

***Dagongmei* in the Context of Rural-urban Migration Processes in Contemporary China**

Since the late 1970s, the Chinese state has assumed a leading role in economic development. Deng Xiaoping took measures that boosted economic growth just when he lost faith in the Maoist model of central planning and collectivization, as well as realized that in terms of economic development China was considerably behind both new Asian Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) and Western capitalists. Rapid economic growth has legitimized the strategy of export-oriented industrialization, pursued through the open-door policy: export-processing, special economic zones, and incentives for foreign investors. Chinese scholars agreed to this kind strategy, as they perceived it as an application of the “grand international cycle” theory, which, in its fundamental nature, describes capital global search for new, cheap sites for investments.¹

In a short time, China’s economic reforms have resulted in a phenomenon of millions of rural people seeking a better life and economic opportunity in the urban areas. These rural to urban migration flows made an impact on almost every social, economic, and political issue in the People’s Republic of China. Migrants represent both agents of change at the places of origin and vital contributors to the economic growth in destination areas. Moreover, through migration peasants not only have become a part of the globalization process, but they also indirectly uncovered the rural and interior areas to its effects.² Chinese migrants have

¹ C. Cindy Fan, *China on the Move: Migration, the State, and the Household*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 3.

² Beatriz Carrillo Garcia, “Rural-Urban Migration in China: Temporary Migrants in Search of Permanent Settlement,” *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, Vol. 1/2, 2004, p. 1.

been the subject of a considerable amount of academic studies of both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars. However, the concerns of women have long been neglected in the studies on migration. Also, the impact of gender on migration patterns and experiences has not received sufficient attention though the number of women among the migrating population is substantial, with conditions in certain parts of China apparently favoring female migration.³ Works from the gender perspective have in mind the creation of theoretical models that would adequately explain the female migration. Yet the analysis is usually limited to either the 'micro' or 'macro' perspective, which is predominant in the gender studies. The 'macro' viewpoint includes classical categories of social structure, class, economic, and political systems – all in the context of globalization which explains the mechanisms and patterns of migration. Women are described as important elements of the new economy, a system based on the service sector, and the transfer of 'soft' capital, which strengthens the central, and weakens the peripheral areas.⁴ In global cities, globalization creates a demand for the migrating workforce. At the same time, the forces placing women in peripheral areas create a supply for workers who can be pushed into such kind of work or sold to do it.⁵ *Dagongmei* (i.e. 'factory sisters' or 'working girls') constitute a vivid example of this process.

Another important issue in the works on female migration are the categories of "female slaves" or "slave caste" used by scholars. Women are presented as belonging to an invisible and powerless class of workers serving the strategic sector of global economy. The terms refer to life and work conditions of female migrants who are often kept in isolation from the world outside work, have their free time controlled by authorities, are financially dependent on their employer and/or are often subject to manipulation and threats.⁶ The lack of 'class consciousness' in female migrants constitutes them a class in itself.

Many sociologists underline the range of phenomena associated with migration: social exclusion, ghettoization, inability to eliminate the periphery syndrome or to leave the poorly paid work segment are present among migrants and especially among women. Exclusion is often seen as a vicious circle of negative circumstances. Many women do not have

³ Delia Davin, *Internal Migration in Contemporary China*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999, p. 2.

⁴ Marta Smagacz-Poziemska, *Między domem a globalnym rynkiem. Przegląd współczesnych perspektyw i koncepcji w badaniach migrantek na rynku pracy*, in: Krystyna Slany, *Migracje kobiet. Perspektywa wielowymiarowa*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2008, p. 37–38.

⁵ Saskia Sassen, *Global Networks, Linked Cities*, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 274.

⁶ Smagacz-Poziemska, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

a work permit and, therefore, are exposed to exploitation. Since there are no official laws regulating this issue, they cannot seek justice in courts.

