

Gender Difference in the Migration of Rural Labor

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I. Difference in General: Quantity and Structure

According to the classification of the population census of 1990, employment in the industrial and business sectors and marriage were the two main ways by which able-bodied rural people moved out of the countryside. The "migration of rural labor" refers to the movement of rural laborers seeking employment in the industrial and business sectors in the cities.

The population census of 1990 showed that men accounted for 51.6% and women 48.3% of the rural migrants aged 15 years and older. The number of the migrants who had jobs was 14.228 million, of which men made up 54.0% and women 46.0%. However, of the 7.254 million migrants who were employed in the industrial and business sectors, men constituted 69.40% while women made up only 30.6%, the ratio being 2.3 to 1. On the other hand, men constituted only 8.6% of the 4.109 million rural residents who migrated because of marriage, while women accounted for the remaining 91.4%. In other words, 93.4% of male migrants entered the industrial and business sectors while 62.80% of female migrants moved because of marriage.

According to investigations of the migration of rural laborers conducted both in the original homes of the migrants and at their destinations, the ratio of male migrants to female migrants was approximately 2 to 1 over the past one or two years. However, according to an investigation of 75 villages conducted by the Center for Agricultural Research under the Ministry of Agriculture, the proportion of women has been increasing: the ratio of men to women was 3.75 to 1 in 1988, 3.22 to 1 in 1991, 2.57 to 1 in 1993, and 2.29 to 1 in 1994. If there are now 70 million peasant migrants in the whole country, at least 23 million of them are women.

Where do these people go? According to the population census of 1990, 60% of male and 65% of female migrant peasant workers moved within the borders of their own province. In the movement across provincial boundaries, the main destinations for both males and females proved to be the developed coastal areas and large cities. In order of preference their destinations were Guangdong, Shanghai, Beijing, Jiangsu and Zhejiang. However, the movement of female migrants was more concentrated, and nearly 50% of those who moved out of the home province headed for Guangdong province, a total of 65% of the women moved either to Guangdong, Shanghai, Beijing, Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Cross-provincial male migrants were also concentrated in Guangdong, 16% of the total moving to this province, those who migrated to Guangdong, Shanghai, Beijing, Jiangsu and Zhejiang accounted for less than 24% of all male migrants. However, there were numerous male migrants from other provinces, but only a few females, in Xinjiang, Qinghai, Guizhou, Hubei, Liaoning, Heilongjiang and Shanxi provinces.

Surveys conducted in recent years have also pointed to a similar tendency, i.e., most of the rural migrants moved within their home province, a large number of those who left their native province migrated to Guangdong, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Beijing, women were concentrated in Guangdong and other industrially developed

areas.

According to the survey in which the author participated, there were 6.50 million peasant workers from other provinces in Guangdong province, and approximately 3.90 million, or 60%, were women. If women accounted for 35% of all cross-provincial migrants, out of a total of 23 million female migrants, 8 million left their native provinces and half of these women went to Guangdong province, a situation similar to that found at the time of the population census in 1990.

What are the personal differences between male and female migrants?

Age: Most migrants were under 35 years of age (approximately 70-80%); the average age for women was below that of men. Level of education: The level of education of the migrants was not only higher than the average educational level of all rural workers, but also higher than the average level of rural workers in the same age group (Table 1). The educational level of women was lower than that of men. The results of our investigation in the Pearl River Delta Region are shown in Table 2.

Table I Educational Level of Rural Migrants

Unit: %

	Senior middle school and above	Junior middle school	Primary school	Illiterate
Rural population, 15-30 years of age in 1990 census	9.1	47.9	42.9	8.4
Rural peasant workers from 442 counties*	15.3	54.8	23.7	6.0
Migrants to Beijing, 15-44 years of age	14.8	54.8	24.9	5.5
Migrants into the Pearl River Delta Region **	15.9	66.1	17.0	0.9

* According to the investigation conducted by the Research Institute of Rural Development under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1994.

