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7 Gender, employment and women's resistance

Wang Zheng

This chapter examines the impact of social and economic transformation on women's lives by delineating changes in urban women's employment. Women's employment has been an intensely contested site that has not only reflected conflicting social interests and escalated gender antagonism, but has also shaped gender identities and class realignment. Women of diverse social groups have deployed differentiated strategies of resistance.

It is often asked: Has reform improved the condition and status of women, or has it set them back? Departing from simplistic assumptions concerning the existence of a monolithic Chinese womanhood, and a singular gender relationship, this chapter highlights multiple contradictory social realities experienced by contemporary women post-neoliberal differentiation across hierarchies of age, urban/rural residence, education and class. Gender relationships are differentially affected depending on one's position in these and other power-laden hierarchies. Women's resistance, accordingly, takes different forms, employs varied resources and aims at diverse goals.

This chapter examines the impact of social and economic transformation on women's lives by delineating changes in urban women's employment. The rapid diversification of the rural economy, the development of the market, the rise of industry, the growth of small enterprises, and the opening of urban labour markets have all brought tremendous changes in women's employment in China. Here I focus on changes in employment in the urban setting, including the employment of women living in cities which the state classifies as "rural". Beginning with a brief review of Maoist policy on urban women's employment, this chapter explores changing patterns of urban women's employment and women's resistance and negotiation in the rapidly changing social, cultural and political milieu of post-Mao urban China.

Urban employment, gender and inequality in the Mao era

In the planned economy, the state guaranteed urban employment while prohibiting labour exodus from rural areas (see chapter 6). Local governments assigned each resident a permanent job either in a state or collectively owned enterprise. Once assigned, mobility was largely restricted to promotion within the work unit. A work unit was not only a production unit but also an all-encompassing welfare institution that covered employees' health care, accident insurance and maternity leave. Some large work units offered housing and child care as well. Employee benefits varied in different industries and enterprises, but within the same work unit, men and women, old and young, generally received comparable benefits. Employment thus meant lifetime security.

Women's employment policy in the Mao era was framed within the dualistic concept of women's liberation and gender equality, only through participation in social production could women achieve liberation. Employment meant socialist reconstruction since the private sector virtually disappeared in the early socialist period. "Housewife", by definition not a participant in social production, became "left at home". In the 1950s, "left at home" in the Mao era, employment was not seen as an important component of a woman's life, even though far from all women experienced it. However, once the economic growth of the Mao era enhanced their status at home, since their income was vital for many urban middle-class families, this "women's employment" suddenly became a sense of liberation through participation in production. Women's employment enhanced their status at home in a way that their income was vitally important to their family, particularly when the economic growth of the Mao era boosted their income through participation in production. Women's employment was the key to the new generation of women's liberation.

Urban employment in the Mao era took many forms with men, and lifetime security and welfare benefits. This does not mean that they had achieved gender equality, as the Cultural Revolution slogan "Women hold the sky in their hands" implies. A recent study investigating two state-owned factories in a rural area in Northern China finds that, although the government based its gender differences on the early 1960s, specific job assignments immediately followed gender stereotypes from the early 1960s, specific job assignments immediately followed gender stereotypes. In a factory plant, lower than twenty of 160 categories were available only for women. In both factories, service and clerical work were seen as suitable for women. Men were also undeniably operating day care centres, dining rooms and canteens. Men were predominantly assigned to technical work and women to non-technical, auxiliary, and service work, regardless of educational level. This gendered employment hierarchy established new women's subordinate position and shaped women's subjectivity in the factory.
skilled were relatively small in China’s low-income, high-poverty, lifetime urban employment system. In line with the slogan that all jobs are equally important to the evolution, gendered job assignments were not perceived as discriminatory toward women.

Urban women employees enjoyed pay, benefits, and severance of which their rural counterparts could only dream. Their wages gap in wages and benefits for working women and men in urban and rural areas continues to exist. The pay package and severance benefits for urban women have considerably improved. Urban women’s substantially higher income in the post-Mao era, even when rural reform has rapidly improved rural people’s living standard. A nationwide survey conducted by the Women’s Federation in 1990 found that 85.6% of urban women had pensions versus 3.6% of rural women. In 1990, 21% of urban women had medical coverage versus 8% of rural women; 79.9% of urban women had paid sick leave versus 9.2% of rural women; and 85.3% of urban women had paid maternity leave versus 7.1% of rural women.

