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THE IMPACT OF EXPORT-ORIENTED MANUFACTURING ON CHINESE WOMEN WORKERS

Paper prepared for the UNRISD Project on Globalization, Export-Oriented
Employment for Women and Social Policy

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The Impact of Export-Oriented Manufacturing on Chinese women workers

Although tending the field is very hard work, we have a lot of free time. When your work is done you can play with your village friends. Here you have to hold your urine until they give you the permit to go to the bathroom (SEZ woman worker interviewed in Lee 1995, p. 384).

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the impact of employment in the export-orientated industries of China on women workers and in particular on their access to healthcare and social welfare. It discusses the way in which the economic reforms, the growth of non-state industry, and the development of a labour market have affected non-wage benefits to workers. It shows that women workers in the new export-oriented industries receive high wages by the standards prevailing in the older state industries, but have little job security, work long hours in poor conditions and lack the health and welfare benefits formerly enjoyed in state-owned industry in China. However, it would be an over-simplification to argue that involvement in the global economy has provided higher wages to the Chinese workforce while reducing security and welfare provision. Access to welfare in pre-reform or 'socialist China' was by no means as comprehensive or as generous as is sometimes believed. Entitlement depended on residence and occupation. Urban workers benefited from the system, but peasants, the majority of the population, had little access to public provision. In difficulties caused by bereavement, disability, sickness or old age they had to depend on the family.

Section one of this study offers an overview of the social welfare regimes of China before and after the economic reforms. Section two looks at the female workforce of the export-processing industry, explaining where the workers come from, describing their lives and working conditions and the controls and pressures to which they are subject. Section three considers the ways in which migration and work in this labour force affect women workers' life-chances, family relations and entitlements. Section four looks at state policy towards problems of social welfare. It explains why the state is unwilling to promote social welfare policies either for the workforce in state owned industries or for the new migrant workforce more actively, and considers differences of interest between local and national officials.

1. Entitlements to social welfare in China before and after the economic reforms

Neither in contemporary China, nor indeed in China prior to the economic reforms, did the labour force enjoy universal or equal access to non-wage benefits. The labour force was, and is, highly stratified. The major cleavage is between the urban and the rural population (Cheng and Selden 1994). Both in the past and in the present people registered as urban residents have access to higher status employment and enjoy superior entitlements compared to the rural population. For the urban population entitlements also depend on occupational status. In pre-reform China social welfare was distributed through the enterprise. State employees in government offices, state owned-enterprises and schools enjoyed job security, pensions, paid sick leave and maternity leave, free healthcare and subsidised housing. The treatment of those who worked in enterprises owned by the lower

levels of local government or by collectives depended on the profitability of their enterprise but was always less generous (Davis 1989 and 1995).

Entitlement to welfare was not strictly dependent on gender in this model. Access to entitlements was dependent on an individual's job and was equal in most ways for all employees of the same grade. The dependants of a state employee were entitled to half price medical treatment. Again, there was no gender discrimination here. A woman who was a state employee could have family members recognised as her dependants. The important exception to the gender blindness of the model was housing which was 'by custom' provided to the couple by the man's work unit¹. The female worker's access to accommodation was thus normally through a man, a situation that disadvantaged women in two ways. Those who never married or who divorced or separated had great difficulty in securing independent accommodation. Married women often had to commute considerable distances, whereas their husbands normally had only a few minutes walk from homes provided by the work-unit to the work unit itself.

The major gender discrimination in entitlements however was not in the model itself but in its practical application. Men greatly outnumbered women as workers and cadres in the formal state sector and also predominated in the senior grades. As a result more men enjoyed the welfare benefits associated with this type of employment. They also tended to receive higher pensions because these were calculated as a proportion of final salary. In the smaller enterprises owned by local government or collectives where welfare provision was much less satisfactory the workforce was often predominantly female.

Since the economic reforms, there have been great changes in the social welfare regime in the cities. A labour market is developing (Wang 1998). Although the State is still the employer for much of the urban population, there are now other possibilities. Employment in privately owned, foreign-invested and jointly owned Sino-foreign enterprises is growing rapidly. Prior to the economic reforms, the State allocated school and university graduates to jobs on the completion of their education. Most of them remained in the same enterprise for the rest of their working lives. Now, by contrast, many young people prefer to seek their own jobs and are willing to move on when they think they can better themselves. Even some of those who had secure jobs in the state sector have chosen to give up the security of a job for life in exchange for the greater potential, but greater risk, of business or a job in the private sector. (The Chinese expression for this action, *xiahai*, - 'jump into the sea'- conveys the common feeling that it needs courage to break away from the protective environment of state employment).

The development of large-scale private employment made it necessary to rethink the distribution of welfare. The old system, relying on State enterprises to distribute and even to fund welfare for their employees, was difficult to extend to the private sector. An added imperative was the mounting cost of welfare to state-owned enterprises as the population aged and many former workers became pensioners. The State was increasingly concerned to relieve its enterprises, many of which were struggling to survive in the new economic climate, of the burden of paying benefits under a non-contributory social security system. Interest in the development of insurance-based systems grew rapidly among policy-makers in the 1980s (Krieg and Schädler 1993).

¹ This custom was perhaps an unconscious reflection of the Chinese family system in which a woman joined a man's family on marriage. Exceptions to the system might occur if the woman's work unit had accommodation available and the man's did not. Interestingly, Beijing Municipality made a conscious decision to reverse the usual practice and give accommodation to its female employees in the 1980s (fieldwork notes, 1987).

It is not easy to provide an overview of welfare provision in China today because regions and cities have been required to experiment with their own systems, China lacks uniform national provision. However certain generalisations can be made. Social welfare is increasingly separated from its enterprise base. Provision is decentralised so that local governments are increasingly responsible for accumulation and distribution of social welfare funds. Family responsibility for those who are sick disabled or in need is emphasised more strongly than ever. Both the marriage law and the inheritance law require family members to support each other and relate the right to inherit to the fulfilment of this obligation.

