are being pushed into the labour market by their families to supplement agricultural income; are they being pulled into labour market with the prospect of earning an income and being independent; or are they being pushed into the labour market because of a lack of access to proper education once they've entered the cities.

These growing concerns over the welfare of migrant women and their children are catching the eyes of policy makers in Beijing. With added pressure from local and international NGO groups, policy makers seem to be making a greater effort in addressing the needs of the growing female migrant population. However, there is a long way to go and much work is needed on paper and on the ground. The next section will explore the concerns, policy actions and proposals of recent leaderships towards rural development and migrant women and their families.

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<sup>127</sup> Chapter 12, Article 94 of the Labour Law states that it is only illegal IF an employer actively recruits a person under, age 16 to work. Therefore there is certainly ample room for employers to feign ignorance and argue that they did not recruit the underage worker or that they were unaware of the employee's age when hired. None the less, although the law exists, it is seldom enforced, even in the large cities like Beijing and Shanghai. Many restaurants and small retail units are staffed by under-aged employees in plain sight.



**CHAPTER FOUR**

## PLACE AND SPACE

There are explicit and implicit tensions within modern Chinese society that need to be reconciled in order to continue constructive discussions on how to ensure equality, a decent economic standard of living and empowerment of female migrant labourer within China's changing political economy. An important starting point is to understand the role of women in migratory decisions and how they fit within the new transitional market economy.

As previously noted, the increasing income disparity between the rich and the poor, urban and rural and men and women play a significant role in deciding who is on the move and why in contemporary China. In a recent BRIDGE report on gender and migration, the authors note that the connections between gender and migration are in fact very much interrelated. Migration influences gender relations, either by entrenching inequalities and traditional roles, or by challenging and changing them. On the other hand, gender influences: who migrates and why, how the decisions are made; and how migration impacts migrants themselves, on sending areas, and on receiving areas.<sup>128</sup> The following section will discuss the relationship between gender and migration in China.

Through their active engagement in the off-farm labour market, female migrants have been able to challenge the traditionally defined gender roles and the spatial and socio-economic boundaries that have been structurally designated to

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<sup>128</sup> Susie Jolly (BRIDGE) and Hazel Reeves, "Gender and Migration: Overview Report", (Brighton: BRIDGE, 2005), 9. BRIDGE is a part of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex.

them.<sup>129</sup> But these relative gains often overshadow the structural and social inequalities that continue to keep migrant women in compromising socio economic positions. Migrant women in China are up against a ‘double-double’,<sup>130</sup> – double burden as an income earner and caregiver and a double burden as a woman and a migrant. The first ‘double’ refers to the double burden of women’s work. As previously discussed, feminist political economists note that women are traditionally saddled with the dual responsibility of working outside of the house and are responsible for completing all work inside the house. The role of caregiver for the young, old and the sick also falls under the realm of women’s responsibility. The other ‘double’ alludes to the reference made to migrant women who are at a disadvantage for being both a woman and being from the countryside. Yan Hairong, mentions this second double in her work on migrant women and domestic helpers in China. Women continue to be more vulnerable in urban centres. Migrants in general are considered to be the social outcasts in the urban cities. Without permanent resident status, migrants are left with no social and health services and migrant children are often left stranded without a proper education.

While men have traditionally been the ones to leave rural homes for work while women and girls stayed behind, there appears to be a shift in who is leaving and who stays put. Jolly and Tan note in their work that decisions on who

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<sup>129</sup> Heather Xiaoquan Zhang, “Female Migration and Urban Labour Markets in Tianjin,” *Development and Change* 30 (1999): 21

<sup>130</sup> No, this ‘double-double’ is not in reference to either basketball or a Tim Horton’s coffee!

migrates are dependent on a combination of structural and social constraints and/or opportunities. Structural factors include the demand for female labour determined by both internal and international gender segregation of labour markets and trends in industry and agriculture.<sup>131</sup> In China, the removal of the commune system from the countryside in the early 1980s and the increased mobility of rural surplus labour resulted in the feminization of agriculture. According to Tamara Jacka, the trend following Deng's rural reforms saw women "increasingly taking charge of agriculture, while more and more men moved to off-farm non-agricultural work."<sup>132</sup> The reasons behind the decision to keep rural women, especially married women, in agriculture are often multifold: 1) since land rights are patrilocal, women who farm the land belonging to their husbands will have a stronger claim to the land; 2) traditionally, it is more economical to keep women, especially married women, in farm work as there is less opportunity available to them in industry<sup>133</sup>; 3) there is a strong identification

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<sup>131</sup> Susie Jolly, Emma Bell and Lata Narayanaswamy, "Gender and Migration in Asia: overview and annotated bibliography," Conference paper for Migration Development and Pro-Poor Policy Choices in Asia organized by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, Bangladesh and the Department for International Development (DFID), UK (June 2003), 3. [internet]; [http://www.livelihoods.org/hot\\_topics/docs/Dhaka\\_CP\\_8.pdf](http://www.livelihoods.org/hot_topics/docs/Dhaka_CP_8.pdf) (accessed 15 September 2005); Tan Shen, "At the Pearl River Delta: The Relations of Women Migrants to Foreign Invested Enterprises and Local Governments," (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Science, 2005), 1 – 4. [internet]; available from <http://www.sociology.cass.net.cn/english/papers/P020050202556602962322.pdf> (accessed 10 October 2005).

<sup>132</sup> Tamara Jacka (1997), 143.

<sup>133</sup> Traditionally, with the exception of the SEZs, there were more opportunities for migrant men to find work over migrant women, however, things are changing. As I will discuss later in this paper, there are an increasing demand for female labour, particularly migrant females to work in a growing service industry spurred on by rapid urbanization.

of women with an ‘inside’ sphere of work in child care and other domestic work.<sup>134</sup>

While some argue that rural women have been empowered by the growing responsibilities of caring for family plots and farm production, others have argued that the decision to keep women in agriculture, forces them to remain ‘inside’, earning less income and remaining subverted to patrilocal authority, leaving rural women vulnerable to isolation and exploitation. Even efforts by the Women’s Federation to improve the economic and social positions of rural women through the development of “courtyard economies,”<sup>135</sup> where women are encouraged to supplement farm incomes with auxiliary production of goods, are viewed as double-edged.<sup>136</sup> Although the courtyard economy has the potential for generating higher levels of income and providing a higher degree of autonomy and flexibility to rural women, research by Jacka and Davin suggests that the opportunity to earn in this auxiliary economy is often short-lived, keeping women at a socio-economic status quo rather than improving their situation.<sup>137</sup>

The paradox between potential gains and potential threats to rural women in their engagement within the Chinese economy does not stop in the countryside. Labour demands in coastal and major cities have provided rural women with the opportunity for potential economic and social gains. However, as rural migrant

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<sup>134</sup> Tamara Jacka (1997), 134-35.

<sup>135</sup> Jacka describes “Courtyard economy” in reference to vegetable and fruit growing, animal husbandry, handicraft production and services (including commerce and small-scale tourism) undertaken in the home or courtyard.

<sup>136</sup> Tamara Jacka (1997), 146.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 152.

women, the potential threats from exploitation, harassment and discrimination in cities are also great. Aside from the feminization of agriculture that Jacka reports on, national statistics show that there are also a growing number of young rural women migrating into export manufacturing zones as well as larger cities to fulfill the rising demand for rural migrant women labourers. Popular destinations such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen have attracted millions of migrant women since the late 1980s where employment can be found in one of two sectors: 1) domestic help or nannies; and 2) manufacturing<sup>138</sup> and tertiary work. Often referred to as *xiao baomu* (小保姆, little nannies) or *dagong mei* (打工妹, young migrant working women), migrant women are generally segregated into these two sectors of work because they are believed to be more docile and more malleable.

In Pun Ngai's 1999 article in the *China Journal*, Ngai argues that the social identities are created for *dagongmei*<sup>139</sup> (working girls) coming mainly from rural areas, "taking advantage of rural-urban disparities, and regional and gender inequalities." Employers, managers and supervisors manipulate these distinctions in an effort to create malleable workers. An example Ngai uses is how managers use the politics of dialects as a system of deliberately contrived

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<sup>138</sup> The manufacturing work women are engaged in range from textiles to toys to electronic goods.

<sup>139</sup> The term *dagongmei* seems to have been coined to describe the women workers in southern coastal factories. Ngai best describes the term as a Cantonese term imported from Hong Kong with a multilayered meaning that denotes "a new kind of labour relationship fundamentally different from those of Mao's period". "*Dagong* means "working for the boss", or "selling labour", connoting commodification and a capitalist exchange of labour for wages. *Mei* means younger sister. It denotes both gender and marital status as "mei" is single, unmarried and younger (and thus of lower status). In contrast to the term "worker" (*gongren*), which carried the highest status in the socialist rhetoric of Mao's day, the new work *dagong* signifies a lesser identity – that of a hired hand – in a new context shaped by the rise of market factors in labour relations and hierarchy." (Ngai, 3).

distinctions marking social differences and hierarchy.<sup>140</sup> While the structural barriers have slowly eased away for women to enter the off-farm labour market, the social constraints are in place to limit the social and economic advancement of these individuals and to exploit their vulnerabilities as “outsiders”. The marginalization of migrant women workers is perpetuated because of gender distinctions and because of social differences.

Deng’s open door economic policy dramatically altered the economy of coastal economic zones and initiated a flood of change to the face of labour in China. China’s migrant labour market was and still is driven by high rates of foreign investment in the export manufacturing zones and the subsequent service sectors associated with the growing manufacturing industry.<sup>141</sup> For instance, export processing zones such as those in the Pearl River Delta have experienced rapid economic growth from foreign investments since the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to research reports and statistics within China, by as early as 1981, 51% of the rural labour within Guangdong province had already shifted from agriculture to secondary and tertiary industries as a result of the combination of agricultural and land reforms and the rapid growth of the manufacturing sector.<sup>142</sup> While the initial group of migrants was moving from within

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<sup>140</sup> Pun Ngai, “Becoming Dagongmei (Working Girls): The Politics of Identity and Difference in Reform China,” *The China Journal* No. 42. (Jul., 1999): 2-4.

<sup>141</sup> Subsequent service sectors include restaurants, hotels, entertainment, etc that are needed to provide service to the workers in the factories.

<sup>142</sup> Tan Shen, “Rural Workforce Migration: A summary of Some Studies,” (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Science, 2005), 9. [internet]; available from <http://www.sociology.cass.net.cn/english/PAPERS/P020050202558916718281.pdf> (accessed 21 January 2006).

Guangdong province, the steady growth of foreign invested industries and subsequent service sectors fuelled a mass mobilization of surplus rural labour from across the county to fill the labour demands in boom cities.

However, the export-led manufacturing industries that spurred on the creation of millions of jobs never resulted in equalizing the opportunities available to all Chinese citizens regardless of sex, age, ethnicity, gender and original place of residence. Far from Deng's prediction that the success of a few will gradually lead the rest of the country to shared prosperity, the income gap has only widened between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, locals and migrants and men and women. The resulting characteristic of the new Chinese labour market circa 1980 mirrors that of other developing economies -- highly segmented and highly gendered -- creating a new labour market beside and separate from the existing local market.