** According to the investigation conducted by this Project Group in 1994.

Table 2 Educational Comparison Between Male and Female Rural Migrants

Unit: %

middle middle school school school

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Women I .2 9.0 68. 3 20.4 1 . I

Marital status According to a survey conducted by the Zero Point Survey Company in 1994 of peasant workers in Beijing and Shanghai, there were roughly the same number of married and unmarried migrants; the proportion of unmarried women was slightly higher than that of unmarried men. Our investigation in the Pearl River Delta Region in 1994 revealed that the ratio of married to unmarried migrants was 15.10/0 to 84.80/0, and that the proportion of unmarried women (84.80/0) was slightly higher than that of unmarried men (84.40/0).

### II. Marriage and Migration

Marriage has a great bearing on migration. For the unmarried, whether or not to go to the city and seek employment depends mainly on their own willingness to move and their circumstances. In matters such as this parents usually do not interfere with their children, whether they are sons or daughters. From our investigation in Guangdong we found that the majority of interviewees were unmarried, and nearly 800/0 had their parents' consent to leave. However, once married, a husband and wife take their family into consideration, and there soon appears a division of labor along gender lines. In underdeveloped rural areas, a peasant's shortcut to a better life or getting rich is to take a job in the city. If possible, husband and wife migrate together. If it is only possible for one of the couple to go, the husband is the one chosen. In a village in Hunan, there were 30 households from which both the husband and wife have migrated, 30 households from which the husband has migrated, and only two households from which the wife has migrated. This means that the possibility of women moving out after marriage is reduced by half. The feminization of agriculture discussed by some researchers in recent years refers to this phenomenon Men move into non-agricultural occupations while women stay on the land. It can thus be seen that while a sense of family responsibility has encouraged men to migrate, it has imposed restraints on women doing the same.

In a case when both husband and wife move out, the husband usually goes first and, after he has become firmly established, he returns for his wife. The gender division of labor established in their native place will be copied in their new home The husband earns money to support the family while the wife takes

care of the children. does household chores and, if possible, takes up some odd jobs to help out with the family expenses, hence the secondary migration of the wife .

In the eyes of the peasants, employment in non-agricultural sectors is more promising than tilling the land. Whenever such an opportunity occurs, the man always takes precedence. After marriage a woman is relegated to a secondary role and her development is subordinate to that of her husband. Only when it is

impossible for the husband to assume the main responsibility for the family does the wife rise to prominence in an alternative role.

Since the introduction of reform and opening-up great changes have taken place in marriage and family life in rural areas, for example, more independence in choosing a spouse, greater equality within the family, higher incomes and development opportunities for women and therefore greater respect and incentive. However, mobility only has a limited role to play in changing tradition. No matter how long they stay in the cities, migration is only a transitional stage. Because of the existing household registration and land systems, most rural migrants will be forced, sooner or later, to return to their native villages and to their traditional lives.

It is this ultimate return to their native land that places migrants in a contradictory and marginal state. In the cities, their status as peasants makes it difficult for them to integrate into urban culture, on the other hand, after their return to their native place, their experiences in the city make it difficult for them to merge back into their former traditional lives. There is yet another contradiction for them. Their non-conformity over a traditional marriage makes them

even more marginalized. Many young peasant girls no longer identify with the rural tradition of marriage, but they find it almost impossible to find an acceptable marriage partner in the cities because of their peasant status. Therefore, wherever there is a concentration of large numbers of young peasant girls there has appeared a marginal group of "average unmarried migrant women" who are suffering from psychological stress.

### III. Sex Distribution in Occupations

. It is well known that the job structure in cities has undergone great changes since the reform and opening to the outside world, and occupations characterized by hard, dirty work are left to the peasant workers. However, the sex distribution in these occupations is basically the same as before, the only change is that urban male construction workers have been replaced by male peasant workers, and urban female textile workers have been replaced by peasant girls. Occupations taken up by women are still characterized by their low status and low incomes, and the fact that employees are younger than in other occupations. What influence then does the sexual division of labor have on the migration of rural workers?