The result of the reforms is that permanent workers in large enterprises are increasingly covered by a social insurance system rather than by enterprise-based welfare. However, enterprise-based welfare has not disappeared. Older workers in state-owned enterprises especially are still often dependent on it. Contract workers, workers in small, collectively owned or private enterprises and migrant workers tend not to be covered at all.

Employment in a state-owned enterprise no longer confers the security or the entitlements once associated with it. As China developed greater contact with the world economy, adopted an export-orientated growth policy and tried to attract foreign investment, the inefficiency and uncompetitive management of state industrial enterprises became more apparent. Under increasing pressure to make cuts, they began to lay off workers and to trim budgets wherever possible. There have been reports of enterprises that reduce their deficits by ceasing to make pension payments for months at a time (Hussain 2000: 11). The State has often had to give subsidies to enable its enterprises to discharge their welfare obligations. Welfare rights formerly enjoyed by state workers have gradually been eroded. Job security for life has come under particular attack. It was said to make workers complacent and give them no incentive. This sort of allegation has been used to justify the large-scale lay-offs and changes in contract conditions since the start of the economic reforms. In October 1986, state enterprises were instructed to give no new permanent posts. All work henceforth was supposed to be on fixed contract (Sargeson 1999: 34). Contrary to official policy, some enterprises began depriving established workers of their existing tenured status. On a much larger scale enterprises began to lay off workers, sometimes, but not always on some fraction of their former salary. By 1997, there were 14.4 million laid-off workers called in Chinese *xiagang gongren* – workers who have left their posts (Hussain 2000: 10). Numbers might have been greater still but for the fear of a threat to social order.

It is policy that enterprise-based responsibility for social welfare should be phased out although the process is more gradual than is sometimes implied. Pilot insurance systems were set up in many cities in the 1980s and in 1986 a contributory unemployment system was introduced to cover workers in formal employment in the urban areas (Hussain 2000). Insurance also covers retirement, health-care and work injuries. Premiums can be as much as 10% of a worker's salary. The 1994 Labour Law of the People's Republic lays down 'The State shall develop social insurance, establish social insurance systems and funds so that workers can obtain help and compensation when they are old, ill injured at work, unemployed or giving birth' (Warner 1994:187). However, in practice, despite attempts to move away from enterprise-based welfare systems, enterprises, including even newly established enterprises, and enterprises in the private sector, are still the important providers of health, welfare, pensions and housing in the urban areas (Francis 1996). Benefits offered by enterprises vary greatly in accordance with historical expectations, the profitability of an enterprise and hence its ability to provide, and the extent to which non-wage benefits are perceived as beneficial to the recruitment of labour.

Changes in social welfare have also come about through the major changes in the structure of employment that have accompanied the economic reforms. An increase of numbers in the types of employment not usually covered by social insurance has been produced by changes such as:

1. the growth in the numbers employed on short-term contract systems without long-term job security.
2. the growth in temporary labour - usually migrants from other areas who will be laid off as soon as there is no need for their services. If these workers have contracts at all they will be short ones.
3. the enormous increases in non-state employment and in self employment.

In addition to the insurance entitlement associated with employment, there are other welfare entitlements for urban people. Even if they are not employed in government enterprises or covered by contributory systems, urban residents do enjoy minimum rights to shelter and sustenance. This is delivered through a welfare system delivered by the municipal bureau for civil affairs. However, entitlement is limited to the urban population with permanent residence. Migrant workers are specifically excluded from this entitlement (Hussain 2000:11). Indigent migrants are expected to return to the villages to be supported by their families. Those who do not leave willingly may be forced to go, and there are frequent reports of the deportation of unemployed migrants from cities.

Social welfare in the rural areas before the economic reforms was provided either by the family or by the institutions of collective agriculture (Davin, 1994). Some communes had a co-operative medical service and most had some minimal support entitlement for the least fortunate. This system guaranteed care, food, shelter, healthcare and burial for orphans or old people without relatives to help them. The use of this 'five guarantees system', however, entailed a loss of status for the peasants who therefore only resorted to it in desperate straits. After the economic reforms, township and village committees acquired responsibility for the modest provision that survived decollectivisation. Many still guarantee a minimal subsistence level to the destitute but this is not universal. In any case, only those without any family qualify for such aid. Otherwise, in most rural areas, the economic reforms resulted in disappearance of welfare entitlements. The social insurance systems that are being developed in the cities are very rarely found in the villages. When peasants fall on hard times, it is the family, including both co-resident members and more distant relatives, that is more than ever the major source of help. The increasing importance of networks of kin, friends and fellow villagers that can be called on in times of need is emphasised in many of the village studies in post-reform China (Chan et al 1984, Potter and Potter 1990, Yan Yunxiang 1996, Huang 2001).

These great inequities between the entitlements of the comparatively well off urban population and those of the poorer rural population survive in part because there are still significant limitations on demographic mobility. It is harder for a rural person to settle permanently in a large city within China than it is for a European citizen to make a move that involves crossing frontiers in Europe. Peasants cannot get urban residential status at will, even if they migrate to the cities. The definition 'urban' or 'rural' is not based on de facto residence, but on residential registration. Prior to the economic reforms restrictions were even more severe. People with rural registration (*hukou*) were not allowed to live in urban areas. An urban *hukou* was necessary not only to obtain work in the urban areas, but even to obtain grain rations or schooling for children there. Rural to urban migration was therefore difficult if not impossible except when sponsored by the State to recruit extra labour. The development of a private market in grain after the economic reforms made it harder to keep the peasants out of the cities and the rapid expansion of the demand for labour forced the

State to relax these iron controls (Davin 1999). Rural people are now tolerated in the cities as 'guest workers'. However their status is that of second class citizens. They have to pay for the temporary work permits they are required to obtain and they are still excluded from the best jobs by the *hukou* system. Job requirements for high status employment specify an urban *hukou*. Some cities have even issued regulations listing jobs that are to be reserved for those with an urban *hukou*. As a result, rural migrants predominate in employment that urban people shun: service jobs in restaurants and repair shops, building and construction, domestic work and petty commerce. The majority of workers in assembly line jobs in export-oriented industry are also migrants. Migrant workers in the urban areas are largely excluded from social welfare because they lack the urban *hukou*. They cannot obtain permanent employment in state industry to which better entitlements still attach and the sorts of jobs they obtain are rarely covered by insurance schemes. They are specifically excluded from the welfare schemes run by the city bureaux of civil affairs to relieve urban poverty. I will look in detail at the particular position of migrant women assembly line workers the following sections.