According to Chinese researchers, local residents are often privy to work in the "primary workforce market" where jobs include the administration of land and housing rentals to employers and labourers or positions within larger collectively-owned enterprises where the pay and benefits are better. Migrant labourers, also referred to as *nongmingong* (农民工) or simply as *mingong* (民工), on the other hand, are limited to opportunities in the "secondary workforce market" where jobs are more physically demanding with longer work hours and precarious work conditions.<sup>143</sup> Residency permits determine where you can work

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

and what kind of work is available to you. The permits also determine one's access to social and health services therefore rural migrants and their families have limited access to schools and medical clinics in cities. The schools migrant children do have access to are often second rate at best and the medical services available to migrants will cost a small fortune, forcing many families to care for the sick themselves, avoid medical treatment or return to their home villages for care. This issue of residence permits and access to health, education and social services will be discussed some more later in the chapter. Seen as temporary labour, migrants without local residence status continue to be marginalized within receiving areas and in their workplace by employers, local residents and urban administrators:

In keeping with the long-standing residence registration system and the related employment system, urban administration have imposed all kinds of restraints on occupational access for mingong, marginalizing them into a different job market from that of the town-dwellers, condemning them to the bottom of urban society.<sup>144</sup>

Labour segmentation within foreign invested firms and local enterprises is further complicated by the blatant gendered division of labour. Consistent with current trends in other export processing zones throughout the world, migrant women in China have become victims to what can be considered as the feminization of global manufacturing. Considered cheap labour, women are usually preferred over men for work on the production lines. The Pearl River Delta region, one of the first Special Economic Zones (SEZ) to open up to foreign

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 10.

invested enterprises in the 1980s, has the highest ratio of female to male workers at 2:1.<sup>145</sup> In a 1997 report published by the Catholic Institute of International Relations, rural women between the ages of 16 to 25 account for 80 percent of SEZ workers:<sup>146</sup>

Foreign-invested enterprises based in these areas favour women workers...[ ]. When their contracts come to an end, they go back to the countryside, freeing employers of any requirement to provide welfare benefits, such as maternity leave or pensions. Most of the women have little education, virtually no knowledge of their rights, and their background is one where women have little or no status within the community. The treatment they get in factories is not very different.<sup>147</sup>

Foreign invested enterprises (FIEs) are able to exploit the social and structural weaknesses within China as officials, businesses and citizens have either been unwilling or unable to make the necessary changes to protect rural women from exploitation. For years now, there have been a plethora of human and labour rights advocates, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics and others who have called for a stoppage in the exploitation of migrant women workers in SEZs but changes to improve conditions have been slow. The lack of will to make any substantial changes stems from the fact that despite the deplorable working conditions there continues to be a steady increase of migrant women willing to work in the FIEs. The reasons why women continue to flock to FIEs and other tertiary and service sector jobs is never clear cut. Although

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<sup>145</sup> Tan (At the Pearl River Delta), 4; Zhang Ye, "Hope for China's Migrant Women Workers," *The China Business Review* 2002, [internet]; available from <http://www.chinabusinessreview.com/public/0205/ye.html> (accessed 10 August 2005).

<sup>146</sup> Angie Knox, *Southern China: Migrant workers and economy transformation*. (Nottingham: Russell Press for the Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1997), 29.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

strongly motivated by economic desperation, many female migrant have indicated their desire to work in off-farm enterprises is spurred on by hopes of social and educational improvements not available to them in their rural homes. The tension between why women continue to work in deplorable conditions will be discussed later in this paper. Nevertheless, it should be noted that any significant changes and improvements to the current work and living conditions for migrants will depend on pressure from international donor groups such as the Asia Foundation and the International Labour Organization. Both these groups have established strong outreach projects in cooperation with local community groups to educate, inform and advocate for the rights and protection of migrant women. While these projects are currently limited in scope and reach, it will hopefully empower migrant women on and off the job about their rights as workers and as citizens and educate the wider community about gender equality.

Due to the high concentration of migrants heading into coastal cities, much of the advocacy for the improvement of policy and programs for migrant women is focused in the SEZs. However, changes in migratory trends call for a wider network of support and programs available to migrant women throughout the county. The recent surprise in migration trends shows an increasing number of rural women flocking into larger and mid-size cities which have been traditional destination sites for migrant males. The maturation of larger domestic economies such as Beijing and Shanghai has changed the structure of urban labour demand. In addition to the booming construction industry which is

usually occupied by migrant men, there is also an increasing demand for labour in the service, hospitality, and domestic help sectors which prefer women. The changes to the perceived opportunity and cost of the new economic and labour market structure leads many rural families to re-examine and adjust their decisions on who leaves the farm for work and who stays behind.

Susie Jolly, Emma Bell and Lata Naranaswamy, in their study of gender and migration in Asia, note that women may have little influence on migration decisions in the household. It is argued that “even where women migrate alone, this is likely to be with reference to, or even determined by, the household livelihood strategy and expectations of contributions through remittances.”<sup>148</sup> This shift is very much reflective of the family decisions based on the changing nature of the Chinese labour markets. In my interview with two migrant workers at the Oriental Taipan Massage and Spa in Beijing, one of my interviewees mentioned that it was a familial decision that the daughters would be the ones to leave the farm to seek urban employment rather than the son.<sup>149</sup> When I asked why she simply said that it was because it was easier for females to find work in the cities. With a growing service industry, there are more opportunities for females to find work in restaurants, hotels, spas and other services positions.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Susie Jolly, Emma Bell and Lata Narayanaswamy (June 2003), 3.

<sup>149</sup> This interview was carried out informally at the Oriental Taipan Massage and Spa in Beijing on November 24, 2005. Two girls, both masseuses, were interviewed.

<sup>150</sup> The continued growth of domestic and export industries such as textile/ garment and light manufacturing, which has in the past preferred female workers for their docility and nimble skills, has also increased the demand for female migrant labourers in export processing zones such as the Pearl Delta region. Researchers such as Tan Shen et al. report that the ratio of female to male migrants into Guangdong and Fujian province is on average 2:1.

On the other hand, migrant males are usually limited to hard and manual labour such as construction. This interviewee is a 21 year old girl from Gansu province. She has an older sister and an older brother. Her sister also migrated to Beijing and works in a restaurant. It was decided by her family that her brother would be the one to stay at home to work on the rice farm and as a driver. The second interviewee is a 20 years old from a rural area in Shandong province. She left her home for better opportunities in the city. She earns approximately 1000 to 2000 Yuan each month<sup>151</sup> and is required to send a large portion of her earnings home to support her parents who are rice farmers. The company that these girls work for provides meals and subsidized housing for their employees. Both girls indicated that they had no prior experience as a masseuse before they arrived in Beijing. They both found part-time work to support themselves while they attended night school to become masseuses. Both girls said that while the job was not glamorous, it was respectable and they enjoyed their freedom in the city and the income they were able to bring in.

However, despite the increasing number of women engaged in the urban labour market, the value of work completed by women varies and is inconsistent at best. Although existing laws tout equality for women to access of employment and to pay, there continues to be a depreciated value of women's work within the public sphere. Through a combination of informal interviews and observations, the average monthly wage for women within the service industry range from 550

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<sup>151</sup> I was told that she sees, on average, 3 to 4 clients each day and receives 70 Yuan per client. The company charges 138 Yuan for a 60 minute full body massage.

to 800 Yuan. Some of these jobs may include housing and meals. Some of them may only be subsidized housing, some not even. The average wage for a maid or domestic help can range from an hourly rate of 6 to 8 Yuan<sup>152</sup>. Manufacturing positions can range from 600 to 1000 Yuan per month, depending on whether the employer is paying a set wage or piece meal rate. Comparatively, heavy labour and construction jobs that will only hire males will pay on average anywhere from 900 to 1500 Yuan a month. Again, these jobs may or may not include housing and meals.<sup>153</sup> According to news reports in 2001, Wang Xiancai, a member of

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<sup>152</sup> Miriam Massabo, a former employee working for a German-based export company in Shanghai notes that the average wage of domestic help ranges from 6 to 8 Yuan/ hour, and may even be as high as 10 Yuan/ hour depending on the employer. Her boss, a Chinese national, pays 800 Yuan per month for a live-in maid. Accommodation and food are covered by the employer. According to her observations, many women workers with whom she has spoken to, prefer factory work over informal domestic work because the former is considered to be more stable. In the factories she dealt with, she noted the following: in the garment factories dealing, 95% of the workers on the assembly line were female; in textiles, most employees were male because the job required extensive handling of chemicals; in factories producing accessories such as glasses for export, the production of parts was 100% male as the work was considered more dangerous; the assembly lines were 60/40 females with workers ranging from 20 – 38 years old. Most workers were outsiders/ migrants or what they call *waidiren* (外地人). The average wage at these factories can range from 800 to 1200 Yuan/ month. However, she was unable verify whether there were differences in wage based on gender.

<sup>153</sup> During my time in Ningbo I was surprised to discover that there were two separate employment centres in the city. One was for local office/ white collar workers while the other was specifically for migrants labourers ready to work in the service sector, in construction or in the factories. Located along a major roadway beside a large, local hotel, the white collar employment centre was open to local residents with office and professional skills. Those unemployed could sign up for employment counselling service and computer courses to upgrade their skills. The other employment office was more tucked away and in what I would describe as a ‘sketchier’ part of town. The only way I was even able to find this employment centre for migrants was to ask two separate cab drivers. The first was reluctant to take me there since I had already mentioned I was Canadian. The second just assumed that I was a migrant looking for work since I lacked the local accent in my speech. Although there were guards posted at the entrance of the building, access in was relatively easy as migrants seeking employment walked freely in and out of the building during regular office hours. In the lobby there is a big electronic board with job postings listing title and type of job, the sex of worker required, any age and education specifications, monthly wage offered and accommodations or meals if included. On the second level, cubicles for labour recruiters lined the walls. Outside each cubicle there were job postings taped to the windows. Two things stood out upon my arrival to this centre: 1) Some of the migrants looked like they just stepped off the train with all their worldly possessions. So despite its location, migrants new and

the Fourth Session of the Ninth National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) argued against the backdrop of growing urban unemployment that married women should leave their jobs and become full-time housewives. Wang went as far as to say that:

women should recognize that taking care of their own houses and children is also a kind of job and responsibility as well as the manifestation of a mother's commitment to her children. Given this, we should encourage laid-off female workers to return home to be homemakers, which I don't think is prejudicial against women at all... [ ]... What I am trying to say is that we should establish a new concept, that is, staying at home and taking care of their husbands and children is also an honor for women and a part of social responsibility.<sup>154</sup>

Wang's comments sparked outrage and a great debate within the CPPCC and in the public over the role of women and work. Feminists argue that relegating women back into the domestic sphere is a step backwards for women's rights and freedoms. On the other hand, supporters of women as housewives continue to argue that it is the "woman's responsibility" to bring social harmony to the household by being a good daughter, mother and housewife. Again, as was the case in urban China during the 1950s and 1960s, women are the first ones to

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old seem to know where they need to go to look for work upon arrival into the city; 2) the employment centre was filled with more males than females. One of the recruiters confirmed my observation. Apparently most migrant men in Ningbo will check out the postings at this employment center. Migrant women, on the other hand, will usually find work through personal referrals for local factories. The community that this employment centre is located in is rather run down. Across the streets from the centre are more recruiters who have opened shop in little cubby holes. Job descriptions, wages and requirements are scrolled on banks of black chalkboards.

<sup>154</sup> Beijing Review, "Women's Choice: Home or Work," *Beijing Review*, 25 April 2001, reprinted on-line in *China.org.cn* (April 2001), [internet]; available from <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2001/Apr/11788.htm> (accessed 2 May 2006) and *Women of China*, 24 March 2006, [internet]; available from <http://www.womenofchina.cn/focus/economy/2299.jsp> (accessed 2 May 2006).

be pushed back into the private sphere when unemployment rates are high on the principle that a woman should be proud to serve her children and husband.

Despite a series of laws including those stated within the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and Chapter IV of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women to equal work opportunities and equal pay, there is an obvious lack of public and administrative will to enforce the protection of women's right within the public or private spheres. Contradictions between policies, practice and social beliefs weigh heavily on the ineffective protection of women against gender discrimination at work and in homes thereby leaving many women, especially migrant women, feeling incapacitated. There are no shortages in domestic policies or international commitments signed and ratified by the Chinese government to ensure women are treated fairly and equally when it comes to opportunity for gainful employment and pay, for safe working conditions, reasonable work hours and work without sexual harassment. However the lack of unanimous support amongst policy makers, public security officers, employers and family to uphold and enforce gender sensitive policies continue to undermine the position of women within Chinese society. Without the ability or will to enforce policies, migrant women will continue to be vulnerable to discrimination, harassment and poverty.

The issue of gender and poverty has always been a grave concern to feminists in the field of development but has only recently gained a wider

audience when the UN General Assembly specifically targeted gender and development as one of the eight primary Millennium Development Goals in 2001:

Women are still the poorest of the world's poor, representing two thirds of those living under a dollar a day. When such a large proportion of women live on incomes of less than \$1 a day, the relationship between being female and being poor is stark. Over the past two decades, the number of rural women living in absolute poverty has risen by 50 per cent, as opposed to 30 per cent for men. To change this severe inequality, women will need to gain control over financial and material resources, and will also need access to opportunity through education.<sup>155</sup>

Comparatively speaking, rural Chinese women are better off than their counterparts in other corners of the world as poverty levels have gradually decreased rather than increased over the past decade. However, despite this break from global trends, the detrimental relationship between poverty and gender in China is very much a reality and is considered to be one of the key deterrents pushing females to participate in the off-farm labour market. With an estimated 12 million rural Chinese women living in abject poverty, many are desperately seeking to break out of the cycle of poverty and find ways to improve living conditions for themselves and their families. Targeting education as a means to reducing poverty levels, the Chinese government has introduced a series of evaluations and reforms since 2001 for a nine-year compulsory education system.

