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The state, the migrant labor regime, and maiden workers in China

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Abstract

Recent research (re)emphasizing the role of the state and the institutional perspective generally neglects socialist economies. At the same time, feminist studies on migration rarely focus on mobility in transitional contexts. Informed by these two bodies of literature, this paper examines how the post-Mao state in China has fostered a migrant labor regime and the incorporation of young, single rural women, dubbed “maiden workers,” into urban work. I argue that the Chinese state has taken on a developmentalist mandate and by doing so has also transformed gender relations in the peasant household and in the urban labor market. By analyzing narratives from a survey of peasant households in Sichuan and Anhui, I emphasize the central role of state policies and institutions, especially the household registration (hukou) system, in channeling peasants to specific sectors and jobs and creating an exploitative migrant labor regime. The incorporation of maiden workers into migrant work and the relative absence of married women in the rural–urban migrant labor force, reflect interactions between institutional controls, gender ideology, and demands of the migrant labor regime. An approach that integrates gender and institutional perspectives is useful because it foregrounds the state’s role in constructing differences based on hukou status, locality, class, and gender.

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Introduction

Most studies on internal migration and the labor market examine capitalist market economies and do not emphasize the role of the state. In transitional

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economies, however, the state is central to understanding how rural labor is incorporated into urban work. During its quest for economic growth, the post-Mao Chinese state has redefined itself in developmentalist terms. Moreover, the state is empowered by control instruments inherited from the socialist period so that it is well positioned to extract rural labor for advancing its interests. Specifically, through the household registration (*hukou*) system, the state is able to erect barriers in an emerging urban labor market and channel rural labor into specific sectors and jobs. In this paper, I argue that in China the state has played an important role in facilitating the emergence of a migrant labor regime, one that is characterized by low wages, manual work, poor work conditions, and other features that appeal to industrial and services employers and enable the penetration of global capitalist modes of production similar to those in newly industrializing economies (NIEs). Demands from such production have triggered a surge of internal migration in China, which is widely associated with the “floating population”—migrants who are away from their *hukou* locations—estimated to be in the range of 100–140 million during the mid- to late-1990s (Di, 2001; Solinger, 1999a: p. 18).

I also argue that the developmentalist state in China is gendered. Specifically, its retreat from an explicit gender-equality agenda has transformed gender relations and enabled the reproduction of traditional gender roles and values. Research in other parts of the world such as El Salvador, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Mexico, has highlighted the gendered nature of policy changes associated with economic liberalization (Cravey, 1998; Kofman & Peake, 1990). In China, likewise, a new developmentalist agenda has powerful gendered implications for the peasant household and for the urban labor market.

The research questions and approach in this paper are informed by two bodies of theoretical works. First, there has been a proliferation of research that challenges neoclassical and neoliberal positions that prioritize market over institutions. Skocpol (1985), for example, calls for “bringing the state back in” to a central place in explanations of social change and politics. Amin (1999), Jessop (1999), and Peck (1994), are among those advocating for an institutional approach in economic geography. Much of this debate, however, has taken place within North American and Western European academic circles and is about their respective countries rather than developing nations. The disconnection of the debate from formerly socialist economies is especially troubling because it is in these very economies that the state’s role is most pronounced and changes of that role are most profound.

Russia and China share some similarities in the persistence of policies and institutions that aim at regulating migration and labor market processes. In Russia, Soviet-period institutions continue to control access to social services and benefits (Buckley, 1995; Mitchneck & Plane, 1995). Similarly, in China, rural migrants’ incorporation into the urban labor market is heavily monitored by the state. In both countries, internal migration is not free but accrues costs such as fines and refusal of social services, and labor markets are young. In this regard, research on international migration may offer more direct insights than that on internal migration for understanding labor and mobility in transitional economies. Studies on international migration highlight the laws and regulations of immigration and

refugee migration (e.g., Farer, 1995), foreign worker programs (e.g., Solinger, 1999b), the incorporation of immigrants into the labor market (e.g., Waldinger, 1992), and segmentation categories such as ethnicity, nativity, and gender (e.g., Wright & Ellis, 2000). They emphasize the state, policy, and institutions. Indeed, researchers have compared Chinese rural migrants with undocumented immigrants in the US and foreign workers in Germany and Japan (Roberts, 1997; Solinger, 1999b).¹

Second, feminist perspectives that emphasize power relations and social hierarchy are especially useful for theorizing the interplay between the state and processes that produce social and gendered segmentation and differentiations (e.g., Kodras, 1999). The focus on marginalized groups and the politics of difference demands that geographic research examine questions of hegemony, justice, power, oppression, and exploitation (McDowell, 1999: pp. 177–180). Feminist theorists emphasize the role of the state in the production, distribution and access to resources and in the construction of gender. Kofman and Peake (1990) argue that the state is not monolithic or consistent and that the form of the state is important. The ways in which the state constructs men and women differently are reproduced in mobility patterns and processes and in the labor market. Feminist scholars studying mobility also illustrate the centrality of household decisions and strategies and intrahousehold division of labor and power hierarchies (e.g., Chant & Radcliffe, 1992; Lawson, 1998; Silvey, 2002). Feminist methodologies emphasize that understanding people's lives enables more equalized power relations between the researcher and the individuals s/he studies, facilitates a bottom-up approach in intellectual reasoning that challenges the assumption that global and national forces are preemptive, and adds richness and texture to the otherwise abstract theorization of the questions at hand (Nagar, Lawson, McDowell, & Hanson, 2002). However, despite some feminist attention on internal migration (e.g., Chant, 1996; Radcliffe, 1991), most of the feminist works on mobility have been on international and transnational migration (e.g., Willis & Yeoh, 2000). In this paper, I ask in what ways the Chinese state interacts with gender ideology and global capitalist production to produce gendered outcomes in the migration and labor market processes within the nation.