The reform of the labor market in the 1980s has reduced, but hardly eliminated, the advantages enjoyed by urban workers. The state no longer guarantees urban employment; urban employment is no longer as exclusive privilege for urban dwellers. But throughout the 1980s, with rapid expansion of urban employment, workers urban residence permits maintained (their advantages is that a worker employment structure that disadvantaged rural workers. Under pressure to reduce losses in the 1990s, however, state enterprises have laid off employees or turned to cheaper rural labor. With job creation slowed to a virtual halt, the influx of rural labor has reduced wages in many urban industries and service jobs levels unacceptable to urban workers. Rural labor has this understanding job prospects for urban workers. While the urban working-class experience in general involves prestige and security distancing from levels enjoyed in the Mao era, the losses suffered by women workers have been greater.

Moving from job assignment by government to a job market in which different ownership forms coexist and compete, freedom of mobility joins freedom of discrimination, and opportunities blend with insecurity. New employment patterns have broad social ramifications entailing realignment of social classes and gender position. This profoundly affects urban dwellers’ relationships to state and reshapes their identities. This is a gendered process in which urban men and women of diverse social positions engage in construction at multiple levels.

**Gendered layoffs: women workers bear the brunt of reform**

Throughout the 1980s, China’s high growth economy created millions of jobs annually, with women as well as men sharing in expanded and diversified employment opportunities. Since the 1980s, however, many women workers in the state sector have found themselves in the category of “surplus labor.” Disproportionate numbers of women were among those laid off or forced to retire prior to the legal retirement age for both men and women, 55 years of age for men, 55 years of age for women, and for workers, 55 years of age for men, 50 years for women. Gendered layoffs reached new magnitudes in the late 1990s, especially in sectors with structural changes in China’s urban and economic landscape. At the heart of the employment crisis is China’s manufacturing sector, which accounts for almost one-third of China’s manufacturing, as many state and collectively owned enterprises, now labeled as a “drown out state resources’ function painful choices of technological change, merger, closure, and layoff. Office workers revealed that by the end of 1997 there were 11.51 million laid-off workers of which 7.59 million were from state-owned enterprises in China’s cities, with 5.7 million more projected for 1998. A survey by the State Statistical Bureau of 33,600 households in twelve cities across the country reveals that women constitute 40.1% of the laid-off workers, while they account for less than 39% of the total urban workforce. Statistics from the China Labor Bulletin (2001) show that the number of urban female employees dropped from 56.9% in 1992 to 44.1% in 1999. The heaviest loss was concentrated in manufacturing, where the number of female employees dropped from 24.82 million in 1995 to 14.25 million in 2000. The proportion of total urban workers that decreased from 10.5% in 1992 to 7.8% in 2000. In other words, women have been singled out as special targets of the massive layoffs in state-owned and collective enterprises, and as a result, the gender gap in employment is widening rapidly.

More than any other issue, gendered layoffs reveal the disproportionate burden borne by women as a consequence of the reform. Women’s journals and newspapers have paid much attention to the issue. Recent studies show that individual laid-off women’s interests. Many surveys show that although work units are supposed to pay monthly subsidies to laid-off workers (from 150 to over 300 yuan), many laid-off workers receive little or nothing. In order to boost the morale of laid-off women, an editorial in Women of China presented a touching analogy.

The whole society is like a woman in delivery who is enduring the pain of contractions. The puding pain shaking you is only one step away from the birth of a new life… Sisters, hang on a little bit longer. You will find your own path in your future choice.

The pain of contractions may be an age analogy to the pain that laid-off women are experiencing, but for women suffering the pain of layoffs can expect a painful new life at the end of contractions. Many have been forced to endure suffering in the form of humiliation and poverty. Many women workers protested.

Before it was said that we workers were the masters. How come now we are so casually thrown out the door. Who are our contributors to the state? The state bears no mention of us. The current state of the enterprise
strategies. But how have women reacted to this transformed social landscape?

What resources have women deployed for negotiation or contestation?

**Women's employment: a contested site**

Long before gendered layoffs became a critical issue, women's employment was already debated. Since the early 1980s, intellectuals have crossed minds over the Maoist equality employment policy, which, between women's employment and the "modernity" patterns of women's employment in the Western economy.

These debates were not only political but also economic interests and social, but also different assumptions concerning gender. In the process of discourse constestation, new demands emerged to shape policy-making processes, including those affecting employment and gender.

