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Grass Roots Activism for Rural Women in China

There are two Chinas, one rich and one poor and I am walking between them.¹

Rural women are the most socially disadvantaged group in contemporary China.² Numbering approximately 400 million in the early 1980s and around 300 million in 2017,³ they comprise close to 50 percent of the female population of the country's 1.3 billion people. Economic reforms introduced since the late 1970s have fundamentally transformed these women's lives, breaking the traditional production mode of village life, dating back some 5000 years. Whereas they previously performed domestic duties, looking after children, weaving, managing some of the farm work, today, many rural women move between the village and the cities, some forced to manage the farms left behind by their husbands, others are forced to migrate to cities to find employment to support family members, which are 'left behind' – mainly the sick, the young and the aged. Both groups of women suffer social and structural discrimination. Those women in farm-based villages now perform up to 70% of farm labour,⁴ in addition to their traditional burden of caring for dependents. Migrant women of the 'floating population' between rural and urban locations, comprising over 102 million in 2019,⁵ on the other hand, face discrimination in housing, employment, personal life, and through government regulations that favour city dwellers. Whether living in the villages or cities, they have little education, are overworked, underpaid, and have few legal protections. Yet, there are still very few channels through which they can voice their concerns or seek social justice.

Since the World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, a number of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) have been established in China with the aim of advancing women's equality, including the status of rural women living both 'at home' and in the cities. These NGOs work with the All-China Women's Federation, or 'Fulian', a hierarchical, top-down, government organization which also has NGO status. Unlike 'Fulian', many of the new NGOs have undertaken women and development projects modelled on United Nations development for women programs. Designed to investigate the lives, needs and desires of rural women and to enhance women's capabilities in the new market driven economy,

1 Xie Lihua: Interview 2011.

2 The research data was collected on a field trip to Beijing in 2011 when Professor Kay Schaffer and I were working on the book 'Women Writers in Postsocialist China'. I would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Professor Kay Schaffer to this research output.

3 NBSC 2017; Ming Lu, Yiran Xia: Migration in the People's Republic of China; Rachel Murphy (ed.): Labour Migration and Social Development in Contemporary China.

4 Xie Lihua: China's Rural Women: Suicide Report, p. 4; Zhiping Wu: An Investigation of Chinese Rural Women's Lives, p. 5.

5 NBSC 2019; Ming Lu, Yiran Xia: Migration in the People's Republic of China.

these NGO organizations offer rare and limited but significant venues in which rural and migrant women's voices can be heard, their problems acknowledged.

One such organization is the Cultural Development Center for Rural Women in Beijing, an organization which Kay Schaffer and I visited twice in 2011, conducting interviews with Xie Lihua, Founding Member and Board Director, and Wu Zhiping, Director of the Cultural Development Center for Rural Women, as well as several staff members and volunteers. The grass roots work of the Center stands virtually alone as an urban-based organization with a mission to improve the lives of rural and migrant women in China.

Xie Lihua

Like many of the women researchers whose work focuses on the problems faced by rural women, Founding Director Xie Lihua has direct personal experience of rural life that motivated her career and commitment. Born in Shandong Province in a small village, the second daughter in a family of three children, her life story aligns with many aspects of the dilemmas faced by rural women's dislocated lives, typical of the 'floating' migration movement, when in the 1980s China opened up to the world, millions of labourers from the countryside, became a sea of people floated to the cities for work. In 1957-8, when Xie was five years old, her mother left the village to join her father, who was working in Beijing in the textile industry. Xie Lihua went with her mother, after Xie's maternal grandmother committed suicide by taking rat poisoning. The grandmother had been the first of her grandfather's two wives. After producing two daughters, her husband took a second wife, who also had two daughters. It was a time of famine, her grandmother received no support from her former husband or from her other relatives, and she took her own life as a sign of her desperation. Her grandmother's suicide provided a life-long lesson for Xie who only escaped the fate of village girls and women of 'floating' migration by accident, when she was relocated to the city with her mother. Once in Beijing, she took advantage of opportunities unavailable to her counterparts, having access to health care and education, and eventually established a career as a journalist. She has devoted her career to working on behalf of rural women for twenty years.