Although the overall gap between males and females in education has decreased over the years as a result of these reforms, there continues to be notable

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<sup>155</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, 56<sup>th</sup> Session, *Road Map Towards the Implementation of the Millennium Declaration: The Report of the Secretary-General*, September 6, 2001, 24-25.

gender differences in rural school enrolment.<sup>156</sup> Girls in rural areas are still more likely to drop-out after grade 6.<sup>157</sup> According to the China Children and Teenagers' Fund (CCTF), as reported in the China Daily in December 24, 2003, more than 2 million children drop-out of school every year. Seven out of ten dropouts are girls. While parents recognize the value of an education, most are unwilling to allocate limited resources to support a daughter's education. It is noted that many rural families in impoverished regions continue to adhere to traditional patriarchal values and beliefs that view males as superior to females. Therefore, it important for civil society groups to step in with the assistance international NGO groups and private donors to improve the accessibility and availability of quality education for rural girls. There are currently several programs in place now such as the Spring Bud Project,<sup>158</sup> to ensure that girls from poverty stricken communities are able to continue their education through the secondary level. More of these programs need to be scaled-up in delivery so to reach as many village communities as possible.

As previously discussed, despite the educational reforms and programs, there continue to be growing concerns over the disparities of access and quality

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<sup>156</sup> The UN Country Team in China reports that one of the major causes of dropping out among minority children is a lack of access to schooling in remote areas, especially for girls wishing to enroll past the primary level. "Low professional standards in addressing the needs of children from ethnic minority areas and poor teaching quality result in low enrolment and high drop-out rates amongst these children." (10)

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> The Spring Bud Project was originally launched in the late 1980s. The project is organized and carried out by the China Children and Teenagers' Fund (CCTF) under the direction of the All China Women's Federation. The goal of this project is to assist girls living in poor rural areas of China to return to school. Many of the participants of this project have previously been forced to drop-out of school due to poverty or were on the verge of dropping out.

among different regions and population groups.<sup>159</sup> The lack of infrastructure and qualified teachers to support a nine-year education system in many rural and remote areas is contributing to a low student retention rate. The particularly high drop-out rate of ethnic minority children and girls in remote rural communities continue to pose challenges for the Ministry of Education. If it is recognized that access to opportunity can be obtained through education, then it is imperative that the government not only provide adequate resources to train qualified teachers but to ensure that rural girls are not forced to drop-out of school as a result of poverty.

Increasing literacy rates and providing equal access to education is an important step towards eradicating the feminization of poverty in rural China. Not only will an education provide rural girls with a chance at future economic security, but it also goes a long way in boosting confidence, self-esteem and a sense of worth that may not always be tangible within rural families. Being educated also means that rural women and girls have more options in how they gain and maintain economic security and independence. Professor Zheng Guizhen, Director of the Institute for Research on Gender and Development at Fudan University notes that most female migrants she has dealt with in Shanghai appeared to have at least middle school education. After over twenty years of conducting research on Shanghai's migrant or floating population, Professor Zheng noticed that the majority of migrant women she has worked with have

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<sup>159</sup> United Nations China, *Advancing Social Development in China: Contribution To The 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan*, UN Country Team China, Occasional Paper Vol. 1 (October 2005), 10.

received some secondary education – between grades 7 and 9 (中学, *zhong xue*).

These women are usually able to find ‘legitimate jobs’ and many became entrepreneurs.<sup>160</sup> She also noted that migrant women who are less educated or uneducated tend to be the ones to remain behind in the countryside. In some cases, those less educated may also end up in Southern SEZs in unskilled manufacturing work. In any case, those who do move without any basic education are often more vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>161</sup> The migrant population in general is already at a disadvantage with respect to labour bargaining power and social security but a migrant who is illiterate or is under-educated is even more vulnerable – to abuse, assault, exploitation and even HIV/AIDS.

The education discussion is further complicated when we turn our attention to concerns over the quality and accessibility of education for migrant children in the urban setting. Since education in urban areas is traditionally tied to one’s residency status, migrant children are often left outside of the classroom. Marriage to an urban resident or birth in the cities does not necessarily guarantee automatic urban *hukou*, a ticket into the city’s public schools. For example, until recently, a child born in Shanghai whose father is a resident but the mother is a

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<sup>160</sup> Many migrant women become active as vendors on the streets or in markets selling merchandise and food. Those who have stalls in markets seem to be more legitimate such that they do not have to pack up and run from local security officials when they approach. Profit margins may be slightly lower as they will have to pay rent and sometimes legal protection fees. However, legal vendors will not have to duck and hide every time local security officials are close by. I witnessed in Ningbo how frantic a couple of vendors were when they thought there was a crack down of illegal vendors down their street. The one man and one woman, who both mentioned they were not local, simply packed up their portable work stations consisting of nothing more than a wooden box with coal for heating inside and a wok on top to fry mini-potatoes) and bolted.

<sup>161</sup> Interview with Dr. Zheng Guizhen conducted at Fudan University in Shanghai, China on 15 November 2005.

migrant or non-resident, has to wait ten years before he/she can obtain an urban *hukou*. This type of policy has great implications to the health and development of a child. Without urban residency status, the child remains on the fringe of society. The initial formidable years of the child's life is spent in a second rate education system, if that. Without an opportunity to enrol in a quality school, migrant/ semi-migrant<sup>162</sup> children are limited in their prospects for advancement later in life. Performance levels in the classroom and on standardized tests determine the type and quality of school students will attend at the next level.

As previously discussed, rather than liberating women from the repressive nature of traditional patriarchal norms, early Party policies have instead transferred the subversion of women by men to that of the state. The culture of gender hierarchy is problematized with the liberalization of the socialist economy where women are entrenched into specific gender roles inside and outside of the public sphere. Again, this is not to say that rural women have not and are not benefiting from opportunities to enter the off-farm labour market. Rural women have unarguably gained from the economic transformation of late. Those who were interviewed seem to be happy with their new found freedom away from home, the contributions they are able to make to their families and the additional spending money they are able to save for themselves. Relatively speaking, women are better off now than they were some twenty to thirty years ago. However, comparatively, rural women continue to be worse off than migrant men

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<sup>162</sup> I use the term "semi-migrant" loosely in reference to children who have one parent who is a migrant and the other holds an urban *hukou*.

and women with urban residence permits. There is a distinct class divide between rural and urban citizens where rural peasants are clearly pegged into the lowest rung of the social ladder and women, who are often viewed as inferior to men, are wedged into the very bottom. Since there is nowhere to go but up, relative improvements, while important, only demonstrates how much work still needs to be done to improve the condition of rural migrant women in China.

### **Dirty, Dangerous and Dead-end**

In a report published by the Asian Metacentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis, author Xiang Biao highlights how damaging migration can be on the health of migrants, especially to migrant women. “It is widely known that migrants typically fill job positions that are unwanted by urban workers and have high health risks, which are sometimes referred to as “3D” (Dirty, Dangerous, and Dead-end/ Difficult/ Demanding) jobs.”<sup>163</sup> Without proper social, legal and health networks readily available to serve China’s burgeoning female migrant population, more and more women are becoming increasingly vulnerable to harassment, physical and emotional assault, deteriorating reproductive health and other health-related risks.

The migrant population has generally been overlooked by policy makers of all levels when it comes to their relocation and the necessary social programs and assistances needed to integrate into urban life. Identified as the “floating

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<sup>163</sup> Xiang Bao, “Migration and Health in China: Problems, Obstacles and Solutions,” *Asian Metacentre Research Paper Series*, no. 17, (Singapore: Asian Metacentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis), 8.

population” and seen only as temporary residents in the cities, migrants are generally expected to return to their original villages of residence for medical and social care. However, the lack of social services available to migrants even at the most basic level in urban settings across the country is proving to be increasingly problematic. The changing demographics of who is moving and the increasing willingness and desire of migrants to stay longer in cities requires a social system that can meet the growing demands of a changing migrant population.

One of the most noticeable indicators of how migrant women are doing in Chinese cities is the number and level of accessible social services available. I have previously acknowledged the short comings of the education system in China where migrant women and their children are concerned. But in addition to education, there is also a notable absence of quality social and health services available to China’s domestic migrant population.

As with international migration, one of the greatest concerns for new migrants is how well they are accepted into their new communities and what programs and support networks exist to facilitate their integration into their new surroundings. In China, the support networks are often informal and inadequate in providing the basic social and health needs of new migrants. While there are a growing number of organizations dealing with migrant labour issues and complaints there is still a shortage of funding and manpower to reach a large majority of those in need of social and health services.

According to Biao, the majority of health related problems in migrants is caused by the lack of ability to utilize existing health services due to financial difficulties and lack of information.<sup>164</sup> Without health insurance, the cost of seeing a physician is too costly. In a health survey conducted in Shanghai, although 80 percent of the migrant women interviewed hoped to have reproductive health checks regularly only 17.3 percent actually did so and 55.5 percent did not even know where they could obtain help regarding family planning.<sup>165</sup>

Alienation is often felt immediately upon entry into cities by most migrants. The social impact and stereotypes resulting from the government imposed household registration system continues to segregate Chinese citizens into unequal classes. It continues to be an uphill battle for migrant women as the inequalities suffered in the areas of social and health services bring us back to the issues of pre-conditioned power relationships based on gender and class. Stigma towards migrants is very high in urban areas and migrants are often blamed for urban problems such as crime and litter.<sup>166</sup> Women are most vulnerable as they must negotiate their way around the city to look for employment and shelter. Most will find the cheapest housing possible which typically pushes them into

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>165</sup> Z, Zhang, “Liudong renkou shong yilin funv shengzhi jiankang de xianshuang yu sikou” (The current reproductive health situation of female migrants of reproductive age and some thoughts), *Renkou Xuekan* (Population Journal) 4; 56; quoted in Xiang Biao, *Migration and Health in China: Problems, Obstacles and Solutions* (2004), 12.

<sup>166</sup> Bates Gill, “Assessing HIV/AIDS Initiatives in China - Persistent Challenges and Promising Ways Forward: A Report of the CSIS Task Force on HIV/AIDS,” (Washington: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, June 2006), 17.

factory dorms or out into housing communities further segregating them from urban society. For example, migrant women in Beijing are often found living on the outskirts of the city in the fourth or fifth ring road.<sup>167</sup> The limited social interaction afforded to migrants isolates them from the political, social and legal communities necessary for improving their living conditions and standards. Without social insurance and legal residence status, migrants have minimal access to public education and medical services.

This is not to say that migrant women are without avenues of recourse in the cities. Han Hui Min, Vice-General Manger of the Migrant Women's Club<sup>168</sup> notes in my interview with her that there are a growing number of organizations around the country being set up to assist migrant women with their settlement in the cities. Local non-profit groups are working closely with or are directly under the guidance of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) to provide migrant women with an outlet for social and legal support. But despite this, research indicates that most of these organizations lack the necessary funding and support needed to meet the needs of a growing migrant female population. Better coordination and delivery of the programs are needed as the majority of migrant

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<sup>167</sup> Han Hui Min, Vice-General Manger of the Migrant Women's Club in Beijing. Interviewed on 25 November 2005 at the Migrant Women's Club office in Beijing. Beijing is built around ring roads. Currently, the city has expanded to 6 Ring Roads. Communities in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Ring Roads are still considered to be in the more remote parts of Beijing. Reasons why migrants would choose to live this far from the urban centre include cheaper housing and closer proximity to factories and manufacturing plants located on the outskirts of the city of Beijing or in neighbouring towns and counties. For a more in depth narrative on the of migrant women's lives in Beijing and their participation in the Migrant Women's Club see Tamara Jacka's *Rural women in Urban China* (2006).