In the early 1980s, leftists criticized Maoist gendered employment policies for impeding economic growth. Rather than criticizing the libertarian gender structure in the workplace, these critics simply pointed to urban women's high employment rate as a relic of Maoist egalitarianism and a source of inefficiency in enterprises. Women's return home was openly advocated in official journals and newspapers as urban reforms began to confront unemployment problems compounded by more than ten million "returned youths" from the countryside.

Thus, even before the government issued any reform policies that threatened women's interests, a serious challenge to equal employment emerged in public discourse.

New theories rationalized sending women home. Women's liberation, it was said, outpaced the low level of productivity in China. According to this view, China's economic development was still at a low level that was incompatible with a high-employment society. Because women's physical characteristics made full employment of women productive of the socialist planned economy. At a time when more women in industry produced the socialist planned economy. At a time when more women in industry produced more than in agriculture, this view was adopted by the Chinese as a means of reducing women's employment.

Women, however, did not go home. This "outpacing theory" (zhengpin lun) openly blamed women for the low level of productivity. To contribute to this goal, women should return home. This "outpacing theory" (zhengpin lun) openly blamed women for the low level of productivity. To contribute to this goal, women should return home. This "outpacing theory" (zhengpin lun) openly blamed women for the low level of productivity. To contribute to this goal, women should return home. This "outpacing theory" (zhengpin lun) openly blamed women for the low level of productivity. To contribute to this goal, women should return home.

Many urban educated men selected the discussion of women's employment to express their enhanced awareness toward gender equality. As one charged, in the name of equality between men and women, the role of women has been placed in exchange for a relative increase in women's status and that of a social "big rice pot" exceeded the value of the quantity and quality of their work. Some simply abandoned gender equality openly and called unabashedly for Chinese women to sacrifice themselves for the sake of national development. Japanese women's domesticity was
In the reform era, when the party’s policies of developing a market economy conflicted with policies upholding gender equality, how could Maoist gender ideology be sustained? To answer this intriguing question, we need to understand that the roots of this discordant policy lie deep in China’s modern history. From the early twentieth century, especially since the rise of Sun Yat-sen, a new political order for China began to take shape, which meant that the usual social practice was to follow the old way of engaging women. China’s women’s liberation in the 1950s, which was a result of the Chinese Communist Party’s policy, in part, was its deep-seated recognition of the need for gender equality. The ultimate goal was to change the traditional social structure and women’s roles in society.

Female voices and strategies

Amid the rising discourse of feminism in the 1980s, few women were more vocal in their support for cultural change than the few women who were. The women’s movement in China was significant because it was an integral part of the cultural revolution, as its objectives were to challenge the traditional Confucian values and the role of women in society. The Chinese feminist movement was a product of the cultural revolution, as it was an integral part of the movement to change traditional Chinese society.

Women’s employment, the family, and women’s liberation. Economics is the foundation. Without participation in the production of goods, women would have no economic status. This would in turn undermine the equality between men and women in politics, society, and family.

They condemned the proposal that women return home as regressive. The "reconciliation" argument was widely repeated and disseminated by Women’s Federation representatives throughout the country and by the media. Women’s Federation officials argued that the "Marxist line of women’s liberation" and "the Marxist theory of women” in China’s modern history had never been a solution to the problem of women’s status. They underestimated, using shrewd and ambiguous language, the power of Maoist gender ideology drawn from China.

Women’s employment must be linked with women’s liberation. To influence policy, law, and social norms in order to protect women’s equal employment rights. A series of policies and laws have been issued countering gender discrimination in the reform era. These include facilitating equal employment opportunities, raising the minimum age for women workers, ensuring equal pay for equal work, and protecting the right of women to be consulted on important decisions. The Women’s Federation has been active in promoting gender equality and women’s rights, and has worked to ensure that women have equal opportunities in all aspects of society, including economic, political, and social life. In 1994, the Equal Employment Opportunities Act was passed, which prohibited gender discrimination in the workplace. This act has been a significant step towards ensuring that women have equal opportunities in the workplace. However, there is still a long way to go in ensuring that women have equal opportunities in all aspects of society, including politics, economics, and society.
policies but legal power and are difficult to enforce in a similar context given the absence of a sound legal system. Violations of gender equality laws or policies have even been reported in journals and newspapers run by the Women's Federation and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. Few perpetrators have been punished. Not only does the private sector abide by the law with impunity, government bodies sometimes ignore them. Finding ways to enforce gender equality laws, rather than policing for their passage, is among the most challenging tasks confronting women's centers and activities inside and outside government.