In her career as a journalist for the 'China Women's Daily' newspaper, Xie rose quickly through the ranks, eventually becoming the Deputy Editor-in-Chief. While working on the newspaper in 1992, Xie returned to her hometown of Shandong to talk 'heart-to-heart' with the women there. She reports that, "in my adulthood, I have become one of Beijing's residents, but the moment I set foot on the soil of my hometown, I hear the rich village sounds and taste our local food, I truly feel that my roots are still deep in the earth of the village".⁶ Accustomed to top down directives, the village women initially would not speak. She only gradually won their trust as a former village 'sister'. Ever cognisant that but for an accident of fate, she could have been one of these women, living in poverty

6 Xie Lihua: Blog.

and oppressed conditions, she recorded their lives, mainly for a city audience which scorned them. Xie, who has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 and awarded with a US women's leadership prize by Hillary Clinton, devoted her career to working with rural women. Her leadership and initiative led to the publication of the magazine 'Rural Women Knowing All' (now 'Rural Women') in 1993 and the establishment of the Cultural Development Center for Rural Women in 2001.

'Rural Women Knowing All'

In receipt of financial aid from overseas donor organizations like the Ford Foundation, Oxfam and the Global Fund for Women, it began its life in 1993 in the build-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) with the publication 'Rural Women Knowing All' [Nongjianü Baishitong] (now 'Rural Women'), a magazine dedicated to migrant women living and working temporarily in the cities. The magazine is a rare publication, which enables women to tell their stories and have those stories circulated, creating a network amongst the women and a platform to have their concerns voiced, their claims respected and legitimated. The magazine features articles about education, employment, adjusting to life in the cities, legal rights and government policies. Directed towards a readership of women aged between 16 and 45 with at least primary school education, a majority of whom belong to the 'floating population' of rural workers seeking employment in the cities, it regularly publishes stories submitted by rural women.

Many articles concern the exodus of young women from the country, as so many rural workers leave home for the cities in pursuit of employment opportunities. Articles counsel women about their protections from exploitation and sexual harassment in the workplace and limited chances of employment for rural women who sometimes turn to prostitution in the cities for their income in lieu of legitimate work beyond their reach; others discuss difficulties women face with the 'one child policy' and the fate of girls born to mothers in a patriarchal culture - including illness, depression, despair and suicide; still others document the neglect of public or institutional acknowledgement of the dignity of women's lives, particularly those voiceless and impoverished women living in the country.

In 1997 the magazine announced a themed issue entitled "Is there hope in the 'land of hope'?". It solicited comments and stories from rural women for publication in this special issue. The volume drew a heated and unexpected response. Overwhelmingly, women wrote of the legacy of discrimination against women, bemoaning their humble destiny in families that deny girls education, marry them off without regard to their wishes, leaving them under the authority of their often-brutal husbands. Many women wrote of how they despised their lives from birth. They were living without hope.

In 1999 the magazine sponsored a short story contest on the topic of 'My Life as a Migrant Worker', which drew some 300 stories from rural migrant women. The contest, although confined by government policies and regulations

on publication, afforded women some recognition through prizewinning and publication.

The stories detail the plight of rural women, some as young as 15, who migrate to the city in search of employment. The women experience hardship, poverty, exploitation, sexual abuse, and contempt from their employers. They have no working or housing rights and few legal protections. In addition, they regularly suffer prejudice from city dwellers, who condemn them as ‘prostitutes.’⁷ Many attempted suicides to escape their plight. Zhou Rencong, the winner of this short story competition, comments, “Literature has been my support through all the hard times”.⁸

Several of these stories were translated into English and appeared in the online sociological journal, ‘Intersections’, as well as in a social science text, ‘On the Move: Women and Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China’,⁹ providing the material basis for a western feminist analysis of Chinese migrant women’s lives. The stories detail the young women’s sense of alienation in the city, their difficulties and hardships with employers, and their problems with domestic violence. Although mainly written to a ‘rites of passage’ structure with formulaic, upbeat endings that conform with the acceptable political rhetoric of progress, they nonetheless, in the words of the editors, allow women a voice and a forum for relating their own personal experience which “helps to counteract the urban elite disdain for rural migrants as faceless hordes and [...] encourages empathy for rural women as individual human beings with difficulties, desires, and aspirations much like ‘ours’”.¹⁰

The magazine continues to publish rural women’s oral histories, some of which have been selected into anthologies for publication, enabling wider distribution. One of these, ‘Zhongguo nongcun funü: qinggan zishu’ [‘China’s Rural Women: Telling how they Feel’],¹¹ opens with a preface that calls attention to the importance of this work, not only for the advancement of rural women but for the progress of the nation as a whole. Acknowledging the difficulties of the task, the editor’s comment on the long tradition of Chinese patriarchal culture that denies women their basic rights. They praise the anthology as a contribution to this liberating work.