<sup>168</sup> The Migrant Women's Club is a branch of the Beijing Cultural Development Centre for Rural Women. The Centre also publishes the Rural Women magazine. More information can be found at [www.nongjianv.org](http://www.nongjianv.org).

women do not seem to be aware of where to go and who to trust when they run into trouble leaving limited resources under utilized. For example, the Migrant Women's Club established a hotline for migrant women to call in with their work, health and legal questions but it is underused. Han estimates that the hotline received only an average of thirty calls each month. According to Tamara Jacka, by 2001 3.3 million migrants had moved to Beijing, of that, 37 percent were women.<sup>169</sup> Thirty is a minuscule fraction of the migrant women in the city of Beijing and certainly a minuscule number of women needing medical, social and or legal assistance.

### HIV/ AIDS

While a virus causes AIDS, fundamental driving forces behind the speed at which it spreads and factors that influence prevention are poverty (economic), gender, religious, spiritual and ethnic norms (cultural), and national policy (political).<sup>170</sup>

One area of concern that arose from my field research in China, and that is attracting growing interest, is how HIV/AIDS is affecting China's migrant women population. Seen predominantly as a disease for those leading a high-risk life style such as intravenous drug users (IDU), commercial sex workers (CSW) or homosexuals, many have until recently ignored the potential catastrophe this epidemic can be to the country's general population. Despite China's reluctance to address this disease head on, the outbreak of SARS in 2002 forced China into

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<sup>169</sup> Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women In Urban China*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 6.

<sup>170</sup> Haejin Yun, Kay Govender and Bella Mody, "Factoring Poverty and Culture Into HIV/AIDS Campaigns," *Gazette* 63.1 (2001): 73.

acknowledging serious weaknesses<sup>171</sup> within its health system and to reaffirm that there is a potential AIDS epidemic in the country.<sup>172</sup> However, HIV/AIDS soon fell off headlines and it would take another year after SARS for it to make the headlines again. This time it was thanks to former US President Bill Clinton's visit to China. Clinton caused a furor at a press conference to discuss HIV/AIDS where he publicly shook hands and embraced a member of the audience who announced that he is living with the disease. Due to a lack of knowledge and education on this disease there is widespread fear that HIV/AIDS can be transmitted through regular contact with those infected. The stigma against HIV/AIDS and those living with it is just as vicious, if not more so, than the stigma rural migrants are faced with.

Soon after Clinton's visit, the Chinese leadership took a visible interest in HIV/AIDS and mobilized the bureaucracy to mount a more effective response. The propaganda blitz saw pictures such as that of Premier Wen Jiabao visiting AIDS patients in affected villages and hospices appearing in national newsprint. In 2003, the national<sup>173</sup> and provincial budgets for HIV/AIDS was enlarged and a

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<sup>171</sup> The SARS outbreak showed the lack of communications between the National Centre for Disease Control (CDC) and its provincial counterparts and medical facilities throughout the country. There was a lack of standard procedure to check in, monitor and track patients. The epidemiological surveillance capacity was weak at best. Since the outbreak of SARS, the MOH, China CDC and provincial CDCs have been working closely with the WHO and other donors such as CIDA to improve on their epidemiological surveillance systems and methodology for handling communicable diseases.

<sup>172</sup> According to Grusky, Liu and Johnston (2002), 1997 was the first time the issue was addressed by the Chinese government. However, it was not until August 2001 that Deputy Health Minister Yin Dakui, publicly acknowledged the seriousness of HIV/AIDS in China.

<sup>173</sup> The China NGO Network for International Exchange notes in their publication "Time to Deliver in China" for the XVI International AIDS Conference in Toronto (August 12 – 17, 2006)

high-level interagency body – the State Council Working Group on HIV/AIDS – headed by Vice-Premier Wu Yi was established to coordinate a national response.<sup>174</sup> National treatment programs such as the one referred to as “four frees and one care” (refers to the free antiretroviral treatment for farmers and indigent AIDS patient, free HIV testing, free prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, free schooling for AIDS orphans, and care for families affected by HIV/AIDS) were introduced.<sup>175</sup>

The increasing policy attention this leadership has placed on China’s new response to HIV/AIDS is a positive step in the right direction. The main priority is to manage the current epidemic so that it does not spread exponentially. However, those who are living with the disease (also commonly referred to as PLWA, people living with HIV/AIDS) in China continue to be frustrated over the government’s treatment of people living with AIDS despite its national treatment programs. AIDS advocates and people living with AIDS are often invited to attend meetings, roundtables and seminars when there is a heavy national and international media presence. However, contradictory to what state media and state sanctioned reports indicate, rather than having an equal seat and an equal voice at the table, these individuals are seldom allowed to speak out and are not heard or taken seriously when they do have a chance to speak. Many of them

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that the national budget for HIV/AIDS prevention and care has risen from 390 million RMB in 2003 to 800 million RMB in 2005.

<sup>174</sup> Bates Gill (2006). 3.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

have expressed their disgust and dismay over the insincere display of public support shown by Chinese leaders and policy makers.<sup>176</sup>

It was estimated in 2003, that there were 840,000 people living with HIV/AIDS. However, in a recent updated report released earlier in 2006 by the Chinese Ministry of Health (MOH), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS<sup>177</sup>, officials announced a much lower estimation of 650,000<sup>178</sup> people living with HIV/AIDS in China.<sup>179</sup> Even with these lowered numbers, it is expected that ten to fifteen million Chinese will be infected by 2010 if the disease remains unchecked.<sup>180</sup> Although many of the 650,000 infected lead high-risk lives, no one is immune to transmission. This became apparent when poor farmers and their families who donated blood

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<sup>176</sup> This narrative is based on news reports, interviews with contacts and my own observations at various meetings and functions. Most recently during my participation in a meeting with the UN Joint Program on HIV/AIDS in the fall of 2005, one of the advocates living with HIV/AIDS broke down in the middle of his presentation to the group over how disappointed he is with the progress or lack thereof in China on addressing the issue of HIV/AIDS. He noted that while the Chinese government appears to be working to improve the social stigma and living conditions of people living with HIV/AIDS in China, little progress has been made. Advocates who are invited to meetings are merely props for photo ops. The government is still not listening to their own citizens.

<sup>177</sup> The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) was established to bring together the efforts and resources of ten UN system organizations (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, ILO, UNESCO, WHO) and the World Bank to the global AIDS response.

<sup>178</sup> Chinese officials and researchers estimate in "Time to Deliver in China" that there is currently 540,000 to 760,000 people living with HIV/AIDS in China as of 2005, of which 75,000 have developed AIDS. In 2005, there were an estimated 70,000 new HIV infections and 25,000 AIDS deaths. Of the total estimated number of people living with HIV/AIDS in China approximately 288,000 are drug users (44.3% of total), 69,000 contracted are commercial blood and plasma donors or recipients of blood or blood products through transfusion (10.7%), 127,000 are sex workers and their clients (19.6%), 109,000 are partners of HIV-positive individuals and members of the gendered population (16.7%), 47,000 men who have sex with men or MSM (7.3%), and 9,000 cases of mother-to-child transmission (1.4%). (5).

<sup>179</sup> Ministry of Health, Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS and WHO, "2005 Update on the HIV/AIDS Epidemic and Response in China," (Beijing: China CDC, January 24, 2006), i.

<sup>180</sup> United Nations, World Food Programme China, "China 2004: Annual Report" (Beijing: WFP China 2004), 12.

regularly in exchange for cash were infected through tainted blood products and supplies in Henan province.<sup>181</sup> Also, the eventual spread of AIDS through sexual transmission was inevitable as “rates of sexually transmitted diseases in China doubled between 1996 and 2000”<sup>182</sup> Therefore, the Chinese Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MOLSS), mass organizations such as the All China Women’s Federation, China Youth Federation, Federation of Trade Unions and local health and non-profit groups are working in cooperation with international NGOs and the UN<sup>183</sup> to actively deliver multi-pronged education and awareness programs on HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care.

In a joint assessment of HIV/AIDS Prevention in 2003, the Chinese MOH and the UNTG on HIV/AIDS identified the following as potential sources of a widespread epidemic: an increase in high risk behaviour; lack of knowledge and social discrimination; the high prevalence of reproductive tract infections among rural women; blood transfusions in rural treatment centres; significant regional disparities in economic development; and large migrant population.<sup>184</sup> Several key points to note from the UNWFP report are that rural residents and migrants

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<sup>181</sup> According to Kaufman and Jing, about a million persons, mostly poor farmers, donate blood to supplement their incomes. As a result of this tainted blood collection practice, 60% of some villages in Henan province are now infected with HIV. Seven other provinces have also reported HIV infections through paid blood donations. The full ramifications and extent of this infection remains unclear. (2339).

<sup>182</sup> Joan Kaufman and Jun Jing, “China and AIDS – The Time to Act is NOW,” *Science* 296 (28 June 2002): 2339.

<sup>183</sup> Members of the UN Theme Group (UNTG) on HIV/AIDS in China include the WHO, UNAIDS, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, UNIFEM, UNESCO and the World Bank.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

have been identified as high risk groups due to both biological<sup>185</sup> and social factors. Many researchers believe that “demographic and/ or social-educational factors within the burgeoning floating population predispose migrants to higher risk for acquisition of HIV.”<sup>186</sup> This assumption is based on the fact that the majority of the mobile population are within the reproductive age and are typically single or if married living apart from their spouses and family therefore more inclined to engage in high-risk sexual practices<sup>187</sup>, often poorly educated and have a low awareness of HIV and STDs.<sup>188</sup> Rural and migrant women are increasingly vulnerable as spouses, girlfriends and as economic actors within the changing economy as there are increasing risks of being infected by unfaithful husbands and partners who are engaged in high risk sexual practices while away from their rural homes. Migrant women themselves are vulnerable as they move into new and unfamiliar surroundings and are easily preyed upon by sex-work recruiters as they try to negotiate ways to sustain themselves in the cities.

In her research Anna Hayes reaffirms reports that identify the migration of rural men to the cities for work as a compounding factor in the situation of

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<sup>185</sup> According to H. Yang et al. (October 2005) women are 2 to 4 times more susceptible to HIV transmission during unprotected sexual intercourse than men because of the permeability of the vaginal tract to viral infection (819).

<sup>186</sup> Hongjie Lie, Liaoming Li, Bonita Stanton, Hui Liu, et al. “Risk Factors for Sexually Transmitted Disease Among Rural-Urban Migrants in China: Implications for HIV/ Sexually Transmitted Disease Prevention,” *AIDS Patient Care and STDs* 15.1 (2005): 50.

<sup>187</sup> High risk sexual practices include having sex with multiple partners, soliciting prostitutes and not using proper protection such as condoms.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.; Drew Thompson, “China’s Growing AIDS Epidemic Increasingly Affects Women,” *Population Reference Bureau* (July 2004), [internet]; available from <http://www.prb.org/Template.cfm?Section=PRB&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=11015> (accessed 13 July 2006).

women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS transmission.<sup>189</sup> Those interviewed note that although a majority of the male migrants are married, they often engage in 'risky practices' such as intravenous drug use (IDU), procuring prostitutes or enter into polygamous relationships while in the cities.<sup>190</sup> Upon their return to their village, these men would then engage in un-protected sexual activities with their spouse. Those interviewed by Hayes further note that most wives who suspect their husbands of being unfaithful are unable to ask their spouse to use a condom due to unequal gender-based power relations within the marriage.<sup>191</sup>

Migrant women themselves are equally vulnerable to HIV and STD transmission due to their depleted status as both women and as outsiders.<sup>192</sup> Without a strong economic and social safety net in their place of destination, migrant women become easy targets for prostitution and other kinds of "transactional sex" out of economic necessity as they try to negotiate employment, food and shelter.<sup>193</sup> Their vulnerability is accentuated by the lack of knowledge and education on reproductive health and protection against sexually transmitted diseases. Most women know that STDs and HIV/AIDS are dangerous and

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<sup>189</sup> Anna Hayes, "Human Insecurity in Twenty-First Century China: The Vulnerability of Women to HIV/AIDS," Conference Paper presented to the 15<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Canberra 29 June - 2 July 2004, [internet]; available from <http://coombs.anu.edu.au/ASAA/conference/proceedings/Hayes-A-ASAA2004.pdf> (accessed 13 July 2006), 10.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Only recently have policy officials and NGOs (both Chinese and International ) begun to recognize the increasing risks of HIV/AIDS transmission to rural women due the increasing mobility of this group and the rising number of women getting infected with the virus over the past decade. Rural women have also not been a concern or priority for HIV prevention due to stereotypes and social stigma that HIV/AIDS only affects gay men and IDUs.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.; Drew Thompson (2004).

potentially deadly but only a few have the necessary knowledge to protect themselves from infection.<sup>194</sup>

The current programs designed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to educate school children about reproductive health, protection against STDs and HIV/ AIDS do not start until grade nine.<sup>195</sup> Although theoretically speaking, all children regardless of sex, class and race should receive a minimum of nine years of compulsory education, the reality, as previously discussed, is that many rural children especially rural girls and those of ethnic minorities are more likely to drop out after grade 6. These are the exact same groups that have been identified several times over by many different organizations including the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS as vulnerable. However, despite acknowledging the vulnerability of rural girls to contracting HIV/AIDS, the MOE and UNESCO have no apparent plans to introduce their AIDS awareness program any earlier than at the secondary level. Their lack of foresight and inability to take into consideration the gendered implication of this decision will increase the vulnerability of rural and migrant females to the exposure and infection of HIV/AIDS. More importantly, this particular example highlights a much larger problem of gendered blindness within the UN system and Chinese policy officials.