2. Export-oriented manufacturing industry and new types of employment

2.1 Export-oriented manufacturing

Export-oriented manufacturing is shorthand for a new type of manufacturing enterprise in China. Most are engaged in manufacturing or processing for the export market although some may only aspire to do so. The term is used to distinguish new industry from the old state-owned industries. The new industries tend to be assembly line organisations with a high volume output and rather basic needs in terms of work skills. The labour force in this sector therefore has its own characteristics and its welfare regime is minimal in comparison to that of state industry. The enterprises of the new industries are generally owned or part-owned by foreign, overseas Chinese, Taiwan or Hong Kong interests but may also be privately owned by Chinese, or belong to local governments or collectives. The situation is further complicated by the fact that ownership and management are not always the same. A foreign-owned enterprise often has a local management. Moreover, in exchange for gifts or 'management fees', local officials will sometimes register a foreign or privately owned enterprise as a collective in order to shelter it from government health and safety requirements (Lee 1998, 55-62). There are great concentrations of export-oriented industry in the special economic zones that were set up to promote it, but export processing zones are also now found in every province of China. Export processing is not therefore an activity confined to foreign invested-enterprises nor indeed to export-processing zones

2.2 The size of the workforce in export-oriented industry

The difficulty in defining export-oriented manufacturing makes it hard to quantify the labour force that it employs. Unsurprisingly, the sector is not an official employment category for the Chinese State Statistical Bureau. The Bureau does, however, collect data on numbers employed in foreign-funded enterprises, enterprises funded with capital from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, private enterprises and TVEs. The table below provides figures for 1994 and 1998 to give some idea of the rise of these enterprises and associated employment compared with the state sector, which although still important, is suffering some decline.

Employment by ownership of enterprise in China (all urban except TVEs) in 1994 and 1998

	1994	1998
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1. Urban state-owned units	112,140,000	90,580,000
2. Enterprises funded by Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan capital	2,110,000	2,940,000
3.Foreign funded enterprises	1,95,0000	2,930,000
4. Privately owned, shareholding, jointly owned and corporations	6,760,000	20,510,000
5. Collectively owned	32,850,000	19,630,000
6. TVEs	120,170,000	125,370,000

From SSB, China State Statistical Yearbook, 1999, section 5.

Although these data can give us some idea of the relative importance of employment in different sectors, it is highly imperfect as an indicator of the numbers in export-oriented industry. It is probably that the great majority of enterprises in categories 2 and 3 could be so defined but they will also include non-manufacturing enterprises. Conversely, there is also substantial export-processing in enterprises in categories 4, 5 and 6 of ownership and no doubt some in category 1.

Another perspective on numbers can be gained from the data for migrant workers in Guangdong (home province to the first SEZs and to an enormous amount of export processing). Surveys have come up with figures of around 10 million migrants from outside the province of whom the majority find employment in export processing (Lee 1998: 68). Migrants are notoriously difficult to enumerate (Davin, 1999). As one local official said, 'They are too many and we are too few. They come and go so quickly that sometimes even their employers cannot keep track of their whereabouts. Counting these workers is almost impossible.' (Lee 1998: 70). It is also difficult to provide a breakdown of the labour force in export processing by sex. However it is clear that export-processing industries depend more heavily than the older state-owned industrial sector on female workers. SSB (State Statistical Bureau) figures show that 39.3% of the workforce of state-owned enterprises was female in 1994, the figure was 50% for urban collectives (SSB 1999:148). The data from studies of export-processing enterprises seem female workforces of the order of 80% (Knox 1997, 29; Lee, 1998, 68-9; Scharping, 1997; Tan Shen 2000).

It is clear that export-oriented manufacturing industries in all of China employ a labour force of many millions, the majority of which is female. The lives, conditions of work and access to welfare of these workers, whatever their exact numbers, are obviously worthy of discussion.

2.3 The location of export-oriented manufacturing industry and labour recruitment

Processing enterprises in China are chiefly located in three types of industrial area. The first, and perhaps the most studied, are the Special Economic Zones. These areas in the south of China are modelled on free trade or export-processing zones elsewhere in the world. China's SEZs were opened in 1984 with tax breaks and other concessions to attract foreign investment in the hope of accelerating economic growth and bringing in modern, high tech production methods and know-how. Since the early 1980s, the booming industries of these areas have drawn in capital from the outside world and labour from all over China. Subsequently, more areas were allowed to offer special investment regimes to foreign capital. In the 1980s investment incentives were extended to the whole eastern seaboard and more recently trade and investment regulations have been generally liberalised. As a result, foreign-invested manufacturing enterprises have grown up in all the coastal provinces

including in old established urban areas such as Guangzhou, Shanghai and Tianjin. Chinese-owned private industry has also flourished, especially in small scale enterprises that often do processing work for larger foreign-owned plants. Finally many of China's rural industries, the so-called TVEs (town and village enterprises), also produce goods or components which are eventually traded on world markets.

From the beginning enterprises in the SEZs recruited migrant labour because the local labour force could not meet their rapidly expanding needs in these newly industrialising areas. Yet, even when export-processing industry is established in existing centres of population as was often the case in the 1990s, it has tended to employ high proportions of migrant labour. Local people shun assembly-line work if they can find higher status, less tedious work. However, there seems little doubt that employer preference is also involved here, there is abundant evidence that employers prefer to take on young rural women whom they regard as docile and easy to control (Chan 1998). Young migrants can also be taken on and laid off easily in response to fluctuations in the market. It has been shown, too, that employers deliberately exploit regional identities and difference among workers from different provinces to reduce the potential solidarity of the workforce (Pun Ngai 1999). The labour force in most TVEs, by contrast, is local. Some TVEs may also attract migrants from distant rural areas, but most of their workers are probably peasants from nearby villages. Assembly-line jobs, although low in the occupational hierarchy in the urban areas, are fiercely competed for in the countryside because they are more remunerative than agricultural work. Indeed, in some industrialising areas the local rural population has transferred almost completely into non-agricultural employment, and leases its land to migrant cultivators from other provinces.