While in the Chinese mainstream media it is rare to report the lives of the ‘floating’ population the oral histories collected by the magazine stand out to give voices to the silent rural women. The editor locates the book within the international tide of feminism and name the rural women as subjects of human or civil rights and charge the nation with the responsibility for recognizing the oppressive conditions that limit rural women’s lives. Utilizing the language of rights and disadvantage familiar in Gender and Development literature, the editors

7 The presumption is that without the protection of fathers or husbands, these ‘independent’ women are ‘de facto’ immoral, whether or not they turn to sex work to earn a living.

8 Kay Schaffer, *Xianlin Song: Unruly Spaces*, p. 22.

9 Ariane Gaetano, Tamara Jacka: *On the Move – Women in Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China*.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 281.

11 Rongchang Zheng, et al.: *China’s Rural Women*.

focus on the poverty of rural women, emphasizing the need for the dominant society to listen to the voices of disadvantage for the benefit of all social groups.

Another important publication by the magazine is 'Zhongguo nongcun funü: zisha baogao' [China's Rural Women: Suicide Report] (1999) which was the first serious investigation of the issue of suicide of rural women. Edited by Xie Lihua, who had been affected by the suicide of her own grandmother in the country, the report is divided into two parts.

The first part of the publication seeks to explore the reasons behind the exceptionally high suicide rate of rural women. During the period of 1990 to 1994, the death rate by suicide in China ranks second to that of heart related illness, an average of some 324,711 per year.¹² While international literature indicates that the male suicide rate is globally recorded as higher than the female suicide rate, however, in China the reverse is true as female suicide rate is much higher than that of the male population. The number of rural women suicides amounts to more than 170,000 per year.¹³

Xie Lihua's 'Suicide Report' is the first document that gives voices to the young rural women who are driven to attempt suicide. Up to that point these women's voices had been silenced and excluded from the mainstream media, just as they had been ignored by sociological studies in contemporary China. Xie's investigation shows that apart from the thousand years old Confucian ideology which relegates women to inferior social status, the widening gaps between cities and the country and rich and poor in contemporary China have exacerbated the desperation of rural women. When forced to move to cities to find jobs to make a living, rural female migrant workers increasingly face the breaking down of family structures and are even further relegated to the margins of society.

The second part of this suicide report documents some twenty cases of suicide by rural women which have previously appeared in the magazine of 'Rural Women'. These heart-wrenching stories detail issues that go beyond personal tragedy. Arranged marriages, domestic violence, traditional shackles of chastity, Confucian demands of filial piety towards mother-in-laws, depression caused by social isolation, compounded by the current social environment of discrimination against rural residents, cultural expectations of getting rich or being glorious, and lack of legal protection in government policies, all contribute to a network of oppression for this most marginalised social group. With little formal education, suicide is within such cultural social contexts often "taken as an act of revenge in a moral and spiritual sense".¹⁴ Xie Lihua pertinently asks the question "why they are driven to take their own lives".¹⁵ Suicide, for these women, has become the ultimate rebellion and revenge against collective oppression and victimization, especially when they are geographically dislocated, culturally discriminated and socially disadvantaged.