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<sup>194</sup> Han Hui Min (Interview, 2005).

<sup>195</sup> Thompson (2003) notes that migrants who are generally young and have little formal education constitute a large number of commercial sex workers.

Most who are discussing the issue of HIV/AIDS acknowledge the increased vulnerability of women and girls both in the entertainment industry and as migrants to contracting the disease. It is widely acknowledged that women are more vulnerable because of both their gender and their physiology. Due to unequal power relations, the economic dependence on men leaves them vulnerable to disease as women are often powerless to demand their spouses, boyfriends or customers wear condoms during sex. However, despite the acknowledgement that women are a susceptible group, there continues to be a lack of discussion on gender sensitive delivery of prevention and care.

For all the discussion over the need to mainstream gender in policy and practice within all UN organizations, the absence of sincere consideration and action to incorporate gender into HIV/AIDS programs is deafening. If this deficiency is not immediately rectified it will surely have serious consequences for the future health and well-being of rural and migrant women and their families as the number of HIV/AIDS cases will only increase.

### **Gender Mainstreaming**

The latest catchphrase in China, well certainly in Beijing, is ‘gender equality’ and ‘gender mainstreaming.’ However, I seriously question whether or not those who use this term comprehend its significance and meaning. I suspect not, as gender mainstreaming is, in all honesty, a new concept in China.

According to Baden and Goetz, gender mainstreaming “signifies a push towards systematic procedures and mechanisms within organizations – particularly government and public institutions – for explicitly taking account of gender issues at all stages of policy-making and programme design and implementation.”<sup>196</sup> They further add that gender mainstreaming “also represents a call for the diffusion of responsibility for gender issues beyond small and under funded women’s units to the range of sectoral and technical departments within institutions.”<sup>197</sup> However, to many Chinese, mainstreaming essentially means to “add women and mix”, which it most certainly is not. However, in so much as the Chinese have a long ways to go to implement this gender project, international organizations have just as much work cut out for them. As a source of policy and technical advice to Chinese policy makers and implementers, international organizations such as the UN and its employees need to have a clear, concise and unified understanding of what gender mainstreaming means in theory and in practice. There is nothing more disheartening than to receive blank stares from UN, WHO and World Bank officials after suggesting that they take a step back to look at how some of their programs need to be revisited so to address the needs of women and girls who have already been identified as vulnerable and high risk to HIV/AIDS.

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<sup>196</sup> Sally Baden and Anne Marie Goetz, “Who Needs [Sex] When You Can Have [Gender]? Conflicting Discourse on Gender at Beijing,” *Feminist Review* 56 (Summer 1997): 5.

<sup>197</sup> Shahra Razavi and Carol Miller, “Gender mainstreaming: a study of efforts by the UNDP, the World Bank and the ILO to institutionalize gender issues,” UNRISD Occasional Paper for the Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing 1995, OP 4, (Geneva: UNRISD/ UNDP, August 1995) as quoted in Sally Baden and Anne Marie Goetz (1997).

Although there is an increasing awareness that China faces a potential epidemic if HIV/AIDS is not contained immediately, there is currently an absence of substantive research and policies in either NGOs, not-for-profits or academia examining the issue of AIDS in China in relation to its impact on rural and migrant women. Considering that there is an increasing number of rural women being drawn into the commercial sex trade, the rising number of sexually transmitted disease and HIV/AIDS cases in sex workers, the number of men buying sex, the percentage of women being infected through heterosexual intercourse and the number of infants being infected with HIV/AIDS through mother to child transmission, one would hope that both the Chinese government and international donor groups would pay more attention to protecting rural and migrant females from further harm. The repercussions of increased exposure to health and social risks by this group are enormous, affecting the economic, social and political security of China for generations to come. To stem the HIV/AIDS epidemic from exponential spread in China, policy advisors, makers and implementers need to start protecting the rural and migrant population by educating them on the risk of HIV/AIDS, promoting the use of condoms and providing access to health and medical facilities for check-ups.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

## **POLICY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR RURAL AND MIGRANT WOMEN**

*Women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life, political, economic, cultural and social, and family life. The state protects the rights and interests of women, applies the principle of equal pay for equal work for men and women alike and trains and selects cadres from among women.*

*(Article 48, Constitution of the People's Republic of China, December 4, 1984) <sup>198</sup>*

Despite grand proclamations by the Chinese leadership from Mao to Hu about equality for all women; the many laws and policies ratified and amended at various levels of government; and its signature on several international declarations protecting the rights of women; women in China, particularly rural women, continue to be most vulnerable to poverty, violence, disease and suicide. Equal rights continue to elude rural women in all spheres of life be it political, economic, cultural, social or familial. Previous discussions reveal that women are typically paid less than men, first to be laid-off, receive less education, are double-burdened with work outside and inside the home and are increasingly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and are being trafficked for marriage and prostitution. The continued marginalization of women despite relative gains is a concern that leads us back to questions regarding policy for the protection of rural and migrant women.

As discussed in previous chapters, rural women are migrating for numerous reasons including economic constraints in rural homes or forced

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<sup>198</sup> People's Republic of China, *Constitution of the People's Republic of China* (Beijing, 1982), published on *People's Daily*, [internet]; available from <http://english.people.com.cn/constitution/constitution.html> (accessed 20 July 2005).

migration due to divorce. What remains unclear is how existing laws and policies affect rural and migrant women. The purpose of this section is to gain a clearer perspective on the implications on how some state policies are affecting rural and migrant women and why this group continues to be marginalized. This discussion will begin by examining China's Marriage Law and the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women. Based on documentary research and according to my observations and discussions with key informants, it will be concluded that although there is no straight answer to the question of why women continue to be on fringe, there are clearly political, social and economic barriers underpinning this group's marginalization from society, from family and from "meaningful"<sup>199</sup> labour participation.

### **Marriage Law**

Over the course of the past 57 years, the Chinese government has passed and amended several laws concerning the welfare of women. The Chinese leadership often sought ways to showcase how far women have progressed in China. The leadership had expressed the belief that "the degree of women's emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation."<sup>200</sup> This emancipation started with the Marriage Law in the 1950s as the government

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<sup>199</sup> I recognize that what is meaningful to the migrants themselves may differ, as was previously discussed. I define meaningful as gainful employment where wages are fair, working conditions are good and workers are treated with dignity, fairness and respect regardless of gender, class or *hukou*.

<sup>200</sup> Wang Zheng, "The Women's Movement in China," *Sings* 22.1 (Autumn 1996); 193. Wang notes that this sentence is one of the most frequently cited Marxist tenets in Chinese texts on women in China. This phrase is one of the Marxist principles guiding the official view on women.

initiated national mass movements to encourage people to leave their feudal marriages.<sup>201</sup> The Marriage Law outlines the fundamental code governing marriage and family relations in China. According to Article 2 of the Marriage Law, China's "marriage system is based on the free-choice of partners, on monogamy and on equality between man and woman" where the "lawful rights and interests of women, children and old people shall be protected" and "family planning shall be practiced."<sup>202</sup> One and a half million divorce cases were filed during this national campaign in the early 1950s.<sup>203</sup> However, the government backtracked on the policy by 1955<sup>204</sup> and it would not be until the end of the 1970s when people were granted more freedom to file for divorce. The changes in policy focus from Mao's class struggle to Deng's economic reform guided the government to relax its control over people that led to the eventual revision of the Marriage Law in 1980. However, a high rate of divorce was seen as a threat to the stability of the family as an institution and in 1997, the Marriage Law was amended once again.

Liu and Chan note that the Chinese government maintains rigid control over divorce because it sees the family as the basic unit of society.<sup>205</sup> "The family, therefore, is a fundamental part of state power: The stability of the family is the

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<sup>201</sup> Meng Liu and Cecilia Chan, "Enduring Violence and Staying in Marriage: Stories of Battered Women in Rural China," *Violence Against Women* 5.12 (December 1999): 1472.

<sup>202</sup> People's Republic of China, "Marriage Law," [internet]; available from [http://unescap.or.esid/psis/population/database/poplaws/law\\_china.htm](http://unescap.or.esid/psis/population/database/poplaws/law_china.htm) (accessed 21 July 2006).

<sup>203</sup> Dai, W. "History of Marriage, sex and love in China," (Beijing: Dongfang Press, 1992) [in Chinese]; as cited in Liu and Chan (1999), 1742.

<sup>204</sup> Meng Liu and Cecilia Chan (1999), 1473.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

foundation for stability of the state.”<sup>206</sup> As such, they argue that changes in government policy regarding divorce can serve as an important indicator of both the social and political environment of China since 1950. If this assumption is correct then China is at a crossroads between economic and social growth and political stability. One can see the fundamental contradictions and tensions acting on the state as China’s economy continue to grow and integrate into the global market. Although the leadership may identify stability of the traditional family structure as stability to state power, economic pressures dictate otherwise. As more rural residents, especially women migrate out of their rural homes and villages to help fuel China’s booming economy it will be increasingly difficult to maintain the traditional family structure. The hyper-mobility of citizens tends to alter social perceptions of family and family commitments. Rural and migrant women may no longer be satisfied to stay with philandering husbands and are therefore more inclined to seek divorces.

At last count, 1.12 million couples divorced across the country in 2005, a 12 percent increase from the previous year.<sup>207</sup> Women now account for 70 percent of those filing for divorce. Those filing for divorce have cited everything from irreconcilable differences, unfaithfulness to domestic violence. The increasing migrant population is undoubtedly responsible for the high divorce rate.

According to Xinhua News Agency, research conducted by the legal service unit

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> China Daily, “Divorce Rates Surge across Country,” *China Daily*, 15 February 2006, [internet]; retrieved from China.org.cn <http://www.china.org.cn/english/Life/158133.htm#> (accessed 19 July 2006).

of the legal bureau in Shangqiu City, Henan found that 60 to 70 percent of divorce cases its office dealt with were primarily from the countryside. Of those cases, 80 percent occurred in families where one spouse either worked or conducted business outside of their hometown while leaving the family behind.<sup>208</sup> In addressing the need to build and strengthen the Chinese countryside in the government's 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2006 – 2010), there is hope that perhaps some of these social issues would also be dealt with. We will examine the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan and its implications for rural and migrant women further on in this chapter.

Chinese leaders have used the Marriage Law as an example of women's liberation such that it provides women with an opportunity to break free from unhappy marriages. However, as mentioned above, the Chinese government's position on marriage and the desire to assume control of the family to preserve state power is in contradiction to the interest of women. Rather than liberating women from the shadows of patriarchal dominance, state manipulation of the Marriage Law has further marginalized women. From the very beginning since the Marriage Law was first introduced, men were often the ones taking advantage of the law, either directly by filing the petition for divorce or indirectly by forcing their wives to file for divorce<sup>209</sup>, or to leave the marriage.<sup>210</sup> This is especially

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<sup>208</sup> The Epoch Times, "High Divorce Rate in China's Countryside Seen As A Result of Working Away From Home," *The Epoch Times*, 23 October 2004, [internet]; available from <http://www.theepochtimes.com/news/4-10-23/23949.html> (accessed 21 July 2006).

