Everything has changed except gender inequality. Discuss with reference to contemporary China.

Abstract

During Mao's labour economics gender discrimination declined but strong patriarchal structures remained, particularly within the household. Since Mao's regime, which saw the withdrawal of the state welfare system, Chinese women have had to battle with the increasing multiplicity of demands on their time. In attempting to understand how gender inequality has changed, China's society may be viewed as a kaleidoscope with a shifting center of gravity connected to the delicate fabric of women's identities and gender norms which intersect to determine various aspects of gender inequalities. As time turns change is inevitable. This essay finds that the picture of gender inequality in contemporary China is looking less rosy than has been assumed. Gender inequalities, as constraints on women's time have been exacerbated by the re-sexualisation of factories combined with China's aging population who are demanding increasing quantities of intergenerational resources from their children.

1. Introduction

The shift from Mao's planned economy to the era after Mao's death is chiefly represented by the narrowing gap between China and the Western world in terms of social and cultural changes and unprecedented economic growth. In order to put the impact of these changes in context, imagine China's society as a kaleidoscope. When structural changes occur, such as economic or demographic transitions, the center of gravity shifts. This essay argues that the inevitable result of these structural transitions will change the various shapes which revolve around the center of gravity but are part of the delicate fabric of society, specifically, gender relations, gender norms and women's individual identities. At the intersection of these shapes are gender inequalities. The resulting picture depends on who you are looking at since no two individuals experience discrimination and inequality in the exact same way. Considering the extensive economic restructuring China has undergone since the end of Mao's regime 'everything' has shifted, thus as time turns changing gender inequalities are also an inevitable outcome.

This essay compares the Mao and post-Mao periods showing that the picture of changing gender inequalities in contemporary China is not always towards a more equitable equilibrium. In particular, the rate of change of particular *gender norms*, which are the 'social practices and ideas that shape the behavior of people and institutions' have not evolved enough within China's confusion culture and women remain the principle caregivers to the young and old (Zhan and Montgomery, 2003; Elson, 2010:209). As such, women face constraints on their time as both productive workers, guardians of the reproductive world, community role models and now they also face additional pressures to earn beyond the income levels of their aging parents. As such, gender inequalities as constraint on women's time are accelerating faster than men's.

1.1 Inequality, Intersectionality and Triple roles

Gender inequalities occur in two interrelated arenas, the 'public' space, such as the labour market or political institutions and in the nominally 'private' area of the household (Chant and McIlwaine, 2009: 205-6). However, it is inaccurate and even dangerous to interpret *inequality* as a static concept. Origins of the word give it connotations of differences in size, degree or circumstances of two variables compared; this implies gender inequality looks at what is not equal between groups of 'men' and 'women'. However, as feminists such as Kabeer (1992, 1994), Molyneux (2000) and Monhanty (2003) have all agreed it is impossible to assume there is anything homogeneous about 'men' or 'women'.

Intersectionality, as a concept is useful to direct our understanding of how women should be understood as a heterogeneous group as it refers to the variation between categories of 'difference' in individual lives. For instance, women's race, age, class, social practices, access to institutional arrangements, cultural ideologies and how these may intersect in women's lives (Crenshaw, 1991; Ludvig, 2006; Davis, 2008). Therefore, *Intersectionality* shows us that women experience inequality through different aspects of their identity, and those aspects (sex, race, class, and so on) join or intersect to impose different dimensions of discrimination, for example, inequality in accessing the labour market or child care facilities. A Chinese woman with children and/or dependent parents may face unequal barriers to men when attempting to enter formal education in the form of higher opportunity costs of not undertaking paid employment in addition to the cost of care services. The extent to which women experience these barriers and constraints will vary depending on how powerfully the various aspects of their identity intersect, for example, young, poor and living in a rural area.

However, here the aim of deconstructing the term *inequality* is not to give a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which inequality intersects in the lives of Chinese women. Rather, it is useful to show us that *inequalities* are not uniform and are not experienced as a collective. Consider the kaleidoscope analogy- as women's identities transform, for example young to old, single to married, poor to rich the various constraints women face will also change over time.