12 Xie Lihua: China's Rural Women, p. 3.

13 Ibid.

14 Meng Liu: Rebellion and revenge, p. 300.

15 Xie Lihua: China's Rural Women.

Beijing Cultural Development Center for Rural Women

The Center itself was established in August 2001, opened by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). In addition to the magazine 'Rural Women',¹⁶ the Center manages a range of services for rural women, including night schools offering skills training for migrant women, practical training centers and capacity-building programs for village women conducted in Beijing, legal aid services and a women's hostel. It hosts national forums on migrant women's issues and runs a blog-site and a hotline – all with an office staff of fifteen workers, aided by several dozen additional volunteers, servicing a target population of some 400 million women. Voted by the Chinese News Weekly as the 'most responsible' NGO in China in 2005, the Center has a mission to "help rural women to establish independent, equitable and happy life", to "develop the capabilities of rural women, protect their rights, and nurture organisations for rural women".¹⁷

The Center has published many volumes directed to the needs of migrant women living in the cities, some are self-help manuals and some are collections of stories: one concerns domestic workers, 'Toushi: Jiazhengong' [A Lens on Domestic Workers] (2008); another reports on the lives of dagongmei (young migrant rural women working as manual labourers, known in China as 'working sisters'): 'Xunmeng: Zhongguo dagongmei baogao' [Pursuing Dreams: a report of dagongmei] (2009); and the most recent, 'Wode Shengyu Gushi' [My Reproductive Story] (2010), addresses male preference and the 'one child policy' in China. These collections provide a variety of first-person narratives, followed by commentaries. Addressed to domestic workers, they give instruction on how to handle difficulties, provide legal advice, and offer solutions to problems ranging from sexual harassment, physical abuse, accusations of stealing, rights to privacy, protections against injuries and salary disputes. Each of the three volumes provides a range of experiences that highlight the need for migrant women workers to be educated about their rights. Intended to engender hope and confidence, the volumes offer a self-help approach. They utilize stories previously published in the magazine 'Rural Women'. Proceeding didactically, in the form of a guidebook, they present a story, followed by a discussion about how the problem might be addressed. In the volume which addresses the dreams and aspirations of migrant manual labourers, the commentaries highlight stereotypes attributed to migrants and contempt of city dwellers, traumas of living an invisible existence in the city, and the like. The third volume, 'Wode Shengyu Gushi' [My Reproductive Story] (2010), focuses on women's reproductive lives, and deals with the impact on women of the demand to produce male babies. The stories lay bare the approbation, abuse, loss of status and humiliation meted out to women without sons, and the risks that women take to ensure that they do have sons. It opens with a preface, directed in part to the women themselves, in part to an audience of city readers, that identifies women's inexperience in sexual matters

16 'Rural women' magazine has since been under the control of All Chinese Women's Federation, no longer run by the Cultural Development Center for Rural Women, and consequently changed the focus of the magazine Xie Lihua established.

17 Beijing Cultural Development Center for Rural Women.

and vulnerability in the cities as a problem of patriarchal social structures and women's lack of knowledge and opportunity, and not low 'suzhi' (inner quality), as the media and common prejudice would maintain. The texts emphasize the need for rural women's self-improvement and empowerment, while also calling for an 'affirmation of their humanity' from city readers.

Wu Zhiping, a retiree who volunteers at the Cultural Development Center for Rural Women, has facilitated in producing several ethnographic studies that highlight the changes in women's lives under the new economic reforms. Wu Zhiping's 'Zhongguo Xiangcun Funü Shenghuo Diaocha: Suizhou Shijiao' [An Investigation of Chinese Rural Women's Lives: Suizhou Perspective] (2008) focuses on the kaleidoscopic changes in the lives of women in the small village of Ye in Suizhou, Hubei Province, population of 1491. Having lived with the women from Ye Village for four years, Wu presents her first-hand experience of the lives of village women as a basis for expounding urgent social issues. She studies the consequences of the shift away from the 'Nangeng nüzhi' (men till, women weave) mode of rural production, to the 'Nangong nügeng' (men labour, women till) mode. Formerly a CCP Party official in charge of Suizhou city's Propaganda department, Wu began this research project investigating the predicament rural women face after being forced into an early retirement.