To summarise, migrant labour is attracted to export-processing industry in all three types of industrialising area. It dominates in the labour force in the Special Economic Zones, indeed these have developed so quickly that most of the population has come in from the outside (Lee 1998:69). In the older industrial areas and in the villages, the proportion of migrant labour in the assembly line workforce depends on the availability of other more desirable work locally. The household registration system provides the means by which the most desirable jobs can be reserved for local people by the simple expedient of requiring a local *hukou*.

2.4 New industries and urban life

Migrant workers in the long established towns and cities are a minority, albeit a large one, interacting with and often having a considerable impact on a settled host population. The situation in the SEZs and other newly industrialising areas around them is quite different. Subsequently, more areas have been allowed to offer special investment regimes to foreign capital while trade and investment regulations have been generally liberalised. Direct foreign investment into China reached over US\$3 billion in 1988 and had risen to over US\$30 billion by 1994. In 1995 it was over US\$40 billion (SSB 1996, p. 554). The SEZs were particularly attractive to foreign investment not only because of the concessions made to investors, but because of their proximity to Hong Kong and Taiwan, two of the major sources of investment. By 1994 the SEZs had absorbed a seventh of total foreign investment into China. The Overseas Chinese in South-East Asia and elsewhere are also important investors and they often favoured the provinces their families originated from. This helped to give Guangdong and other southern provinces an initial advantage, reflected in the disproportionate share of the investment they received. In the 1990s, however, industrialisation based on foreign investment, cheap labour and booming exports gradually spread northward creating many new boom areas along the coast.

In the original SEZs the process of urbanisation is far advanced. Skyscrapers dominate city skylines. Villages whose economies only two decades ago were based on rice and fish have been absorbed by urban sprawl, their paddy fields built over with factories, roads and cheap dormitory housing. Industries set up on greenfield sites have led to the development of new urban settlements where almost everyone is a migrant. It is estimated that there are over 10 million migrant workers in the SEZs of Guangdong Province alone. They come from all over China, but the largest numbers are from the interior provinces where the impact of the economic reforms has been less pronounced and the economy is expanding less rapidly. Most enterprises in these areas were created with foreign capital and management practices, wage rates and working conditions are quite different from those that prevail in state enterprises.

There is a clear hierarchy of work in the zones and new industrial areas. Many of the managers, engineers and technicians are expatriates, but some of these jobs also go to a new, prosperous Chinese middle class. The best jobs are taken either by local urban people or by urban people from elsewhere. Jobs in tourist and hotel services confer higher status than factory jobs and tend also to go to local people or to the best qualified of the migrants. Most managerial, supervisory and technical posts are held by men, whereas the assembly line workers are predominantly female (Tan 2000).

In the SEZs there are also differences of status dependent on registration. At the top of the hierarchy are local people who always had local registration or those who were given it as an inducement to move to the zones when they were first set up. Most of these permanent workers are older, better educated and much better paid. They tend to live in good accommodation and to enjoy various fringe benefits (Ip 1995: 280). The majority of the workers in the zones have only temporary status (Ip 1995: 272). Most come from other areas and have a rural *hukou*. They sign a contract with an enterprise in the zone. They are expected to go home when the contract ends unless they can find another job. Temporary workers have no right to remain in the zones once their employment is ended.

The manufacturing industries of these areas are labour-intensive and require only moderate skills. They include electronics assembly line work, garment-making, and shoe and toy manufacture. The Chinese state has made huge investment in the infrastructure of these areas to attract foreign capital. China has to compete for overseas investment with other Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia and the Philippines where bureaucracy may be less, and living conditions more attractive to foreign managers. Much of China's success is probably owed to its linguistic, cultural and sentimental attraction for Hong Kong and Overseas Chinese businessmen, but the availability of cheap labour with work discipline and a decent basic education is no doubt also important.

3. Female workers in the export-oriented industries

In their classic 1980s study of female labour in export-processing zones in the Third World, Elson and Pearson observe that managers liked to recruit young rural women for assembly line work (Elson and Pearson 1981). Two decades later, managers in export-oriented industry in China, whether Chinese or foreign, come out with the same stereotypes and clichés to explain the same preferences. Young women are said to be dextrous, and to have small, delicate hands. This enables them to do fine work. Their patience allows them to spend long hours on repetitive tasks which men would not tolerate. Women are also regarded as easier to control and less likely to prove troublesome.

As we have seen, about 80% of the thirty million assembly-line workers in China's Special Economic Zones are female (Knox 1997:28). Most are recruited from rural areas of interior provinces where the less developed economy has little to offer them. Ordinary Chinese citizens cannot simply enter the SEZs at will; they need special permits in order to be allowed to enter and. This provides an opportunity for various types of middlemen to profit. New workers may be recruited by state run labour bureaux or directly by the enterprises. Sometimes local governments in the sending areas also play a role. For example some county governments in Sichuan sign contracts with labour bureaux in the coastal areas. They then establish recruitment offices and run long-distance buses to take young women on the long trip to the coast. County governments even run training schools in Sichuan to teach young people the skills they will need as migrants. Local governments explain these activities with reference to notions of welfare and protection. They point out that naïve young villagers are vulnerable, don't know how to find themselves jobs and are easily cheated or exploited when they migrate. All this is of course true, but in reality local governments are probably also motivated by the recruitment fee, often paid by both the worker and the employer, that would otherwise go to a private labour contractor.