In order to make some useful suggestions about how far, and in which direction gender inequalities have evolved some generalizations must be made. These generalizations can be structured around *gender norms* in China. Within historically patriarchal socio-political environments, such as China, specific tasks are viewed as 'women's work', too demeaning for a man or, conversely 'men's work' which are seen as un-feminine (Elson, 1991:1). In particular, gender norms are associated with the way that women interact with the labour force or other time constraining activities such as formal education. For instance, in China it is traditionally regarded as 'masculine' for men to be the primary breadwinners and work within the home is the 'responsibility' of women. It is here that the work of Moser (1989) and later Kabeer (1992, 1994) is particularly helpful. They use the 'triple role' framework to highlight the way in which women's roles are divided into activities in the *productive economy*, *reproductive economy* and additionally, *community management* roles (Moser, 1989).

The *productive economy* is market orientated, can be measured and included in national accounts through formal or informal markets, paid or unpaid work or any space where goods or services are produced (Gideon, 1999:3). The *reproductive economy* maintains the health and happiness of the population through day-to-day activities such as housework, fuel and food collection, disposal of household waste and thus produces and maintains the labour inputs for

the productive economy (Gideon, 1999:3). Finally, Moser (1989) shows that women are more likely than men to take on *community management* roles, which refer to community organization and provision of items that are collectively consumed, for example, ceremonies and celebrations.

As Moser (1989:1801) has drawn attention to, women are unequally constrained by different degrees to men since they are expected to simultaneously balance the reproductive and productive economy as well as community management roles. This framework is useful to assess how far gender inequalities have been transformed by comparing the constraints women faced under Mao and in contemporary China. While useful, this essay argues the triple role framework does not go far enough to account for the ways in which women face new constraints today. Indeed, as will be discussed later, today many Chinese women face additional burdens to earn beyond their predecessors income levels in order to support the intergenerational resource transmission to their aging parents.

2. Inequality under Mao

The Maoist era (1949-1976) oversaw a clear improvement in the status of Chinese women after the government sought to reduce gender discrimination by encouraging their participation in the labour force and by giving women equal access to educational institutions (Zhang, 2007:674). The labour system was based on Engels and Marxist dominated ideology, which argued that social production is an integrated process of the creation of physical goods and additionally, the re-production of humans (Engels, 1972; Grapard, 1997; Cook and Dong, 2011). In theory this was a virtuous circle, the idea being that where socialized labour was integral for the emancipation of women, their full participation in the labour force was also necessary to achieve ‘the re-production of humans’ and equality under Mao’s communism.

Particularly working-age women who were employed full-time in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) benefited from the alleviation of gender discrimination (Croll, 1983; Cook and Dong, 2011:948). The status of female *state employees* entitled them access to equal benefits as men, for example, they secured lifetime employment as well as a wide range of social services such as maternity leave, healthcare, subsidized housing and retirement pensions (Cook and Dong, 2011: 948-9). Indeed, under Mao's communism, women's participation in the labour force was transformative in constructing women as de-sexualized workers giving them capacities and status equal to their male counterparts.

Despite a decline in the level of discrimination against women in the first 30 years of Communist rule, these inclusive policies were self-serving and dependent on an ideology that did not recognize women face multiple barriers to labour market entry beyond discrimination in education, for example, childbearing responsibilities. In the 'public' space of the labour market, women mostly undertook low-status work and did not have jobs with real decision-making power (Cook and Dong, 2011). In the 'private' space of the household gender norms and attitudes to women's reproductive responsibilities remained unchanged.

One indication that gender norms remained deeply entrenched is that family preference for sons was very high, particularly in rural households. Under Mao average birth rates where 5.8 per woman, reflecting a parental desire to offset infant mortality and produce multiple sons (Riley, 2004). As Zhang (2007:674) has shown, son preference was mostly connected to the traditional ideals that sons should take on 'men's work' in order to be responsible for labour, family continuation and provision of support for the elderly. Despite legislation that granted equal status and rights among sons and daughters, daughters were regarded largely irrelevant

for economic support, particularly since upon marriage women transferred her labour from her natal family to her husband's (Zhang, 2007:675). The continuation of the patrilocal marriage custom re-affirmed patriarchal traditions and gender norms under Mao (Parish and Whyte 1978; Johnson, 1983; Zhang, 2007).

The provision of care within households for the old, young and sick remained the women's responsibility. As Cook and Dong (2011:949) point out, although 'the socialist labour regime minimized the market "penalties" that women had to endure due to their role as care givers in a market economy…[Chinese women] bore the double burden of paid work and unpaid domestic labour'. Here Cook and Dong (2011) draw our attention to the multiplicity of demands on women's time, which implies gender inequality within the household was still endemic under Mao. In summary, despite the relative gains in the 'public' sphere for women under Mao's labour economics, women remained subordinated to men and on the periphery of families.