In the next section, I articulate the nature of the transitional state in China and the specific ways in which it has redefined itself. Then, I turn to empirical evidence based on qualitative data from a survey of households in Sichuan and Anhui. In the analysis, I focus specifically on narratives that illustrate the role of the state in enabling the emergence and expansion of a migrant labor regime and the institutional and sociocultural bases for the migration and labor market experiences of young, single rural women migrants.

¹ In her study of mobility in South Sulawesi, Silvey (2000) observes that theories of diaspora yield insights that are applicable to not only transnational flows but also population flows within nations.

The Chinese transitional state

During the past two decades, the Chinese economy has undertaken a transition from the former socialist model into a “socialist market economy.” Despite the adoption of market logic, the state continues to see itself as the ultimate planner that guides and regulates the economy. In fact, the “socialist” in socialist market economy refers less to political ideology but more to the very planning (*jihua*) function of the state. Here, the state is broadly defined and includes not only the central government but also local governments and agencies and institutions authorized for planning purposes. Though the state does not necessarily have a unified and consistent approach all the time, its shift toward a developmentalist agenda is undeniable. This shift has greatly influenced how the state redefines itself and how it fosters social and economic transformations. In what follows I describe three changes associated with this shift.

From a socialist state to a developmentalist state

By the mid- and late-1970s, it was abundantly clear to Chinese leaders that the nation’s economic development was lagging considerably behind that of the neighboring NIEs (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) and Western capitalist economies. Losing faith in Maoist approaches that championed socialist egalitarian ideology, the post-Mao state (1976 to the present) is determined to adopt measures that boost economic growth. The latter, rather than socialist ideology, is thought to be able to elevate China to the ranks of powerful nations in the world.

Deng Xiaoping—the post-Mao paramount leader—further set the tone for the economic reforms that began in the late 1970s. His famous quote “It doesn’t matter if the cat is white or black so long as it can catch mice” epitomizes the state’s shift in focus to pragmatism, expertise, and performance. Publicized national goals are typically in terms of doubling or tripling of gross domestic product. Policies that would have been unacceptable during Maoist times, such as marketization, decollectivization, and fiscal decentralization, are now pursued because of their promise to bring about economic growth. The household responsibility system (HRS) that was formalized in the early 1980s and subsequently adopted throughout China’s rural areas, for example, replaced communal production by household farming and is credited for the rapid increase in agricultural productivity (Lin, 1992). The reforms have directly affected peasants’ lives in at least two ways. First, the increased magnitude of rural labor surplus exacerbates the push for peasants to find off-farm work (Banister & Taylor, 1989). Second, abolition of communes signifies the state’s increased disengagement from peasants and from their agricultural work.

The mandate of rapid economic growth legitimizes the “developmentalist” role of the state. Noting that the nation has an abundant labor supply, and inspired by the success of the NIEs, the state decided to advocate a strategy of export-oriented industrialization (e.g., Yang, 1991). Chinese scholars accept this strategy as applications of the “grand international cycle” theory and point to opportunities that arise as more advanced economies search for new sites of investment (Cheng,

1994). Indeed, the state has actively pursued an open-door policy, via export-processing and special economic zones and incentives for foreign investors, and by doing so has accelerated labor-intensive industrialization especially in the eastern coastal areas. Furthermore, past policies that emphasized agriculture have been abandoned and instead the new focus is on diversifying and modernizing the economy by promoting industries and services. For example, cities are encouraged to shift from purely productive agents to consuming entities with burgeoning markets and a thriving service sector (Lo, 1994; Yang & Guo, 1996). By recycling the development ideology and logic that proved to be successful in the NIEs, therefore, the state has become the driver behind the import of global capitalist modes of production that demand a labor regime different from that of the socialist period.

From socialist labor to a migrant labor regime

During the Maoist period, the state's approach toward labor was one based on centralized allocation. Through "unified state assignment," state agencies allocated jobs to school graduates and workers according to national development blueprints. This approach entailed low job mobility and controlled labor migration. In this context, the hukou system was implemented in the late 1950s. Under this system, urbanites were assigned urban registration (or urban hukou) that entitled them to work and gave them access to subsidized food, housing, education and other social services. Open markets for food, housing and jobs were simply non-existent and almost all necessities in urban areas were controlled by the state. Without urban hukou and accompanied benefits, it was next to impossible for peasants to survive in cities. Thus, peasants were bound to the countryside and rural-urban migration was minimal.

Though it is widely believed that migration control is the objective of the hukou system (e.g., Yu, 2002: pp. 15–21), another explanation focuses on the state's development philosophy. In the latter view, the state blocked flows of resources, including labor, from rural to urban areas in order to adopt Soviet-style development model and to extract value from agriculture for subsidizing industry—especially heavy industry. By binding a large labor force to the countryside, this strategy ensured a supply of low-priced agricultural goods for achieving "industrialization on the cheap" (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Cheng & Selden, 1994; Tang, Chu, & Fan, 1993). The premise of this political-economic argument is that the state erected barriers between the city and the countryside in order to advance its interests.