One significant development in this respect is that Women's Federations at different locations are placing an increasingly prominent role in supporting individual women to use the legal system to fight against the violation of their rights. The Department of Protecting Women's Rights at different levels of Women's Federations have helped set up legal services for women, and have been directly involved in lawsuits initiated by women. In an interview in 2002, the director of the Department of Protecting Women's Rights of the Women's Federation proudly told me many cases in which the department had helped individual women win lawsuits. Of these lawsuits, some were related to labor disputes, and some were initiated by pregnant women who lost their jobs because of their pregnancy. "Without the women's organization's help, individual women would have little power to win lawsuits," the director emphasized.13 These legal services are useful, but can be eclipsed by numerous cases of violating women's rights. However, the director also pointed out that the attention to the potential of the official women's organization as an institutional resource for disadvantaged women.

Unable to stem the tide of poverty in the late 1990s, the Women's Federation and the Women Workers Department of the Trade Union have devoted much effort to retraining, referral and reemployment. Vocational training centers and job referral services were established by the two organizations at local levels. A report in 2002 by the Women Workers Department of the Shanghai Trade Union indicates that since 1995 the Shanghai Trade Union has helped 21,000 laid-off workers find new jobs, of whom 87 percent are women.14 Many surveys and reports on laid-off workers have been published by the two organizations to call public attention to the plight of laid-off women, to press for government action to guarantee women's employment rights, and to establish social security and unemployment benefits to buffer the impact of institutional and industrial transformations.

After the Fourth UN Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, activities and researchers on women's issues found both renewed legitimacy and new analytical frameworks to fight for gender equality. Since the Chinese government sponsored the conference and signed the UN documents pledging gender equality, official women's organizations and women activists have sought to hold the government accountable. On 8 March 1996, The China Women's News republished Jiang Zemin's welcome speech at the Fourth UN Conference on Women. One sentence from Jiang's speech was selected as the title: "Equality Between Men and Women is the Fundamental State Policy in Promoting Social Economic Development in Our Country." Following this policy, the Women's Federation also collaborated with the All-China Women's Federation to popularize the Platform for Action. Feminist scholars in academia utilized the cultural atmosphere to circulate through the official media feminist issues and concepts. In all these discursive resonances, the central message has been to consolidate the connection between gender equality and modernity. The principles in the four documents passed by the UN Conference are presented as the standard practice in "modem civilizations" that China must adopt to continue its path of modernization.

Preparing and hosting the UN Conference enabled frequent interaction and communication between Chinese women activists and global feminists. A direct consequence of all these activities is that the feminist concept of gender (feminism) in a single state, a term unfamiliar only a few years ago, has been adopted by many Chinese feminists in their analyses of the contemporary situation. The new conceptual tool borrowed from global feminism: helped Chinese feminists to break up with the constraints of their previous dilemmas. Pursuing gender justice in the framework of Maoist gender ideology had not only limited their analytical power, but also made them look "conservative" in the social context of deconstructing Maoism. In the 1980s, with the decrease of feminism in the US, few women opposed the suggestion of gender differentiation in occupations because it sounded "progressive" in its attempt to reverse Maoist "uniform" gender relations. In the late 1990s, women researchers began gender critique of the female "survivors" and encouraged women to cross gender boundaries to compete for high-tech, managerial and entrepreneurial jobs. Using gender together with other newly learned concepts such as "sustainable development" and "human-centered development," Chinese feminism is calling for a development agenda that prioritizes social justice and gender equity.

Activists in and outside the Women's Federation have organized many training sessions and workshops to promote gender consciousness. Many of these workshops aim at changing consciousness of decision-makers and power holders in different administrative positions, and actively intervening in the process of reform. In recent years, a growing number of women scholars have been engaging in establishing women's studies curricula in higher education. Funded by international donors, training faculty members to create new courses and teaching material have been offered nationwide by feminist scholars. The official Guidelines of Chinese Women's Development issued in 2001 also includes establishing women's studies programmes as a goal in the next decade. We may expect to see women's studies programmes being set up at feminist institutions in the near future. Next steps confrontational to the state, but ever ready to stretch boundaries in their own innovative ways, Chinese feminists have become a significant social force in China's transformation. In concert with many other...
critical voice in contemporary China, this feminist voice has gained some legitimacy in the dominant political discourse. This allows women forums to participate in the institutional changes of the reform era.

