

Gender, employment and women's resistance

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This chapter examines the impact of social and economic transformation on women's lives by delineating changes in urban women's employment. Women's employment has been an intensely contested site that has not only reflected conflicting social interests and revealed gender assumptions, but has also shaped gender identities and class realignment. Women of diverse social groups have deployed differentiated strategies of resistance.

It is often asked 'Has reform improved the condition and status of women, or has it set it back?' Departing from simplistic assumptions concerning the existence of a monolithic Chinese womanhood, and a singular gender relationship, this chapter highlights multiple contradictory social realities experienced by contemporary women positioned differentially across hierarchies of age, urban/rural residence, education and class. Gender relationships are differentially affected depending on one's position in these and other power-laden hierarchies. Women's resistance, accordingly, takes different forms, employs variegated resources and aims at diverse goals.

This chapter examines the impact of social and economic transformation on women's lives by delineating changes in urban women's employment. The rapid diversification of the rural economy, the development of the market, the rise of industry at the township level as well as of household enterprises, and the opening of urban labour markets have also brought tremendous changes in rural women's employment. Here I focus on changes in employment in the urban setting, including the employment of women living in cities which the state classifies as 'rural'. Beginning with a brief review of Maoist policy on urban women's employment, this chapter explores changing patterns of urban women's employment and women's resistance and negotiation in the rapidly changing social, cultural and political milieu of post-Mao urban China.

Urban employment, gender and inequality in the Mao era

In the socialist, planned economy, the state guaranteed urban employment while prohibiting labour influx from rural areas (see [chapter 6](#)). Local governments assigned each resident a permanent job either in a state or collectively owned enterprise. Once assigned, mobility was largely restricted to promotion

within the work unit. A work unit was not only a production unit but also an all-encompassing welfare institution that covered employees' health care, accident insurance and maternity leave. Some large work units offered housing and childcare as well. Employee benefits varied in different industries and state-run enterprises provided better packages than collective enterprises. But within the same work unit, men and women, old and young, generally received comparable benefits. Employment meant lifetime security.

Women's employment policy in the Mao era was framed within the Engelsian concept of women's liberation and gender equality: only through participation in social production would women achieve liberation. Employment meant socialist construction since the private sector virtually disappeared in the early 1950s. 'Housewife', by definition not a participant in social production, became a scorned urban social category and increasingly a historic relic. For urban women growing up in the Mao era, employment was taken for granted as an important component of a woman's life, even though far from all women experienced a sense of liberation by participating in social production. Women's employment enhanced their status at home since their income was vitally important to the family in the egalitarian low-income system of the Mao era.

Urban women in the Mao era enjoyed equal employment opportunities with men, and lifetime security and welfare benefits. This does not mean that they had achieved gender equality, as the Cultural Revolution slogan 'Women hold up half the sky' implied. A recent study investigating two state-owned factories in Guangzhou finds that, although the government issued equal employment guidelines from the early 1960s, specific job assignments invariably followed unstated gender lines. In an optical instrument factory, for example, of twenty-five categories of technical work, seven were seen as suitable for women and eighteen for men. In a machinery plant, fewer than twenty of 106 categories were seen as suitable for women. In both factories, service and auxiliary work was always 'female work'. This included maintenance of tools, cleaning, and operating day care centres, dining rooms and clinics. Men were overwhelmingly assigned to technical jobs and women to non-technical, auxiliary, and service jobs, regardless of educational level. This gendered employment hierarchy established women's subordinate position and shaped women's self-definition.¹

While job assignment, promotion and allocation of resources such as housing in the workplace have reinforced both men's and women's identity, differential gendered social expectations also colour assessments of performance in the workplace. Women's family responsibilities and their tendency to focus expectations on their husbands' career development are major factors that render women workers less motivated than men to pursue promotion or join the party, a form of political capital and a means of networking critical for advancement and other benefits.

Another important factor kept women in subordinate positions. In Maoist egalitarianism, which reached a peak for the cohort entering the workplace during the Cultural Revolution, income differentials, including those based on skill, were

relatively small in China's low-income, high-welfare, lifetime urban employment system. In line with the slogan that all jobs were equally important to the revolution, gendered job assignments were not perceived as discriminatory toward women.

Urban women employees enjoyed pay, benefits and security of which their rural sisters could only dream. Urban women's substantial gains in the Mao era, often cited by the state as proof of Chinese women's liberation, were inherent in privileging the urban working class over the peasantry. The huge gap in wages and benefits for working women (and men) in urban and rural areas continues in the post-Mao era, even when rural reform has rapidly improved rural people's living standard. A nationwide survey conducted by the Women's Federation in 1990 found that 82.6 per cent of urban women had pensions versus 5.6 per cent of rural women; 71 per cent of urban women had medical coverage versus 8 per cent of rural women; 79.9 per cent of urban women had paid sick leave versus 9.2 per cent of rural women; and 85.3 per cent of urban women had paid maternity leave versus 12.1 per cent of rural women.

The reform of the labour system in the 1980s has reduced, but hardly eliminated, the advantages enjoyed by urban workers. The state no longer guarantees urban employment (see [chapter 3](#)). Indeed, urban employment is no longer an exclusive privilege for urban dwellers. But throughout the 1980s, with rapid expansion of urban employment, workers with urban residence permits maintained their advantages in a two-tier employment structure that disadvantaged rural workers. Under pressure to reduce losses in the 1990s, however, state enterprises have laid off employees or turned to cheaper rural labour. With job creation slowed to a virtual halt, the influx of rural labour has reduced wages in many urban unskilled and service jobs to levels unacceptable to urban workers. Rural labour has thus undermined job prospects for urban workers. While the urban working-class experience in general involves prestige and security dwindling from levels enjoyed in the Mao era, the losses suffered by women workers have been greatest.

Moving from job assignment by government to a job market in which different ownership forms coexist and compete, freedom of mobility joins freedom of discrimination, and opportunities blend with insecurity. New employment patterns have broad social ramifications entailing realignment of social classes and gender position. This profoundly affects urban dwellers' relationships to the state and reshapes their identities. This is a gendered process in which urban men and women of diverse social positions engage in contestation at multiple levels.

Gendered layoffs: women workers bear the brunt of reform

Throughout the 1980s, China's high growth economy created millions of jobs annually, with women as well as men sharing in expanded and diversified employment opportunities. Since the 1980s, however, many women workers in the state sector have found themselves in the category of 'surplus labour'. Disproportionate numbers of women were among those laid off or forced to retire

prior to the legal retirement age (for cadres and professionals, 60 years of age for men, 55 for women; and for workers, 55 years of age for men, 50 for women). Gendered layoffs reached new magnitudes in the late 1990s, coinciding with structural changes in China's industry and economic slowdown. At the heart of the employment crisis is China's manufacturing sector, which accounts for almost one-third of urban employees, as many state and collectively owned enterprises, now labelled as a drain on state resources, confront painful choices of technological change, merger, closure or bankruptcy. Official statistics reveal that by the end of 1997 there were 11.51 million laid-off workers (of which 7.87 million were from state-owned enterprises) in China's cities, with 3.5 million more projected for 1998. A survey by the State Statistical Bureau of 15,600 households in seventy-one cities across the country reveals that women constitute 62.8 per cent of the laid-off workers, while they account for less than 39 per cent of the total urban workforce.² Statistics from the *China Year Book* (2001) show that the number of urban female employees dropped from 58.89 million in 1995 to 44.11 million in 2000. The heaviest loss was concentrated in manufacturing, where the number of female employees dropped from 24.82 million in 1995 to 14.25 million in 2000. The proportion of total urban female employment decreased from 38.6 per cent in 1995 to 38 per cent in 2000. In other words, women have been singled out as special targets of the massive layoffs in state-owned and collective enterprises, and as a result, the gender gap in employment is widening rapidly.