Factory managers in the SEZs can set their own wage rates and can hire and fire at will. Most workers in the SEZs are between 16 and 25 years old. This suits the needs of employers who wish to maintain a young, docile labour force that can be worked hard with minimal health problems. Employers actively discriminate against older workers. They tend to be given jobs such as canteen work or gate-keeping (Lee 1998: 81). The government of Shenzhen, the largest of the SEZs, does not permit permanent workers over 35 to take up jobs in the Zone (Summerfield 1997:729). Wages are far below the level to be found in Hong Kong or Taiwan and hourly rates can be considerably below what is paid to urban workers in state industry in China. However because the hours worked by factory workers in the SEZs are so long, 10-12 hours per day is normal, overtime brings sharply up the wages actually received. And despite all hardships, migrants continue to stream into the newly industrialising areas. It seems that the chance to earn a good wage is seen as compensating for everything else. The attitude of migrants is pragmatic. They believe their lives are hard but that if they can endure the difficulties for a short time they will save or improve their prospects enough to make it all worthwhile.

Once they arrive in the economic zones, young workers are usually accommodated in dormitory blocks often belonging to the factory. It is worth considering the significance of this type of arrangement. Factory dormitories also appeared early in the Industrial Revolution in England in places where mills using water power created a demand for labour that could not be satisfied by the local population. Girls drawn in from elsewhere were accommodated in factory dormitories (Cruickshank 1981:15-17). Subsequently however, when the arrival of steam power made it possible to locate industry in pre-existing centres of population, the dormitories disappeared. Young women workers either lived in their own homes, or, if they were migrants, found lodgings with local families.

The dormitory system has been much more common in labour-intensive industrialisation in East Asia, even when industrialisation has taken place in pre-existing urban areas. Early Japanese industrialisation also housed a female labour force drawn from faraway villages in dormitory accommodation (Hunter 1993; Tsurumi 1990) as did the factories of Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s (Honig 1986). Dormitories were also commonplace in Taiwan in recent decades (Kung 1983). In all these societies, as in China today, the dormitory system makes it possible for factories to recruit cheap female labour from the distant rural hinterland. Without dormitories, the migration of young unmarried women might be inhibited by a lack of accommodation felt to be suitable for them. Families worry about the welfare of young women and the lack of supervision away from home. The problem is all the more important

because the preservation of virginity is still crucial to a young woman's marriage prospects in rural China. Indeed, the preoccupation with the protection of young women helps to explain why much labour migration to the cities, in China and elsewhere, is dominated by males.

Where employers particularly wish to attract migrant women workers as in the case of assembly line work, or indeed domestic service, accommodation is often part of the employment agreement. This gives the employers additional control over the lives of their workers, even outside working hours. It also helps them in the struggle to retain labour, countering the inclination of many young women to move from one job to another seeking better conditions (Lee 1998: 86-87). Dormitories solve the new arrivals' problem of where to live. Parents feel that in a dormitory their daughters have some supervision. Janitors exclude men. Long working hours, dormitory curfews and communal sleeping and living arrangements afford little opportunity for young women to develop relationships with men. In some dormitories there is even an older woman whose function is to keep an eye on the young women. The choice of occupations for young women reflects the same concerns. Parents are reported to prefer that their daughters should take up factory work than work in restaurants or beauty parlours although the latter may be better paid. Factory work is seen as disciplined and confining and therefore providing proper conditions for young women. Service work by contrast involves contact with all sorts of people and in the case of hairdressing and waitressing is seen by some as almost akin to providing sexual services. Parents therefore fear lest such employment should result in the loss of a daughter's reputation (Lee 1998: 82-4).

Although employers use dormitories for the retention of labour over the short to medium term, this accommodation contributes to a high turnover of labour in the Special Economic Zones. Many plants lose 50 per cent of their labour force every year. Dormitory life is incompatible with marriage and family formation, and the system therefore discourages the formation of a permanent labour force. Few workers wish to live and work in these conditions for more than a few years.

The lives of young female workers in the SEZs are hard and limited. They work very long hours. The Chinese Labour Law of 1994 stipulates normal working hours of 44 hours a week with one day off. Overtime is supposed to be arranged only after consultation with the workers and the unions and should not exceed 36 hours per month (Warner 1995:177-192). However, working hours in export-processing industry tend to be much longer. When orders are high, a 10-12 hour day is normal (Knox 1997:31; Zhang 1997:12; Tan 2000:302; author's fieldwork 1994 and 2000). A refusal to work overtime may be recorded as an absence and bring the sack. Remuneration is calculated on piece rates but workers must also achieve set production quotas. There are fines for being late, for refusing to work overtime, for speaking at work or during meals and even for infringements of the rules on uniforms or for going to the lavatory without permission or too often (Lee 1995:383, Knox 1997:31). It is often said that assembly line work is so stressful that no-one could do it for more than a few years. Working conditions can also be unhealthy or even dangerous. Health and safety rules are not properly observed, there are frequent accidents and there have been horrific fires with much loss of life.²

Living conditions in crowded dormitory blocks bring little respite. Workers complain that there is round the clock noise and one shift moves off to work and another comes home to eat and sleep (Zhang 1997:13). Workers enjoy very little personal space and often have to keep their meagre possessions on their bunk beds. This is also where they sleep, dress, make up their

² Fires and industrial accidents in China's foreign invested industries have been widely reported. Details can be found in Knox, 1997 and in the Chinese Labour Bulletin published in Hong Kong.

faces and do their hair. It is a risk to have anything of value in case it is stolen. Leisure time is spent chatting, window shopping, doing laundry, writing letters, reading and watching television if one is provided. Sometimes the dormitory doors are even locked at night to enforce strict curfews. Locked doors have been the cause of loss of life in dormitory fires.

China provides cheap labour to the foreign invested enterprises by international standards. However to the rural migrants who make up most of the work force the pay seems good compared with what they could earn at home. Monthly earnings of RMB 5-600 were often quoted in the mid-1990s, by 2000 they could go to RMB1000 or even higher (Knox 1997:31; author's fieldwork notes, 1994 and 2000). But these are good rates. A survey of migrant workers in Guangdong Province in 1993 found that 53.6% reported monthly incomes of RMB 3-500 and one third earned less than RMB 300 a month (Tan 2000:298). Even these levels of remuneration are only achieved with a lot of overtime, the hourly rate is very low. The money is nevertheless an attraction. Many of the young women workers previously worked on family farms where they never received an independent wage. In the SEZs they may be able to earn in one month more cash than a man in their home villages would make in a year. Their standard of living may remain quite low because they wish to save or to send money home. But their ability to earn and the experience they obtain can have a long-run impact on their relationship with their families, on their sense of themselves, and on their future prospects.