A further case in point is the passage of reproductive policy in many cities. Since the early 1990s, families in and outside the state system have been using Western feminist theory on the value of women's reproductive work to argue for public compensation. Efforts to establish public policies to acknowledge the value of reproduction began in the early 1980s by Women's Federations in some small cities and the first Conference of Chinese Women's Development Association aimed at upgrading reproductive services policy in all cities. As issued by the end of 2000, all the 10 million urban administrative units that have a public policy for women's reproductive work, issued a 'Method for Reproductive Services in Shanghai City and Towns.' According to the method, 0.6 per cent is deducted from the social security budget each enterprise to set up a Reproductive Security Fund and 15 per cent is managed by the municipal government. Women whose work units pay for social security, and who abide by the birth control policy, can apply for the fund. The fund covers women's maternity leave (three months' pay for normal births, six weeks' pay for miscarriage between three to seven months' pregnancy), and one month's pay for miscarriage under three months' pregnancy, and one month's pay for miscarriage under three months' pregnancy, and one month's pay for miscarriage under three months' pregnancy. This method makes clear that its goal is to promote women's employment. These are not arguments to show that this policy has improved women's chances of getting jobs, but certainly, the low cost of public policies can no longer be an excuse for depriving women of their job opportunities.

The history of women's activism in this sector. As women have become more vocal and visible, and have generated their own discourse space. Rampant distinctions in the job market and commercially popularized sexism are powerful forces competing with the discourse of gender equality. This new social environment has prepared fertile soil for the growth of feminism in China, as well as preserved serious obstacles to women activists.

Women's employment and 'modernity'

Despite the decline in the percentage of women's gainful employment, two decades of economic reforms resulting in privatisation, commodification and contraction of the service sector have created a large number of and wage job in cities, as well as in dynamic rural regions. Many new occupations emerged with a distinctive gender label and an image of 'modernity.' The new job market is even more gendered than its predecessor, with women channelled predominantly to the service sector and secretarial jobs while men are received for technical and managerial positions. However, gender dynamics intersecting with other social forces have led to certain unexpected consequences.

Changes in employment in the reform era are not limited to industrial restructuring. They reflect the rise of new industries and tasks, and regulations of ownership. While state enterprise workers faced mass lay-offs, managers, operatives and others have long been working in the industrial and private sectors. According to 1998 statistics from the State Labour and Social Security Bureau, 10.5 million registered private entrepreneurs are female, accounting for 70 per cent of the total. Clearly, many women have opted to become their own bosses.

The Women's Federation has appealed to the Women Entrepreneurs Association, a non-profit, for assistance for laid-off women workers in state enterprises. The Women's Federation proposed a scheme to open different forms of ownership. Here in hand, many women take to the street of market building. The Women Entrepreneurs Association responded by calling on entrepreneurs actively to participate in state enterprise reform. Enterprises were also encouraged actively to participate in state enterprise reform. Entrepreneurs, through profit, are encouraged to help state enterprises out of their predicament. The proposal could be interpreted as a discourse to women entrepreneurs to enhance their social status.

The confidence expressed by women entrepreneurs in this proposal is inevitable. They are in a position to help the state, rather than be dominated by the state. A close look at some of their achievements may clarify the source of their confidence. Zhai Min, 34, vice-president of the Women Entrepreneurs Association, is the chief executive officer (CEO) of the multi-billion yuan Nianqiu Gold Seafood Conglomerate in Guangzhou province. Its 746-plus enterprises with over 16,000 employees include furniture, real estate and finance. Zhai has been credited with laying 600 million yuan in public welfare, helping 9,000 laid-off workers, with activities and employing over 1,000 laid-off workers. Liu Yufan, 46, CEO of the East Yingying Conglomerate in Hebei, has 150 enterprises with 200 million yuan in assets. She hired 740 laid-off workers and donated 304,000 yuan to build a school for orphans. These entrepreneurs are hailed as models by the Women's Federation and the government for both their business success and their social contributions. 25