More than any other issue, gendered layoffs reveal the disproportionate burden borne by women as a consequence of the reform. Women's journals and newspapers have paid much attention to the issue by publicizing individual laid-off women's miseries. Many surveys show that although work units are supposed to pay monthly subsidies to laid-off workers (from 150 to over 300 yuan), many laid-off workers receive little or nothing. In order to boost the morale of laid-off women, an editorial in *Women of China* presented a touching analogy.

The whole society is like a woman in delivery who is enduring the pain of contractions...The piercing pain shaking you is only one step away from the birth of a new life...Sisters, hang on a little bit longer. You will find your own path in your future choice.³

The pain of contractions may be an apt analogy to the pain that laid-off women are experiencing, but few women suffering the pain of layoffs can expect a joyful new life at the end of 'contractions'. Many have been forced to endure suffering in the form of humiliation and poverty. Many women workers protested:

Before it was said that we workers were the masters. How come now we are so casually thrown out the door? Why are our contributions to the state-run enterprises no longer mentioned? The current state of the enterprises was not caused by women workers. Why should we be told to swallow the bitter fruit?⁴

Why has the weight of urban reform in the form of unemployment impinged so heavily, and disproportionately, on women workers? Since the majority of laidoff women are in their thirties and forties with a high-school education or lower, many studies emphasize these women's reproductive role, domestic role and low education level as key factors disadvantaging them in the labour market. But the gender disparity in layoffs suggests that something deeper is involved.

The discriminatory structure of the socialist workplace disprivileges women workers in a market economy. As noted previously, most women lack the bargaining power that skilled male labourers and technicians have both inside their factories and outside in the job market. A 1998 survey from Chongqing indicates that women comprised 65 per cent of all those laid off and that more than 80 per cent of these women held non-technical and service jobs.⁵ When state-owned enterprises are being transformed from all-encompassing 'work units' to profit-seeking entities, auxiliary and service components are the first to be cast off. Structural readjustment is profoundly gendered in its implications, if not its goals. Disproportionate numbers of women have been driven out of state industry and into low-prestige, low-pay collective- or private-service-sector jobs with few benefits. In short, gendered training and job assignment in the socialist planned economy provided the foundations for widening gender disparities in the reform era.

Although none of the reform policies specifies or rationalizes policies addressing gender, the explicit prioritization of profitability and sheer disregard of gendered consequences are indicative of the state's withdrawal from its previously proclaimed, if weakly implemented, commitment to gender equality. Abandoning women workers who have long been disadvantaged by gendered practices at workplaces, the state is creating an urban underclass whose predicament is aggravated by widespread gender discrimination.

With the end of state commitment to women's equality, 'freedom' of gender discrimination has become rampant. Where gender stereotypes previously structured job assignments, they now provide the rationale for layoffs. Indeed, there is abundant evidence that in addition to factors such as women's predominance in expendable service positions, gendered stereotyping by overwhelmingly male managers is at the heart of women's disproportionate unemployment. Asked why so many more women than men were laid off, a factory manager replied without hesitation, 'If you lay off men, they will get drunk and make trouble. But if you lay off women, they will just go home and take it quietly by themselves.'⁶ This remark may be taken as representative of the mindset of many in power who would put women workers in jeopardy in order to achieve profitability or stability. From the perspective of the state, layoffs which leave most families with one job intact produce a result that is far less explosive than if many families were without even one income earner. From job assignment to layoffs, gender is a critical dimension in labour management and development strategies. But how have women reacted to this transformed social landscape? What resources have women deployed for negotiation or contestation?

Women's employment: a contested site

Long before gendered layoffs became a critical issue, women's employment was hotly debated. Since the early 1980s, intellectuals have crossed swords over the Maoist equal employment policy, relations between women's employment and 'modernity', patterns of women's employment in the market economy, and the predicament of laid-off women workers.⁷ These debates reveal not only conflicting social and economic interests, but also different assumptions concerning gender. In the process of discursive contestation, new demands have emerged to shape policy-making processes, including those affecting employment and gender.

In the early 1980s, reformers criticized Maoist gendered employment policies for impeding economic growth. Rather than critiquing the skewed gender structure in the workplace, these critics simply pointed to urban women's high employment rate as a relic of Maoist egalitarianism and a source of inefficiency in enterprises. 'Women return home' was openly advocated in official journals and newspapers as urban reform began to confront unemployment problems compounded by more than ten million 'returned youth' from the countryside. Thus, even before the government issued any reform policies that threatened women's interests, a serious challenge to equal employment loomed in public discourse.

New theories rationalized sending women home. Women's liberation, it was said, outpaced the low level of productivity in China. According to this theory, China's economic development was still at a low level that was incompatible with full employment of women. Because women's physical characteristics made them less adaptable to various job requirements, excessive employment of women reduced enterprise efficiency. The goal of socialism, reformers asserted, is to increase productivity. To contribute to this goal, women should return home. This 'outpacing theory' (*chaoqian lun*) openly blamed women for the low productivity of the socialist planned economy. At a time when urban women activists were beginning to question the myth that 'Chinese women are liberated' and express their discontent with a masculinist Maoist 'gender equality' that taxed women with a double burden, advocates of the 'outpacing theory' claimed that Chinese women were too liberated, or liberated too early.⁸

Many urban educated men seized on the discussion of women's employment to express their long-held aversion toward gender equality. As one charged, 'In the name of equality between men and women, the role of men was suppressed in exchange for a relative increase in women's status.' Another complained, 'The helping that women took from the socialist "big rice pot" exceeded the value of the quantity and quality of their work.'⁹ Some simply abandoned gender equality openly and called unabashedly for Chinese women to sacrifice themselves for the sake of national development. Japanese women's domesticity was cited as an example for Chinese women to emulate. Chinese women should likewise return home and sacrifice themselves for the nation.

The anti-gender equality sentiment expressed in the debate over employment was not an isolated case in the 1980s. Throughout the 1980s, urban China was engulfed by a rising discourse of femininity that aimed at combating Maoist

perspectives of gender equality and widening gender differences. Beginning as a critique of the ultra-left line of the Cultural Revolution, the discourse of femininity evolved rapidly from condemning such Cultural Revolution era practices as identical clothing (see Emily Honig's chapter in Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002) and job assignments to a demand for new norms for women. The emerging market economy was quick to produce commodities to enhance femininity. Gender differentiation in dress, social roles, behaviour and occupations became hallmarks of the decade. The challenge to women's equal employment was shaped by, and contributed to, the discourse of femininity.

Feminist voices and strategies

Amidst the rising discourse of femininity in the 1980s, few women or men contested such problematic proposals as 'women should choose feminine jobs'. Fewer disputed new norms of feminine appearance and feminine demeanour that were associated with the image of modernity. But when it came to defining women's social roles, sharply opposing views were expressed, often along gender lines. The debate on women's employment and the attack on gender equality in the form of the proposal that 'women return home', alarmed women activists. The defence of women's equal employment rights became a priority of the Women's Federation as well as of academics engaged in research on women's issues.