<sup>209</sup> This does not mean husbands physically force their wives to initiate the divorce but rather as a result of their unhappiness or dissatisfaction with their husbands due to such reasons as infidelity, women will file for divorce.

true since economic reforms in the country allowed for greater mobility of individuals to leave families and homes to seek employment. The time and distance away from home often led to extramarital affairs and resulted in divorce. In a study conducted by the Anhui Women's Federation, divorce rates in rural areas are on the rise, particularly among migrant communities within the province. This study also notes that while most divorce petitions are brought on by women who are unable to deal with their husband's infidelity and/or lack of responsible action as a father, it is ultimately the woman who pays heavily for the divorce.<sup>211</sup>

There are serious economic and social repercussions against female divorcees that the leaders do not take into consideration. According to Wan's article, in 1998 most divorced mothers in their late thirties are often stripped of custody of their children. If the family home is a benefit of the father's job, as homes were usually distributed by a person's employer or work unit, the child's mother will find herself homeless.<sup>212</sup> This continues to be the case in rural communities today as rural wives are often stripped of child custody because they are unable to care for their children adequately, and lack the necessary skills and education to earn a living.<sup>213</sup> In addition to this, fathers will benefit in custody battles as traditional patriarchal values emphasize the importance of children

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<sup>210</sup> Elaine Wan, "China's Divorce Problem," *The Tech*, 118.57 (November 10, 1998). [journal online]; available from <http://www-tech.mit.edu/V118/N57/wan.57c.html> (accessed 19 July 2006); Meng Liu and Cecilia Chan (1999), 1473

<sup>211</sup> Unisumoon, "Rise in Rural Divorces," *China.org.cn*, [internet]; available from <http://www.china.org.cn/english/China/150233.htm> (accessed 19 July 2006).

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. Wan further adds that unlike western societies where mothers are often awarded custody of the children, Chinese fathers are usually given custody because they have "more favourable economic conditions in which to raise children and are aided by their new young wife."

<sup>213</sup> Unisumoon, "Rise in Rural Divorces."

carrying the father's family name.<sup>214</sup> Some female divorcees will head back to natal family homes. However, the stigma associated with divorce is still strong within Chinese society and as a result, some of these women may no longer be welcomed back into their parent's home. In this case, these women will most likely have to migrate into new cities or villages to seek employment to sustain themselves.

The Marriage Law and the accompanying liberal divorce laws while empowering in one respect, are also demeaning to women in another. A divorce can strip a woman of her home, children, economic security and social status. At the present, there are no social security measures or legislation in place to protect women and their children after divorce. As such, many women who would like to and should get out of bad marriages plagued with infidelity and violence choose not to because they feel that the economic, social insecurity and the stigma of being a divorcee is more difficult to deal with than staying in a potentially dangerous relationship. It is therefore important for Chinese leaders to address the lack of social assistance available to women after divorce since removing the option of divorce would be counter productive.

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<sup>214</sup> I was unable to locate any statistics that would provide a clearer picture of the number of custody battles and their outcomes. It would certainly be interesting to see what the numbers are in urban cities versus rural communities. And while no study appear to be available on this, it would be interesting to see if it mattered whether the children were male or female in custody battles. Since traditionally, sons are prized over daughters one wonders if in a divorce, girls are often left with their mothers who may or may not be able to provide for them. This becomes a serious question because it adds another dimension to the feminization of poverty in the rural countryside if in fact, fathers default any responsibility to provide for their daughters.

**Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women (LPRIW)**

The second piece of legislation important to improving the welfare of rural and migrant women is the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women that was enacted by the National People's Congress (NPC) in 1992. As stated in Article 1, "in accordance with the Constitution and the actual conditions of the country, this Law is formulated to protect women's lawful rights and interests, promote the equality between men and women and allow full play to women's role in socialist modernization."<sup>215</sup> However, as some critics note, although the Law touches on all aspects of life providing the government to protect women in a wide range of issues from political rights, to cultural and education rights, property rights, marriage and family rights and rights to the person, it "does not permit women to assert their own rights."<sup>216</sup> None-the-less, the 1992 Law is a first step to ensuring legal recognition for the rights and interests of women.

The Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women was recently amended. The amendments that came into effect in December 2005 outlaws sexual harassment, giving victims the right to complain to her employer, seek legal punishment with police, and bring a civil suit for damages. The amended law also includes stronger provisions for the protection of women against

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<sup>215</sup> People's Republic of China, "Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women," (Beijing, 1992), [internet]; available from <http://www.women.org.cn/english/english/law/02.htm> (accessed 15 July 2005).

<sup>216</sup> US Congressional Executive Committee on China, "2005 Annual Report," Section III(f) Status of Women, 2005, [internet]; available from [http://www.cecc.gov/pages/annualRpt/annualRpt05/2005\\_3f\\_women.php?PHPSESSID=2a273378da158fb8604a35beff4d06c1](http://www.cecc.gov/pages/annualRpt/annualRpt05/2005_3f_women.php?PHPSESSID=2a273378da158fb8604a35beff4d06c1) (accessed 15 June 2006).

domestic violence and abuse.<sup>217</sup> This piece of legislation has been acknowledged as the “first law in China specifically enacted to safeguard women’s legitimate rights and interests, to promote equality between men and women and to enable women to play an active role in society.”<sup>218</sup> It is the most comprehensive piece of legislation to legalize provisions which China has signed onto when it ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1980. In efforts to address the changing needs of women throughout China and to commemorate the ten year anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the standing committee of the National People’s Congress passed an amendment to the Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests on August 28, 2005.

The new law states that gender equality is one of China’s basic national policies and for the first time, gives women explicit legal status as equal persons to men in China: “*Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in all aspects of political, economic, cultural, social and family life*” (Article 2). This is in addition to Article 33 from the original Law stating that “*The state shall guarantee that women enjoy equal rights with men relating to their persons.*” These amendments are hailed by many as a “significant step forward in gender relations.” The amendments will hopefully establish a comprehensive body of

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Rong Jiaojiao, “Law Revised to Protect Women’s Rights,” The Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United Kingdom of the Great Britain and Northern Ireland website, 20 September 2005, [internet]; available from <http://uk.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/t213042.htm> (accessed 15 March 2006).

regulations protecting all aspects of women's rights, including political, educational and work rights.<sup>219</sup>

Mo Wenxiu, Vice-Chairwoman of the All-China Women's Federation believes that "economic independence is the most basic and crucial step to achieve gender equality."<sup>220</sup> Mo feels that the new amendments regarding women's economic rights were satisfactory as "it reinforces the women's rights to property by stipulating that female farmers enjoy the same right to contract, to purchase or to own farm land." The amendment has several other significant additions that pay special attention to workplace and employment discrimination and harassment against women. The new law stipulates that sex should not be a pretext for refusing to hire women and that sexual harassment is now an illegal and punishable offence.<sup>221</sup> The All-China Women's Federation, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security have been working closely with the ILO and other UN and donor groups such as CIDA to address the issues of harassment and gender equality in the work place.

The amendments to the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women are indisputably significant for the advancement of women in China. The individuals on the committee responsible for revising the law recognize the difficulties women face in their everyday lives and the need to provide legal protection for them. More importantly though is the dialogue in China on the

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<sup>219</sup> Louise Winkler, "Open debate on women's rights," *China Daily*, 20 July 2005, [internet]; available from [http://www2.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-07/20/content\\_461685.htm#](http://www2.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-07/20/content_461685.htm#) (accessed 20 September 2005).

<sup>220</sup> Rong Jiaojiao, (2005).

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

amendments that ensued immediately after it was passed. Although most in China provide it with glowing reviews there are some women's rights advocates who provide a more cautious assessment noting the gaps and potential problems with these amendments. One of the issues of concern is with abortion. While selective abortion of female fetus and female infanticide are prohibited under Article 35:

Women's right of life and health shall be inviolable. Drowning, abandoning or cruel infanticide in any manner of female babies shall be prohibited; discrimination against or maltreatment of women who gave birth to female babies or women who are sterile shall be prohibited; cruel treatment causing injury even death of women by superstition or violence shall be prohibited; maltreatment or abandonment of aged women shall be prohibited.<sup>222</sup>

It is alleged by Rong that there are legal experts who are unwilling to take legal action against abortions, believing women should have freedom of choice in childbearing.<sup>223</sup> Not to mention, the BBC reports that China's legislature scrapped a bill in June 2006 that would have introduced fines and prison terms for aborting girls. Although sex-selective abortions are not criminalized, Chinese authorities claim to have prosecuted 3,000 cases of selective abortion for non-medical purposes over a two year period from 2004 to 2006.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> People's Republic of China, "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women," accessed through National People's Congress Website [internet]; available on <http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/english/news/newsDetail.jsp?id=2204&articleId=345034> (accessed 15 January 2006).

<sup>223</sup> Rong Jiaojiao (2005).

<sup>224</sup> BBC News, "China vow on sexed-based abortion," *BBC News*, 02 August 2006, <http://nes.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/ft/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/5237980.htm> (accessed 03 August 2006).

The issue of abortion rights is and always has been a contentious issue within most cultures. However, in China, women's reproductive rights are significantly reduced to a point where one could argue that they are virtually non-existent. Human rights groups have voiced concerns over China's continuing violation of women's human rights with its one-child policy<sup>225</sup> as a method of population control. This limitation on the freedom of women to bear children combined with traditional patriarchal beliefs where sons are valued over daughters has created a large moral and social crisis in the country, especially in the rural countryside.

High rates of female infanticide have been reported in rural communities due to pressures from husbands and their family to produce a male heir to carry on the family name and to keep farm property within the "family." With only one chance to give birth, rural women and/ or their families and relatives may decide to commit infanticide if the child born is a female so to have a second chance at producing a son in their next pregnancy. Women who bear daughters may be subject to mental and psychological abuse by the husband and his family even though the law states specifically that "discrimination against or maltreatment of women who gave birth to female babies or women who are sterile shall be prohibited."

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<sup>225</sup> The one child policy was introduced in 1979 to ensure sustainability of its growing population. The policy that stipulates each couple living in the cities should only have one child, unless one or both of the couple are from an ethnic minority or they are both only children. It is also reported that in most rural areas, couples are allowed to have a second child if the first one is female and only after several years after the first birth. According to the BBC in 2000, government officials applaud the success of the policy by preventing at least 250 million births since 1980.

The one-child policy not only strips women of their reproductive choices but also creates a moral dilemma where the issue of abortion is concerned. There have been reported cases of forced abortion and/ or even sterilization of women who have more than one child. In addition, couples are forced to pay subsequent fines or be subject to wage cuts for breaking the one-child policy. With the advancement of technologies and rising levels of disposable income, many private medical clinics across the country have been offering ultrasounds to expecting parents to determine the sex of their child before birth. Some parents who could afford it have even purchased ultrasound equipment for private use. In several reported cases, parents have decided to abort the fetus if the results show the child is female. This new trend has sparked government regulations banning the unnecessary pre-screening of expecting mothers and the sale of such medical devices to the public.

Although the ultimate choice to keep or abort a fetus should rest with the mother, China's one-child policy strips that fundamental right for a women to chose. As it stands, the one-child policy is feeding local patriarchal and patrilineal traditions that undermine women's rights and position in Chinese society. This policy also infringes on the human rights of women. The result of this policy is the underreporting of female infants and worse yet, infanticide, forced abortion and sterilization. The looming concern with the one-child policy

is the growing imbalance between male to female ratio<sup>226</sup> and the social implications that will create for the Chinese society in future. BBC news reports that government figures show that 117 boys are born for every 100 girls.<sup>227</sup> There is already a serious breach in human security as reports of women being trafficked for marriage within China is on the rise. Local men, especially in rural communities are finding it more and more difficult to find suitable wives especially with the increasing number of women migrating into cities for work and have resorted to the illegal purchasing of brides.

Recent amendments to the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, that also promotes equal employment opportunity and equal land rights to women, will hopefully empower women to increase their confidence and economic security. Due to international pressure calling for gender equality and improving the rights and interests of women in politics, education, health and labour, economic pressures integrating women deeper into the China's growing economy, and the increasing presence of local women's NGO groups advocating for change, the Chinese government has taken small but sure steps to implement positive policy changes. With increased confidence and security, women will then be able to make their own choices. The Chinese government is at a crossroads where women's rights are concerned. The changing demographics of rural-urban migrants and the alarming increase in the male-female ratio in recent

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<sup>226</sup> According to the latest statistics on the CIA World Factbook, the male to female ratio as of July 2006 in China is 1.06 male: 1 female. CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ch.html> (accessed 20 July 2006).

