

Rural Workforce Migration: A Summary Of Some Studies

TAN Shen

The massive exodus of rural people flooding into cities and more developed areas to do business or find jobs (called *nongmin gong*, or simply *mingong*) has in recent years become a topic of interest for social scientific research. The phenomenon and the communities involved are now the object of studies by researchers in a number of disciplines, e.g. economics, demography, sociology, political science and urban geography, not to mention state and foreign aid agencies, who observe what is happening from their respective points of view and use a range methods ranging from synthetic overview¹ to case study² and specialized inquiry³.

1. Research patterns and theories

Research on migration, it has been noted, has adhered so far to roughly three models. First are classical and neoclassical “equilibrium” models, which point to an unequal geographical distribution of resources (most typical here is the “push-pull” theory), resulting in a new regional balance in the distribution of economic elements. The second is the structuralist-historicist-functionalist model, in which migration is seen in relation to a series of traditional, structural and historical factors, and human mobility is seen as a response to a given structure. The third is called the “agent-practice” pattern, which regards the migrant as just another social and political subject who at every instant creates something new by means of his “practice,” rather than a mere agent acting in accordance with what the “structure” dictates.⁵ Huang Ping and his associates for their part, drawing on Giddens’ theory of structuration, have synthesized holist and individualist perspectives, long opposed to each other in sociology, and thus tried to advance a new explanation for the transfer of rural workers to non-agricultural trades. Given the relations between individual and structure it is impossible, in their opinion, for rural workers to go elsewhere but for opportunities and constraints stemming from structural factors and conditions. Conversely, should there be no need to go elsewhere on the part of the rural workers, no institutional arrangement could make any sense. As to the *mingongs*’ behavior, in the very process of their exodus and migration here and there, they constantly rethink what they are doing and switch from one goal to another. The outcome

of their behavior hence often turns out to be something unexpected, and indeed “inconsistent with rationality.”⁶

Summing up the studies on workforce migration that have been done in China, some argue that two kinds of analysis provide the central frameworks. One is *structural analysis*, whereby social mobility is studied within social structure, with social configuration supposedly stratified in a scale of diverse statuses and only afterwards with the concept of mobility inserted into the configuration for further observation. The second is *social network analysis*, whereby the process of individual mobility is seen as something carried out through the establishment of a social network, with emphasis placed, not on the status attributes of individuals within the social structure, but on the relative advantages of individuals’ position within the social networks⁷.

Qu Jingdong has gone a step further arguing that the study of presupposition and method itself may risk oversimplifying the abundant and complicated data; it may even dismiss phenomena felt to be hard to classify, yet having immense social impact. Indeed, structural analysis cannot be equated with the whole of social study. Qu advocates, therefore, a network analysis pattern endorsed by new economic sociology, contending that starting from the social network of these communities to examine their interactive relationship and the social ties they have entered into would be an easier pattern for entering into the realm of their uncommon lives. In a sense, the urban residents of rural origin themselves, as well as their social network and even their community, are actually the outcomes of a social network and its movement.⁸ An exemplary study along these lines was that conducted by Xiang Biao, who spent an entire six years observing Beijing’s “Zhejiang Village.” Instead of starting from sociological concepts, he based himself on the agent-practice pattern, putting emphasis on the role of the agent, abstracting concepts from within the facts he observed and only then interrogating existing theories. In his detailed account of the origins of “Zhejiang Village”, he constantly analyzed and criticized the relevant sociological and anthropological theories and their basic concepts and then advanced his views. One example is what we mean by “community,” a readily existing concept the “Zhejiang Village” can by no means fit into, for while a lot of stories take place in this village, “their origins and consequences often go beyond such a community.” A similar discrepancy is the difference between those

seen as “big shots” by community members and what researchers regard as the “élite,” as well as the different interpretation of what distinguishes “big shots” from “nobodies” in terms of strata, redistribution, center and “layer overlapping.” Another case are models of embeddedness in migration research, where it is held that instead of economic behavior being “embedded” into the social relations, what happens is that people “unfold” their economic behavior relying on their social relations. And so on.

2. Social network for migration

A vast amount of survey data shows that in their migration, especially in their first migration to other regions, *mingong* rely mainly on their local native networks as a social resource, rather than the state or the market. Such native local networks plays a very important roles both in the livelihood and social contacts of *mingong*. Li Peilin⁹ and Zhao Shukai¹⁰ point out that neither marketization nor changes in farmers’ work and livelihood have essentially altered their dependence on the social network articulated by consanguinity or fellow-villagership. Concretely analyzing *mingong*’s native networks, Zhao Shukai notes that they consists of two parts. The first, primary one, is the local native relationship in place even before their exodus. The second, secondary part, is the new relationship they go into after exodus. A survey, however, by Zero Point Inc.¹¹ finds that the limited resources available within a homogeneous community determines that some of these people tend to dissociate themselves from the original community when possible.

Later on, M.S. Granovetter’s theory of “strong and weak ties” was introduced. Before that, Bian Yanjie had pointed out in his study on job seeking in overseas Chinese communities that, unlike the channels of job seeking through weak ties, common in Western society, Chinese communities mostly rely upon strong ties. This view has served as a basis for most of the research conducted at home about the network of ties of *mingong*. For example, in their survey, Li Hanlin *et al.* argue that contacts among *mingong* in the cities and the social support they rely on are formed basically by what we called strong ties, which, starting from consanguinity, gradually extends to fellow-villagership. At the same time, the *mingong* in the cities go through a process of learning and re-socializing, and some of them extend their weak ties.¹² Using the participatory

method, Liu Linping¹³ conducted a survey of Shenzhen's "Pingjiang Village", composed of people from Pingjiang District, Hunan, mainly engaged in the transport trade. Results of his survey show that, moving from Pingjiang to Shenzhen, these people did not rely on strong manpower or financial capital, but quite thoroughly on the social resources made available through their social network. In the network theories of Granovetter and Bian Yanjie, ties are simply divided into strong and weak, with a time point in between. Liu Linping, by contrast, identifies two time points, the past and the present, and advances a new classification of ties into four patterns: strong, weak, weak-strong and strong-weak. Through his survey, he finds that these types are interchangeable, depending on personal effort. He thinks, consequently, that ties should not be regarded as ready-made social structures, but as dynamic processes.