The Women's Federation played the most prominent role in blocking the proposal that 'women return home' in the 1980s, drawing on Maoist gender ideology to counterattack. When the suggestion to send women home first appeared in an article in 1980, the Shanghai Women's Federation quickly rejected the proposal as a solution to mitigate Shanghai employment problems.¹⁰ They counterattacked, using unambiguous language of Maoist gender ideology drawn from Engels:

Women's employment must be linked with women's liberation. Economics is the foundation. Without participation in social production, women would have no economic status. This would in turn undermine the equality between men and women in politics, society and family.¹¹

They condemned the proposal that women return home as retrogressive. The 'retrogression' argument was widely repeated and disseminated by Women's Federation representatives throughout the country and by the mainstream media. Women's conscious appeal to 'the Marxist line of women's liberation' in defending employment rights reveals the continuing power of Maoist gender ideology as a source of resistance.

In the reform era, when the party's priority of developing a market economy conflicted with policies upholding gender equality, how could Maoist gender ideology be sustained? To answer this intriguing question, we need to understand that the roots of this discursive power lie deep in China's modern history. From the

early twentieth century, especially since the rise of May Fourth feminism in 1919, women's liberation has been linked with the modernity project in nationalist discourse (see Wang 1999). The Communist Party built its legitimacy in part on its self-proclaimed role as liberator of Chinese women. In other words, maintaining the image of the liberator of women has been a pillar in maintaining the legitimacy of party rule. Just as the party could not openly abandon Marxism, it was hardly free to abandon the powerful signifier of modernity and socialism—gender equality. Indeed, in the half-century history of the People's Republic, equality between men and women is one major constitutional principle that has remained unchanged through social turmoil, constitutional revision and economic reform. At the same time, while the party has loudly proclaimed equality, deeply entrenched patterns of gender inequality in social institutions and law have been neglected (see Margaret Woo's chapter in Goldman and Perry 2002). As one contemporary Chinese scholar observed, 'Constitutional "equality between men and women" seems to be an untouchable cultural taboo.'¹² Contemporary attempts explicitly to detach gender equality from the goal of modernization could be seen as illegitimate in this dominant discourse.

Moreover, as the institutional centrepiece of gender discourse, the Women's Federation has continued to serve as both spokesperson for and symbol of gender equality in the reform era. A new term, 'the Marxist theory of women', was created in this period to suggest detachment from a stigmatized political era and to confirm a strong affinity to the party's continued claim to uphold Marxism. Although this stance was awkward in a political era in which upholding Marxism was seen by the public as a project of die-hard conservatives, promotion of the Marxist theory of women served both to remind the party of its commitment to gender equality and to consolidate the power of the official women's organization. Using the Marxist theory of women as leverage, the Women's Federation, and other women in the state apparatus, skilfully negotiated with the party on behalf of women.

Women in and outside the state system have sought with some success to influence public policy, law and discourse in order to protect women's equal employment rights. A series of policies and laws have been issued countering gender discrimination in the reform era. These include forbidding setting enrolment or recruitment requirements higher for women than for men; stipulating the same retirement age (60) for both male and female senior-level professionals; and forbidding laying off women during pregnancy, labour or breastfeeding.¹³ In 1992, the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women was passed, which reiterated women's comprehensive equal rights in all aspects of social, economic, political and domestic life. Again, the 1994 Labour Law specified women's equal employment rights. However, these gender equality laws and policies lack legal power and are difficult to enforce in a market economy in the absence of a sound legal system. Violations of gender equality laws or policies have often been reported in journals and newspapers run by the Women's Federation system and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, but few perpetrators have been punished. Not only does the private sector evade the laws with impunity, even

government branches sometimes ignore them. Finding ways to enforce gender equality laws, rather than pushing for their passage, is among the most challenging tasks confronting women cadres and activists inside and outside government.

One significant development in this respect is that Women's Federations at different locations are playing an increasingly prominent role in supporting individual women to use the legal system to fight against the violation of their equal rights. The Departments of Protecting Women's Rights at different levels of Women's Federations have helped set up legal services for women, and have been directly involved in lawsuits initiated by women. In an interview in 2002, the director of the Department of Protecting Women's Rights of the Shanghai Women's Federation proudly told me many cases in which the department had helped individual women to win lawsuits. Of these lawsuits, a few were related to labour issues and initiated by pregnant women who lost their jobs because of their pregnancy. 'Without the women's organization's help, individual women would have little power to win lawsuits', the director emphasized.¹⁴ These legal success stories may easily be eclipsed by numerous cases of violating women's rights. However, the director's firm pro-women position calls our attention to the potential of the official women's organization as an institutional resource for disadvantaged women.

Unable to stem the tide of layoffs in the late 1990s, the Women's Federation and the Women Workers Department of the Trade Union have devoted much effort to retraining, referral and reemployment. Vocational training centres and job referral services were established by the two organizations at local levels. A report in 2002 by the Women Workers Department of the Shanghai Trade Union indicates that since 1995 the Shanghai Trade Union has helped 250,000 laid-off workers to find new jobs, of whom over 60 per cent are women.¹⁵ Many surveys and reports on laid-off workers have been published by the two organizations to call public attention to the plight of laid-off women, to press for government action to guarantee women's employment rights, and to establish social security and unemployment benefits to buffer the impact of institutional and industrial transformations.

After the Fourth UN Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, activists and researchers on women's issues found both reinforced legitimacy and new analytical frameworks to fight for gender equity. Since the Chinese government sponsored the conference and signed the UN documents pledging gender equality, official women's organizations and women activists have sought to hold the government accountable. On 8 March 1996, *The China Women's News* reprinted Jiang Zemin's welcome speech at the Fourth UN Conference on Women. One sentence from Jiang's speech was selected as the title, 'Equality Between Men and Women is the Fundamental State Policy in Promoting Social Development in Our Country'. Following this reprint, presented as a new official document from the top leadership, newspaper reporters interviewed officials around the country asking what concrete measures they had taken to implement the 'fundamental state policy'.¹⁶ The Women's Federation also campaigned to popularize the *Platform for*

Action. Feminist scholars in academia utilized the congenial atmosphere to circulate through the official media feminist issues and concepts. In all these discursive manoeuvres, the central strategy has been to consolidate the connection between gender equality and modernity. The principles in the feminist documents passed by the UN Conference are presented as standard practice in 'modern civilizations' that China must adopt in the process of modernization.

Preparing and hosting the UN Conference enabled frequent interaction and communication between Chinese women activists and global feminists. A direct consequence of all these activities is that the feminist concept 'gender' (*shehui xingbie*), a term unfamiliar just a few years ago, has been adopted by many Chinese feminists in their analyses of the contemporary situation. The new conceptual tool borrowed from global feminism helped Chinese feminists to break out of their previous dilemma. Pursuing gender justice in the framework of Maoist gender ideology had not only limited their analytical power, but also made them look 'conservative' in the social context of deconstructing Maoism. In the 1980s, with the discourse of femininity on the rise, few women opposed the suggestion of gender differentiation in occupations because it sounded 'progressive' in its attempt to reverse Maoist 'unnatural' gender sameness. In the late 1990s, women researchers began gender critiques of the fad to 'feminize' women and encouraged women to cross gender boundaries to compete for hightech, managerial and entrepreneurial jobs. Using gender together with other newly learned concepts such as 'sustainable development' and 'human-centred development', Chinese feminists are calling for a development agenda that prioritizes social justice and gender equity.