Our investigation of the non-native peasant workers in the township in 1974 SOCIAL SCIENCE IN CHINA Spring '98

village enterprises in the Pearl River Delta Region demonstrated that more women than men earned a monthly salary of less than 300 yuan, and fewer women than men earned a monthly salary of more than 500 yuan. Was this phenomenon a result of "unequal pay for equal work.," More than 70% of the interviewees did not think so. The problem is that there is a clear sexual division between occupations and women are employed in those that are less profitable. According to data from relevant departments and similar investigations, in enterprises in the

Pearl River Delta Region, workers have a monthly salary of 300 to 500 yuan. security guards, around 500 yuan, technical workers, 1,000 to 2,000 yuan, and white-collar employees, 1,000 to 3,000 yuan. Women account for a large proportion of all manual workers, and a small proportion of workers in the higher-pay scales. It is therefore not surprising that women's incomes are generally less than men's.

In large cities there are more occupations and types of work available for peasant workers than in purely industrial areas, but some of the occupations are also gender related. For example, construction workers are almost all male. Approximately one-third of all male peasant workers in Beijing between the ages of 15 and 44 years of age work in the construction industry,<sup>10</sup> while the vast majority of domestic helpers, child-minders, restaurant staff and shop assistants are female. In the case of individual traders and peddlers, they usually run a mom and pop shop with the husband as the mastermind and the wife playing a secondary role.

According to a survey of migrants in Beijing, the average monthly income of the peasant workers is about 450 yuan, individual traders and peddlers in the open markets earn more than 1,000 yuan, sanitary workers about 800 yuan, construction workers 500 yuan, workers in the catering trade around 400 yuan, and domestic helpers or child minders less than 250 yuan.<sup>11</sup> In addition, according to a survey conducted by the author among non-local female peasant workers in township and village enterprises in Beijing, they received a monthly income of less than 250 yuan, which also testifies to the fact that women receive less than men.

How does this gender division in occupations come about? This question involves all aspects of the social life of both sexes. Here the author would like to examine the question only in the light of the relationship between institutional changes and the employment of women.

There have been two social transformations in China since 1949: One is the transformation of the ownership of the means of production in the 1950s, during which socialist public ownership and a planned economic system were established. The other is the reform of the economic structure and the establishment of a socialist market economy. The first social transformation gave Chinese women an unprecedented equality with men in terms of employment. However, this equality was achieved because of the intervention of the government to ensure the employment of women, not through the labor market. At that time, the responsibility of the government departments in charge of labor and personnel was to find a job for every (urban) able-bodied person. Even in those years the problem arose now and then of some units not employing women, but this was resolved through a bargaining process that took place between government administrative departments and the enterprises. Corresponding to this practice was the state ideology that "woman can do whatever man can do." "March-eighth woman hot-line work groups," "woman pilots" and "iron girl tennis" sprang up everywhere, signifying women's wholesale entrance into work areas traditionally

monopolized by men.

Once reform of the economic structure had led to reform of the labor system, and especially after the labor market outside the state system appeared, the employment of women immediately became a difficult problem. In the rush to get rid of workers from publicly-owned enterprises, many female workers were removed from their posts in the mining industry, from oil fields and smelters and the machine building industry, if they were able to find new jobs they were usually ones where women traditionally concentrated. If people want to find jobs through the labor market, they can go through the following channels: employment agencies run by the government, institutions, enterprises or private individuals, mass recruitment of workers by units, "wanted" ads in the newspapers, on the streets and at the gates of factories and stores, and private intermediaries. Gender has become a conspicuous problem in this labor market. For example, I analyzed all of the recruitment advertisements in Beijing Daily from January to March 1993 and found that one third of them specified gender as a condition of employment, and reflected the traditional division of labor between men and women.<sup>8</sup> Recruitment advertisements are often seen at the gates of factories in the Pearl River Delta area. Some of them have only a few words: "We want a large number of skilled woman workers." There are two famous employment agencies in Wenzhou: One is for women and the other is for men. In labor markets such as these, a clear distinction is drawn between the sexes in terms of employment.