Extending this political-economic argument, I argue that the same urban-rural barriers have been used by the post-Mao state to achieve new developmentalist goals. By maintaining an institutional and social order in which peasants are inferior to urbanites, and by permitting rural-urban migration without granting urban hukou to peasant migrants, the state has created a migrant labor regime that enables labor-intensive industrialization and urban development at low cost. Specifically, the post-Mao state invented a variety of additions and new identity statuses that facilitate the "temporary" migration of peasants to work in urban areas (e.g., Chan & Zhang, 1999; Wong & Huen, 1998). Here, temporary refers to

the peasant migrants' lack of urban hukou rather than their duration of stay (e.g., Goldstein & Goldstein, 1991). In essence, peasants are permitted to take up certain jobs in cities but continue to be denied urban entitlements. In this way, the state makes available a large supply of rural labor for industrialization and urbanization at low cost and ensures that most peasant migrants will eventually return to the countryside without burdening the state.

These "temporary migrants" are attractive to global capitalist investors. Peasant migrants' institutional and social inferiority, and severe labor surplus in the countryside, leave them with few options other than to pursue and tolerate low-paying urban jobs. Without social insurance and labor rights infrastructure, the migrant labor regime is a safe haven for urban and industrial employers that thrive on cost-minimization. In a host of open economic zones especially in the coastal areas, this labor regime is augmented and replenished by continued rural–urban migration which further suppresses wage hikes (Lin, 1997: p. 175). Dormitories are built by factories for recruiting migrant workers and for facilitating long hours of work.

On the surface, the new migrant labor regime in China is not too different from those in export processing zones common to many developing countries, where a cheap and unskilled labor force enables labor-intensive industrialization. What is unique about China, however, is that the state plays a central role in channeling and constraining rural migrants to specific sectors and jobs through socialist control instruments such as hukou. Hukou barriers in the urban labor market result in the crowding of peasant migrants in jobs that are dirty, dangerous, exploitative, physically demanding, and requiring long hours (Fan, 2002; Yang & Guo, 1996). Both government recruitment and social networks channel peasant migrants into construction, garment factories, domestic work, and other jobs shunned by urbanites. In essence, the migrant labor regime is a product of a system that defines opportunities by hukou status and locality and that fosters a deep divide between rural and urban Chinese.

Responding to criticisms of the hukou system, a series of reforms aiming at relaxing hukou control has been implemented since the 1990s (Chan and Zhang, 1999; *China Daily*, 2002; Yu, 2002: p. 379). However, most reforms commodify urban hukou for benefiting local governments' coffer and cream the most competitive rural Chinese for stimulating local economy (*Guangdong wailai nongmingong lianhe ketizu*, 1995; *Blue-cover*, 2002). The vast majority of peasant migrants do not benefit from the reforms. Moreover, the adoption of the reforms is highly uneven and most large cities are resistant to significant changes of the system.

The migrant labor regime is also gendered. In other parts of the world, the availability of young female labor has motivated multinational corporations to invest in export-processing zones (e.g., Chant & Radcliffe, 1992; Cheng & Hsiung, 1992). In China's migrant labor regime, likewise, young, single women constitute an important magnet to global capitalist investors. The latter's employment criteria tend to focus on physical attributes and discipline (e.g., Tam, 2000). Age, height, and gender are almost always explicit in their job advertisements (e.g., Tan, 1996). Factory work targets young, single migrant women because they are constructed to be detailed, able to handle delicate work, and easy to control (e.g., Lee, 1995), while

migrant men are channeled to heavy work such as construction. Urban migrant work is therefore highly segregated by gender (Fan, 2003; Yang & Guo, 1996). In addition, the state's continued prominent role in the migrant labor regime fosters new forms of labor disciplining that is not only gendered but also conducive to the penetration of global capital (Ong, 1999: pp. 38–40).

To be sure, the migrant labor regime is not the only labor regime in post-Mao China. Remnants of the socialist period based on state labor-allocation, and greater job mobility of skilled and professional workers, also characterize China's labor market. The migrant labor regime is, however, a profound testimony to the state's role in using socialist control instruments to foster its new developmentalist goals. I shall now turn more specifically to gender and the state.

From gender equality to "Silence of the State"

Mao's famous statement that "women carry half of the heavens on their shoulders" summarizes a Marxist version of feminism and the logic behind massive efforts to mobilize women to enter the labor force. The Maoist state organized social services such as laundry stores and childcare facilities at the neighborhood level and in workplaces so that women could spend more time at work (Lock, 1989). China today still has one of the world's highest rates of women's labor force participation (Riley, 1996). According to the 2000 Census, 80.1% of the women between the ages of 15 and 54 are in the labor force (Population Census Office and National Bureau of Statistics, 2002: pp. 1241–1242). Other Maoist feminist measures include the 1950 Marriage Law which outlawed feudal practices of male supremacy such as concubinage and bigamy (Croll, 1984). In short, the Maoist state sought to promote a specific gender ideology through top-down policies and legislations. Yet, critics argue that the focus of the Maoist state was class rather than gender and that it emphasized the sameness between men and women rather than their differing social expectations and circumstances (Honig, 2000). Moreover, they point out that the Maoist state did little to challenge patriarchy and women's heavy responsibility in the home (Johnson, 1983).

By focusing on economic growth, the post-Mao state appears silent in gender ideology and has retreated from an explicit gender-equality agenda (Xu, 2000: p. 36). Yet, growth-oriented policies have indeed produced gendered effects that collectively promote patriarchy and undermine the status of women (Park, 1992). The one-child policy, in particular, legitimizes the state's surveillance of women's bodies, invades their privacy, and penalizes fertility. The social vulnerability of mothers and daughters is further reinforced as most couples, especially those in urban areas, have only one chance to produce a son. The HRS—another product of the post-Mao state—also signifies changes in power dynamics in the peasant household. Rather than being part of a commune, the wife is now likely to be subordinate to the husband as he takes on the role of the household head when negotiating with village authorities.