Activists in and outside the Women's Federation and scholars from academia have organized many training sessions and workshops to promote gender consciousness. Many of these workshops aim at changing consciousness of decision makers and power holders in different administrative positions, and actively intervening in the process of reform. In recent years, a growing number of women scholars have been engaging in establishing women's studies curricula in higher education. Funded by international donors, programmes training faculty members to create new courses and teaching material have been offered nationwide by feminist scholars. The official Guideline of Chinese Women's Development issued in 2001 also includes establishing women's studies programmes as a goal in the next decade. We may expect to see women's studies programmes being set up as feminist institutional bases in the near future. Never openly confrontational to the state, but ever ready to stretch boundaries in their own innovative ways, Chinese feminists have become a significant social force in China's transformation. In contrast with many other critical voices in contemporary China, this feminist voice has gained some legitimacy in the dominant political discourse. This allows many feminists legitimately to participate in the institutional changes of the reform era.

A further case to illustrate this point is the passage of reproductive security policy in many cities. Since the early 1980s, feminists in and outside the state system have been using Western feminist theory on the value of women's reproductive work to argue for public compensation. Efforts to establish public

policies to acknowledge the value of reproduction began in the early 1980s by Women's Federations in some small cities, and the first Guideline of Chinese Women's Development aimed at setting up reproductive security policy in all the cities was issued by the end of 2000. In 2001, the Shanghai Municipal government, a late-comer but the largest urban administrative unit that has a public policy for women's reproductive work, issued a 'Method for Reproductive Security in Shanghai City and Towns'. According to the method, 0.8 per cent is deducted from the social security fund of each enterprise to set up a Reproductive Security Fund (RSF). The RSF is managed by the municipal government. Women whose work units pay for social security, and who abide by the birth control policy, can apply for the fund. The fund covers women's maternity leave (three months' pay for normal birth, six weeks' pay for miscarriage between three to seven months' pregnancy, and one month's pay for miscarriage under three months' pregnancy), and covers medical expenses up to 2,500 yuan for normal birth, 400 yuan for miscarriage between three to seven months' pregnancy, and 200 yuan for miscarriage under three months' pregnancy. The Method states clearly that its goal is to promote women's employment. There are no statistics to show to what extent this policy has improved women's chances of getting a job. But certainly reproductive costs can no longer be an excuse for depriving women of their job opportunities.¹⁷

As illustrated in this section, women activists within and outside the state system have devoted much attention and energy to negotiation with the state. However, the rapidly growing market economy has rendered the state impotent in many realms and has generated its own discursive space. Rampant discriminatory practices in the job market and commercially popularized sexism are powerful forces competing with the discourse of gender equality. This new social environment has prepared fertile soil for the growth of feminism in China, as well as presented serious obstacles to women activists.

Women's employment and 'modernity'

Despite the decline in the percentage of women's gainful employment, two decades of economic reform involving privatization, commodification and expansion of the service sector have created a large number and wide range of jobs in cities as well as in dynamic rural regions. Many new occupations emerged with a distinctive gender label and an image of 'modernity'. The new job market is even more highly gendered than its predecessor, with women channelled primarily to the service sector and secretarial jobs while men are recruited for technical and managerial positions. However, gender dynamics intersecting with other social forces have led to certain unexpected consequences.

Changes in employment in the reform era are not limited to industrial restructuring. They reflect the rise of new industries and trades, and diversification of ownership forms. While state enterprise workers face mounting insecurity, numerous others have long been immersed in the volatile and risky private sector. According to 1998 statistics from the State Industry and Commerce Bureau, 18.35

million registered private enterprise owners are female, constituting 40.16 per cent of the total. Clearly many women have opted to become their own bosses.

The Women's Federation has appealed to the Women Entrepreneurs Association (*Nüqiyejia lianyihui*) for assistance for laid-off women workers from state enterprises. The Women's Federation proposed a slogan to span different forms of ownership, 'Hand in hand, sisters walk together on the road of career building'. The Women Entrepreneurs Association responded by calling on entrepreneurs 'actively [to] share the worries of the state'. It called on its members to absorb laid-off workers or help retrain them. Enterprises were also encouraged 'actively [to] participate in state enterprise reform, through purchase, merger, and lease to help state enterprises out of their predicament'.¹⁸ The proposal could be interpreted as a discursive manoeuvre by women entrepreneurs to enhance their social status.

The confidence expressed by women entrepreneurs in this proposal is unmistakable. They are in a position to help the state, rather than to be dominated by the state. A close look at some of their achievements may clarify the source of their confidence. Zhai Meiqing, 34, vice-president of the Women Entrepreneurs Association, is the chief executive officer (CEO) of the multi-billion-yuan Xiangjiang Gold Seahorse Conglomerate in Guangdong province. Its 100-plus enterprises with over 10,000 employees include furniture, real estate and finance. Zhai has been credited with donating 60 million yuan to public welfare, helping 9,000 laid-off workers with subsidies and re-employing over 1,000 laid-off workers. Liu Yufen, 46, CEO of the East Xingtai Conglomerate in Hebei, has twenty-six enterprises with 230 million yuan in assets. She hired 740 laid-off workers and donated 860,000 yuan to build a school for orphans. These entrepreneurs are hailed as models by the Women's Federation and the government for both their business success and their social contributions.¹⁹

In contrast with women entrepreneurs who have risen in status through their business acumen and public profile, another group of women has achieved upward mobility drawing on human capital, specifically their youth and beauty. Replacing the 'iron rice bowl' of job security in urban China in the 1990s is the craze of creating the 'rice bowl of youth' (*qingchunfan*). Everywhere attractive young women have been sought to represent the shining image of 'modernity'. Booming service, commercial and entertainment industries post numerous age-, gender- and, often, height-specific advertisements seeking women under the age of 25 and above 165 centimetres in height. Stylish, elegant, or sexy, young 'Misses' (*xiaojie*) are displayed in remodelled or newly built 'modern' hotels, restaurants, department stores, travel services, night clubs, dance halls and so on. As older state industries lay off women workers over 35, these 'modern' young Misses, many with no particular education or technical skills, are entering the rising industries (mostly in the private sector, some with foreign investment) where their youth and beauty provide a ticket to incomes several times higher than those of their older sisters. Rather than clinging to a stable job, competitive young women in the fast lane often 'fire' their bosses in search of rapid upward mobility with their time-limited human capital.

In a sophisticated study of the ‘rice bowl of youth’ phenomenon, Zhang Zhen delves deeply into its social psychology and cultural meaning. ‘The aura of their youth and beauty, coupled with a trained mellow voice which air-pumps the value of any plain object, magically touches the product and turns it into a commodity.’ Zhang points out that:

The vivacious image of young female eaters of the ‘rice bowl of youth’ has served in the fast-moving transition to a market economy as a novel energetic labor force, a model of social mobility, and above all, consumption as endorsed by the current official ideology, which intentionally promotes a form of ‘democracy of consumption.’²⁰

But there is more beneath the dazzling urban scene accentuated with commodified feminine beauty. Seeing the issue as ‘a product or, in fact, a symptomatic form, of an urban mass culture that is imbued with sexual and commodity desires’, Zhang finds ‘an underlying structural anxiety of historical consciousness in which feminine youth and ephemeral beauty are paradoxically refashioned as a “timeless” object of male desire and as a rhetorical trope in modernist discourse’.²¹

The creation of the ‘rice bowl of youth’ is a ‘joint venture’ of consumerism and sexism that commodifies and objectifies women. Its contradictory aspects should not, however, be overlooked. Many a Miss Public Relations, Miss Shopping-guide and Miss Travel-guide is far from being a passively constructed ‘decorative’ object for the fulfilment of her bosses’ utility needs and their male clients’ sexual fantasies. Rather, many are active players in the melodrama of ‘modernity’, who consciously maximize their ‘profits’ by a range of strategies, including frequent job changes to advance their position, and investing in various adult education programmes to acquire new qualifications and skills. Seizing the ‘rice bowl of youth’, many young women catapult themselves into lasting careers. The inherent ‘modern’ values in this position, such as assertiveness and competitiveness, have been expressed prominently in young Misses’ pursuit of career development in a competitive job market. This gendered employment pattern with its inherent contradictions, in short, provides opportunities for young women’s social and economic advancement, even as it blocks employment access of older laid-off women workers, and reinforces gender stereotypes.