'Investigation of Chinese Rural Women's Lives' opens with a preface by Xu Yong (2008), a male professor of Rural Society, entitled "The changes concerning rural women who are 'not counted as humans'" (不算人). His title refers to the traditional attitude of not recognizing rural women, as a category, as having any significance in village life. His title is prompted by the name given to Wu's first chapter of the study, "Are there no *ren* [Humans / People] in the Countryside?" It refers to a phone conversation between Wu Zhiping and the village CCP secretary. Explaining her desire to investigate rural women in the country, the Party Secretary responded: "there are no *ren* in the countryside, what do you want to come here for?" When Wu persisted, he responded that "all the young and able-bodied ones have gone out to *dagong* [do manual work], only the aged, women and children are left behind".¹⁸ In China, those people left in the village with the departure of the able-bodied 'floating population' are often referred to as the '38 61 99 army' (signifying women, children, and the aged).¹⁹ The Preface, a typical feature of studies published in China, written by Xu Yong, goes some way towards bolstering the legitimacy of Wu's position under the imprimatur of a distinguished male intellectual. In the website of the book currently still available, Xu notes "Rural women studies is still virgin territory yet to be developed. Peasants live the hardest lives under heaven, those who suffer the most are rural women. [...] Rural women are creating a history we must record".²⁰ Wu Zhiping's

18 Yong Xu: Foreword, n. pag.

19 38 61 99 signifies women, children and the aged in the following way: 38 is a shortcut term that refers to the 3rd of March, International Women's Day; 61 refers to the 1st of June, International Children's Day; and 99, refers to the numeral 9, which in Chinese is a homonym for 'long', as in longevity, referring those who have lived a long time. The issue of left-behind children (numbering 69.7 million) is a direct consequence of migrant women in China, see Tong et al.: The factors associated with being left-behind children in China, n. pag.

20 Yong Xu: Foreword, n. pag.

study is unique in that she lived with the so-called '38 61 99 army', participating in the life of the village and collecting stories of village life from the women. Partly funded by the UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, and the Chinese Ministry of Education, the oral histories collected by Wu Zhiping highlight dilemmas faced by rural women still living in the country.

As the former Chairperson of Suizhou Writers' Association, Wu writes in a polished and highly readable style. Her narratives are steeped in the particulars of everyday life of Ye Village's women: their local customs, emotional and physical struggles, their dreams for a better future and early attempts at village governance. She reports that the number one problem identified by the village women she interviewed is sexual loneliness. Given traditional reticence women have on speaking about their private lives, this is perhaps a surprising confession. It has significant consequences, however. The absence of husbands as sexual partners has led to new social and sexual arrangements in villages, where elder men take it upon themselves to 'service' the women and are sometimes exchanged between the younger wives. This has led not only to a breakdown of traditional family structures but also of traditional Confucian morality. Wu delineates the moral and social costs of these major changes in society, including the abortion and abandonment of girl babies, the increasing sexual abuse of children who are left behind in the countryside with their grandparents by their parents who have gone to the cities to work, the misery of motherhood for widowed or abandoned mothers, and the spread of HIV-AIDS among the poor people, which is not only on the rise because of new sexual arrangements but also because of rural poverty which prompts villagers to attempt to make a living by selling blood.²¹

Wu's prominence as a former Deputy Head of the CCP's Suizhou Department of Propaganda shapes the production, reception, and circulation of the text. Framed within traditional Chinese didactic discursive practices, the text is peppered with photographs of seemingly healthy, happy villagers engaged in a range of productive activities: schooling, mothering, doing craft and farm work, engaged in communal and personal relationships and involved in self-improvement activities, all designed to render a positive image of rural lives. Published by a prominent literary publisher in Wuhan, with an initial print run of 30,000 copies, her mediation of the lives of Ye Village women in Hubei Province has wide circulation. Yet, in her preface, she presents the stories as literature, not sociology out of necessity mainly to avoid political attention, and in her conclusions, she is careful to outline measures taken by the government to assist women in the rural areas. Her study transforms the stories into narratives of self-improvement. In addition, Wu's former official status and that of the publishing house have the potential to garner acceptance for and lend credibility to the conditions of rural women's lives, albeit within officially acceptable parameters. In this way the actual 'Investigation of Chinese Rural Women's Lives' serves to raise the profile of rural women and foster greater understanding of their plight, thereby giving a voice

21 Ai Xiaoming, one of the country's leading social activists, works with poor girls in the south. In one of many campaigns, she filmed appeals of girls who contracted HIV after giving blood and the rebuff of government officials to their claims for acknowledgement and compensation.

to the voiceless, in a society in which these people are 'not counted' as 'ren' and their plight is largely under the political carpet