In contrast with women entrepreneurs, who have risen in state enterprises through their business acumen and public profile, another group of women has achieved upward mobility drawing on human capital, especially their youth and beauty. Replacing the "four levels of job security in urban China in the 1960s is the core of creating the 'face level of youth' image. Everywhere, young women have been sought to represent the shining image of 'modernity.' Bouncing service, commercial and entertainment industries post numerous age-related jobs, especially high-paying and attractive beckoning women under the age of 25 and above 43 centimetres in height, stylish, elegant, or sexy, young 'Mores' (models) are displayed in remodelled or nearly built modern halls,
餐厅、旅馆、医生、律师、教师、服务员、纺织女工等。与此同时，年轻女性也越来越多地从事一些需要较高技能的工作，如护士、教师等。这些“新女性”年轻女性，甚至包括一些大学教授，也越来越多地出现在高级餐厅、俱乐部、酒吧等场所，她们的出现改变了传统的性别角色和职业模式。年轻女性的这种新角色和新形象，反映了她们对传统性别角色和职业模式的挑战和颠覆，也反映了她们对自我价值和尊严的追求和实现。年轻的女性们，她们的出现改变了传统的性别角色和职业模式，也改变了人们的观念和态度。
which is an "infinitesimal" sphere in popular discourse. A report in 1998 found that almost half of the personnel departments in foreign enterprises in Shanghai were run by women, and women constituted 30% of the employees of some foreign companies in Shanghai by the Shanghai Foreign Service Company. Of about 7,000 female workers, over 2,000 were at the senior managerial level in these foreign companies. One-third of the representatives, the top position for Chinese in foreign companies in Shanghai, were women. Within a decade the number of women in this position has increased dramatically from a few to over a hundred.27

White-collar and managerial positions in foreign companies combined with occupations associated with the "middle class" have given rise to the emergence of an urban young female group with high-income earnings. While most studies by sampling married couples' income show that the development of market economy raises living standards generally, as well as enlarging gender disparity in income in many cities, some sociologists in Shanghai have found that the income of unmarried young women exceeds that of married young men. Recently, a major reason for the increased gender disparity in earning levels the "brain drain" or "material drain" of young women, is that more young women than men are white-collar workers in foreign companies and joint ventures.28 Although the availability of the finding needs to be noted with systematic and larger-scale research, it shows that the job market not only respects gender, but also discrimination. It thus calls our attention to other variables that affect women's employability opportunities.

The young urban professional women in foreign companies are a new elite group that has emerged in the reform era and is concentrated in a few large cities with mostly foreign investments. Ironically, certain gender norms unexpectedly work in favour of women. If we look for factors that contribute to the high percentage of women in foreign companies at a time when such the Chinese government discriminates against female college graduates, gender differences in specialties appears significant. The first requirement for working in foreign companies is a good command of a foreign language, particularly English. Foreign-language language universities in universities have long been among the few with more female than male students because foreign-language language majors have long been portrayed as an innate female strength. Where both male and female foreign-language language graduates enter the job market, more women than men work in "female" clerical jobs in the private sector, jobs perceived as physically tiresome and modern. The gender term White Collar Beauty ships young women's career choices. In the late 1990s, the work required are combinations of abilities high in one and high-exitism.

My interviews with young urban professional couples in Shanghai in the late 1990s reveals a common pattern in which the wife works in a foreign company and the husband in a government or academic job with less income but annual increases higher prestige and lifetime security. A young male English professor whose wife works in a foreign company commented, "It seems that women are more daring in entering the private sector. Or rather, they have fewer quotas."
expectations and social reality can be expected to give rise to growing discontent among the women who are the largest beneficiaries of these trends. The new wave of middle-age women who are being recruited to work in the labor market are likely to pose serious challenges to gender boundaries in employment and society.

Women and unemployment

In the 1990s, the magnitude of laid-off workers threatened social stability, prompting action by central and local governments. See chapter 2. In 1993, the Labour Department began the pilot "Re-employment Project" in three trials cities and in 1995 it was taken nationwide. The "Re-employment Project" mobilizes public resources to provide reemployment for laid-off workers with government support and fees. At best, it is a stopgap measure that maintains laid-off workers' basic need for employment in an uncertain state. It does not change the reality that the state has abandoned them, many years of service.

The state policy stipulates that laid-off workers retain a relationship with their work units unless they officially terminate it and take a job with another enterprise. Laid-off workers retain entitlement to medical coverage, housing and housing unless their work units go bankrupt. Even in rare cases in which workers were successful in finding a better paid job, most experienced downward mobility. Leaving state enterprises is still seen by many state workers as involving a loss of status. Re-employment, especially for older workers, involves reconstituting one's identity from a previously positively defined state worker to various ambiguous, uncertain or demeaning categories.