At one end of the ‘rice bowl of youth’, and far from the lowest paid, is the controversial occupation *sanpeiniü*—literally, ‘tri-service escorting girls’. These escorts, many working without a boss, accompany their clients in drinking, dancing and singing, and may provide other services that fall in the murky area that attracts both male clients and public security personnel. A report from Jinan alleges that 70 per cent of the arrested prostitutes in that city were *sanpeiniü*. But while prostitution, though widespread, remains illegal in China, escorting has increasingly become a legitimate occupation. In recent years, some local governments have begun to levy income taxes on these ‘temporary service personnel in the entertainment industry’. The trade has become a target of local revenue

bureaux because of its high income and its large size. It is estimated that a *sanpeiniü* in booming Shenyang may earn at least 4,000 yuan a month, and that 80 per cent of the 20,000 'temporary service personnel' in the city are female. Most *sanpeiniü* are migrants, either from other cities or rural areas, as few would like their families to know the nature of their high-paid jobs.

Unlike other glittering Misses who have become symbols of modernity, *sanpeiniü*, though sometimes indistinguishable from other Misses, are for many the symbol of moral degeneration. Public moral condemnation has mixed messages. Many accuse young women of being 'decadent and hedonistic'. Others are indignant at male clients' decadence and corruption. The prosperous entertainment industry, including escort services, is partly sustained by public funds, as many male clients are cadres who can easily get their entertainment expenses reimbursed by their work units. By matching wealthy or powerful male customers with young women 'temporary service personnel'—migrants of few means—escorting presents the starkest image of gender disparity in Chinese society. Many young women in this borderline trade earn a high income that they could never make in other occupations. Success stories in the popular literature tell of young women who launched private businesses after a few years of work in the trade. Cautionary tales, however, emphasize violence and abuse encountered by *sanpeiniü*. Because of the ambiguous nature of the trade, few *sanpeiniü* seek protection from the state. Rather, evading state interference and taxation is as much a part of their business as skilful handling of their male clients. 'Resistance' may be a common experience in their daily life, but it involves very different strategies from those adopted by feminist activists.

In metropolises where foreign investment has underwritten acres of new high-rise buildings, another new social group is emerging along with the changed urban landscape. Young college-educated women have found clerical and managerial positions in foreign and joint-venture companies. Many from inland cities have secured jobs in foreign companies by migrating to the Special Economic Zone in the south. 'Miss Office' or 'White Collar Beauty' (*bailing liren*), terms associated with this group of professional women, share an affinity with the term 'rice bowl of youth' by accentuating their subjects' femininity. However, distinct from the 'rice bowl of youth', these terms connote a much higher status which is typically bought by a college degree and, more importantly, a high salary, often in a foreign company or joint venture. Most began with a clerical job, considered appealingly 'feminine' and suitable for young women. By the late 1990s, many of these educated young women had moved up to management, which is an 'unfeminine' sphere in popular discourse. A report in 1998 found that almost half of the personnel departments in foreign enterprises in Shanghai were run by women, and women constituted 63 per cent of the employees sent to foreign companies in Shanghai by the Shanghai Foreign Service Company. Of about 7,000 women employees, over 2,000 were at the senior managerial level in these foreign companies. One-third of the representatives, the top position for Chinese in foreign

companies in Shanghai, were women. Within a decade the number of women in this position has increased dramatically from a few to over a hundred.²²

White collar and managerial positions in foreign companies combined with occupations associated with the 'rice bowl of youth' have given rise to the emergence of an urban young female group with high income earnings. While most studies (by sampling married couples' income) show that the development of market economy raises living standards generally, as well as enlarging gender disparity in income in many cities, some researchers in Shanghai have found that the income of unmarried young women exceeds that of unmarried young men. Reportedly, a major reason for the reversed gender disparity in earning, besides the 'rice bowl of youth', is that more young women than men are white collar workers in foreign companies and joint ventures.²³ Although the reliability of this finding needs to be tested with more systematic and larger-scale research, it shows that the job market not only practices gender, but also age, discrimination. It thus calls our attention to other variables that affect women's employment opportunity.

The young urban professional women in foreign companies are a new elite group that has emerged in the reform era and is concentrated in a few large cities with mostly foreign investments. Ironically, certain gender norms unexpectedly work in favour of women. If we look for factors that contribute to the high percentage of women in foreign companies at a time when even the Chinese government discriminates against female college graduates, gender difference in specialities appears significant. The first requirement for working in foreign companies is a good command of a foreign language, particularly English. Foreign-language departments in universities have historically been among the few with more female than male students because foreign-language mastery has long been portrayed as an innate female strength. When both male and female foreign-language graduates enter the job market, more women than men seek 'feminine' clerical jobs in the private sector, jobs portrayed as glamorous, feminine and modern. The gender term 'White Collar Beauty' shapes young women's career choices. In the late 1990s, the term acquired new connotations of ability, high income and high consumption.

My interviews with young urban professional couples in Shanghai in the late 1990s revealed a common pattern in which the wife works in a foreign company and the husband in a government or academic job with less income but (until recently) higher prestige and lifetime security. A young male English professor whose wife works in a foreign company commented, 'It seems that women are more daring in entering the private sector. Or rather, they have fewer qualms.' If women with a college degree had fewer qualms about entering the private sector in the 1990s, they confront a more competitive job market in the twenty-first century. Shanghai is now attracting job applicants from all over the world. Many foreign companies are turning to applicants from their own countries who have studied Chinese. Chinese women professionals in foreign companies or joint ventures have begun to complain about a glass ceiling with both a racial and a gender tint.

The rise of young urban women in the 1990s is also a demographic phenomenon. The state has strictly controlled births since the late 1970s. However, many one-child families emerged in urban areas, especially metropolises, well before state enforcement of the one-child policy. With reduced family size and improved living standards, and with education heavily subsidized (until the 1990s), even two-child urban families often invested in the education of both sons and daughters. The percentage of women students in colleges has steadily increased from 24.2 in 1978 to 36.4 in 1996, and the number of women college students more than quadrupled in these years from 207,000 to 1.1 million.²⁴ Women students have also gained recognition for academic excellence. In recent years, the top candidates in the national college entrance exams have consistently been women. The phenomenon has caused a panic in a culture anxious to sustain the male sense of superiority. The media swiftly popularized an authoritative interpretation: female candidates' high performance is the product of the poor design of examination questions which fit in well with rigid female minds but fail to test the capacity of flexible male minds. So far no one has suggested that different socialization of a whole generation of only daughters may be the major reason for the rise of confident, assertive and competitive young women.