<sup>227</sup> BBC News, "China acts to protect baby girls," *BBC News*, 07 July 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asi-pacific/3896669.stm> (accessed 03 August 2006).

years will become a social, economic and political strain on the country if women's rights and interests are not better protected. Laws pertaining to the rights and interests of women are being broken and violated although the Chinese leadership has formally acknowledged women's rights in all aspects of the society because there is a lack of resources available to keep up with the counter-pressures that prevent women from becoming empowered. Some of the pressures include: the emerging trade in women and girls for prostitution or as brides; pre-existing patriarchal culture and norms that undermine the position of women as anything but subordinate; the rate and magnitude of rural to urban migration and the inability of policy tools to keep up with changing needs of the migrant female population; and societal and political fear of what will happen to the family unit when women are empowered. More women are moving into cities for work but despite existing labour laws, lenient enforcement has resulted in the continued abuse of rights against women. From sexual harassment to being fired for becoming pregnant, violation of state sanctioned labour laws do exist.

Even though both urban and rural female residences are affected by such violations, rural and migrant women are noted to be more vulnerable to harassment and illegal termination of employment because they lack the knowledge or means for legal recourse. It is therefore increasingly important for the government to ensure the enforcement of this law and others for the protection of women. There also needs to be pressure from the central government for all provinces and localities to enact and enforce similar laws to ensure women are

guaranteed the same legal protection throughout the country. Currently, it appears that the Laws enacted by the State Council act as a guideline for local governments and public security bureaus to operate under. For example, although the Criminal Law, the Criminal Procedure Law, the General Rules of the Civil Law, the Marriage Law and the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women all forbid violence against women by anyone and in any form, only 22 out of 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities had enacted local statutes outlawing domestic violence by 2004.

### **Why Still on the Fringes?**

If one just studied policy documents and public pronouncements the Chinese government has enacted and revised over the past fifty years to protect the rights and interests of women, one would assume that all women in China would be completely empowered and free from poverty, violence and gendered discrimination. The leadership has always publicly identified women as “equals” among men especially during the formative years of the Communist party under Mao. However, the reality is that despite the Marriage Law, the Population and Family Planning Law, the Law on Rural Land Contracting, and the Law on Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, women are still suffering from violence, poverty and gendered discrimination.

As noted, one of the reasons why rural women remain on the fringe of society is because they are most vulnerable to exploitation and harm through a

combination of patriarchal norms and practices in rural communities such as favouring sons over daughters for education and land rights and structural constraints such as residential permits that strips migrant women of their agency once they move off the farms. Structural constraints imposed by the state to control population movement relegate rural women to the bottom of the barrel. Rural – urban migrants are often viewed and treated by local urbanites as second-class citizens. Their status as a second class citizen combined with traditional patriarchal sentiments leave rural women with a diminished sense of self-worth, greater economic insecurity and non-existent political rights.

Nevertheless, the laws and policies do exist on paper to address some of these issues unfortunately, rural women continue to be marginalized not because of a lack of laws and policies but rather, the lack of political capacity of the judicial system to enforce the laws on the one hand and a lack of will to enforce the laws on the other. Keith claims that despite the unresolved antithesis of wishing to maintain social control on the one hand and promoting legal and social protection of newly defined rights and interests on the other, China's legislative strategy during the 1990's, which includes the 1992 Law on Protecting Women's Rights and Interests, fostered a new "incipient jurisprudence."<sup>228</sup> Ten years later, the struggle appears to have deepened. The tableau on which these rights and interests are drawn, revised and amended pay testament to the leadership's desire to address changing socio-economic concerns of its citizens. However while the

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<sup>228</sup> Ronald C. Keith, "Legislating Women's and Children's 'Right and Interest' in the PRC," *The China Quarterly* 149 (March 1997): 52.

laws are written, China's fledgling judicial system lacks the capacity (politically, economically and socially) to enforce those laws.

The Chinese court system is highly flawed despite existing for nearly twenty-eight years after Deng's declaration at the onset of economic reforms that "the country must rely on law."<sup>229</sup> Most lawyers, judges and courts are not properly equipped to handle cases outside of property or business claims. In an article examining the current state of China's judicial system, Joseph Kahn notes how "police and courts still rely mainly on pre-trial confessions and perfunctory court proceedings to resolve criminal cases instead of the Western tradition of analyzing forensic evidence and determining guilt through contentious court trials."<sup>230</sup> Only recently have many international donor groups engaged in civil society building within China started to work with courts to train and educate Chinese judges, lawyers and members of the legal community about proper methods of the judicial process dealing with women's legal rights. However, regardless of the proper training, as Kahn observes, the court system has its limits as political influence trumps all evidence or claims. The political grip of the Chinese government remains disproportionate to the socio economic changes thereby resulting in a semi-dysfunctional judiciary.

Yet, it should also be recognized that the state has relinquished its grip ever so slightly to allow for slow improvements to the legal system. According

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<sup>229</sup> Joseph Kahn, "Deep Flaws, and Little Justice, in China's Court System," *New York Times*, 21 September 2005, <http://www.freaserbia.net/Articles/2005/Justice.html> (accessed 14 August 2006).

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

to a newly released Government White Paper to commemorate the ten year anniversary of the Fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing, the state has established a national coordination group comprised of members from 19 government departments for the protection of the rights and interests of women and children. With the help of various projects sponsored by international donors, efforts have been made to educate and promote greater gender awareness among law enforcement and judicial officials. In 2003, the Regulations on Legal Aid stipulated that it is the government's responsibility "to provide legal aid, and citizens in straitened circumstances can obtain legal aid for free-of-charge, which therefore provides material aid to impoverished women against infringement of their rights."<sup>231</sup> Nevertheless, even with 3,023 government legal aid institutions up and running by the end of 2004, it remains unclear how many women, particularly rural and migrant women, have made use of this service.

As discussed in the previous chapter, most women especially those constantly on the move, are often unaware of the services available to them or are too afraid of the repercussions of speaking out to seek legal aid. Such is the case in situations of violence, harassment and domestic abuse. The possible social repercussions of leaving abusive relationships and workplaces may prove to be too great for women to take action. For example, despite the Criminal Law, the Criminal Procedure Law, the General Rules of the Civil Law, the Marriage Law

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<sup>231</sup> People's Republic of China, "Legal Guarantees of Women's Rights and Interests," *Gender Equality and Women's Development in China*, Government White Paper, (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, August 2005), <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20050824/9.htm> (accessed 14 July 2006).

and the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women forbidding violence against women by anyone and in any form, women are still being abused physically, mentally and emotionally. Unfortunately, there is a lack of reliable data on the incidence of gender-based violence for China at the time of this submission. According to one survey, domestic violence exists among 34.7% of the population; however the data is not disaggregated by sex or age.<sup>232</sup> At the Conference on the Ending of Domestic Violence hosted by Maple Leaf Hotline<sup>233</sup> in fall of 2005, Li Wen Jin of the Ford Foundation noted five problems in the area of domestic violence in China: 1) gaps between laws and enforcement; 2) existing laws are unclear and are opened to varied interpretations; 3) there are a lack of networks between social workers, counselors and public security officers to provide victims with the support they need; 4) knowledge of support systems need improving as many women are unaware of where to turn for help; and 5) need to address domestic violence from a gender perspective, not just women.

### **Glimmer of Hope for Progressive Changes and Limitations**

Participants of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing noted the paradoxical relationship between the leadership's desire to show the world that it is advancing the rights and conditions of its citizens, particularly those who are traditionally left on the margins such as women, and its need to quell dissent that would potentially weaken the government's power. Feminist

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<sup>232</sup> United Nations, Development Fund for Women – China, “Press Release: International Day for the Elimination of the Violence against Women,” (Beijing, 25 November 2005).

<sup>233</sup> Maple Leaf Hotline, is a not-for-profit psychological counselling hotline and centre for people suffering domestic abuse. The centre is located in Beijing.

scholars have argued that the window of opportunity for genuine discourse on the advancement of gender and women's rights is slim in China. This statement is best exemplified in the leadership's handling of the conference before, during and after the event.

There are no illusions that the decision by the Chinese leadership to bid for and host the FWCW was for anything other than political expedience. China's top leaders expected the FWCW to be a great showcase displaying the "great achievements of women's liberation in socialist China" that would "demonstrate to the world the high degree of general liberation in China."<sup>234</sup> In preparation for this "showcase" Wang notes that the government's "official line of welcoming the FWCW in the period preceding the conference greatly heightened public interest in women, a sharp contrast to the state's withdrawal from women's causes in previous years."<sup>235</sup> Some of the immediate benefits from the propaganda leading up to the conference include: ad hoc support to some projects in women's interest including the Spring Bud program previously mentioned in Chapter 4, a new building for the All-China Women's Federation in downtown Beijing, increasing the number of women students and women's studies centres in universities, having publishers looking for monographs on women's issues, including feminist texts and editors of various journals and newspapers organized

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<sup>234</sup> Wang Zheng, "The Women's Movement in China," *Sings* 22.1 (Autumn 1996): 193.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

special issues either to display women's achievements or to discuss issues related to women.<sup>236</sup>

Some women scholars and activists found the glorification of the image of Chinese women during all the pre-conference hype a hindrance in their effort to name and study women's problems in contemporary society.<sup>237</sup> On the other hand some believed that this conference and specifically the NGO Forum was an enormous opportunity for them to "break China's intellectual isolation and to push the boundaries of women's activism in China."<sup>238</sup> Although there was noted progress in the free flow of dialogue over global feminism, women's activism and role of NGOs in gender and development within China during this time came to a halt when the Chinese government began to encounter challenges and protests by human rights organizations at other international meetings.<sup>239</sup> Fears of political protests and demonstrations like those leading up to the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre led the Chinese government to clamp down on all activities and participants immediately before and during the conference. Chinese participants and panelists were screened and prepped on what could and could not be discussed and workshops and talks were redirected to display the achievements of Chinese women rather than discussing problems. Meetings between international participants and their Chinese counterparts were no longer granted official

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.; Jude Howell, "Post-Beijing Reflections: Creating Ripples, But Not Waves in China," *Women's Studies International Forum* 20.2 (1997): 242.

<sup>237</sup> Wang Zheng (1996), 195.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Wang (1996), Howell (1997).

approval and foreign media, which I suspect already had limited access to local participants, were further restricted in terms of what they could cover of the event.

What this demonstrates is that the Chinese leadership is willing to go as far as they need to address the concerns that are considered “hot” issues, usually as a result of growing domestic unrest or international pressure, but only as long as there is no threat of destabilizing the political authority of the government. This becomes a problem in the way which policy is framed, developed and implemented. The social constraints of patriarchal values and norms that are entrenched within Chinese society can only begin to change and improve in favour of women if and when the government takes a strong, decisive and committed role in making the necessary structural changes. Commitment from the Central government will influence changes at the provincial and local levels that will effect positive social perception on the value of women in society. That means upholding the 1980 Marriage Law, Labour Law and ensuring that all articles of the Law for the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women are upheld such as making sure that all rural girls receive the nine years of compulsory schooling and enforcing labour laws that protect the rights and interests of women to employment and their safety and well being at work.

The increasingly mobile population and rapid urbanization in China has created policy concerns for cities and for the rural countryside alike. Cities have either been unwilling or unable to accommodate the influx of rural-urban migrants. Lack of suitable housing, social and medical services force migrant

women to compromise their personal safety for economic gain and their survival. Encroaching urbanization has created social unrest as farmers and peasants are stripped of their land and means of economic sustainability. Furthermore, the rapid economic success creating opportunities for rural-urban migration has also lead to a brain and labour drain in rural communities. As more and more migrants choose to stay longer or permanently in the cities, the burden of maintaining China's agricultural economy shifts to the old and the young that are left behind. This creates another unforeseen social crisis as the country lacks proper social security programs for the rural countryside. Traditionally, the responsibility of caring for the young, sick and old fell with the family or the village community. More often than not, the burden of care belonged to the women in the household – wives, daughter-in-laws, daughters, etc. However, as more and more young women and young men leave their rural homes for employment opportunities, the question of the future of China's rural countryside and agricultural economy has forced China's leaders to address the need to strengthen rural communities and their economies.