Many of the Center's publications investigate specific problems faced by rural women. They carry a sociological apparatus, proceeding by way of interviews, oral histories, participant observation and focus groups. Some offer statistical data on demographics, questionnaires, flow charts, and the like. Their discussion and analysis differ, however, from standard western social science texts. Apart from highlighting social issues and offering generalized advice to the women, there is little examination of the social and economic conditions that structure the women's lives, no critique of underlying social conditions and economic structures or recommendations for policy development or action. The empowerment of women and capacity building approach affirms the humanity of rural women. In accentuating women's 'good qualities' - their strength, endurance, resilience, and the like, the research collections underscore rural women's individual responsibility rather than their collective identity and places the burden of change on *their* shoulders. In this it engages with a universalist discourse, stressing the women's similarity with city dwellers rather than delineating their differences or examining the underlying social structures, patriarchal traditions and prejudices that produce difference. The texts produced by the Center collectively address the disparity between rural and urban, poor and wealthy, traditional and modern lives in that they conduct action research with rural women, both in the villages and for migrant women in the cities.

With China increasing its pace to enter the global arena, the grass-root work by 'Rural Women' magazine and the Center has had positive flow-on effects in terms of drawing the public attention to China's most marginalised social group. Many overseas scholars and researchers have participated in the Center's activities and followed its steps to make the voices of rural women heard. Apart from the research in 'On the Move: Women and Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China'²² which published a number of the oral narratives of 'working sisters', the stories collected by Leslie Chang and Tiantian Zheng also contribute to the activist work to bring to light the conditions of rural women, creating channels, though limited, for their concerns to be acknowledged. Leslie Chang, a Chinese-American journalist for the 'Wall Street Journal', travelled to China to interview factory girls living in the cities in order to put a human face to the terrible conditions of factory life that had been reported in her newspaper. She spent two years following two village girls, Min and Chunming, working in Dongguan, a factory town close to Shenzhen. Her study 'Factory Girls: Voices from the Heart of Modern China' (2008) reports on their lives, imagining their internalized worlds, before detailing her own family story of farming life in China in the early twentieth century. She notes parallels between the past and the present; in particular, the reticence of Chinese people to talk about their sufferings. At the same time, she poignantly portrays the sacrifices and compromises that modern Chinese migrant girls must make to survive.

22 Arianne Gaetano, Tamara Jacka (eds.): On the Move.

Another ethnographic account, 'Red Lights', by Tiantian Zheng (2009) documents the US-based scholars' ethnographic research in the north-eastern seaport town of Dalian, one of China's new "special economic zones". Zheng, a native of Dalian, returned to the city in 2000 on a PhD scholarship from Yale. She embedded herself as a hostess at a karaoke bar, living and working with the hostesses and forming close bonds with them, as part of her two-year participant observation study. She details the creative self-fashioning of the young women as they move from 'country bumpkins' to modern urbanites, struggling to maintain their personal dignity and autonomy in the face of cruelty, corruption, degradation and the official Chinese socialist morality of the state. Her sympathetic study does not moralize. To the contrary, she asserts that hostessing, which, in the main, entails not prostitution per se but sexual services, including entertainment, singing, dancing, drinking, and fondling,²³ is the only venue available to migrant women to enable them an opportunity to secure a status with urbanites, acquire access to influential male business and political networks, and support themselves and their village families on wages that far exceed those of other migrant workers.²⁴ In other words, the women engage in hostessing as a means to an end of material and social advancement, often opening their own businesses or becoming 'second wives' of businessmen or politicians. In her complex analysis, Zheng studies not only the lives of her subjects but also the ways in which the performances and repertoires of femininity and masculinity are mutually constituted in the space of the karaoke bar and how hierarchies of social status, mediated by class and gender, are negotiated and reconstituted in its competitive, hypermasculine atmosphere. As Harriet Evans notes, Zheng not only challenges traditional prejudices concerning sex workers but also offers a cogent critique of the collusion between sex work, entrepreneurial capital and state power, and "young migrant women and emasculated men converge in sustaining a sex industry that serves the interests of patriarchal state system".²⁵

In different ways the stories of village and migrant life translated and published in Gaetano and Jacka's 'On the Move', Chang's journalistic account of factory workers in Shenzhen, and Zheng's ethnographic study of hostesses in Dalian's karaoke bars all deepen our understanding of the constraining and enabling features of the new market economy for rural and migrant women. These studies convey to an English-speaking audience the human face of the conditions endured by the legions of young women who are powering China's economic boom.