The arrival in the 1990s of a cohort of well-educated and strong-willed only daughters on the job market will give rise to new dynamics in gender discourse. Having been brought up with high expectations from their families, many female college graduates will experience frustrations once they try to locate a job that meets their standards. Top female graduates find that male classmates with inferior academic records are recruited for good jobs that are denied them. Gender discrimination is not subtle. Many advertisements of desirable jobs state clearly that only men need apply. A young professional woman related her sad experience: 'In college, I was always admired for my outstanding academic performance. I never experienced gender discrimination. But once I graduated, I was denied the job I sought simply because I was a woman.' Her superb academic record counted for naught. The painful experience strengthened her determination to fight for gender equality. Facing persistent and pervasive gender discrimination in employment, many young women begin to adopt an individual strategy, that is acquiring higher degrees to compete with men. Women applicants to graduate programmes have increased rapidly in recent years. How successful this strategy will be remains to be seen, though the ramifications of a large proportion of female higher degree holders in Chinese society will be significant. At least, the huge gap between young women graduates' expectations and social reality can be expected to give rise to growing feminist activism at a time when a feminist discourse is gaining increasing influence. This cohort of women may pose serious challenges to gender boundaries in employment and society.

Women and unemployment

In the 1990s, the magnitude of laid-off workers threatened social stability, prompting action by central and local governments. (See [chapter 3](#).) In 1994, the Labour Department began the pilot 'Re-employment Project' in thirty selected cities and in 1995 it was taken nationwide. The 'Re-employment Project' mobilizes public resources to provide reemployment for laid-off workers with government support and facilities. At best, it is a stopgap measure that mitigates laid-off workers' deep resentment at being abandoned by the state. It does not change the reality that the state has discarded them after many years of service.

The state policy stipulates that laid-off workers retain a relationship with their work units unless they officially terminate it and take a job with another enterprise. Laid-off workers retain entitlement to medical coverage, pensions and housing unless their work units go bankrupt. Even in rare cases in which laid-off workers succeed in finding a higher-paid job, most experience downward mobility. Leaving state enterprises is still seen by many state workers as involving a loss of status. Re-employment, especially for older workers, involves reconstituting one's identity from a previously positively defined state worker to various ambiguous, uncertain or demeaning categories.

Re-employment options for laid-off women are generally limited and nearly all point to sharp downward mobility both in status and income.²⁵ In many big cities, laid-off state-sector women workers are being encouraged to work in community services. Shanghai, with large numbers of laid-off women textile workers, has pioneered this structural readjustment by providing low-paid neighbourhood jobs caring for the old, the young and the sick as domestic helpers, or encouraging private or collective-service businesses such as laundries, tailors, hairdressers, cleaning and food services. None of these jobs provides benefits or prestige comparable to that enjoyed by a state worker. Aware of the downward mobility in this re-employment, official women's organizations sought both to provide training and to upgrade the social status of domestic and service workers. The Shanghai Women's Federation and the Women Workers Committee in the Trade Union Federation have run training sessions in 'home economics' for laid-off women and issued certificates to graduates. They changed the name 'Maids Referral' to 'Home Economics Referral'. Equipping laid-off women with a certificate in home economics, official women's organizations tried to replace the scornful image of 'maids', long associated with rural women, with a respectable niche in urban 'modernity'. They also worked to secure state recognition of this 'new' occupation. In 1995, the Labour Department classified 'family service personnel' in the category of technical jobs. Although the state classification does not entail better pay and benefits in the private sector, some women have since officially obtained this credential as a technical worker in the hope that it may help them secure a job. Shanghai's experience has been propagandized nationally as a model.

This gendered re-employment solution promoted by official women's organizations has the negative implication of reinforcing a gender division of labour. However, the propaganda portraying home and community as the arena for

women can also be interpreted as women's strategy to meet immediate practical needs, even survival needs, at a time of rampant unemployment. The majority of laid-off women are middle aged with few resources to compete in the new job market. Laid-off women with scant special skills and a family to support have limited choices. Community service provides many new and useful jobs that require minimal training.

Some widely circulated success stories herald achievements of laid-off women in creating new businesses in community services. A famous 'Mama Zhuang Vegetable Service' was created by a laid-off woman in Shanghai named Zhuang Weihong. She and her husband were both laid off in 1992, when she was in her mid-twenties. In 1996 she got an idea from a re-employment training school. Renting a room with borrowed money, she began a vegetable cleaning service with her family members. They shopped for vegetables, picked, cleaned and prepared them for cooking, then delivered them to clients' homes with a 10 per cent surcharge for processing. In eight months, their clients grew from their six neighbours to 300 families. Zhuang hired 140 employees (120 were laid-off workers) and installed a computer to track customer orders. Asked why a young woman would name the business 'Mama Zhuang' (which suggests an image of a woman at least over 50), Zhuang explained: 'Mama is the warmest person. Mama will never cheat you. Using this name means we will succeed with high quality of service and credentials.'²⁶ Here woman's role as mother is deployed skilfully and positively by a woman innovator tapping a market that had not previously existed while building on maternal images of service. The strength of 'female' roles and 'female' qualities in the service sector is a theme in many of the success stories about laid-off women's re-employment.

The mounting crisis of unemployment and various 'upgrading' efforts, including propaganda, seem, at least in Shanghai, to have changed the attitudes towards such re-employment of many laid-off women from resistance to acceptance. In 1997 alone, Shanghai trained 3,000 laid-off women in a 'family services' training programme. More than 90 per cent of them found jobs. By 2002, the term 'Shanghai maid' (*Shanghai baomu*) had entered public discourse. However, we should note that the feasibility of sending laid-off women workers to family service is also a function of the economic boom and the rise of a wealthy class in Shanghai. In other industrial cities plagued by the failure of state owned enterprises, laid-off women would not have many job openings in domestic service even if they were willing to take whatever is available.

The increasing supply of laid-off women as domestic helpers is shown clearly in the drastic change in the nature of 'Maids Referral' services run by neighbourhood residents' committees. Until recently, they referred rural women seeking a job in Shanghai to families seeking domestic help. But since early 1998, jobs for rural women are drying up as many of these jobs are being taken by laid-off women. A State Statistical Bureau survey in 1998 showed that in seven large cities, over 90 per cent of urban residents preferred local to rural women for domestic and community service. The employers do not have to provide room and board for local

employees. They share the same dialect and have 'more harmonious interaction'. Moreover, middle-aged laid-off women come with rich experience in housework and childcare, and 'modern' training in home economics. Urban employment restructuring, therefore, directly affects employment opportunities of migrating rural young women.

'Peasant workers' in the city

Two decades of rapid industrialization and urbanization have resulted in a growing 'rural population' in urban areas. Millions of people with rural residence certificates who now work in cities are called 'peasants' or 'peasant workers' (*nongmingong*) and are subject to discriminatory state and business practices. Policies such as the requirement that families lacking urban residence permits have to pay for their children's education in public schools not only deter rural migrant workers from settling in cities, they also delineate second-class citizenship. The urban/rural divide follows migrants who settle in the urban areas, as [chapter 6](#) in this volume shows.

Most rural workers have low-paid, low-skilled, low-status and frequently insecure jobs, many of which are, or at least were until recently, scorned by urban dwellers. Domestic service has long been the entry job for rural women coming to large cities. A 1988 study estimated that 40,000 rural women sought domestic work that year in Beijing alone. 'Little maid' (*xiao baomu*) became a trade associated with rural young women. Many rural women since the 1980s have also secured employment as waitresses and shop assistants. Some state and collective enterprises recruit rural women as contract workers to lower labour and benefit costs.