In the studies on migrants the category of social capital becomes useful. It brings into discussion the non-economic and non-political aspects that are deeply rooted in human relationships, and serve the well-being of the community by integrating the individuals, and thus giving them safety and the sense of belonging.⁷ Regardless of the macro-social determinants, each migration has a deep and often dramatic impact on the life of an individual that leads to changes in attitudes, reorientation of identity, and the reconstruction of personality in migrants. What is more, even if migration was only temporary and resulted in returning home, the experience causes permanent psychological change.⁸ According to Floya Anthias, “migrants are dynamically located in three places: in the society to which they migrated, in their homeland and in the group of migrants.”⁹

Floating population vs the *hukou* system

To understand the importance and range of the internal migration in China it is necessary to look back at the previous generation. The Mao era left no room for spontaneous migration, since one of the methods used by the government to monitor the population was the household registration or *hukou* system. Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang have described it as “one of the major tools of social control used by the state,” and as a “part of a larger economic and political system set up to serve multiple state interest.”¹⁰ The *hukou* system divided people into four categories, and, therefore, separated the Chinese society into two major groups. The first two categories are associated with a person’s place of registration or *hukou suozaidi* (rural or urban), and the other two deal with a person’s type of registration or *hukou leibie* (agricultural or non-agricultural).¹¹ The registration system made a clear distinction between the agricultural and urban labor force, thus creating spatial hierarchies between the citizens of the city and countryside. Furthermore, children born to a mother

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44–45.

⁸ Tadeusz Paleczny, *Migracje*, in: *Słownik społeczny*, ed. by Bogdan Szlachta, Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2004, p. 662.

⁹ Floya Anthias, “Where do I Belong? Narrating Collective Identity and Translocational Positionality,” *Ethnicities*, Vol. 2, No. 4, December 2002, p. 500.

¹⁰ Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang, “The Hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China: Process and Changes,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 160, 1999, p. 821–822, in: Garcia, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

with a rural *hukou* had rural status regardless of their father's registration status. Even children born in a town or a city to an urban father could not acquire an urban status if the mother had a rural *hukou*. Such a child had no right to food rations or schooling in urban areas. These regulations demand further consideration, since in the Chinese patrilineal and patriarchal tradition, a child is normally perceived as belonging to the father's family. Why then the state insists in this case that the child inherits the mother's status? The explanation lies in the state determination to limit the numbers of urban population. It is socially acceptable for men to 'marry down' in the Chinese society, but much less so for the women to do so. Accordingly, 'mixed marriages' between men of high status (urban *hukou*) and women of low status (rural *hukou*) occur more often than between urban women and rural men. Men are also more occupationally 'mobile' than women, and, therefore, are more likely to move up the spatial hierarchy through the state employment system.¹² Such policy proves that the institutional structure of the *hukou* system also reinforced gender inequality, since it is associated with cultural constructs of gender and labor.¹³

Since 1984, when the *Regulations of Permanent Residence Registration* were alleviated, millions of Chinese rural residents have migrated to the urban areas in search of employment. This tendency is increasing, as the income gap between rural and urban areas subsequently becomes larger. Even though the loosening of the traditional *hukou* system allowed rural residents to migrate, it did not allow them to change their residence status or gain any profits in the cities. It resulted in the emergence of an ever-growing population of migrant laborers living in the cities without minimal benefits of residency including medical care, housing or education for their children.¹⁴ Most of these migrants are the so-called unofficial, *de facto* temporary, or non-*hukou* migrants, belonging to what is commonly referred to as the 'floating population.'¹⁵ According to *The 2010 Report on the Development of China's Floating Population*, the estimated size of this group in 2009 was beyond 200 million people.¹⁶ The term 'floating population' was coined with regards to practically anyone who

¹² Davin, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹³ Arianne M. Gaetano and Tamara Jacka, "Introduction: Focusing on Migrant Women," in: *On the Move: Woman in Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China*, ed. by Arianne M. Gaetano and Tamara Jacka, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 21.

¹⁴ "Dagongmei" – *Female Migrant Labourers*, China Labour Bulletin, <http://www.china-labour.org.hk/en/node/3448> (May 30, 2011).