Since his rise to power, President Hu Jintao has taken several policy actions to address the growing discontent over social and economic inequalities of those identified as vulnerable and on the margins. From peasants to women to the disabled and those suffering from HIV/AIDS, the new five year plan of the Hu government will be his legacy to the Chinese people if it stays the course and the plan is enforced. One of the most significant points in the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan is

its rural development strategy that calls for the construction of a “new socialist countryside.” Eight priorities listed to promote the reconstruction of the countryside include: 1) plan economic, social development in urban-rural areas as a whole, and firmly promote construction of the countryside; 2) boost modern agriculture to consolidate industrial support to the new countryside construction; 3) ensure sustained increases of farmers’ income to lay a solid rural economic foundation; 4) increase infrastructure construction in rural areas to improve rural material conditions; 5) accelerate development of public services in the countryside and encourage new farmers; 6) deepen comprehensive rural reform to guarantee systematic protection of rural people; 7) improve democracy in rural areas and improve rural management and; 8) enhance leadership and motivate all party members and the entire society to care and support the construction of a new countryside.

These eight priorities, if carried out, will improve the livelihood and welfare of rural citizens. This new ‘socialist countryside’ will allow the Chinese government to kill two birds with one stone – address and slow the current rural-urban migration of rural residents and calm growing discontent among farmers over rapid urbanization. Also, improving the countryside will certainly directly impact rural and migrant females. The question then is how and in what manner. If the rural development plan can be carried out in conjunction with the amended Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women then rural girls and women will benefit from education programs, health services and equal

opportunity to earn equal pay and to own property. However, changes in the countryside may also force women to return to their former position and status within their rural homes. The state has a delicate balancing act in policy implementation over the next five to ten years so to address the urgent concerns and needs of those on the margins of Chinese society.

Inconsistent interpretation and lack of effective implementation of current laws seriously undermines the feminist project in China and further marginalizes rural girls and women. The decision by several Chinese leaders over the past half decade to build and maintain what they consider a “harmonious” society often relegates women to the subservient position. However, one would be remiss not to note the legislative progress made in the past decade for the protection of rights and interests of women. The state and its policy makers are displaying a concerted effort to improve conditions for rural and migrant women. Nonetheless, a deeper and more genuine gender discourse must take place in addition to a firm commitment by Chinese leaders to implement and enforce the Laws and legislations discussed. There is also a great responsibility of local and international groups to further the existing gender discourse so not to lose sight of the goals of the gender mainstreaming project.



**CHAPTER SIX**

## CONCLUSION

### Where We Were

In Chapter 2, I concluded by reiterating the need for an analysis of how gender, class, and ethnicity intersect to produce and reproduce the inequalities between males and females. In addition to this, one needs to recognize that the political and economic cannot be separated from the social when discussing the role of women within the political economy. This was further argued within the context of how social norms under Confucianism have devalued women and the limitations for life advancements under state structures such as the *hukou* system.

The historical social values and norms under Confucianism have long normalized patriarchy and male dominated hierarchical structure within both the private and public spheres in China. The masculinized social and cultural practices have been difficult to break in spite of early attempts at egalitarianism by the Communist regime under Mao and the public proclamations by leaders since. In fact, rather than unraveling inequalities associated with feudalism, Chinese communist policies have resulted in the restitution of women from the family to the state rather than emancipating them from the grips of traditional practices.

The existing inequalities that have rendered women invisible as political, social and economic actors are exacerbated by the re-enforcement of political structures such as the *hukou* system. The policy developed to control population mobility has in effect segregated the urban and rural populations from each other,

creating sub-sets of social identities based on citizenship, gender and class that are devalued within normalized socio-economic hierarchies. Recognized only as second-class citizens, migrant women are stripped further of their ability to negotiate fair and equitable terms of employment in their place of destination and are forced into the lower tiers of the segmented labour market characterized by low pay, long hours and poor working conditions.

### **Where We Are**

Contrary to capitalistic assumptions that a liberalized market economy will benefit all, China's changing socialist market economy has produced mixed results for rural women. The hyper-urbanization of cities and global market forces has accelerated the participation of rural women in China's labour market. However, the opportunities afforded to women within the labour market are often limited to low-skill, low-pay and tertiary work. Growing capitalistic tendencies under neo-liberal market practices in China's changing political economy continues to exploit women's subversive position in society. The relative improvements of economic gain for rural women within the new labour market overshadow the inequalities perpetuated by normalized gendered hierarchies and formal and substantive constructs of citizenship. Although most migrants consider the economic gains with entry into the off-farm labour market a step-up from their previous posts, they also agree that their integration into their new communities is difficult at best. The social ostracism migrant women face, first

as migrants and then as women in the cities, leave them extremely vulnerable to exploitation.

Most migrant women and their families encounter hardship and an uphill battle for social and political acceptance. Lack of recognition and acceptance by groups outside the migrant community at their place of destination leave migrant women isolated and invisible. Strong social stigma against migrants also forces many to shy away from seeking formal assistance from the already limited resources available to this group. This pushes many migrant women underground and away from reciprocal access to important social and health outreach programs such as HIV/AIDS prevention and reproductive health education. These migrant women become increasingly more vulnerable to prostitution, drug-use, and abuse, communicable disease transmission. Therefore there needs to be a stronger presence of social networks and programs such as those offered by local Women's Federation groups to ensure access of services to migrant women wherever they go.

As the saying goes, "knowledge is power," however, with limited access to education opportunities, girls living in rural and remote communities will experience difficulties advancing in life. No knowledge, no skills, and no power will prevent their advancement later in life thereby perpetuating the gendered inequalities within the labour market. The segregated education system between rural and urban and within urban stands to perpetuate the vicious cycle of inequality and poverty as rural girls and migrant children have limited access to

quality education at their immediate place of residence. Despite laws for a compulsory nine year education system, discrepancies in delivery of and access to quality education for all children regardless of gender, age, class, ethnicity and residence status continues to leave rural and migrant children on the margins.

In my interview with Guo Ruixiang, China Programme Specialist with United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), she reaffirms the three major deficiencies fuelling the challenges that migrant women face within Chinese society today: 1) lack of social protection; 2) lack of skills training; and 3) deplorable working conditions despite the Labour Laws.<sup>240</sup> In theory, all three areas could and should be easily remedied. Social protection can be assured for all migrant women through fair and gainful employment, access to available health and social services and access to affordable housing. Skills training can be improved by ensuring rural girls receive the same education as boys and technical training programs accessible to rural women before and after migration. Improved working conditions can be obtained via more stringent enforcement of the Labour Laws to ensure working conditions in all labour intensive factories are adequate. However, in practice, the delivery of effective and meaningful policy change to improve the condition of rural and migrant women has been arduous and glacial. As this thesis highlights, the problem facing migrant women today is not because of a lack of policies in place at the national level to protect their

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<sup>240</sup> Interview conducted with Guo Ruixiang, Programme Specialist (UNIFEM China), at the UNIFEM office in Beijing on 02 November 2005.

interests. Rather, it is the lack of will and commitment to enforce said laws. So, where do we proceed from here?

### **Where We Need To Go From Here**

Migrants and migrant issues have been brushed aside or ignored by most local urban residents in the past. However, urban Chinese residents and policy makers can no longer ignore the realities of an increasingly fluid population and the rural to urban migration. In addition to the large flow of people moving in and out of cities, there seems to be a growing number of migrants that seek to settle down in the cities they migrate to, especially young single female migrants. The changing demographics of today's migrant population appear to have caught policy makers off guard. The little active policy attention paid to addressing the needs of migrant workers in general tends to blanket the whole migrant population without due consideration for gender specific needs in areas of health, education, and social services. As such, there are a growing number of local and international women's groups advocating for greater emphasis to be placed on gender mainstreaming policy making in China.

There is no doubt that the gender mainstreaming project is an important undertaking however, there is growing concern over the potential of depoliticizing "gender" within the gender discourse. As the discourse becomes more technocratic, it "no longer addresses issues of power central to women's

subordination.”<sup>241</sup> There is certainly a sense of ambiguity amongst policy makers, donors and local activists as to what gender and gender mainstreaming is. The greatest fear of this technocratic discourse as noted by Khan over ten years ago at the FWCW is the “professionalization and ‘NGOization’ of the women’s movement and the consequent lack of accountability of ‘gender’ experts to a grassroots constituency.”<sup>242</sup> China is at an important juncture for feminists to engage in dialogue with local and international NGOs, government and grassroots constituents for a comprehensive approach that addresses the issues of power and power relations central to the subordination of women in China. The concern now is that the lack of political will and commitment by the Chinese government to take a lead role in addressing an issue such as gender inequalities facing rural and migrant women will soon desensitize the gender discourse within the country.

Pre-existing policies developed to correct political, social and economic inequalities suffered by women in China fall short of their intended purpose. Developing policies without the intent and commitment to enforce them is superficial and counter-productive. There needs to be stronger commitment from Chinese policy makers to ensure that changes to improve the condition of rural and migrant females are happening at all levels of government and within all sectors of society. However, this will unlikely take place unless those who are making, implementing and enforcing the policies first clearly identify all the parts

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<sup>241</sup> Baden and Goetz (1997), 5 quoting Nighat Khan, Director of the Applied Socio-economic Research organization in Pakistan and a panelist at the NGO Forum at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 6.

that naturalize gender and class based inequalities and how they are intertwined to keep rural and migrant women on the margins. After which, there needs to be multi-leveled, multi-departmental and multi-sectored (businesses, donors, civil society, local and international NGOs, etc) delivery of gender sensitive policies and programs.

Efforts to educate government officials, bureaucrats and public security officers about gender sensitive approaches to policy implementation and enforcement need to be scaled-up. Changes to attitudes and approaches that have traditionally marginalized rural women need to take shape starting from the top and then filter down to the rest of society. All levels of government officials and public service officers, including those in law enforcement, need to understand the root of current inequalities within Chinese society and the steps needed to be more inclusive in addressing gendered issues.

Equally important to changing attitudes of policy makers, is to equip grassroots organizations working directly with rural and migrant women with the tools and resources necessary to empower women to take an active role in making changes. A bottom-up approach is necessary so those directly affected also have an active role in advocacy, skills training and awareness programs. The social movement for women and women's rights at the grassroots level has grown over the last several years and has already made a serious impact in advocating for women's rights. As mass organizations like the All-China Women's Federation

(ACWF) gain more autonomy from the central government, they can better tailor and deliver programs in the interest of women rather than the state.

The ACWF and its local chapters around the country are a focal point for grassroots activities. There now needs to be a more coordinated effort between source and destination Women's Federation groups to train and educate rural women right before they migrate and upon their arrival into the cities to prepare them for their new life. This continuum of networks through the ACWF will provide migrant women with a sense of familiarity and trust. This will hopefully establish a point of contact that migrants can turn to for assistance if and when needed. This established network will also provide a basis through which to provide social and health services and outreach programs.

There also has to be a more integrated and cooperative effort between all local and international NGO groups and their government counter parts. However, first, large influential organizations like the United Nations (UN) need to clarify its position and practices to be more gender sensitive. As it currently stands, there is a lack of continuity between UN organizations in the delivery of its programs regarding gender. To many UN officers, including those from the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Development Fund (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Fund for Children (UNICEF) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), terms like 'gender mainstreaming' and 'gender analysis' are new and somewhat foreign to their specific projects. Many UN officers, both locally

engaged and otherwise, seem to understate the urgency needed to engage in gender sensitive dialogue and analysis. This has to change.

UN groups have a comparative advantage over many other organizations such that they do have the attention of Chinese policy makers. The UN has worked closely with all departments such as the Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MOLSS) with policies directly affecting rural and migrant women. Recent programs include the ILO's partnership with the MOLSS and local business owners to develop policies against sexual harassment in the workplace.

China's dramatic and unprecedented economic success over the last half decade is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, its economic success is spurring on growth of industries, creating employment, accelerating urbanization and overall development. On the other hand, more than one half of the country's population is worse off than the other due to growing inequalities in income and access to services between diverging groups. Therefore, to really understand the place of rural and migrant women within this dynamic political economy, it is not enough to merely dissect the dichotomous relationship between the masculine and the feminine. Alternatively, we need to understand how social identities are created, how cultural values and practices are normalized and how political structure alters or reinforces those identities and values. Only then can we really engage in the project to deconstruct and reconstruct the role of these women in work and society today. This is a project that requires immediate attention and

sincere effort by all levels of government and all sectors of society. Without which, rural and migrant women will fall further behind in education, in health and at work.



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