The majority of rural women work in the private sector where state labour protection and worker benefits are difficult to enforce. Long hours, low pay and hazardous work environments are common phenomena among private enterprises that employ young rural women. Ching Kwan Lee's study of management strategies in private industry in the booming southern city of Shenzhen, near Hong Kong, finds a pattern of gendered localistic authority that disguises class domination. Young rural women are introduced to factories by male relatives or acquaintances from their home towns. These male locals exercise paternalistic authority over women on the shop floors. As Lee points out, 'Localism and genderism not only organize the labor market and channel labor from all over China to Shenzhen, they are also incorporated into the factory to facilitate and legitimate managerial control.'²⁷

Gender is also embodied in young women's praxis as migrant workers. In a study based on 109 letters from young women migrant workers and their families, Tan Shen notes that while many send money home to help their poor families, some young women specifically shoulder the responsibility of paying for their brothers' college education. Sometimes two sisters labour to support one brother. Tan tells a tragic story in which two Sichuan sisters worked extremely

hard in a Shenzhen sweatshop for several years to put their older brother through college. Four months after his graduation, both sisters died in a fire caused by managerial violation of labour safety. Tan's study forcefully demonstrates that in such instances migration is not taken as a route for personal advance.²⁸

The widely circulated new term 'maiden workers' (*dagong mei*) for young rural women workers connotes the lowest rank of the urban workforce. Being young and female in the context of Chinese traditional generation and gender hierarchy automatically places them in a subordinate position to senior males. Being 'rural', seen in urbanites' eyes in the context of urban craving for 'modernity', not only means that they lack a permanent urban residence, but also suggests their distance from the 'modern'. The social and cultural meanings of this element in their identity are new to many women who had never left their villages. The worst pain experienced by many is bearing the stigma of being 'rural'. At a meeting in Beijing organized by a women's journal, *Rural Women Knowing All*, to hear about migrant workers' experiences, some 'maiden workers' from Xiamen were invited to speak about their success stories. These 'maiden workers' had recently obtained Xiamen residence because of their excellent performance at work and also because the Women's Federation in Xiamen struggled hard to obtain a quota of twenty urban residences for 'maiden workers'. Contrary to the expectations of the meeting organizers, however, what they heard was a litany of sweat and tears. One after another these model 'maiden workers' recounted painful experiences of prejudice and discrimination based on their rural identity. In work, love, marriage, children's education, housing and all other aspects of their lives, they encountered adversity—constantly reminding them that they are the 'other' to urbanites.²⁹

Despite discrimination, rural women workers generally regard working in cities as an opportunity. Many young unmarried women use migration as an effective means to resist undesirable arranged marriages. Freedom of mobility, in fact, also enables them to quit and change jobs frequently, the most common form of their resistance to abusive bosses and intolerable working conditions. In order to leave options open for a better job, Tan Shen finds that many young women workers opt not to sign a contract. Many young women from families that do not rely on their income come to big cities with a dream of personal development. Metropolises provide them with educational facilities and opportunities, and many have enrolled in secondary vocational schools or even colleges. As one 20-year-old woman from Shaanxi said, 'The best thing in Beijing is that there are so many schools. You can learn whatever you want to. You can also go to evening college. Our hometown does not have these. There is nothing there.' Arriving in Beijing with 800 yuan in savings from her family, she paid 400 yuan to enrol in a hairdressing school. Her dream is to open the first hairdressing salon in her home town after five years of work and study in Beijing.³⁰ The freedom to migrate has enabled this young woman to make a career choice likely to lead to upward mobility.

The deepening crisis of urban unemployment threatens such opportunities for rural as well as urban women. Since the mid-1990s, many big cities have restricted employment of rural workers. Many of the most desirable jobs always required urban

residence. But now even many humble jobs are reserved for laid-off workers. For example, a 1996 Shanghai government document stipulated that any enterprise with 10 per cent laid-off workers cannot hire outside labour freely, and commercial and service enterprises must hire 50 per cent laid-off workers in their new recruitment of non-technical workers. Although some intellectuals criticize state regulations for blocking the free flow of labour and restricting competition, the state can be expected to adopt measures to limit the influx of rural migrants in order to maintain urban social stability.

Conclusion

A widely circulated cliché in contemporary Chinese society is that ‘reform presents women with both opportunities and challenges’. Sounding inclusive, it glosses over tremendous differences among women, ranging from those who have ample opportunities and resources to those who face monumental challenges. This chapter highlights processes of differentiation and diversification among women in the reform era. ‘Women’ as a social category has to be complicated and concretized if it is to provide explanatory utility. Age, education, geographic location, residence (rural or urban), enterprise ownership form, type of industry, skills, capital and network resources are all important variables that intersect with gender in differentiating women in the turbulent social and economic transformations that are reshaping China.

Differentiation and diversification among women, however, do not reduce the salience of gender. Rather, the reform era has brought accelerated gender discrimination and gender conflicts. Conflicting gender interests are prominently expressed over women’s employment. Gendered layoffs expose women’s disadvantaged and subordinate status. Masculinist usage of young women as a trope for ‘modernity’, both in jobs and in advertisements, demonstrates not only men’s dominance in economic enterprises but also their dominance in reproducing gendered cultural norms. Yet we have also noted the ability of women to seize diverse opportunities to rise in important sectors of the economy. In all of these contradictory sites ‘women’ retains its usefulness as a collective category. In contesting and manipulating gendered categories, we see multiple strategies of resistance ranging from those pursued by the Women’s Federation and women’s labour organizations to the individual strategies pursued by women of older and younger generations and different levels of education.

As a collective category, women occupy a unique discursive space in contemporary China. In the very period when the state has delegitimized ‘class’ as an analytical category while pursuing accelerated privatization and other strategies that contribute to class polarization, women activists and cadres have successfully made gender a legitimate category in public discourse. The fact that they have been able openly to demand and redefine gender equality testifies in part to the effectiveness of their resistance strategies. Resistance does not always require a confrontational or overtly oppositional stance, especially when the lines

between conflicting interests are shifting and unstable. Standing between the state and the market, women have utilized the political and legal power of the state to combat socioeconomic practices detrimental to their interests, many of them practices that originate in state reform policies. Holding the state accountable for its rhetorical commitment to gender equality, consolidating the connection between gender equality and modernity, quietly expanding functions and influences of official and non-official women's organizations, women activists in and outside government strive to 'implement the fundamental state policy of gender equality'. Women's constant negotiations and manoeuvres are daily resistant practices behind the scene, taking place at various levels and diverse sites, contesting and stretching the boundaries without alarming the authorities, and reshaping the processes of reform with their strong sense of entitlement to hold up 'half the sky'.

The diverse implications of contemporary Chinese women's activities are farreaching. Efforts by feminists to establish women's studies in higher education have the potential to develop a critical intellectual force in the male-dominated academy that has been paralysed by political pressures and the corrupt lures of both state power and the market. Critical scrutiny of gender inequality can be extended to other forms of hierarchy and injustice, thus making women's studies an avant-garde of intellectual resistance to political, economic and cultural domination. Outside the academy, women activists have engaged in political, social and cultural realms. While quietly exploring innovative ways to redefine women's relationship with the state, women's organizations may act more like interest groups that function with legitimacy in a political culture they have helped to shape. Busy consolidating the territory and legitimacy they have worked hard to gain, however, women activists in and outside the government have little incentive to jeopardize their own accomplishments by venturing into areas marked as politically taboo by the state. Even as feminist academics investigate how gender intersects with class, ethnicity, sexuality and other forms of domination, many women activists may consciously disassociate themselves from resistance strategies that clash directly with state power.