¹⁵ Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration and Social Change*, New York: M.E. Sharp, 2006, p. 7.

¹⁶ "China's 'floating population' exceeds 210m," Xinhua, *China Daily*, June 27, 2010, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/27/content_10024861.htm (May 30, 2011).

has moved away, either temporarily or permanently, from their registered place of residence without corresponding transfer of official residence registration. The majority of workforce in China's special economic zones and in other newly industrialized districts are called the *dagongmei*. The approximate size of this group is 50 millions. The following paragraphs are intended to bring a broader description of migration concerning this particular group in the Chinese society.¹⁷

***Dagongmei* – who are they?**

Since the early 1990s, the development of special economic zones and technology development zones across China was based on a massive exploitation of young workers, in particular of unmarried women who are considered the cheapest and the most obedient workers. *Dagongmei* constitutes a new gendered labor group shaped at the particular moment when the private and the international capital appeared in the post-Mao era. Ngai explained that as a newly coined term, *dagongmei* embraces a multi-layered meaning, and denotes a new kind of labor relationship fundamentally different from those from the Mao period. *Dagong* means 'working for the boss' or 'selling labor' which represents commodification and capitalist exchange of labor for wages. This new concept is in contradiction to the Chinese socialist history. Labor, which is evidently emancipated by the Chinese revolution, is again sold to the capitalists, and this time it happens under the auspices of the state. In contrast to the term *gonren*, 'worker,' which denoted the highest status in the socialist rhetoric of Mao's times, the new word *dagong* symbolizes a weakened identity of a hired hand, with a context shaped by the rise of market factors in labor relations and hierarchy. *Mei* means a 'younger sister' (in contrast to *jie*, i.e. an 'older sister'). It implies not just gender, but also marital status – *mei* is unmarried and young, and thus often of a lower status.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Tamara Jacka pointed out as well that the term *dagongmei* paradoxically does not necessarily carry a negative connotation for young women from rural areas, it rather provides new identities and new senses of the self that they acquire once they begin to work in the city.¹⁹

¹⁷ *On the Move: Woman in Rural-to-Urban Migration...*, p. 19.

¹⁸ Pun Ngai, "Engendering Chinese Modernity: The Sexual Politics of *Dagongmei* in a Dormitory Labour Regime," *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 28, June 2004, p. 151.

¹⁹ Tamara Jacka, "Working Sister Answer Back: The Presentation and Self-presentation of Women in China's Floating Population," *China Information*, Vol. 13 (1), 1998, p. 60.

Age and marital status

Age and marital status are important determinants of women's migration in China as elsewhere, although researches are not all in agreement on the exact relationship between these variables, and there is some evidence that the picture is changing over time. To date, most surveys indicated that the migrant population is on average younger than the rural non-migrant population, women tend to be younger and less often married. In general among non-*hukou* migrants, women are concentrated in the 15–19 years old group, whereas men are concentrated in the 20–24 years old cohort.²⁰ In the scale of the country some 83 percent of female migrant workers are estimated to be under the age of 30, compared to only 55 percent of male migrant workers who are under 30. The precise relations between age and sex of migrants as given by 2000 census were presented on Figure 1.

The difference in ages is a result of several factors. First of all, as married women are less mobile, female migrant workers are younger and more likely to be single than their male counterparts. Young women are generally seen as easier to control than male employees. What is more,