4. Women workers and economic change: hopes, prospects, entitlements and welfare

The young woman worker in export-oriented industries is a person 'between worlds'. She is an industrial worker and in most cases lives in an urban settlement of some sort but she does not have urban residential status and does not enjoy the full range of social welfare benefits accorded to the older industrial workforce. The new enterprises are supposed to pay social security premiums for their workers, but according to one survey in the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province, more than half failed to do so. Migrant workers are themselves quite conscious of this comparing their situation unfavourably to that of permanent workers (Zhang 1997:14). Workers who develop long-term illnesses are likely to be sacked and to have to return home.

The migrant worker is expected by her employers and by the state eventually to return to her village. Individuals come and go from the sending areas to the SEZs and cohorts who settle back in their home villages are replaced by younger cohorts.

Many young women have ambitions for personal development and want to realise these in the towns. They talk of acquiring more education, training, skills or even an urban husband (Zhang 1997; Lee 1998: 80-82). The cards, however, are stacked against them. Their employers see them as cheap and replaceable. The nature of the work they do does not encourage training and other investment in human capital. Their living conditions make a long-term stay impossible and the State reinforces their difficulties by allowing them only temporary residence certificates. Moreover family ties inevitably exert a pull.

Some women overcome all this and settle. Researchers in the Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences estimate that between a fifth and a quarter of migrants who leave their home villages will not return (interview at SASS, summer 2000). For the majority, however, the long-term effects of migration will be played out in the villages. A sojourn in an urban area, experience of wage-earning and of life as a migrant worker give the returning migrant some advantages over those who have stayed in the countryside. Through the experience of

waged work, a returnee may have acquired capital, new competencies, more sense of choice in her life, a better range of options (albeit still limited) and more control over her life chances.

Interestingly, female migrants sometimes admit that they see migration as a way of escaping the control of the family and developing some personal autonomy. Lee (1998: 80-82) found that many of her interviewees among young SEZ workers gave poverty as the reason for their migration when she first talked to them. However, it soon became apparent that this was the 'respectable' explanation. As they talked more, many admitted that their primary reason for coming was to escape from family restrictions and to experience a new life. For most young women poverty was not simply a cover, they did send money back to their families or save it for their futures. But they wanted to earn money not only to help their families but also to be able to buy things without having to account to someone for everything they spent. Some women even sought more fundamental freedoms. Lee (1998:79-80) found that some hoped to avoid unwelcome betrothals by distancing themselves from home. In my fieldwork I have twice encountered migrant workers who were saving to pay off husbands from whom they wished to be divorced. The men were demanding large sums of money in exchange for their consent, in one case as a repayment of the brideprice and in the other as child support (Davin 1999:127-129).

Of course, in entering factory employment women accept a new form of control. As Hoy (1996:355) observes:

with many young women literally locked into factories and dormitories, bound by contracts, their wages remitted to families sometimes hundreds of kilometres away and used for the promotion of the family and individual family members other than themselves, we should not assume that growing numbers of women in the migrant labour force are always associated with a growing sense of autonomy and independence.

Yet we cannot either dismiss as meaningless the voices of the many young women who affirm as sense of achievement and pride in the lives they make for themselves as factory workers (Lee 1998:80-84; Zhang 1987:19). And hardship may be a price worth paying if the cash that they earn allows them to change something that they disliked in their past or that they wish to avoid in their future.

By taking such control over their lives and prospects they are challenging their traditionally prescribed gender roles within the Chinese family. They do not, however, cut themselves off. Though they lose the close, daily contact of living together, migrant workers in China take considerable trouble to stay in touch and endeavour to reinforce these ties or construct new ones through remittances and gifts and helping fellow villagers to migrate. The earnings of these young female migrants often go to pay for a brother's education or his marriage or enable their parents to build a new house. By making such contributions young women remain part of the web of obligation and responsibility that links Chinese families. This is a good strategy for the future when they may no longer wish or be able to stay in the destination areas. Family is an important source of long-term security and mutual assistance for everyone in China, and especially for rural people who have few entitlements from the state. Migrants who have helped their families at home know that they will be able to call on the help of relatives if they themselves are ever in need.

The Chinese *hukou* system interacts with Chinese marriage practice to provide another obstacle to migrant settlement and ensures that most rural to urban migration is, for the moment at least, circulatory. Marriage between migrants and urban people is unusual. Partly this is a matter of status, - urban people tend to regard migrants as inferior - but there are

other, practical reasons. Even marriage to an urban person does not give a migrant the right to an urban *hukou*. If an urban man marries a rural woman, they can only live together in an urban area for as long as she is able to retain a temporary permit. This is dependent on her continued employment. Moreover a child, inherits the mother's *hukou* not the father's. Rural migrants can buy a permanent residence certificate, but it is hugely expensive and quite beyond the means of ordinary people³. By 2000, many cities had introduced regulations allowing those who purchased apartments over a certain value to acquire resident status but again only a tiny proportion of migrants would be prosperous enough to benefit from this concession (fieldwork 2000). Migrants without the right papers are often rounded up and expelled. In the past, married couples with different *hukous* sometimes have to live apart for years (Ma et al 1996). The knowledge of the difficulties brought by these 'mixed marriages' is a strong disincentive.