The transformation of official women's organizations has been a major factor in the changing landscape of Chinese women's activism. Challenged by women activists outside the government, consciously exploring their new identities, official women's organizations have assumed more functions as interest groups on behalf of women. Located in the state bureaucratic system, official women's organizations have limited but valuable accesses to state power and resources, which has enabled them to attract women activists and scholars to collaborate with them on many research projects. In the past two decades, official women's organizations have formed wide-ranging connections with women activists and scholars from all over the country. The newly formed (1999) Chinese Women's Research Association (*zhongguo funü yanjiuhui*) by the All-China Women's Federation, which includes on its executive committee scholars and senior administrators of universities nationwide, demonstrates the intention to form a wide coalition and to extend their influence to women of all walks of life. This is

the only 'mass organization' that has paid state employees working from the top All-China Women's Federation down to each urban neighbourhood and rural town. The changing function of the Women's Federation is profoundly significant not only because a powerful women's interest group is emerging, but also because this interest group is still located in the state system. The contradictory functions and murky boundaries involved in the transformation of Fulian defy any existing theory on democratization.³¹ What is clear is that because of the transformation of this largest women's organization, women have formed a different relationship with the state than other disadvantaged groups in China. Women have been able to negotiate with the state both inside and outside the state, though they can only negotiate as *women*. Chinese women have certainly come a long way from the days when class was the only legitimate social and political category.

Notes

- 1 Ping Ping, 'Guoyou qiye guanli de xingbie celue yu nügong de qiye yilai' (Gender Strategy in the Management of State Enterprises and Women Workers' Dependency on Enterprises), *Shehuixue yanjiu* (Sociology Studies), 1 (1998), pp. 55–62.
- 2 *Zhongguo funübao* (China Women's News), 12 June 1998. There are various statistics in regard to the total number of laid-off workers cited in journals and newspapers in China. But the percentage of women laid-off workers has been consistently over 60 per cent.
- 3 *Zhongguo funü* (Women of China), 5 (1998), p.7.
- 4 Fang Hong, 'Xiangang shiye nüzhigong de kunjing' (Laid-off and Unemployed Women in Predicament), *Zhongguo gongren* (Workers of China), 3 (1998), pp.10–11.
- 5 *Zhongguo funübao* (China Women's News), 3 June 1998.
- 6 Many surveys, however, reveal situations contrary to this stereotype. They report 'extreme actions' taken by some laid-off women workers. 'Extreme actions' include destroying public property and factory equipment, and stealing enterprise property.
- 7 Liu Bohong, 'Guanyu nüxing jiuye wenti zongshu' (A Summary of Issues in Women's Employment), *Zhongguo funü lilun yanjiu shinian* (Women's Theoretical Research in China: 1981–1990) (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 199), p.325.
- 8 The CCP myth of liberated Chinese women was most heartily embraced by these male advocates even when many cases of violence and discrimination against women were widely reported. For a discussion of Chinese women's critique of Maoist gender equality, see Wang Zheng, 'Research on Women in Contemporary China', in Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig, Lisa Rofel and Susan Mann (eds), *Guide to Women's Studies in China* (Berkeley: Center for East Asian Studies, 1998).
- 9 Chang Leren, 'Youhua peizhi he zuijia fenpei' (Optimization and Best Distribution), *Zhongguo funübao* (China Women's News), 11 July 1988.
- 10 The Shanghai-based journal *Shehui* (Society) set up a column for this debate. See issues 1–4 1984.

- 11 Zang Jian, 'Funü zhiye jiaose chongtu de lishi huigu' (A Historical Review of Conflicts over Women's Career Roles), in *Beijing daxue funü wenti di'erjie guoji yantaohui lunwen ji* (A Collection of Papers from the Second International Conference on Women's Issues by Beijing University) (Beijing: Women's Studies Centre, Beijing University, 1993), p.114.
- 12 Li Dun, 'Guanyu xingbie: pingdeng, fazhan yu heping' (About Gender: Equality, Development and Peace), *Dongfang* (Orient), 4 (1995), pp.17–21.
- 13 The adjustment of female senior professionals' retirement age is made in five documents issued by the Ministry of Personnel in 1990, entitled 'Guanyu gaoji zhuanjia tui (li) xiu youguan wenti de tongzhi' (On Issues Related to Senior Experts' Retirement).
- 14 The citation is from my interview with Cai Lanzhen on 18 July 2002.
- 15 Zhang Lu, 'Weile zhenzheng yiyishang de pingdeng' (For Equality in a Real Sense), *Laodong bao* (Labor News), 17 June 2002.
- 16 The discursive manoeuvre can be discerned from *The China Women's News* in April 1996, when many interviews of high officials were printed. Behind the scenes, women cadres of Fulian have been talking about this accomplishment with pride and amusement.
- 17 In her talks to women cadres in Hunan while visiting there in August 2002, Peng Peiyun, the chair of the All-China Women's Federation, emphasized the importance of reproductive security policy to women's employment, and also indicated that the development of this policy was not even across the country. Apparently, the goal of setting up the policy in the cities nationwide by the end of 2000 has not yet been achieved. Peng's talks were publicized at the website of Hunan Women's Federation.
- 18 *Zhongguo funübao* (China Women's News), 1 June 1998.
- 19 *Jingji ribao* (Economy Daily), 8 July 1998.
- 20 Zhang Zhen, 'Mediating Time: The "Rice Bowl of Youth" in *Fin-de-siècle* Urban China', *Public Culture*, 12, 1 (Winter 2000), pp.93–113.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Liu Jian, 'Bailing liren de ganga' (The Dilemma of the White Collar Beauties), *Zhongguo funübao* (China Women's News), 25 June 1998.
- 23 Hou Xiaofu, 'Shilun xiandaihua yu Zhongguo funü jingji diwei de bianqian' (On Modernity and the Transformation of Chinese Women's Economic Status), *Dongyue Luncong* (East Mountains Journal), Jinan (March 1997), pp.49–53.
- 24 *China Statistical Yearbook* (Beijing: China Statistical Information and Consultancy Service Centre, 1997), p.647.
- 25 Some surveys reveal, however, that in Special Economic Zones in Guangdong laid-off women have more opportunities to go into the private sector using family resources. They are less inclined to insist on a job in state-owned enterprises, as a longer history of privatization has reduced the prestige of such jobs and increased the desirability of working in the private sector.
- 26 *Zhongwai nüxing yanjiu xinxi* (Information on Women's Studies in China and Abroad) (April 1997), p.6. This is an internal journal published by the China Women's College in Beijing.
- 27 Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p.135.

- 28 Tan Shen, 'Dagongmei neibu huati' (Internal Topics of Maiden Workers), *Shehuixue yanjiu* (Sociological Studies), 6 (1998), pp.63–73.
- 29 Li Tao, 'Chongpo chengxiang zhijie' (Breaking the Boundary of Urban and Rural), *Nongjianü baishitong* (Rural Women Knowing All), 12 (1997), pp.14–16.
- 30 *Zhongguo funübao* (China Women's News), 28 May 1996.
- 31 Two books published in 2002 (see Judd and Wesoky) examine the contemporary Chinese women's movement from different points of focus. Ellen R.Judd (2002) critiques Fulian's role in promoting rural women's participation in the market economy, while Sharon Wesoky (2002) suggests a symbiotic relationship between the non-governmental women's organizations and the state. Neither pays adequate attention to the transformation of Fulian at different levels.

Suggested reading

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- Tamara Jacka, *Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Opportunity in an Era of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- Ellen R.Judd, *The Chinese Women's Movement Between State and Market* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002)
- Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle. Two Worlds of Factory Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998a).
- , 'The Labor Politics of Market Socialism', *Modern China*, 24, 1 (January 1998b).
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