From the perspective of Chinese society and culture, Qu Xuewei¹⁴ contends that the division between strong and weak ties in Granovetter's theory presupposes two arbitrarily identified independent entities in society, whereas such a presupposition does not apply to the constitution of Chinese social relations. Between two Chinese individuals, even with no previous contact with each other, natural consanguinity or local native coincidence is enough to ensure intimacy and trust in a voluntary and reproductive way. An analysis of the interviews carried out in the survey shows that crucial for a rural migrant worker to find a job is neither how much information is available nor whether the information is repeated or not, nor whether the ties are strong or weak, but whether the information is true or false, so as to ensure that there is no deception. Hence a concept of *strong* and *weak* trust ties, whereby it is argued that the job seeking process for *mingong* is, first of all, a process of identifying the most reliable person. What is common, however, to all the above approaches is that they point to the instrumental rationality of the *mingong* rather than their "cultural habitus" in setting up and making use of a network of ties.

Likewise, Xiao Biao focuses on "ties" in his analysis of the "Zhejiang Village," but, instead of starting from the theory of strong and weak ties, he believes that underlying what is called "ties" is a "popular theory of the Chinese concerning social and interpersonal relationships, which possibly will become a theoretical resource for developing sociological and anthropological studies. People used to see "ties" as a linkage between two

acting persons. By contrast, in Xiang Biao's opinion, he who sets up a given relationship bears in himself some already existing relationship. It may be said that a relationship is in essence a "bundle of ties." As a key link in the development of "Zhejiang Village," "ties" represent a new acting unit, called a "set" by the author. A "set" is a combination of multiple ties surrounding a certain acting person. When it comes to the economic setting with network characteristics, "trust" is often fundamental to its maintenance. However, the author does not regard this as consistent with the real logic of human behavior, and therefore holds that the substantial meaning of the setting up of a stable relationship lies in a mutual conditioning between both sides, or, as the author calls it, a mutual "pinpointing," that is, the possibility of punishing and rectifying the partner if necessary. Trust, as people feel it, is nothing but an expression of this mutual conditioning. Circles of relatives and acquaintances and circles of business partners, overlapping one another, form the overall order of the community.¹⁵ As to the relations between State and society, Xiang notes that, while moving, the migrants do not move from one pre-existing social structure into another, but do transform these structures in the very process of their migration, giving birth to new social structures called "non-State space" by the author.¹⁶

3. "New Arrival" Communities

From the perspective of *mingong* migration, social structure or urban administration, concentrated neighborhoods of new arrivals in the cities are often in the spotlight. In recent years many studies have addressed this phenomenon. From the point of view of social structure and change, Wang Chunguang¹⁷ pioneered this field by offering a panoramic description of "Zhejiang Village," a neighborhood of concentration of people from Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province. Surveying the same village from the perspective of how farmers enter the cities, Wang Hansheng et al.¹⁸ concluded that Wenzhou farmers who engage in business make their entry in a "business-community" pattern which is quite peculiar. Its meaning consists in the following:

- It goes on changing the opportunity structure of the market in keeping with changes in urban commerce administrative institutions and in consumption structure of town-dwellers.
- Being not just a settlement, it has contributed to the emergence of an organizational form of new trades, an organization in charge of the division of labor and

cooperation by means of an “internal market,” as distinguished from the external market organized by large businesses.

- It makes use of traditional, especially local native resources.
- It engages in a peculiar relationship with the administrative structure of the cities.

As shown above, Xiang Biao also advances new views of community on the basis of surveys. Through in-depth observation of Zhejiang Village and comparison with other network settlements in Beijing, he finds that the more agglutinated the community, the more internal conflicts there are and the more open to the outside world and externally radiating it is. Previous studies about “immigration settlements” (including “Chinatowns” abroad) held that their major characteristics were closure and independence. More recent theories of “embeddedness” and “ethnic settlement economy”, while suggesting that the peculiar internal structure inside the settlement provides uncommon economic opportunities, hold, however, that closure is the basic cause underlying the existing characteristics of this kind of communities.

Introduced into China, the concept of “community” has undergone a change in its connotation, and the transfer of this theory has affected Chinese researchers’ understanding of what community is: an entity with distinct boundaries, with its internal integrity as one of its major characteristics, as well as the greater society in miniature. What has been found in Zhejiang Village, however, is integration, conflict and openness, all combined. To the author, a “community” looks rather like a stage whose real content is not the written script, but the actual performance of each actor who thinks in terms of things far beyond the limits of the stage.¹⁹ Zhejiang Village has become an “unbounded community” because it keeps closely tied to other sectors of society while at the same time staying outside the integral social order. Another feature is that it oversteps not only geographical, but also a series of other profound, hidden boundaries, e.g., those relating to the organizational, administrative and personal identity systems. What the Zhejiang Village shows is the possibility of a new life status.²⁰

By means of surveying and analyzing the networks of tie of *mingong*, Li Hanlin et al.²¹ arrived at the concept of “virtual community.” In fact, sociologists have referred to social networks as “non-territorial” or “spiritual communities”. How, in terms of such

interaction and ties, do people enter systems and groups which are informal, non-institutionalized, supported by social and sentimental relationships and particularistic in orientation? How do the latter promote development and change by interacting with the structure of territorial communities? In the author's opinion, it is a network of social ties created by *mingong* in accordance with a prioritized setup and their own instrumental rationality, with mutual non-institutionalized trust as the basis of such a virtual community and the tie strength as an important form for organizing and structuring such a community..