Nor is it easy for migrants to marry and live together in the urban areas. There are migrant couples and even migrant families in the big cities, but most migrants are single. There are obvious reasons for this. The housing available for migrants is usually for single people. Migrants have to pay for healthcare and their children are either excluded from urban schools or they have to pay high fees. The discrimination they suffer ensures that most return to the rural areas to marry and bring up their children. Married men sometimes continue to migrate on a seasonal basis even after they have children, coming and going from their village, supporting their families through remittances and leaving their wives or relatives to cultivate the land. For women however, migration seems to be much more clearly a phase in a life cycle. The period they spend away may be anything from one to six years but after they return to their villages and have children they are less likely to leave again.⁴

Once back in their villages, migrant women may be distinguished in various ways from those who have never left. Some have the means to set up a small business. Migrants who have managed to earn and save show their success in their demeanour and the way they dress. Their savings allow them to buy the clothes and toiletries they want and to purchase gifts for others from their own pockets. In other words they have an independence that is still unusual in peasant society where so much income derives from family-controlled farming or sideline enterprises.

The duration of migration for young women may be decided by all sorts of factors, the amount they are earning, whether they are needed at home or whether their remittances are more useful, whether they are homesick or are positive about their migratory experience. For all of them, however, marriage prospects must be a factor taken into account. Marriage is almost universal for women in China. The minimum legal age for women is 20. Most rural women get married in their very early twenties⁵. There is evidence that women who have

³ In 1994 a city permit for Beijing cost 50,000 renminbi and the cost for Shenzhen was similar (Davin 1999:45).

⁴ I am here contrasting the experience of most men with most women. There are of course exceptions. Zhang (1997) found that many young migrant women were determined to improve their qualifications in order to stay in the urban areas, some succeed in marrying urban people and some young women are able to leave their children with their mothers-in-law in order to return to factory work (fieldwork notes, Sichuan 1994). It should also be noted that the restrictions on settling in small towns have now been lifted. Only the cities and the SEZs continue to deny permanent residence to migrants.

⁵ This cultural disposition to marry young is reflected in the official definition of 'late marriage'. Under the birth planning regulations there is a reward for marrying late. Males who marry at 25 and above

been migrant workers may marry later than those who have not left home, delaying until their late twenties, perhaps because they or their families wish to maximise their earnings. However, there is also a fear of leaving marriage too late when the pool of eligible young men will inevitably be smaller. Nearly all rural women marry before they enter their third decade.

A woman in rural China becomes part of her husband's family on marriage. The young couple may actually first live in the bridegroom's parents' house. If they set up a separate household it will be in his village and probably very near to his parents. A woman's standard of living and future security are therefore dependent on the economic status of her husband's family. The woman and her family will be sensitive to this in selecting her husband. The man's family also has an interest in the economic status of his bride's family. There is an obligation of mutual aid and support not only between blood relations but also between affines. A link with a family much poorer than one's own thus carries the threat of future liabilities, conversely, one to a prosperous family or one with useful official or commercial contacts carries promise. A sojourn as a migrant worker may increase a woman's value as a bride in various ways. Firstly, she may have returned with some of her earnings as personal savings. Secondly, even if her remittances have gone to finance projects of her natal family such as house building or a brother's marriage, they can contribute to her family's economic status. The higher this status becomes, the better a woman's marriage prospects. Her family may also decide to recognise the contribution her remittances have made by giving her a large dowry. Finally, returned migrants sometimes come back with sufficient skills or capital to improve their income generating potential at home. A young woman who has her own small business may be seen as a more desirable spouse. Potentially a period as a migrant worker can increase the young peasant woman's own economic standing in her home community and thus her chances of economic security through a good marriage.

We have already seen that another group of young women are involved in the export-processing industries work in town and village enterprises while continuing to live in their own homes. In some ways they benefit just as the young female migrants do. They also have money of their own and are able to make recognised contributions to the family income. Judd (1994) has shown how this tends to affect gender relations within the family. With money of their own, these women may also seem more desirable marriage partners. Of course, they enjoy less freedom from family control than migrant workers do, and have less chance to broaden their horizons. None the less, with money of their own, they may be able to negotiate more power, for example in such matters as the selection of their marriage partners. On the positive side, they do not suffer the homesickness or vulnerability of the young women who find work far from home.

Workers in the established industrial labour force are the third group of women affected by the China's economic reforms and her associated entry into the world economy. They are usually state employees. China's economic reforms have involved the exposure of her industries to world markets, In this process many enterprises have been found to be uncompetitive. At the same time, an ageing workforce means that they are burdened with higher welfare bills. State enterprises have been forced to make economies. The wages bill has been an obvious target. Millions of workers have been laid off, transferred to lower-paid jobs or sent home on a fraction of normal pay. These measures involve at least a partial loss of welfare entitlements. It has been widely reported that a disproportionate number of the

and females who marry at 23 and above are eligible. (see for example the Birth planning regulations of Liaoning Province in Scharping 2000).

workers selected for this treatment are women. It is felt that they are less likely to make trouble and can be supported by their men. A special term, *xiagang nugong*, has evolved for them and they have become a much-discussed social category (Benyon 2000). *Xiagong nugong* usually look for new employment but their age and lack of qualifications tends to tell against them. If they find a new job it is likely to be poorly-paid, lower status work such as cleaning. The impact of China's incorporation into the global economy for these women has been negative in terms of status and remuneration.

The cohort of women most affected by cutbacks in China's state industry belong to a generation brought up to believe that women should be in the labour force and to draw their self-esteem from the contribution their work made to their society. They also learnt that the welfare benefits they enjoyed were an achievement of the revolution and something of which to be proud. The loss of their job security, enforced dependence on husbands or other relatives, the desperate search for low status work to replace what they have lost, and the blow to their self-esteem as valued members of society have demanded a heavy psychological adjustment from this group of women workers.

Even younger women suffer in some ways. The workings of the labour market have produced discrimination against women. Many employers, whether state or private, prefer to hire men who they claim are more able, less costly in social security and do not have to take time off for family responsibilities.