The stipulations of the hukou system have other, perhaps less direct, gendered effects. Until recently, a child born in cities to a rural woman must inherit her, and

not the father's, hukou status. Though in 1998 the State Council approved guidelines that allowed children to inherit hukou from the father (Yu, 2002: p. 394), the bias against rural women remains and their inferior statuses render them among the least desirable in the urban marriage market (Davin, 1998; Fan, 2000). Thus, most peasant women return to the countryside for marriage. As migrants are motivated to maintain close ties with the village and farmland because of their lack of urban hukou (Huang, 1999), the most popular strategy within marriage is one where the husband continues to pursue migrant work and the wife stays in the village (Fan, 2000). In practice, this household strategy of division of labor terminates peasant women's urban work opportunities and reinforces the traditional inside–outside ideology as well as the gendered power hierarchy within marriage (Jacka, 1997). As described earlier, the migrant labor regime is also gendered and is characterized by segmentation by hukou and by gender (Fan, 2000, 2003; Yang & Guo, 1996).

Far from being ideologically neutral, therefore, the post-Mao state has promoted policies that produce gendered outcomes in the peasant household and in the labor market. Even though legal codes such as the 1980 Marriage Law and its revisions in 2001 officially uphold equality between the sexes in marriage and political, education, and labor rights, sociocultural traditions undermining women's status remain resilient. Documented and anecdotal evidence of women trafficking and girl infanticide reflect the prevalence of regressive gender ideology (Davin, 1999: pp. 148–149; Riley, 1996). The state's retreat from a gender-equality agenda in the name of economic development has reinforced, if not endorsed, the reproduction of traditional gender ideology.

The maiden workers

Women constitute a significant proportion of rural–urban migrants in China, and most female rural–urban migrants are young and single. Among the 4.2 million rural–urban temporary labor migrants² documented in the 1990 Census, 28.1% were women. The average age of female and male rural–urban labor migrants was, respectively, 25.4 and 28.3, and the 15–24 age range accounted for 64.0% of female migrants and only 47.1% of male migrants. Respectively 58.5% and 48.4% of female and male migrants were single.

The high representation of young, single individuals among women migrants is observed in other large-scale surveys as well,³ and has given rise to the term

² Rural–urban temporary labor migrants include those who move from villages (townships) to cities, do not have urban hukou at the destination, and select “seeking work in industry or business” as their reason for migration.

³ For example, in 1996, the Ministry of Agriculture conducted a random sample survey of 2820 rural households in Sichuan (1820) and Anhui (1000). A total of 487 households, or 17.3%, are migrant households, defined as those with at least one member working outside the county. The survey included a total of 610 migrants, of whom more than two-thirds (68.4%) are men. Among male migrants, 36.5% are 18 years or younger and 45.0% are single; but among female migrants, the proportions are, respectively, 63.2% and 66.8%.

dagongmei, literally working women or working sisters. Based on a study of a Shenzhen factory, Lee (1995) uses the term “maiden workers” to describe young, single women migrants. She points out that women workers depend on place-based networks and she highlights explanations based on modes of management control and patterns of shop-floor politics. Moreover, she contends that “the state is a less important determinant of workers’ conditions of dependence than are local communal institutions like localistic networks, kin, and families” (Lee, 1995: p. 394). Though Lee’s work adds important insights to the theory of production politics (Burawoy, 1985), she downplays the role of the state in bringing about a migrant labor regime of which the maiden workers are part. In this paper, I use the concept of maiden workers as a point of departure and highlight the role of the state for explaining the presence of and incorporation of large numbers of young, single migrant women into urban production. I argue that the presence and construction of maiden workers should be understood in relation to a migrant labor regime fostered by the state. Indeed, Lee (1995) has observed that investors favor the hiring of young, single rural women because of their association with low wage and labor discipline. What is not articulated in her theorization is the state’s active role in enabling the attributes of low wage, labor discipline, and other features of the emerging labor regime in relation to its developmentalist goals.

Evidence from the Sichuan and Anhui Survey

In order to illustrate the role of the state in peasants’ migration and labor market experiences, I examine qualitative data drawn from a survey of peasant households (NNJYZ, 1995), conducted by the Research Center for the Rural Economy (RCRE) of China’s Ministry of Agriculture. The survey was designed to examine the determinants, patterns and trends of rural labor mobility in China (Du & Bai, 1997: pp. 3–12). It was funded by Ford Foundation and involved a large number of RCRE researchers as well as Chinese and foreign academicians. The project is heavily research driven and is thus less prone to reflecting state agenda than most other works commissioned by government agencies. RCRE is known for its rigor in research and its products have been widely used and cited in scholarly work.

The survey included three villages each from two counties in Sichuan and two counties in Anhui. In each of the 12 anonymous villages, 15 migrant households (where one or more household members had had migrant work experience) and 10 non-migrant households were randomly selected and interviewed during the 1995 Spring Festival—a time of year when many migrants return to the home village. Thus, a total of 300 households were interviewed. In the migrant household, one or more of the household members who had had migrant work experience was interviewed. The survey included a total of 191 migrants, of whom 83.8% are men. As expected, most rural migrant women are young and single, more so than their male counterparts. The age group 15–24 accounts for 75.9% of female migrants and only 25.0% of male migrants; and 77.4% of female migrants and only 20.6% of male migrants are single.