4. Motive forces for migration

Why do rural people leave home? What is the cause of such migration? That is a question referred to in recent years in every study about *mingong* migration. In a good many studies, the "push-pull theory" is used to explain the macro-factors of rural people's migration, with special reference to the structural factor of uneven economic development of different areas as responsible for the migration of rural people from underdeveloped to more-developed areas and cities.²² Some studies by Western scholars, inquiring in micro-terms about the immediate causes of rural workforce exodus, suggest that it is an individual decision-making process of seeking interest maximization and cost minimization. In China, by contrast, researchers pay more attention to the decision-maker being different from that in the West, pointing out the following: Firstly, whether leaving home for elsewhere is a question decided by the whole family rather than by the individual alone.²³ Secondly, the Chinese *mingong* migrate with the main purpose of earning more.²⁴ Thirdly, based on the theory of manpower capital, it is argued that exodus is a kind of manpower capital investment in which the expectation is related to conditions of the manpower at issue such as age, gender, education level, etc.²⁵ Fourthly, unlike the view, once very widespread, that *mingong* were leaving home "blindly," researchers have advanced from various perspectives the concept of "reasons," such as economic, migration, etc., agreeing that exodus is a choice of interest maximization.²⁶ Huang Ping, for his part, has come up with the concept of "survival reason," saying that seeking survival or even eking out a living, rather than trying to maximize profit in a market setting, is the primordial strategy and motive force for peasants choosing among real options.²⁷ Starting from the "rational choice perspective", Wen Jun, for his part, has

advanced the concept of “social reason,” holding that human behavior has something irrational about it and paying attention to the impact of institutional and cultural factors on personal preferences and aims. Based on diverse teleological hypotheses, Wen divides human rational behavior into three layers: survival, economic and social grounds, arguing that at the beginning of his exodus in search of jobs, the peasant chooses primarily on the basis of survival rationality. But, he adds, as he takes up one job after another, and as the process drags on, choices based on social and economic reason tend to become more and more prominent.²⁸

From a sociological point of view, *mingong* migration represents not only workforce and population mobility, but also social mobility in its three aspects: territorial, occupational and strata.⁴ In sociological terms, recent studies in the main address the following issues:

- the migratory behavior of people involved, including, for example
- their motivation,
- the forms of their migration
- their social network
- the extent to which their migration is organized
- their family patterns
- their consciousness of identity, anomie, etc
- internal differentiation and stratification, including, for example, difference in their geographical origins or in their occupations
- the relationship of the migrant workers community with society at large, including, for example, their social status, social rejection and inequality,

relevant administrative functions and public policy and research about communities.

i will focus on theoretical aspects. In micro-analyses of *mingong* migration, most Chinese researchers agree that decision-making by the family and choices based on economic reason are characteristic. Some point out however that almost all the surveys on rural workforce migration point overwhelmingly to two motivations: earning money and seeking development, both in equal proportion, which would make it seem oversimplifying to emphasize the objectives of economic nature. Furthermore, whether the family can be simplified into a “whole” the maximization of whose overall interests “naturally”

serves as the starting point for every decision-making is still open to discussion. After repeated surveys, Tan Shen²⁹ points out that if motivations are classified into two kinds, one “for the sake of one’s family” and the other “for one’s own sake,” it can be seen that quite a large amount of migrants leave home to work elsewhere motivated mainly by their own needs rather than by the needs of their families. Even according to the most conservative estimates, such people account for one fifth to one third, and roughly a half, of the unmarried migrants.

5. Status and Stratification

Research shows that the while *mingong* can raise their economic status, no visible change consistent with this economic change is seen in their overall social status.³⁰ In fact, “occupational improvement” is only relative to their previous situation, for in China’s stratified social structure the peasants are on the lowest rung, so that mobility can only be upward. In this sense, the first instance of occupational mobility necessarily points to an obvious improvement. Further occupational mobility, however, leads to a very slight overall improvement.³¹ In comparison with town-dwellers and the native population, *mingong* remain at the very bottom of the social scale. In his repeated survey conducted since 1996 about social prestige and status, on the scale divided into 100 occupations representing the stratified structure in the cities, *mingong* are situated at the 92nd (those engaged in business) and 94th (those employed). Moreover, all the lowest 10 occupations have something to do with *mingong*.³²

It is through the job market that *mingong* acquire their new occupational status in the cities or other areas they’ve moved to. Owing to the inertia of the established institutions, the job market in most cities is divided by a hard and fast line into two compartments, called respectively by researchers “primary workforce market” and “secondary workforce market.”³³ What *mingong* have access to is the secondary workforce market of low pay, substandard working conditions, bad treatment and poor welfare services. Why are they concentrated here, then? Some researchers stress institutional and public policy factors. In keeping with the long-standing residence registration system and the related employment system, urban administrations 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. Besides, researchers have noticed the relevance of the work unit (*danwei*) to a person's status. The status of the town-dweller is obviously conditioned by the work unit he belongs to. Furthermore, his performance in his work unit is of possible accumulation, and this status accumulation can become a kind of capital to his credit. *Mingong*, by contrast, have neither working unit status nor any interests from it, and therefore know no status accumulation, and thus can hardly raise their occupational status.³⁴ Some researchers emphasize the role of manpower and social capital and, based on surveys, think that the main factor determining the economic status of *mingong* is their manpower and social capital,³⁵ the latter being even more important because its "use" is more effective than the manpower originally available.³⁶