Re-employment options for laid-off women are generally limited and nearly all point to downward mobility both in status and income. In many big cities, laid-off state and state-owned workers are being encouraged to work in community services. Shanghai, with large numbers of laid-off women seeing at work, has pioneered this structural replacement by providing low-wage neighborhood jobs for the old, the young and the sick as domestic helpers, food runners, cleaning and food services. None of these jobs provides benefits or prestige comparable to what is enjoyed by a state worker. Aware of the downward mobility in this re-employment, official workers' organizations sought both to provide training and to upgrade the social status of domestic and social workers. The Shanghai Women's Federation and the Women Workers Committee in the Trade Union Federation have run training sessions in "house economies" for laid-off women and issued certificates to graduates. They changed the name "Maid Referral" to "Home Economics Referral". Equipping laid-off women with a certificate in house economics, official women's organizations tried to reshape the "maid" image of "middle-aged women" associated with domestic work, with a respectable and "urban" identity. They also worked to secure state recognition of the new occupation. In 1993, the Labour Department classified such people in the category of "non-traditional" jobs. Although the state classification does not entail better pay and benefits in the private sector, some women have since officially obtained this credential as a technical worker in the hope that it may help them secure a job. Shanghai's experience has been replicated in numerous other cities.

The gendered re-employment solution proposed by official women's organizations has the negative implication of reinforcing a gender division of labor. However, the women who are part of community are the families support have limited choices. Community service provides many new and difficult jobs that require minimal training. Some widely circulated success stories hold achievements of laid-off women in creating new businesses in community services. A famous "Mama Zhang Vegetable-Service" was created by a laid-off woman in Shanghai named Zhang Weiling. She and her husband were both laid-off in 1992, when she was in her mid-twenties. In 1996 she got an idea from a re-employment training school. Renting a room with borrowed money, she began the vegetable business with her family members. They shopped for vegetables, packed, cleaned and prepared them for cooking, delivering them to clients' homes. They sold the produce for 80% of the cost. In eight months, their clients grew from their six neighbors to 500 families. Zhang hired 140 employees. 120 were laid-off workers and installed a company to bulk orders. Asked why a young woman would name the business "Mama Zhang" which suggests an image of a woman of at least over 50. Zhang explained: "Mama is the warmest person. Mama will never cheat you. Using this name means we will succeed with high quality of service and credits."

Here women's work is gendered skillfully and positively by a woman innovator tapping a market that had not previously existed while building on her personal image of service. The strength of "female" roles and "female" qualities in the female service is a theme in many of the successful stories about laid-off women's re-employment. The meaning crisis of unemployment and various "upgrading" efforts including propaganda, seem, at least in Shanghai, to have changed the attitudes towards this re-employment of many laid-off women from resistance to acceptance. In 1997 alone, Shanghai trained over 6,000 laid-off women in a "female services" training program. More than 90% of them found jobs. In 1992, the term "Mama" was banned in Shanghai for public discussion. However, women are not only the feasibility of sending laid-off workers to family service is also a reflection of the economies boom and the rise of a "middle-aged" community. In other industrial cities plagued by the failure of state-owned enterprises, laid-off women would not have many job openings in domestic service even if they were willing to take whatever is available. The increasing supply of laid-off women as domestic helpers is shown clearly in the thesis "Change in the nature of 'Mama's Referral' services run by neighborhood residents' committees. Until recently, they relieved rural women
'Peasant workers' in the city

Two decades of rapid industrialization and urbanization have resulted in a growing 'rural-population' in urban areas. Millions of people with rural residence certificates who now work in cities, are called 'peasants' or 'peasants workers' (zhuanjie). They are subject to discriminatory state and business practices. Policies such as the requirement that families lacking urban residence permits have to pay for their children's education in public schools not only depress rural migrant workers from settling in cities, they also discriminate against second-class citizens. The urban-rural divide follows migrants who settle in the urban areas, as chapter 6 in this volume shows.

Most rural workers have low-skill, low-status and frequently insecure jobs, many of which are, or at least were until recently, scorned by urban dwellers. Domestic service has long been the entry job for rural workers coming to large cities. A 1988 study estimated that 40,000 rural women sought domestic work that year in Beijing alone. "Little maids" (niulang) became a trade associated with rural young women. Many rural women since the 1980s have also secured employment as waitresses and shop assistants. Some state and collective enterprises recruit rural women as contract workers to lower labour and benefit costs.

The majority of rural women work in the private sector where state labour protection and worker benefits are difficult to enforce. Long hours, low pay and hazardous work environments are common phenomena among private enterprises that employ young rural women. Ching Kwan Lee's study of management strategies in a private industry in the booming southern city of Shenzhen, near Hong Kong, finds a pattern of gendered pool-like authority that disfraces class distinction. Young rural women are introduced to factories by male relatives or acquaintances from their home towns. These male employees paternalistic authority over women on the shop floors. As Lee points out, 'localism and genderism not only organize the labor market and channel labor from all over China to Shenzhen, they are also incorporated into the factory to facilitate and legitimate managerial control.'