Interviewees' responses are in the form of narratives and are concerned with migration, labor market, the household, and other aspects of rural life. The narratives were transcribed word for word, and the average length is approximately 3000 (Chinese) words. These accounts are an invaluable and rare source of qualitative data that can shed light on migrants' experiences, the institutional and socio-cultural constraints they face, and the logic of the migrant labor regime. While both quantitative and qualitative data are important for feminist research, first-person narratives are powerful means for identifying migrants' agency and household strategies. The empirical part of this paper begins with the lives of people, a bottom-up approach that feminist scholars argue can bring to the fore the experiences of marginalized people in addition to global and macro perspectives (Nagar et al., 2002). The survey was not designed to be representative in a statistical sense, but Anhui and Sichuan are two major origin provinces of rural–urban migrants and as such the experiences of peasants in these two provinces can shed important light on those of peasants elsewhere in China. In the following, I select narratives from the survey that capture the sentiments and experiences shared by many respondents as well as those that illustrate specific aspects of the migrant labor regime and the maiden worker labor force. Migrants' agency in social change, their responses to the state, and the impacts of migration, are not within the scope of this paper but are in part addressed elsewhere (Fan, 2004).

The maiden worker

Maiden workers are a group of workers distinguished by their gender, youth, and single status. Their high representation among women migrants not only reflects traditional gender ideology but is also an outcome of state policies and institutions. Through migrant women's narratives, I shall examine the roles of gender ideology and the state in constructing the maiden worker labor force.

Maiden worker surplus labor

Under the HRS, peasant households contract from village authorities farmland (contract land)⁴ that is allocated primarily according to household size. The problem of surplus labor that had been hidden in the form of underemployment in former communes is exacerbated by population growth and improvement in agricultural productivity. The labor surplus of young women is especially pronounced because most peasant women do not pursue education beyond junior high and many stop after primary school. The decision to quit school may be made by themselves or by their parents, but either way it reflects age-old patriarchal ideology that discourages household investment in girls (Bauer, Wang, Riley, & Zhao, 1992; Park, 1992). The state's retreat from a gender-equality agenda discourages further any efforts to counter traditional gender ideology.

⁴ In return for the farmland contracted from village authorities, the peasant household is obligated to give up a certain amount of its yield to fulfill the contract, which in essence is rent for the farmland.

Between school and marriage, many peasant women in their late teens have little to do apart from house chores. Some have never or seldom engaged in farming because of rural labor surplus. A Sichuan woman left her village to work in Dongguan, Guangdong when she was 17. Her father is a village cadre, and her mother and two older sisters take care of farming and house chores, and as a result her labor is not needed in the household:

I am the youngest in the family, and have never been needed in farming. . . I was just staying at home doing nothing. So, after graduating from junior high I wanted to go out⁵ [to work] (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 247–249).

Likewise, other young women also comment that they had “nothing to do at home” (e.g. NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 121–122, 370–372, 454–455).

Young men, on the other hand, are more likely than their female siblings to be encouraged by their parents to stay in school beyond junior high.⁶ More so than their sisters, young men have access to household resources for improving their human capital. It is not uncommon, for example, for young women to undertake migrant work in order for their brothers to go to school. This Anhui woman left school when she was 18 and before she finished junior high:

My father is a teacher and has an annual income of only about 1,000 yuan.⁷ My mother has been sick and in bed for three years. Her medical bills are very high. . . My grandma is 70 years old. . . Three years ago, one of my older brothers was admitted to the university. This good news, however, meant additional burden on the family. The amount of farmland allocated to us is barely enough for fulfilling the contract (see also footnote 4) and feeding the family, and my father’s income couldn’t even cover my mother’s medical expenses. I had no other options but to quit school and go to Shanghai to work (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 298–299).

Another woman left school when she was 16 and before she finished junior high also because of poverty. She has two older sisters and one younger brother. After she managed to save up some money from migrant work, she wanted to make sure that her brother would have opportunities to go to school, even though his application to senior high was denied:

In 1991 my father had hepatitis and became sick. . . I was in junior high, but since the family was poor and needed money, I forced myself to quit school . . . I planned to go back to school after I saved up some money. . . But it was

⁵ “Going out” is a common expression by the rural Chinese to refer to the pursuit of migrant work; “home” refers not only to the family but also to the home village; and “returning home” and “staying home” refer respectively to coming back to and remaining in the home village.

⁶ Despite the adoption of the one-child policy in 1979, many rural Chinese managed to have more than one child. This is due to relaxation of the policy in the countryside and peasants’ willingness to pay fines or resort to other means, including bribery, to circumvent the policy.

⁷ The exchange rate is approximately US\$1 to 8.3 yuan.

difficult to work and study at the same time. . . . Two years ago my mother also became sick. . . . We just built a house and were in need of money. So I didn't go back to school after all. I was always a good student and have always wanted to go to school . . . I am still sad that I missed the opportunity to study more . . . In June of last year, I returned home in order to persuade my brother to repeat a year [and apply to senior high again] (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 473–475).

Even though she was unable to continue her education, she wants to see to it that her brother seizes the opportunity to further his education. Her story not only illustrates the traditional patriarchal ideology that works against peasant women's agency toward personal goals, but most importantly it demonstrates the gendered expectations that women are more tolerant and should sacrifice for the well being of others, especially men, in the family. Such ideology was to some extent challenged by the Maoist state but is in the post-Mao period largely ignored by the state.

Returning home for marriage

Despite the lure of migrant work, the hukou system and the social order it fosters prohibit peasant migrants to stay in the city permanently. Most peasant migrants are treated as institutional and social outsiders in the urban society, where their opportunities for social mobility are slim (Fan, 2002). Therefore, they must continue to hold on to contract land and plan to use their savings from migrant work for their eventual return to the village. The pressure for women to return home is even more immediate when they reach their early or mid-20s, because of continued prevalence of early marriage in the countryside. Parents are eager for their daughters to find a husband during their "marriageable age" and before they become "too old." This 23 year-old Sichuan woman, for example, is pressured by her parents to give up migrant work:

My parents think that I have reached the age for getting married and are eager that I find a husband. They don't want me to go out anymore (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 26–28).