In today's economy, the *mingong's* occupational status makes it impossible for them to enter formal employment system in the cities. What is left for them to do are often jobs in irregular entities or jobs of irregular employment, where social security is a serious problem. To say nothing of welfare benefits reserved for regular employees, they can hardly claim what is elemental for a worker, such as a working day, weekly pay, paid leave permit, minimum wage, unemployment insurance, health insurance, etc. In surveys conducted in Beijing, in 2002 as much as 45.4% of *mingong* had unemployment problems. Roughly one in four got no payment or was being paid in arrears. For various reasons 36.3% of them were penniless. Approximately 60% had to work over ten hours a day, one third over 12 and 16% over 14. In 2002, 46.0% suffered from disease and 93% received nothing from the employer for medical treatment.³⁷ Another survey of three cities, Beijing, Zhuhai and Wuxi, compared local residents and nonnative *mingong*. It showed that the latter got lower pay than the former and that the higher the common local wage level, the larger the difference. The migrants lived in much deeper poverty than the former. The percentage of rural workers living in poverty in Beijing, for example, was three times larger (25%) than that of the native dwellers (8%).³⁸ A survey conducted by a task force organized by Wu Weiping and Wang Hansheng³⁹ of housing of the floating population in Shanghai and Beijing showed that, despite current housing reforms, work units retain certain functions, and mechanisms of the housing market (e.g., commercial

home mortgages, used housing transfer and house rental) ignore the needs of the floating population. Less than 1% of the latter in these two cities own their own houses; the vast majority have to live in poorer conditions and more crowded spaces. According to some surveys, their per capita housing area is no more than a third of what the local town-dwellers occupy, although the average cost they have to pay for housing is twice what the latter pay. On top of that, they often find themselves under the attack of urban authorities that, equating “irregular” with “illegal employment”, subject them to drastic measures such as expulsion, searches and fines. It can be said that they are at constant risk in various fields like living conditions, employment and medical assistance.⁴⁰

In some areas with a highly industrialized countryside such as the Pearl and Changjiang (Yangtze) River Deltas, *mingong* even account for the majority of the local job market, but remain a marginalized community. Unlike in the large cities, in such areas it doesn't matter whether you have permanent urban or only rural residence registration. What matters is whether you are a local or a newcomer. Unlike what is stated in the workforce market theory, in the Pearl River Delta the labour market for the newcomers involves not only two factors, labor force and capital, but three, namely, capital, labor force and place of immigration. Local government, acting directly to solicit investors, is in fact one of the interested parties. If in the other large cities *mingong* are discriminated against mainly because of the urban-rural dichotomy and the apathy of urban society, in areas like the Pearl River Delta, the marginalized status of the nonnative (*mingong*) workers is linked to a clearer awareness of the native dwellers of their own interests. Within such a special triangular structure, the migrants, faced with the powerful capital, have barely any chance for dialogue. When conflict takes place, government authorities rarely act as an impartial go-between, but instead are biased favor of capital. On the flip side, however, as the newcomers are an indispensable for the local economy, the job market there is less exclusive than in the large cities. As labor issues intensify, state power increasingly intervenes on the *mingong*'s behalf, so much so that such areas are ahead of the rest of the nation in terms of institutional arrangements.⁴¹

As to the relationship of the local population with the newcomers, some researchers, having analyzed this subject in terms of income distribution, job distribution,

consumption and entertainment, settlement style and social psychological analysis, believe that two kinds of people result in two separate systems, and hence the idea of “dual communities.” They believe, again, that such phenomena stem from the “parasitic nature of the local economy” and the “regionalist policies of the local authorities.”⁴² Wang Xiaoyi et al.,⁴³ for their part, have found in their surveys of four already industrialized villages scattered in four different provinces that the villages far from becoming more open with industrialization and urbanization (not to mention the increase in their available resources and power), as was predicted in the theories of modernization, are even more closed than before. This is expressed in, among other things, their forming all kinds of communities articulated by different ties, inaccessible to newcomers. Both formal and informal institutional constraints make it impossible for migrant workers moving from one place to another in the countryside to integrate into local society. In this way, there exist inside the same village two different social communities separated by a wide social abyss, leading to social tension.

There exist divisions within the same community of *mingong* as well. While in their home village society they belong to the upper-middle strata, once in the cities, they find themselves situated in the lower-middle strata. Rural migrants working in the cities are a community of better make-up among the Chinese peasantry. In terms of personal qualities they have an obvious edge over other peasants, since, for example, they mostly belong to the most vigorous age groups and, especially, have strong capacity for economic activity and are usually better educated than those who stay home. Leaving home for the first time, they compare themselves with the peasantry in general and feel quite satisfied with themselves. As they stay longer and longer outside, their reference point shifts from the countryside to the cities and then they begin to feel discontented. Especially, within the community of *mingong* there must be a hidden élite group of a special character, called “bottom élite” by Li Qiang. According to Pareto’s élite theory, the long-standing presence of an élite at the bottom of society generates social imbalance and disorder. Surveys show that the social bottom élite harbors a strong anti-social tendency, different from the social discontent of other strata: the latter is predominantly a social state of mind, whereas the former, or social hatred, is a strong anti-social state of mind, usually accompanied by anti-social action. Under whatever circumstances it may

be, the presence of a highly dynamic community at the bottom of society poses a massive threat to mainstream society. For this reason, Li Qiang suggests that *mingong* be oriented in such a way that they switch from “collective exclusivity against other communities” to “individual exclusivity among themselves” based upon free competition, so that upward mobility will be possible for the élite.⁴⁴

6. Differentiation among the migrants

Owing to the long-standing system of urban-rural dichotomy of the resident status of China’s population, migrant farmers have mostly been regarded as a homogeneous community in studies about social differentiation and stratification, and the increasing diversity within this community and its emerging differentiation has often been ignored in a static framework of social stratification.⁴⁵ In his studies, Li Peilin notes that after successive occupational differentiation, *mingong* now belong to three quite different social strata:

- * entrepreneurs who own considerable amounts of productive capital and hire workers;
- * self-employed individual businessmen who own small amounts of capital
- * wage workers who earn their living exclusively by getting employed.⁴⁶

By means of a tracing survey of the system of junk recycling in Beijing’s “Henan Village,” Tang Can and Feng Xiaoshuang⁴⁷ have found profound changes in the last dozen years in the inner structure of the community of *mingong*, changes they call “a second differentiation,” in the sense that on the one hand, horizontally, newer and newer jobs are being created and, on the other hand, vertically, the community is undergoing stratification with considerable differences in capital ownership, economic income, social prestige and value orientation. The original homogeneity of the community was broken. In their analysis of the contributing factors to such differentiation, the authors, as was said above, emphasize the role of social capital. But they go on to point out that Henan Village’s *mingong* have begun to develop an awareness of the boundaries between strata, and reckon with these boundaries. Their circles of contact gradually bestride the original status boundaries, giving rise to new relationships of identification and community. However, the nature and process of this differentiation run into the hardened hurdle of the closure of a dichotomized urban-rural residence status, so much so that this process results mainly in the emergence of another stratified structure of *mingong* workforce,

relatively independent from the mainstream urban stratified structure, with an inner social space very hard to typify in an institutional form.

Through his surveys, Wang Chunguang⁴⁸ makes a distinction between the first and a new generation of floating population of rural origin and analyzes the differentiation of *mingong* from the point of view of generational identity. He holds that intergenerational changes have already taken place in the *mingong* population, with major differences between the older and the younger generation not only in terms of motivation for migration, but also of a good many social characteristics. His surveys show that the migrant workers of the new generation are decreasingly receptive to their institutionally determined status. Unlike the first generation, some of them have begun to try to identify themselves with the society on the ground. Their efforts to do so, however, fall short of the acknowledgment of the local community. At the same time, their attachment to their home village is weakening, and in contrast with the first generation, implies mainly an attachment to loved ones back at home rather than any interest in the land. They are even critical of some customs and traditions of the countryside. As the new generation of migrants increases, more and more rural people are bound to drift away both from the rural and the urban social structure. In conditions of economic depression, they are likely to wind up as vagrants, or “problem migrant workers,” as Zhao Shukai calls them.

7. Migration and gender

In studies done so far, what is gender- or women-related implies roughly four perspectives:

Gender differences: In such studies, gender often is addressed as a variable for inquiry and analysis to describe something of a trend, such as the number of migrants, their age, their geographical distribution, etc.

Women's problems: Certain issues are addressed as women's own problems, such as family planning, sexual concepts, etc.

Women's experience: Their experience, consciousness and situation are singled out as separate topics for study.

Gender relationship: Topics under discussion are the impact of migration on the division of labor between men and women, on the relationship between the two sexes and on women's status in social stratification.

In this study, we will focus on the third and the fourth perspectives.

In his book *Inequality and Heterogeneity*, Peter M. Blau calls for attention to the division of labor and distribution of power as two most important forms of social differentiation. A form of division of labor, sexual division of labor carries implicit in itself something of a distribution of power. Market-oriented reform in China, with the increase in resources it brings, has an inevitable impact on resource allocation and labor division landscape as between men and women. Prior to reform what determined everything was the planned economy and state ideology; standing out more and more nowadays is the influence of the individual, family and market. For rural people, mobility toward non-agricultural jobs is no doubt a new opportunity, a “developmental resource.”⁴⁹ But how is this distributed between men and women? What kind of relationship between women and the family, market and the nation, is embodied in such a distribution?

On-the-spot transfer through community industrialization is a *sui generis* form of transfer. By virtue of the communitarian character of such collective rural industries, what usually happens is that communitarian resources begin being distributed among the households and then among the individuals. In his investigation and observation of what was happening in the south of the Jiangsu Province from the 1980s to mid-1990s, Jin Yihong⁵⁰ analyzed the gender tendency in the resource distribution and the gender layout of the rural industrial system. She holds that against the backdrop of the peculiar local conditions, the consanguineous and local native ties actually help protect women, giving them access to the subject-to-transfer resources through “ties” or “equality among households” within a community. But when these resources, not yet amply available, are to be distributed inside the household, some invisible preference can be detected in the distribution process, although the villagers are unaware of any gender bias. Interests are essentially prioritized in a family in accordance with the principle “male before female, elder before younger and inner before outer circles.” This is the logic of patriarchal power. Now, in the new industrial system in the countryside, the gender division of labor is even more obvious and detailed, with the coming into being of male and female jobs. The male supremacy has been renewed owing to men’s advantages in terms of social and

organizational resources they have inherited from the past generations as well as their better mastery of new techniques.

In contrast, things are different when it comes to migration elsewhere. What happens on the job market in the new areas or even worldwide, the strengthening commercial culture, intertwined with the state ideology and institutions and the gender division of labor in the rural household, has a multiple impact on the gender division of labor and gender relationships among migrants. This topic is being addressed in some studies.

As more and more young workers leave their rural homeland, it is noticeable that the bulk of workforce remaining in the countryside comprises increasingly of women and elderly people. This “feminization of agriculture” was identified in earlier days by Gao Xiaoxian.⁵¹ Those who hold optimistic views emphasize the role and contribution of women in agricultural production and defend the positive significance of such a fact in the improvement of women’s status.⁵² Other researchers point out, however, that lower income from agriculture leads to lower contribution of women, mainly engaged as they are in agriculture production. At the same time, just because agriculture is mainly a feminine job doesn’t mean that women play a leading role in agriculture. “Women work while men command.” Power is still in men’s hands, with women playing the role of an unskilled workforce.⁵³ What is happening is thus an “agrarianization” of women rather than a feminization of agriculture.⁵⁴ In contrast with the high percentage of women staying in farm work, those going out include less women than men.⁵⁵ Hence the problem of gender choice in migration. Starting from the family as an “interested whole,” some researchers emphasize that gender division of labor is rational.⁵⁶ Another view however holds that many of the activities women are engaged in are not assigned them in accordance with the principle of maximization of economic returns, but rather owing to merely cultural conceptions that turn these activities into “female-special” jobs, and the structural constraints determining certain “female-special” jobs results in a switch of agriculture from a “male-” to a “female-predominant” pattern. Whenever a certain job yields relatively little, men turn it over to women. (See Feng Shizheng: 1996) With respect to the sluggishness of women’s transfer to non-agricultural jobs, some researchers have come up with the concept of a “secondary reservoir,” in the sense that if rural workers