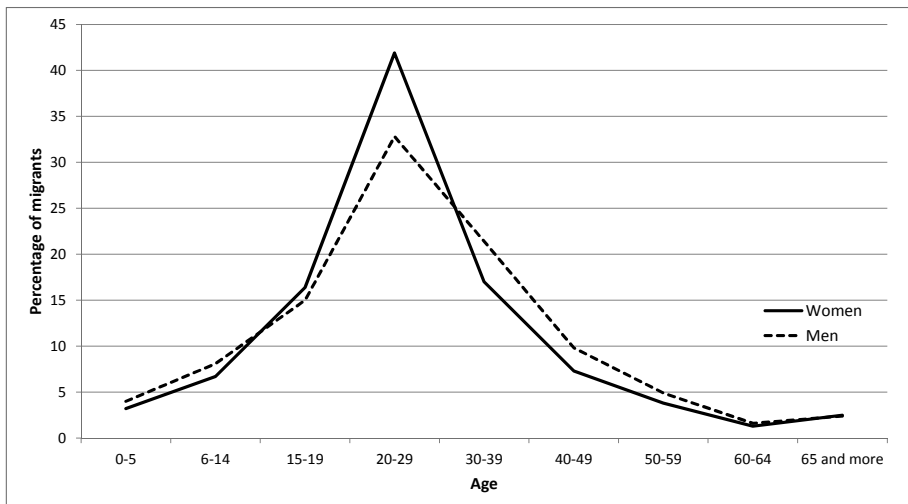


Figure 1. Age and sex of migrants according to the 2000 census

Source: own work based on the data from "Major Figures on 2000 Population Census of China (No. 1)," *National Bureau of Statistics Peoples Republic of China*, March 28, 2001, in: *Women and men in China. Facts and figures 2004*, Beijing: Department of Population, Social Science and Technology, National Bureau of Statistics, August 2004, p. 15.

²⁰ *On the Move: Woman in Rural-to-Urban Migration...*, p. 23.

such women have little knowledge of their rights. They are less likely to get pregnant, more willing to work long hours. Younger women also have added advantage of being able to endure continual overtime and lack of rest days that many factories offer.²¹

Another important factor which has to be taken into account is the strong tradition and the social pressure for peasant women to marry young. Marriage has two implications for female peasant migrants. First, most women return to the countryside to find their marriage partner. Second, once they are married, and especially after they have children, peasant women usually completely abandon the pursuit of migrant work. Both explain why young, single women are more highly represented than the older, married women among rural labor migrants.²² The traditional Chinese ideology defined women in reference to marriage, and postulated that marriage. Even the engagement legitimizes the transfer of woman's labor, and autonomy to the future husband's household. The opinion that migrant women are immoral is also related to the age-old belief that woman's proper place is 'inside' (the home and the village). Marriage traditions in rural China – women marrying at a young age, migrant women returning home for marriage, and staying in the village upon marriage – mean that migrant work is nothing but a short episode during a peasant women's youth. It is common that marriage denotes the end of migrant and urban work for a peasant woman.²³

However, there is also some interesting evidence that the probability of married women migration increases with the birth of a male child. Rural households' desire for a male heir is well documented as a historical and contemporary tendency. The birth of a son may provide his mother with a bargaining power in the household, in particular the ability to demand child care from her in-laws, thus facilitating her own migration.²⁴

Education

In rural China, most young women do not continue their education beyond junior secondary school, and many withdraw from school after completing the primary level. The decision to withdraw at or before junior secondary school may be made by themselves or by their parents, but either way it reflects the age-old view that education for the daughter is

²¹ "Dagongmei" – Female Migrant...

²² Fan, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁴ *On the Move: Woman in Rural-to-Urban Migration...*, p. 28.

a waste of time and money, because she will eventually marry out and become a member of another household. At the same time, the large agricultural labor excess and lack of farmland mean that many peasant women have never or hardly ever engaged in farming. Those in their late teens after leaving school may have little to do other than house chores. Having ‘nothing to do at home’ is, indeed, a common explanation by peasant women for their pursuit of migrant work. Young peasant women’s quest for migrant work not only brings family financial savings by their ‘not eating at home,’ but it is also a means of increasing household income, and creating opportunities for others, especially for male siblings.²⁵

Migration channels and social networks

In contrast to stereotype, the majority of the floating population does not migrate blindly, but it responds systematically to information channeled to the villages mainly through social networks comprised of relatives and co-villagers. Major flows of migrants reported in the 2000 census are shown in Figure 2. It is noticeable that the main directions of migration are from the western parts of the country to the east coast. The largest group of incoming citizens is concentrated in the Guangzhou province.