Institutional barriers also explain peasant women's returning home for marriage. Even though they may have stayed in urban areas for an extended period of time, their lack of urban hukou and their rural background render them the least desirable in the urban marriage market. A 23-year-old Anhui woman, who is engaged to a man from her native place and plans to get married in two years, comments:

I have never considered finding a husband in Shanghai (where I work as a nanny). Among Shanghai natives, only men who are twice our age, widowed, or disabled, would marry rural women (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 511–512).

Similarly, a 22-year-old Sichuan woman who has done migrant work for 6 years plans to return home for marriage:

For sure I'll return to the home village to find a husband. It's unrealistic to try to find a husband 'outside.' ... Among the urban natives, only the disabled are willing to marry migrant women; very few urbanites would marry migrant women because of affection. I am going to find a husband from home. ... Migrant work is not a long-term strategy. I'll return when I am 24 or 25 years old (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 176–180).

In short, the outsider status of peasant women limits not only their access to urban jobs but also their access to prospective mates in the urban market. Returning home for marriage means that migrant work is only but a short episode during their youth.

Married women staying in the village

As in many other parts of the world, where married women are expected to take up caregiving roles in the family (e.g., McDowell, 1999: p. 126), marriage signals a termination of migrant work for peasant women in China. This is illustrated by the sharp drop in mobility among rural women in their late 20s and early 30s and the small proportion of married migrant women in the urban labor force (Fan, 2000). Married men, on the other hand, are less constrained to pursue migrant work. This gender difference is attributable to both traditional gender ideology and the hukou system. First, the age-old notion that men are responsible for the "outside" and women for the "inside" is reproduced in today's rural China where married women are tied not only to the home but also to the village and farm work (Jacka, 1997). Second, lacking urban hukou and access to urban services, peasant migrants are encouraged to pursue a household strategy whereby some household members remain in the village. Such division of labor enables peasant households to take advantage of migrant work opportunities and at the same time cling on to farmland and the village for the migrants' eventual return. More than likely, it is the husband that migrates to work while the wife stays in the village to take care of farmland, household cores and children. This strategy reinforces the inside–outside ideology and accelerates the feminization of agriculture that has been observed by many researchers (e.g., Davin, 1998; Jacka, 1997). To this Sichuan man, who works as a construction worker in Beijing, the ability to stay in the village to farm is an important criterion for a wife:

I had had several girl friends ... I was looking for someone who was capable and could take care of the farmland while I worked as a migrant. My wife is indeed very capable. She can take care of all the farm work by herself (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 164–167).

In addition to the practical value of a husband–wife division of labor, married women, and even single women who are engaged, are expected to be content with village life. They are discouraged from pursuing migrant work because of the perception that the outside is disorderly and unpredictable, especially compared with village life that connotes order and security. This 24-year-old Anhui woman describes the pressure on peasant women to stay home:

In our village, most women my age are already married. After they get married most will not pursue migrant work anymore . . . In our village, there is a common perception that migrant women are more loose. Therefore, after you are engaged, your fiancé and his family would discourage you from migrant work. . . . (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 505–507).

Her experience illustrates the traditional gender ideology that women are defined in relation to marriage and that marriage, even engagement, legitimizes the transfer of a woman's labor and autonomy to the husband's household.

From the supply side, therefore, rural married women are largely discouraged from migrant work. At the same time, the migrant labor regime is one that targets especially maiden workers, to which I shall turn.

Maiden workers and the migrant labor regime

I have advanced the notion that the Chinese state has fostered a migrant labor regime to attract domestic and foreign investors and to boost industrialization via capitalist modes of production. Below I shall describe the roles of the state and social networks in channeling women migrants to urban work, and the conditions of migrant work with special reference to maiden workers.

Recruitment and networks. The state plays both direct and indirect roles in incorporating peasant migrants into urban work. First, local governments are actively involved in recruiting and exporting workers from rural origins (Liu, 1991). Second, because of the state's bias toward urbanites, most peasant migrants do not have access to institutional resources and must rely on social networks for labor market information. Thus, new migrants repeat the work patterns of experienced migrants. Both recruitment and social networks enable the expansion of the migrant labor regime.

Recruiters do not recruit randomly, but use criteria that fulfill the demands of the migrant labor regime. This 21-year-old Sichuan woman describes how employers coordinate with government agencies to organize the incorporation of peasants into urban work:

The county labor agency came to recruit workers for an electronics factory in Guangzhou. . . . They required junior high education and had body height requirement. They also tested my eyesight. . . . We paid a total of 500 yuan, including a deposit of 100 yuan to the factory, 50 yuan for the county labor agency, and transportation fee. That money is from my parents. . . . The county chartered a train car and sent some people to take us to the factory (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 174–176).

Social networks serve as conduits of labor market information and reinforce the channeling of migrants to sectors and jobs that experienced migrants are engaged in (see also Fan, 2004). Fellow villagers inform one another how to look for jobs. For example, several women in one Anhui village took off on their own to a specific employment agency in Beijing not because they were recruited but because

they learned of this agency from other fellow villagers (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 349–350). Another Anhui woman describes how she found work as a nanny:

There are many domestic work employment agencies in Shanghai, mostly organized by street committees or residents' committees.⁸ They help you connect with employers. They charge both the employer and the employee a fee (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 505–507).