can be regarded as a reservoir to meet the need, if any, of society at large for them, rural women serve as a secondary reservoir within the larger one.⁵⁷ If transfer and exodus definitely represent access to more resources for development, it can be concluded that in terms of distribution of new resources, women again fare worse than men.

Two opposite views have long held sway as regards the impact of industrialization and the recently highlighted marketization on gender differences. One holds that the market tends to shrink the role of all congenital factors and thus helps reduce the gap between men and women in terms of division of labor and distribution of income. The other, by contrast, suggests that as a result of division of labor on the market, differentiation leads to de-skilling and downward mobility of female workforce, resulting in further marginalization of women on the workforce market.⁵⁸ Studies based on practical experience have confirmed that in the places of workforce in-flow what has taken shape is not only the dichotomy of the job market into a “regular” and a “subsidiary” one, the former for local people and the latter for outsiders, but also into another two, one for each gender, with corresponding male and female jobs. Those jobs reserved for women are usually rather labor- than technology-intensive and require long working hours with low pay.⁵⁹ The first view is the “theory of determination by local interests,” subject to a lot of criticism, and the second, interpreted by the entrepreneurs as the “theory of determination by biological attributes,” or by some researchers as the “theory of determination by manpower capital,” has been scarcely questioned. According to this theory, women’s physiological conditions determine their stronger patience than men’s and make them more suitable for more monotonous and time-consuming work. But surveys conducted in Southern China show that women working on assembly lines suffer no less from psychiatric and physiological ailments than men owing to stress, depression and fatigue, except that these are blamed on personal reasons. Markets aim at the maximization of profit. If women are preferred for a certain job, the real reason is that, being the marginal portion of household economy and social power, they are more receptive to lower pay than men. They are the cheaper labor force within the cheap labor force. They can hardly resist in any organized way. Capitalists can then maximize their profits by taking advantage of women’s weaknesses.⁶⁰

Gender expectations determined by traditional gender division of labor, coupled with women's disadvantageous situation on the job market, results in different puzzles for women than for men. An account by Pan Yi describes the nightmares of a migrant girl working at a factory amid extreme stress and inner crises. The author noted that the girl was subject to a triple misery. Firstly, she sought a career livelihood only to find herself in crippled health. Secondly, conflict between sexuality and morality resulted in strong stress. Thirdly, requirements of traditional marriage culture and official restrictions on population mobility left her with no way out.⁶¹ Likewise, in their interviews with factory girls, Feng Xiaoshuang⁶² et al. have found that migration had disrupted the life cycles of women such as marriage, child-bearing, etc. As to married women, their migration had led to their separation from home and children and the loss of their integral home life and, consequently, their traditional peace of mind. Among the unmarried women, for their part, there appeared a large number of "rural spinsters." An analysis by Tan Can is so sensitive as to be aware even of stratum differences among migrant women. Unlike white-collar women employees, blue-collar women workers are subject to sexual harassment implying both sexual and status discrimination.

While emphasizing the structural constraints, we should not fail to reckon with what the rural migrant women feel and do themselves. The task force "Women Leaving the Countryside to Get Jobs" conducted interviews in a township in Sichuan Province where more women than men had gone outside and, on the basis of these interviews, suggested that under some special conditions, the socialist concept of gender equality might happen to coincide with the demand on the job market and these two factors, coupled together, might alter the common gender order and make an uncommon gender division of labor acceptable in such a way that it was the wife who went out and the husband who stayed home. Surveys conducted in Hunan and Sichuan show, besides, that some migrant women workers continue to send money to their parent homes, a fact which suggests certain changes in gender relationship.⁶⁴ In interviews with women workers in Shenzhen, Li Jingjun⁶⁵ has found that the explanatory pattern based on "family strategy" was a failure, for the motivations of women's exodus included their eagerness to pursue personal goals and free themselves from family burden and parents' demands.

8. Residence registration system and urbanization

A specific survey by the task force for rural economic studies of the Ministry of Agriculture⁶⁶ shows that over 22% of the rural workforce is or have once been outside their home village, and less than one third of them have returned home. On top of that, of those who have returned over a half possibly will go out again and of those who have never gone out nearly one fourth also want to. A survey by Li Lulu⁶⁷ of the newcomer population in three cities also shows that some 50% of the “floating population” want to settle down where they’ve wound up and most of them don’t want to go back to the countryside unless they are forced to. Less than 10% want to go back to their homes. Such a multitude continuously streaming into the cities poses an increasingly serious challenge to the existing urbanization policy and its bottleneck: the *hukou* system.

In Li Qiang’s opinion,⁶⁸ as compared with what happened in the developed countries, China is faced with three dilemmas in its urbanization process. Firstly, with the process far from gradual, China has to solve long-accumulated problems in a short time, which will bring with it imbalance in development. Secondly, there is an enormous regional gap, with the developed areas already at the second stage but the underdeveloped areas still at the initial stage of urbanization, which makes it difficult to implement a unified policy. Thirdly, under the heavy burden of population pressure, China is faced with the need not only for new infrastructure building in its urbanization drive, but also for arduous efforts on the part of its hundreds of millions of inhabitants to change their lifestyles. Therefore, he argues, multiple patterns should be allowed to co-exist when it comes to urbanization.