Dilemmas of the heart: motivation for migration and *dagongmei*’s problems in the cities and workplaces

Generally, migration is characterized by a mixture of push and pull factors, including the economic poverty of home villages, desire to lessen the burden to the family by leaving, and the sense of being unproductive and without value as unmarried daughters. Consequently, on one hand, migration can be regarded as a displacement rather than a positive movement. However, there are also strong pull factors, expressed by these women in phrases such as “to test myself” (*duanlian ziji*), “to open my eyes” (*kaikuo yanjie*) and “to change myself” (*gaibian ziji*). Young rural women leaving for the city seek a sense of independence and value. They recognize the struggle and monotony of their present and future rural lives. Notably, they use migration for work to avoid early marriages, and draw away pressure from parents to control their marriage choices. At the same time, they see such migration as a chance to form a better marriage.

²⁵ Fan, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

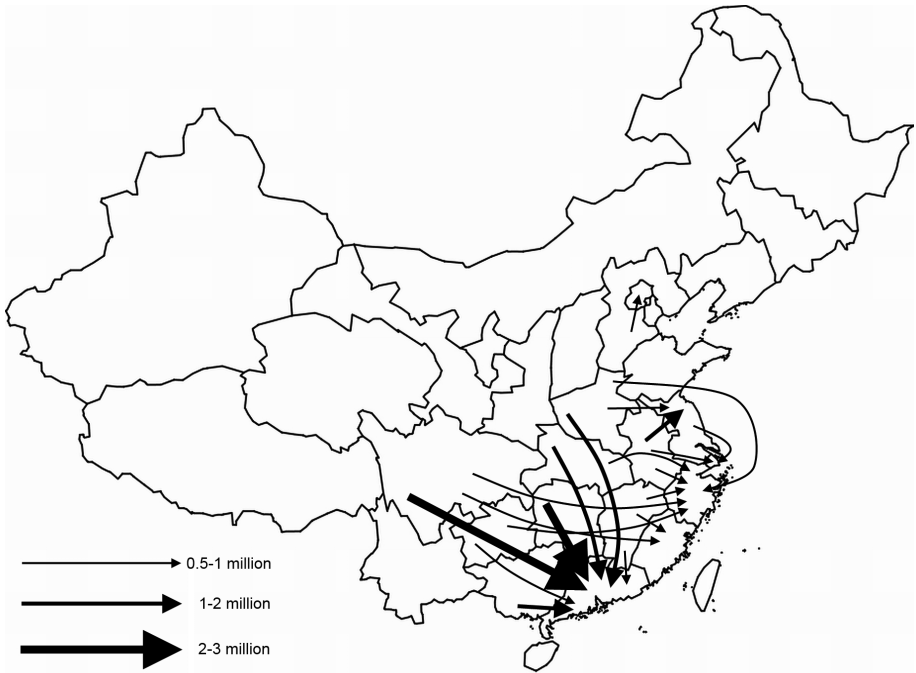


Figure 2. Main directions of interprovincial migration in China in the period 2000–2005, according to the 2005 Sample Survey of 1%

Source: own work based on the data from “2005 nian quanguo 1% renkou chouyang diaocha ziliao (Data on the Sample Survey of 1% of the National Population in 2005),” Zhongguo tongji chubanshe (Chinese Statistics Press), Beijing: State Council, Population Census Office and Department of Population Statistics, State Statistical Bureau, 2007, in: Kam Wing Chan, *China, Internal Migration*, Washington: May 2011, <http://faculty.washington.edu/kwchan/Chan-migration.pdf>, p. 11. (May 28, 2011).