At both the origin and the destination, therefore, government agencies play a significant role in recruiting the type of labor desired by urban employers. These agencies may be associated with town or county governments in the countryside, or with various levels of governments in the city. Recruited migrants, together with those relying on social networks, are channeled to specific sectors and jobs designated for rural labor, and their arrival continues to boost the migrant labor regime.

The conditions of migrant work. The inferior positions of migrant workers are precisely the feature of the migrant labor regime that attracts global capitalist investors. The constraints migrants face in urban areas and their plan to eventually return home explain their willingness to tolerate exploitation, short tenure, and absence of job mobility. Their wages are low by urban standards, in part due to the large supply of rural labor and in part because of the distorted labor market where migrants are crowded into specific types of jobs. The former reflects the neoclassical logic of supply and demand, but most importantly the latter underscores the institutional barriers in the labor market that put further downward pressure on wages. The urban labor market is not only segmented between locals and peasant migrants but also by gender. Factory work and domestic work are mostly reserved for migrant women, and migrant men are channeled to construction and heavy manual work (e.g., Fan, 2000; Yang & Guo, 1996).

Among women migrants, young and single individuals are especially appealing because they are perceived to fit the demands of an exploitative labor regime. Employers in this migrant labor regime are ageist. Women who are in their late 20s and early 30s are already considered too old. A 29-year-old Sichuan woman decided to try her luck after her husband failed in his migrant work, but she was uncertain if she could find work:

I wasn't sure if factories would hire me since I was older. But I looked young and most people thought I was only 25 or 26 years old (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 65–68).

Women beyond the 30s have even greater difficulty finding urban work. A 41-year old Sichuan woman has no other options but to work in a vegetable farm in Guangzhou's outskirts:

⁸ Street committees and residents' committees are the lowest levels of government administration in Chinese cities.

Vegetable farm is hard and low-paying work. Most migrants don't prefer to work there. But I have no choice. I am too old for factory work. Factories won't hire me. The minute they see my identity card they would turn me away (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 124–126).

Besides age, other physical attributes such as stature are also important criteria for migrant work. For example, this 32 year-old Sichuan woman describes her experience:

I went out one year ago ... I was worried that I would not be able to find work because of my age ... But everybody said that I looked young and encouraged me to try ... A *laoxiang* (people from the same place of origin; same as *tongxiang*) introduced me to work in a machinery parts factory. Initially, I was hired only on probation because the production manager was concerned that I was small and thought that I could not manage the hard work (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 2–4).

The migrant labor regime is one that emphasizes low cost, long hours of work, and minimal disruption to production. Youth correlates with short tenure, low seniority and low wages; and a single status facilitates the demand for long hours and long workweeks. To employers, keeping the machines running and the shop floor occupied is important. Single women who have no families to take care of are therefore more desirable than married women (Lee, 1995). Indeed, employers go to great length to prevent disruption of work. One popular strategy is to deduct or withhold workers' wages for leaves. A Sichuan woman working in Shenzhen laments:

We get a 1 1/2 month's wage as bonus if we don't take time off at all during the year. If we return home for the Spring Festival then we'll lose the bulk of that bonus (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 59–61).

The practice of deducting wages for leaves is quite common, as described by a number of other women migrants in the survey (e.g. NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 65–68, 85–86, 124–126, 127–129, 317–319, 370–372, 497–500). The disciplinary regulations extend to many other aspects of work, including long hours, absence of sick leave, and wages by the piece, all designed to extract as much labor from the worker as possible. An Anhui woman who works in a shoe factory in Luoyang, Jiangsu describes her experience:

We are paid by the piece; so the more we work the more we will earn. ... We work 12–13 hours a day, and make about 200 yuan a month. ... Two years ago, one of my fingers was crushed by the machine. The factory took care of the medical expenses, but stopped paying me wages. In order to make more money, I rested for only one week before going back to work again (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 317–319).

Driven by the desire for increased income and constrained by the low wage rate, migrants have no choice but to work as many hours as possible. A 23-year-old Anhui woman working in a food-processing factory in Tianjin describes this sentiment:

The factory has three 8-hour shifts. Our wages are determined by the number of pieces we complete. . . . Everybody wants to work more, even a few minutes more, in order to make more money (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 294–296).

Foreign and domestic investors that target migrants for labor build dormitories in addition to production spaces. They require migrant workers to eat and sleep in the factories or in employers' homes, and often deduct room and board from employees' wages. This requirement makes it easy for management to impose disciplinary regulations on the workers, facilitates employees to work long hours, and isolates migrants from the world outside the work place. Migrants' work spaces and living spaces are virtually indistinguishable. Even though they work in urban areas, they are in essence entrapped within an environment designed solely to exploit their labor. A 20-year-old Anhui woman working in a garments factory in Changzhou, Jiangsu describes her work condition:

We live and eat in the employer's home (employee-paid), and we work 12 hours a day (two shifts). We are paid by the piece, 0.11 yuan per one meter of cloth, but if we don't knit the cloth right then we'll get a deduction in pay. We have less than 10 minutes for meals (we take turn to eat, since the machines do not stop). After work we mostly just sleep, eat, and do laundry (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 470–471).

Like her, a number of migrant women indicate that they stay in employer-provided living spaces, typically 6–12 people to a room, and that after work they are too tired to go out. For example, this Anhui woman works in a shoe factory in Changzhou describes:

We work 12 hours a day, and the work place is very dirty, with soot and cotton fragments flying everywhere. We are on our own if we get sick or injured at work. We are paid by the piece, with no bonus or insurance. . . . The factory deducts from our pay if we don't make the shoes right. . . . All the 12 workers are women. . . . We all live in the employer's home. . . . We don't eat well, but we try to tolerate it because better food means more deduction from our pay. Because of the long work hours, after work we just want to go to bed and do nothing else (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 370–372).