In terms of social stratification, he believes that the *hukou* system is a kind of “social closure,” essentially aimed at setting up some kind of order among people as well as between man and resources. Over the two decades of reform, he argues, property rights, diplomas and know-how certificates have been gradually replacing the *hukou* system in its functions of maintaining order, and the new system, which lends social status to a person based upon his or her postnatal endeavors rather than congenital conditions, should be regarded as more just and fair.

All of the above is a brief account of what is theoretical in the studies carried out in

recent years about rural workforce migration. Some other topics, however, have not yet been developed in this account despite of their fruitful studies, among them the impact of exodus of workforce on rural development, the impact of migration experience on the modernity of the peasantry, problems of education for the children of the migrants, migrant criminality, and administration and policy regarding the floating population.⁶⁹ Limited space renders it necessary to leave these topics for a future account.

Currently, reform is under way as to China's *hukou* system, a series of social security mechanisms in favor of *mingong* are being put in place, and urbanization is speeding up. What is essentially in mind is the strategy of developing small cities and towns and the policy of promoting elite migration. In 1997, the Ministry of Public Security started a pilot experimental reform of the residence registration system in 382 small cities and towns. At the annual session, held in March 2002, of the National People's Assembly, some deputies submitted a proposal calling for "including as soon as possible in the revised Constitution citizens' 'right of migration'." This marks that the institutional changes related to population and workforce mobility have begun to approach the core of these institutions: the residence registration system.

Notes

¹ Among other examples, we can point out the survey conducted in 1995-96 by the Topics Team of the Ministry of Labor about 4,000 rural households in eight provinces, 3,000 *mingong* as well as labor service institutions and employment agencies in four cities; the surveys conducted in 1995 and 1998-2001 by the Rural Economy Research Center of the Ministry of Agriculture about Sichuan and Anhui Provinces; the tracing survey conducted in 1994 by the Institute of Rural Development of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences about 222 villages; the survey conducted in 1994 by the Topics Team of the Institute of Sociology about migrant workers from other regions who were working in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province; the survey conducted by the Rural Section of the Development Center of the State Council in 1995 about migrant workers in the Southern part of Jiangsu Province and Shanghai city and in 1999 about incoming and outgoing migrant workers at the Beijing Railway Station; the surveys conducted in 2001 and 2002 by the Departments of Sociology of the Chinese People's University and Qinghua University about Beijing's permanent and floating population, and the survey conducted in 1995 by Li Peilin, Cai Fang et al. about migrant workers in Jinan city; the survey organized by Ke Lanjun, Li Hanlin et al. about the Beijing population coming from the outside. Besides, there are surveys wherein urban dwellers and migrant workers are put together as a whole, as are the survey conducted in 1998 by the Chinese Research Center for the Promotion of Scientific and Technological Development about the labor

market in the cities of Beijing, Wuxi and Zhuhai, the survey organized by Wang Hansheng and conducted by the Department of Sociology of Peking University about the labor market in Beijing, Nanjing and three other cities, and other relevant surveys conducted by different local governments. Limited space makes it impossible to enumerate the entire bibliography.

² Examples can be found in surveys about the “Zhejiang Village” in Beijing conducted by Wang Chunguang (1995), Xiang Biao (1998 and 2000) and Wang Hansheng et al. (1997) as well as the Zero Point Investigation Corporation (1996); surveys conducted by the Zero Point Investigation Corporation (1996), Tang Chan and Feng Xiaoshuang about the “Henan Village” in Beijing; the survey conducted by Liu Linping (2001) about the “Pingjiang Village” in Shenzhen; the survey conducted by the Topics Team of the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences about the rural workforce migration between Zhuzhen, Sichuan Province, and Hengzhen, Guangdong Province, etc.

³ Examples are the surveys conducted by Han Jialing (1999) and Zhao Shukai et al. (1999) about schools for children of migrant parents; the survey conducted by Wang Chunguang (2001) about the “new generation” of migrant workers; the studies made by the Rural Section of the Development Center of the State Council (1999-2000) about the relevant administrative functions of competent government agencies, etc.

⁵ Xiang Biao, “Migration, Marketization of Traditional Network and ‘Non-State Space’”, in Zhang Jing (ed.), *State and Society*, Zhejiang People’s Publishing House, Hangzhou, 1998.

⁶ Huang Ping (ed.), *In Search of Survival---A Sociological Study of Rural Exodus in Contemporary China*, Yunan People’s Publishing House, Kunming, 1997, pp. 3-8.

⁷ Que Xuewei, “Social Mobility and Relationship Trust ---Another Contribution to the Question of Relationship Strength and *Mingong*’ Jobseeking Tactics,” in *Shehuixue Yanjiu*, 2003, no. 1.

⁸ Qu Jingdong, “Relationship Strength in the World of Life --- Locus of the Lives of Urban Population Coming from the Rural Areas,” in Ke Lanjun and Li Hanlin (ed.), *Rural People in Cities --- Floating Population in China’s Large Cities*, Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe, Beijing 2001.

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⁹The same as Note 4.

¹⁰ Zhao Shukai, *Crisscrossing the Cities and the Countryside --- Rural Workforce Migration Observed and Studied*, China Agriculture Publishing House, Beijing, 1998, pp. 61-69.

¹¹ Beijing Zero Point Market Survey and Analysis, Inc., “Naked People --- a Report on the State of Organization of Migrants in Beijing,” 1995, a paper later presented to the International Workshop on Rural Workforce Migration in China, Beijing, 1996.

¹² Li Hanlin, “Relationship Strength and Virtual Communities --- A Viewpoint on Rural Migrant Workforce Studies,” a paper presented to the Workshop “Rural Workforce

Migration --- Current Situation, Trends and Policy,” sponsored by the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 1996.