5. The role of the state

It is a high priority for government in China to ensure economic growth and to attract foreign investment. De-emphasising the difficult terrain of ideology, the post-reform government has based its claim to legitimacy above all on the extraordinary growth rates achieved by China in the 1980s and 1990s. Any serious setback to growth could threaten this legitimacy. To maintain high growth rates China must continue to attract foreign investment and for this it is essential that the country continue to offer a cheap labour force. Chinese leaders are all too well aware that the labour-intensive industries are very cost sensitive. After all, much of the industry China has attracted was relocated from places such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea as a response to rising labour costs. At the same time, the Chinese government has an ideological commitment to workers' welfare and a constituency to please that may react badly to the perceived ill-treatment of workers, especially when that ill-treatment is at the hands of foreigners. The government wishes China to be seen as a modern state giving appropriate attention to the health and welfare of its citizens.

The way in which these different pressures translate into action and policy can be seen in the ambivalence of the government in the area of social policy. Aware of the fiscal problems associated with the universalist welfare state model of western Europe, Chinese reformers have shown a clear preference for contribution based social insurance linked to employment (White 1998). Labour and trade union legalisation of the 1990s laid down obligations on both the state and the enterprise to provide a wide range of social insurance and welfare benefits (Warner 1995). However this has not been matched by an effort to implement legislation or to create enforcement machinery. One is left with the impression that these laws, like much Chinese legislation, set out what is considered desirable rather than what is actually expected to happen. Even more importantly, a large and rapidly growing part of the labour force, the migrant labourers, was specifically exempted from these national laws. In the SEZs, and in foreign invested industry in general there is a clear reluctance to create a full and compulsory programme of social security and welfare rights for the labour force or even to enforce the rules that do exist. The same reluctance can be observed in the failure of the

Chinese government bodies to enforce their own health and safety and anti-pollution legislation.

But it is important to realise that the Chinese state is not a monolithic unified body in relation to the labour force. Any policy analysis will reveal the need to distinguish between the state at national level and at the local levels. There is some communality of interest and overlap of agenda between the various levels but there are also important differences. There are also differences of interest at the local level, for example, between different provincial governments.

Unsurprisingly, the provincial governments of the sending areas tend to be particularly concerned with migrants' rights. The government of Sichuan, a densely populated interior province that is the place of origin of many migrant workers but attracts little foreign investment, has attempted to defend migrant rights. It has argued that migrants should be allowed to acquire rights of residence in other provinces after a qualifying period of residence (fieldwork notes 1994). As we have seen it runs training schools for migrants and organises transport for them. It calculates and publicises the importance of migrant remittances in the provincial GNP. Its newspapers publicise bad conditions and factory accidents in export-oriented industries. Its Academy of Social Sciences take a sympathetic tone towards migrants in its research. Sichuan government officials even complain that it is unfair that Sichuan has to function as a nursery and a retirement home for the labour force while other provinces benefit from the productive years of its sons and daughters (fieldwork notes, 1994).

By contrast, the provincial government of Guangdong, the major destination area for migrants in China, has been resistant to the idea of giving residence rights to migrants. Its constituency is local people who, like people in other destination areas tend to lack sympathy for migrants (Davin 2000). Guangdong is, of course, anxious to continue to attract foreign investment and to maintain its competitive edge over other investment destinations, including the poorer interior provinces of China. This may dispose its regulatory bodies to ignore infringements of health and safety and social security rules that are so obvious in its factories, and to side with capital rather than labour in the not infrequent labour disputes in the province (Knox 1997). The impact of the Asian economic crisis and of slower growth rates has no doubt been to make the Guangdong provincial government more anxious than ever to retain its competitive position in relation to the rest of Asia and the rest of China.

Conclusion

It is difficult to draw a balance sheet for the effects of China's export orientated industrial policy on the lives, security and welfare of her women workers. The majority of women who work in the export-oriented industries come from villages where they had little or no entitlement to social welfare. The lack of non-wage benefits in their new employment does not, for them, represent a loss of anything they previously enjoyed. Their wages, although low by international standards, often allow them to acquire savings or to increase the resources of their natal families. Most migrants eventually return to their villages where the family-based system of security, mutual assistance and resource flow will in the end have most relevance for them. A period as a migrant usually enables young workers to improve their position within their home society. The same is true for young rural women who are able to work in export-oriented town and village enterprises close to home without migrating.

The position of women who were recruited to the industrial workforce in earlier decades when they were seen as a socialist vanguard, and rewarded with a high level of job security and social welfare is different. The impact of China's economic reforms and of export-

oriented policies on them has been clearly negative. Millions have been laid off or had wages and other benefits reduced. Although as urban residents many still enjoy a better standard of living and more entitlements than young migrants, they have suffered a net loss economically and in terms of security and self-esteem. It seems inevitable that when China's accession to the World Trade Organisation reduces its ability to protect state-owned enterprises there will be an increase in these laid-off workers.

It is unlikely that these broad trends will see any dramatic changes in the short-term. The government will try to attract higher tech industry that requires a better-educated workforce. Where it succeeds, a high labour turnover will no longer suit the needs of the employers, and in future they may perhaps seek to train and retain their young workers to a greater extent than they do today. In such cases they will presumably offer some non-wage benefits as part of the package. But most growth in employment will still be in the labour intensive sector where China's main comparative advantage lies. Young rural people will continue to be willing to accept poor conditions and low wages on the assembly line because these jobs appear, temporarily at least, more attractive than anything available to them in the villages where there is a vast pool of under-employed labour. The willingness of these young rural workers to work for low wages makes China attractive to foreign capital. The state may try to control the worst excesses of managers in the export-oriented industries, but is bound to make China's competitiveness in the struggle for foreign investment its first priority. It cannot, therefore, force investors to fund an expensive system of social security, nor, with its weak fiscal base, does the Chinese state appear capable of taking this burden on itself. The Asian economic crisis and the recent downturn in the global economy must make the Chinese state more anxious to attract foreign capital and less willing to pay too much for welfare.

China's economic performance in the last two decades has been an enormous success. It enjoyed an extraordinary growth rate of exceeding ten per cent per annum in many years. It increased its share of world trade even during the years of international recession. Among the many factors contributing to this success has been the availability of plentiful female labour that is cheap because it accepts low wages and levels of social security. China therefore appears tied in to this mode of development for some time to come.

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