The blurred boundaries between work and living spaces are consistent with the demand for employees to be always available for work. This demand is more easily fulfilled by single workers who have no family responsibilities. Both on the factory shop floor and in dormitories, young women depend on place-based networks as their main source of practical and emotional support (Lee, 1995). This 23-year-old

Anhui woman who works in a food-processing factory in Tianjin, compares factory life to campus life:

There are many *tongxiang* from Anhui in this factory. We take care of one another and do things together—like taking photographs and going to karaoke. . . . In the four years I was at the factory, no one ever harassed me. Even though I could have made more money elsewhere, I did not want to give up this job. . . . Fellow workers are mostly in their late teens and early twenties, are friendly and full of life. As a result, factory life is a bit like campus life. We seldom interact with the Tianjin natives (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 294–296).

Her experience suggests that social networks are used by migrants not only to find work but also to negotiate their adverse labor conditions and social inferiority in urban areas. In this light, the dormitory that is designed for single migrant workers not only facilitates their incorporation into urban work but also serves the purpose of socializing young women into an environment conducive to exploitation and to global capitalist production.⁹

Migrants share the sentiment that when faced with exploitation there is little that they can do. The state not only disengages itself from peasants' livelihood in rural areas but also does not address labor interests in migrants' destinations. The silence of the state is not an accident but is rather a prescribed attribute of the migrant labor regime. This 20-year-old seamstress who works in a private-owned apparel factory in Jiangsu provides a succinct analysis:

I work 17 hours a day. I start working early in the morning, and go to bed in the evening only when I am extremely tired. . . . Every job is the same. The employers make big money, and what we make is not even worth their change. . . . These bosses always want to find ways to squeeze our pay. . . . Nobody in the government, either at home or at the destination, speaks for us. If governments at both ends provide specific agencies to offer us support, then we can have a place to turn to when cheated by employers. . . . Even though we know we are exploited, we have no choice but to work as hard as possible in order to make more money (NNJYZ, 1995: pp. 470–471).

Many other migrant workers give similar accounts of their work conditions. Their institutional inferiority—an outcome of state policy—leaves them with few options for economic betterment other than tolerating the rampant exploitation of the migrant labor regime.

⁹ Cravey (1997), in her work on Mexican maquiladoras, also highlights how worker dormitories contribute to highly exploitative labor relations in a new factory regime.

Summary and conclusion

The state continues to be prominent in transitional economies, though in academic research these economies remain peripheral to the mainstream debate about the state. I have argued in this paper that an institutional perspective must be central to understanding how rural labor is incorporated into urban work in the Chinese economy. I have shown that the state continues to have access to control instruments inherited from the socialist period, which are used to stiffen urban–rural hierarchy and foster a migrant labor regime, one that is attractive to global capitalist production. By doing so, the state has reinforced the construction of differences, defined by hukou status, locality, class, and gender. In this regard, feminist studies that focus on questions of hegemony, power and marginalization and argue for understanding people's lives have provided especially useful intellectual and methodological insights for this work.

I have shown that the post-Mao state has redefined itself in three ways, all related to its economic growth mission. First, a socialist ideology is replaced by a developmentalist one, which entails policies that aim at improving productivity and facilitating the penetration of global capitalist production. Second, the state uses socialist control instruments, especially the hukou system and the status-based social order that has ensued, to foster an exploitative migrant labor regime. This is a regime characterized by rural–urban and gender segmentation, low wages, poor work conditions, long hours, and minimal disruption to production, all designed to extract as much labor, albeit generally unskilled, from young rural migrants. Young, single migrant women are especially sought after because of their institutional and social vulnerability. The blurred boundaries between work and living spaces, for example, are designed for young women to be always available for work. Third, the state has retreated from the Maoist gender-equality agenda to a relatively silent position, but the reform policies it implemented are collectively regressive and have encouraged the reproduction of traditional gender ideology in the peasant household and in the urban labor market.

Narratives from the Sichuan and Anhui survey show that the incorporation of maiden workers into urban work reflects interactions between institutional controls, traditional gender ideology, and demands of the migrant labor regime. Facing severe labor surplus and poverty, peasants are motivated to strategize, including finding off-farm work, for survival. Both recruitment by government agencies and social networks channel peasant migrants to an exploitable migrant labor regime, which offers opportunities for them to improve their economic well being. Migrant work, however, constitutes only an episode of peasant women's youth between school and marriage. Their returning home for marriage reflects both social and institutional (hukou) barriers in the urban marriage market. Moreover, the role of the state penetrates into peasant households, as they derive strategies to take advantage of migrant work opportunities and at the same time hold on to the farmland as a long-term security. Within marriage, therefore, peasant women are largely blocked from migrant work because of household division of labor and also because of the migrant labor regime's preference for young labor.

Peasant migrants are institutionally and socially inferior in urban areas and can do little to context exploitation in the migrant labor regime. Though some migrants eventually became entrepreneurs and some return migrants managed to foster positive social and economic changes in the countryside (Fan, 2004; Ma, 2002), the vast majority of peasant migrants continue to be marginalized and disenfranchised in the city.

Findings from this study suggest that the state remains extremely central for understanding internal migration and labor markets in transitional economies. This paper has also sought to emphasize two directions for future research. First, researchers who have emphasized the role of the state in Western Europe and North American economies should be pushed to including developing countries and transitional economies in their theorization. Second, feminist scholars who have focused their work on international and transnational migration should also examine how integrating feminist and institutional perspectives can produce insights for understanding mobility and labor within the national boundary.

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