We can see from the above that equality for women in employment under the planned economy was an expression of the ultimate attainment of equal employment rights for women. However, the fulfillment of this right was subject to interference from traditional ideas such as a deeply ingrained consciousness of gender. Therefore, although women had the same right to work as men, they were not at the same level and did not have the same jobs. As soon as the labor market replaced the government system, the gender-based division of labor was openly advocated and the gap between the sexes in terms of employment became increasingly clear and increasingly wider.

We should gain from this discussion the knowledge that gender differences in employment are related to the time-honored social division of labor between the sexes, to a social culture that is more deeply rooted than the social division of labor, and that changes in cultural psychology are more profound and slower than institutional changes.

#### NOTES

1. For example, in the investigation of 80 administrative villages conducted by the Ministry of Labor in 1995 the ratio was 2.7 to 1, the investigation of peasant workers in Beijing and Shanghai conducted by the Zero Point Survey Company in 1994 showed the ratio was 1.74 to 1; and according to an investigation conducted by the Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in a

village in Hunan province, the figure was 1.84 to 1.

2. There were both adults and children among the 70 million and not all of them were able-bodied

persons. If migrants as a result of marriage were included, the figure for women would be greater. .

3. According to the State Bureau of Statistics, in 1992, 82.80% of rural migrants moved within their

native provinces this figure probably includes those who left their villages but not their native region,

that is, those who did not actually migrate), and 17.20% moved beyond the provincial border (quoted

from one of the "Social Blue Books," [1993-1994 nian Zhongguo: shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce [China

1993-1994: Analysis of the Social Situation and Forecasts] jointly edited by Jiang Liu, Lu Xueyi and

Shan Tianlun, and published by the Chinese Social Sciences Press, p. 73. According to the Project

Group for the "Annual Analysis of the Rural Situation," the figures were 69.80% and 26.30%

respectively in 1993 (quoted from [1992 nian Zhongguo nongcun fengji fazhan niandu baogao-jian

xi [1993 nian fazhan qushi [Annual Report on Economic Development in Rural China in 1992 and

an analysis of the Developmental Trend in 1993], the Chinese Social Sciences Press, 1993.

4. 65% of the cross-provincial migrants were in the eastern part of China (Jiang Liu et al., p. 73).

According to the investigation of 80 administrative villages in eight provinces conducted by the

Ministry of Agriculture in 1995, 20% of cross-provincial migrants were in Guangdong, 11.10% in

Shanghai, 9.50% in Jiangsu, 7.3% in Beijing, and 5.40% in Hubei (the Center for Agricultural Research

under the Ministry of Agriculture, Forum on Migration of Rural Labor, December 1995).

5. The total was provided by the Guangdong Bureau of Labor. It was calculated on the basis of work

certificates. The author took part in the investigation of the migration of peasant workers into the

Pearl River Delta Region in Guangdong and the migrant peasants from Zhongshui Village in Hunan

from the end of 1993 to 1995 as a member of a project group from the Research Institute of Sociology

under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. All the figures attributed to the

Project Group came  
from this investigation.

6. Calculated on the basis of data from the investigation of the migrant population in Beijing.

7. Ji Dangsheng et al., "The Present Condition of Migrants in Beijing and a Study of Policies" in

Zhongguo renkou kexue (Demography in China), 1995, no. 4.

8. The author, "A Perspective on the Present Division of Labor Between the Sexes in China," Fund

tanjiu jiucong (Forum on Research of Women), 1993, no. 4.

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