¹³ Liu Linping, “Relationship Use in New-Come Communities --- a Case Study about the ‘Pingjiang Village’ in Shenzhen,” *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue*, 2001, no. 5.

¹⁴ The same as Note 7.

¹⁵ Xiang Biao, *Border-Spanning Communities --- History of the ‘Zhejiang Village’ in Beijing*, Sanlian Shudian, Beijing, 2000.

¹⁶ The same as Note 5.

¹⁷ Wang Chunguang, *Social Mobility and Social Restructuring --- A Study About the ‘Zhejiang Village’ in Beijing*, Zhejiang People’s Publishing House, Hangzhou, 1995.

¹⁸ Wang Hansheng, Liu Shiding, Sun Liping and Xiang Biao, “The ‘Zhejiang Village,’ a Peculiar Form of Chinese Farmers’ Entry into the Cities,” in *Shehuixue Yanjiu*, 1997, no. 1.

¹⁹ Xiang Biao, “What is the Community for?” in *Shehuixue Yanjiu*, 1998, no. 6.

²⁰ The same as Note 15.

²¹ Li Hanlin and Wang Qi, “Tie Strength as a Form of Organization of a Community,” in Ke lanjun and Li Hanlin (ed.), *Rural People in Cities -- Floating Population in China’s Large Cities*, Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe, 2001.

²² For example, Du Ying and Bai Nansheng (ed.), *Leaving the Countryside --- A Positive Study about China’s Rural Workforce Migration*, Jingji Kexue Chubanshe (Economic Sciences Publishing House), Beijing, 1997, p. 34; Cai Fang, *Problems of China’s Floating Population*, Henan People’s Publishing House, Zhengzhou, 2000, pp. 47-56.

²³ For example, Huang Ping (ed.), *op. cit.* in Note 6, 1997, p.79; Du Ying and Bai Nansheng (ed.), *op. cit.* in Note 22, 1997, p. 40, .

²⁴ For example, Du Ying and Bai Nansheng (ed.), *op. cit.* in Note 22, 1997, pp.44-52; Cai Fang, *op. cit.* in Note 22, 2000, pp. 081-084.

²⁵ For example, Du Ying and Bai Nansheng (ed.), *op. cit.* in Note 22, 1997, pp.52-56; Cai Fang, *op. cit.* in Note 22, 2000, pp. 145-159.

²⁶ For example, Du Ying and Bai Nansheng (ed.), *op. cit.* in Note 22, 1997, pp. 81-82; Cai Fang, *op. cit.* in Note 22, 2000, pp. 014-015.

²⁷ The same as Note 6, p. 78.

²⁸ Wen Jun, “From Choices Based on Survival Reason to Choices Based on Social Reason: A Sociological Analysis of the Motivations for the Exodus of Chinese Peasants in Search of Jobs,” in *Shehuixue Yanjiu*, 2001, no. 6.

⁴ Li Peilin, “Migrant workers’ social network and social status”, in *Shehuixue Yanjiu*, 1996, no. 4.

⁴ Li Peilin, “Migrant workers’ social network and social status”, in *Shehuixue Yanjiu*, 1996, no. 4.

²⁹ Tan Shen, “Family Strategy or Individual Self-Decision? --- A Gender Analysis of the Decision-Making Pattern of Rural Workforce Migration,” 2002, a paper presented to the workshop “Rural Workforce Migration: Current Situation, Trends and Policy.”:

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³¹ Li Qiang, “Occupational Mobility of *Mingong* in China’s Large Mainland Cities,” in *Shehuixue Yanjiu*, 1999, no.5.

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- ³² Li Qiang, "Stratification in China's Household Registration and Social Status of *Mingong*," in *Forum for Zhongguo Dang Zheng Ganbu Luntan* (Forum for Chinese Party and Government Cadres), 2002, no. 8.
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- ⁴⁰ Li Qiang, "*Mingong* in Cities and Irregular Urban Employment," in *Shehuixue Yanjiu*, 2002, no. 6.
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- ⁴³ Wang Xiaoyi, "Newcomers in Villages --- Formal and Informal Institutional Constraints on Population Migration Between One Place to Another in the Countryside," 2002, a paper presented to the workshop "Rural Workforce Migration: Current Situation, Trends and Policy."
- ⁴⁴ See Notes 32 and 33.
- ⁴⁵ Tang Can and Feng Xiaoshuang, "Differentiation Among the Migrant Rural Workers in the 'Henan Village'," in *Shehuixue Yanjiu*, 2000, no. 4.
- ⁴⁶ The same as Note 4.
- ⁴⁶ The same as Note 4.
- ⁴⁷ The same as Note 45.
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- ⁵³ Gao Xiaoxian, *op. cit.* in Note 51, 1994; Fei Juanhong, "Reform in China's Agriculture and Gender Division of Labor," in *Shehui Kexue Yanjiu*, 1994, no. 2.
- ⁵⁴ Gao Xiaoxian, *op. cit.* in Note 51, 1994.
- ⁵⁵ Generally, for one woman going out there are three men doing so. Some studies suggest an ascending tendency of the percentage of women going out. See Tan Shen, "Gender Differences in Rural Workforce Migration," *Shehuixue Yanjiu*, 1997, no. 1.
- ⁵⁶ For example, Du Ying, Bai Nansheng et al., *op. cit.* in Note 22, 1997, pp.40-56; Cai Fang, *op. cit.* in Note 22, 2000, pp. 152-159; Si Xiu, in Cai Fang (ed.), *Population Floating in China: Forms and Ways*, Social Sciences Documentation Publishing House, Beijing, 2001, p. 130.
- ⁵⁷ See Note 49.
- ⁵⁸ Jin Yihong, *op. cit.* in Note 50, 2000, pp. 92-99.
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--*Translated by* Chen Yongyi *and* Zhang Zhiping

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