Gender is also embedded in young women's praxis as migrant workers. In a study based on 109 letters between young women migrant workers and their families, Tan Shuen notes that while many send money home to help their poor families, some young women specifically shoulder the responsibility of paying for their brothers' college education. Sometimes two women labour to support one brother. Tan tells a tragic story in which two Shenzhen sisters worked extremely hard in the Shenzhen area for several years to put their older brother through college. Four months after his graduation, both sisters died in a fire caused by washrubbery violation of labour safety. Tan's study forcefully demonstrates that in such laborers migration is not taken as a route for personal advancement.

The widely circulated new term 'migrant workers' (zaixian ren) for young rural workers contrasts the lowest rank of the urban work force. Being young and female in the context of Chinese traditional gender and gender hierarchy automatically places them in a subordinate position to senior males. Being 'urban, seen in urbanites' eyes is the context of urban craving for 'modernity,' not only means that they lack a permanent urban residence, but also suggests their distance from the 'modern.' The social and cultural meanings of this element in their identity are new to many, many women who had never left their villages. The worst pain experienced by many is bearing the stigma of being 'rural.' At a meeting in Beijing organized by a women's journal, Rural Women, focusing on how about migrant workers experience, some 'migrant workers' from Shenzhen were invited to speak about their success stories. These 'migrant workers' had recently obtained Shenzhen residence because of their excellent performance at work and also because the Women's Federation in Shenzhen winged itself hard to obtain a quota of twenty urban residence permits for 'migrant workers.' Contrary to the expectations of the meeting organizers, however, what they heard was a frame of sweat and tears. One after another these model 'migrant workers' recounted painful experiences of prejudice and discrimination based on their rural idiom. In work, love, marriage, children's education, housing and all other aspects of their lives, they encountered adversity—constantly reminding them that they are the 'other' to urbanites. Despite discrimination, rural women workers generally regard working in cities as an opportunity. Many young unmarried women use migration as an effective means to resist undesirable arranged marriages. Freedom of mobility, in fact, also enables them to quit and change jobs frequently, the most common form of their resistance to abusive hours and intolerable working conditions. In order to leave outside job for a better job, Tan Shuen finds that many young women workers opt not to sign a contract. Many young women from families that do not rely on their income come to beg cities with a dream of personal development. Metropolis provide them with educational facilities and opportunities, and many have enrolled in secondary vocational schools or even colleges. One 20-year-old woman from S anchor said, 'The best thing in Beijing is that there are so many schools. You can learn whatever you want to. You can also go to evening college. Our hometown does not have three. There is nothing there.' Arriving in Beijing with 100 yuan in savings from her family, she paid 400 yuan to enroll in a hairdressing school. Her dream is to open the first hairdressing
sion in the home town after five years of work and study in Beijing. The freedom to migrate has enabled this young woman to take a career change to lead to upward mobility.

The deepening crisis of urban unemployment threatens such opportunities for rural as well as urban women. Since the mid-1990s, many big cities have resisted employment of rural workers. Many of the most desirable jobs always regarded urban residence. But now even more insecure jobs are reserved for rural workers. For example, a 1990 Nanjing study indicated that an enterprise with 100 permanent workers cannot hire outside workers, and commercial and service enterprises must hire 50 percent foreign workers in their new recruitment of non-technical workers. Although some urban areas attempt to formulate national regulations for blocking the free flow of labour and restricting competition, the state can be expected to adopt measures to limit the influx of rural migrants in order to maintain urban social stability.

Conclusion

A widely circulated cliché in contemporary Chinese society is that reform presents women with both opportunities and challenges. Similarly, it ignores the tremendous differences among women, ranging from those who have ample opportunities and resources to those who face monumental challenges. This chapter highlights processes of differentiation and discrimination among women in the reform era. Women as a social category has to be complicated and contextualized in order to provide explanatory utility. Age, education, geographic location, residency status, and urban or non-urban circumstances are all variables that intersect with gender in differentiating women in the turbulent social and economic transformation of China.

Differences and discrimination among women, however, do not lead to the subordination of gender. Rather, the reform era has brought accelerated gender discrimination and gender conflicts. Conflict-generating interests are prominently expressed over women's employment. Gendered layoffs expose women's disadvantaged and subordinate status. Mass untreated urban young women as a group face new opportunities in economic enterprises but also their domination in reproducing gendered cultural norms. Yet we have also noted the ability of women to seize new opportunities at the same time as they resist new forms of exploitation.
Suggested reading