Since the New Cultural Movement in the 20th century, Women's status in China has been tied to the nation's progress. In their appeal to the audience, contemporary sociologists and women's advocates repeat this familiar ideological move, one re-iterated in the Maoist era dictum 'women hold up half of the sky' as implied equality. By contrast, the recent publications discussed here emerge

23 However, in 2004 at a time of economic slump, the bars changed their policies, demanding that the hostesses dance nude and fondle their clients to test their reactions, an alarming trend that only enhances the exploitation of the women, Tiantian Zheng: *Red Lights*, p. 244.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 179 ff.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

from women-centered sociological critiques and grassroots action research that is grounded in the actual needs and experiences of the women themselves. The moral imperative made by researchers to the larger public to listen, acknowledge, and take responsibility for the predicament of rural women has another valence. It emerges out of a gendered analysis of social relations, adopting the discourse of international feminism utilized by United Nations' sponsored Gender and Development programs and adapting it to national programs for action. This approach extends the local reach of rural women's stories to the global reach of feminist networks within and outside of China. Its effectiveness as a neo-liberal strategy for improving the lives of rural women, however, has several disabling effects. It exists within the hierarchal and authoritarian forms of governmentality, which runs counter to public discourses like 'suzhi' that operate within China to separate rural from urban dwellers and discriminate between them on the basis of their country registration, and it makes its appeal mainly to the moral conscience of urban dwellers in an era characterized by increasing amorality and economic self-interest.

Conclusion

The work of the Cultural Development Center for Rural Women led by Xie Lihua extends the reach of advocacy, documenting the issues faced by women living in the cities as part of the 'floating population', enabling them to write their own stories, using their voices to offer advice in the form of self-help manuals, and reporting on women's needs as a way of maintaining pressure on the government in a time of new economic reforms. The emergence of these narratives by and about rural women makes it possible for readers in China and beyond her borders to contextualize differences between rural and urban-based women, aid understanding of the consequences of massive structural change, evoke empathy for women's difficulties, and advocate on their behalf, sometimes with state support, sometimes in grass roots sites of 'gender training'.²⁶ The advocacy work of the Center provides rare venues which amplify the voices of the voiceless, create new areas of activism, spur calls for gender equality, individualize and humanize the rural women about whom so little is known, and provide contexts in which they can develop their own agency and autonomy.²⁷ In this sense, the work of the Center contributes to the 'unruly spaces' of Indigenous feminism unique in contemporary China.²⁸

Yes, there are many blank spaces yet to be filled in, especially in regard to the destabilization of traditional social structures and the cultural impact of those structural changes, including the degeneration of family life in the villages, the

26 See Zheng Wang, Ying Zhang: *Global Concepts, Local Practices*.

27 Sharon Wesoky: *Chinese Feminism Faces Globalization* and Zheng Wang, Ying Zhang: *Global Concepts, Local Practices* all note that much of the advocacy on behalf of rural women that has taken place since 1992 would not be called 'feminist' in China but rather couched in Women and Development terms like 'gender mainstreaming', or 'gender equality'.

28 See Kay Schaffer, Xianlin Song: *Unruly Spaces*.

sexual abuse of children, and the alarmingly high rate of women's suicides. In addition, there are many ideological barriers to women's equality which are unrecognized by the State, especially when Chinese official policies and practices in the countryside regard male as heads of household, which make it exceedingly difficult for women to play a significant decision-making role in the management of farms and village life.²⁹

The new representational frames offered by sociologists, women's organizations, the Center for Rural Women's Development, and feminist researchers within China and overseas, nonetheless, extend the discursive domains through which rural women gain affirmation and validation for their lives. Juxtaposed against barriers of resistance, stereotype, othering, and marginalization through 'suzhi' discourse – all of which serve to justify neglect by city counterparts and government policy makers, the writings by, for and about rural women enable their voices to be heard and their concerns acknowledged, challenging traditional belief systems and opening up to readers new channels of critical responsiveness to rural people in general, and rural women in particular. The fate of rural women in contemporary China will serve as a measure of the civilisational state of its time.

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