Thus, alternatively, their migration can be regarded as a positive desire to run away, to gain autonomy, and to change their fate.²⁶

Nevertheless, female migrant workers struggle with many problems in the cities, both related to work and to the new place of residence. They are suffering because of health issues and bad safety conditions at work. Each year, thousands of workers are maimed while working on machines without safety guards or in dangerous conditions. This is especially true in smaller privately owned manufacturing enterprises that require their female workers to operate machinery without proper safety guards or maintenance checks. The Chinese Labor Bulletin (CLB) has monitored many cases of fires, chemical spills, explosions, loss of limbs, most of which could have been avoided if there had been proper attention and

²⁶ Louise Beynon, “Dilemmas of the Heart: Rural Working Women and Their Hopes for The Future,” in: *On the Move: Woman in Rural-to-Urban Migration...*, p. 133.

enforcement of existing safety legislation. Thousands of female migrant workers suffer from deadly diseases caused by working in factories laden with chemical fumes or toxic dust. Without the right to form unions, and with only the state sanction of the All China Federation of Trade Union there is little help for workers wanting to protect themselves from unscrupulous employers.²⁷ Another problem is caused by differences in languages spoken by female workers. China is a big country with numerous dialects. The struggle over regional, rural/urban, and ethnic identities should lead to investigation over the politics of dialects in the workplace. Language is a system of symbols produced and reproduced in the net of social differences, hierarchies, and distinctions which constitute social reality. It does matter what dialect and what accent does one use. In the factory, a hierarchy of dialects was deployed in a 'language war' linked to the struggle over work position, resources, and power. Mandarin is the official language in China, but in much of Guangdong (where most factories are located) it has lost its legitimacy to Cantonese.²⁸ Several researchers have reported that as a result of such language barrier different local or ethnic groups in the work place may seldom talk to each other and make friends across the boundaries. Discriminatory language used by the city dwellers also appears. Depreciative terms like *xiangxiamei* ('village girl') or *cushou cujiao* ('sun-burned hands') are often used. *Cushou cujiao* is the physical stigma of a peasant, whereas *xiangxiamei* was the abject identity that had to be polished and upgraded.²⁹ As Pun Ngai reports, distrust is also frequently worsened by the lack of spare time to communicate with coworkers. Daily conflicts sometimes escalate due to tight space and rushed time, aggravated by the mutual creation of negative images. Since the migrant working class is deprived of the right to stay in the city, the state controls labor mobility by dormitory regime.³⁰ The experience of living in the city is offering *dagongmei* a taste of cosmopolitan lifestyle, and, more importantly, the self affirmation of modern gendered subjects.³¹ For them, places like fashion shops, department stores, supermarkets, and coffee houses are manifestations of the Western world. Their consumerism is driven by an urgent desire to reduce the disproportion between themselves and the city dwellers, as well as by an ambition to live up to the calling of a modern model of female beauty, increasingly presented by the mass media. The switch to being

²⁷ "Dagongmei" – Female Migrant...

²⁸ Ngai, "Becoming Dagongmei (Working Girls): The Politics of Identity and Difference in Reform China," *The China Journal*, No. 42, July 1999, p. 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁰ Ngai, *Made in China*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005, p. 160–162.

³¹ Ngai, "Engendering Chinese Modernity...", p. 162.

a modern woman, even if only in terms of appearances, expresses dreams and desires of *dagongmei* as they strive to transform themselves. It is sad truth that in the urban industrial world the 'lure of consumption' produces irresistible desire to consume, even for those who cannot afford it.³²

Conclusions

In contemporary China the search for modernity has resulted in opening the socialist economy to global capitalism. At the beginning of the 21st century, China is well known as the 'world factory', attracting transnational corporations from all over the world, especially Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, the USA, and the Western Europe. During the first decade of the new millennium, the rise of China was carefully observed by media around the globe. The success of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai showed how rapid the country's development was.

Behind the glamour, millions of migrant workers have been toiling for decades to make, build, and serve. This massive population that flows from rural to urban areas does not only constitute 'the phenomenon of the century' for China, but it also represents the largest flow of labor out of agriculture in the world history.³³ The aim of this short article was to outline the main problems connected with rural-urban migration, drawing special attention to the group formed of young women called the *dagongmei*. The importance of this phenomenon is measured not only by the numbers of women trying to improve their status, but also by their input to the modernization of China, and the impact on the global economy.

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³² *Ibid.*

³³ Garcia, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

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