3. Post-Mao: Economic Transitions

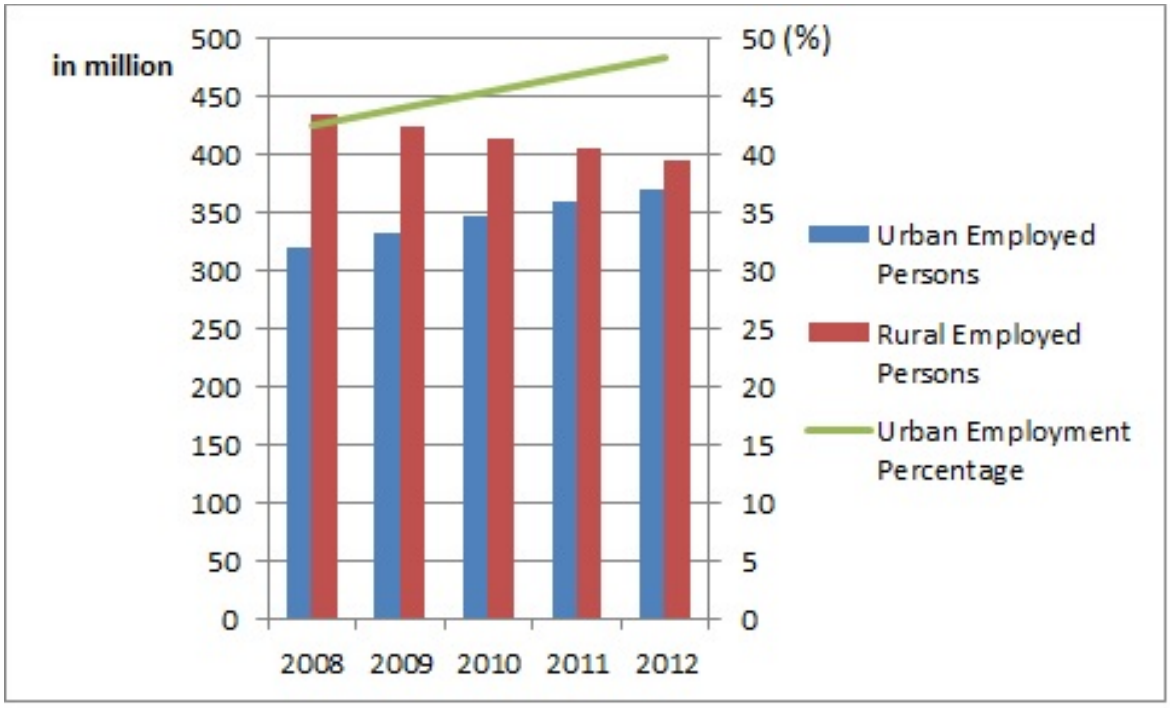
China's impressive economic development trend since Mao is well known[1]. In 1978 China started the shift from planned to market based economy. Some clear links with the past were encapsulated by the opening up of trade and the market oriented 'three step' development strategy launched by Deng Xiaoping, the spectacularly successful 2008 Beijing Olympics and the Expo Shanghai in 2010. Indeed, China's transition to a relatively more modern socio-political state is a result of its shift from a poor-rural agriculturally driven economy to an increasingly non-state sector industrialized nation (Fan, 2006; Harvey, 2005; Lin and Ghaill, 2012)[2]. Despite this step towards modernization, with the liberalization of the economy, the

[1] Since the beginning of the economic reforms in 1979, China has sustained a GDP growth rate of around 9 percent per annum (World Bank, 2013).

inefficient and unproductive unit system could not be sustained leading to layoffs in SOEs that cut in half state lead employment by 2001(Brooks and Ran, 2004:22; China Labour Bulletin, 2013)[3].

Simultaneously, the private market economy was expanding rapidly. Qian (2003:310) among many others have emphasized the successful development of non-agricultural sectors, for example, China's predominantly agricultural labour force decreased from over 70percent of total workers in the late 1970s to below 50percent at the start of the 2000s.

Fig 1. The urban and rural workforce in China from 2008 to 2012.



Source: MOHRSS

Fig 1. shows that between 2008 and 2012 workers employed within the urban sector continued to steadily increased, conversely, employment in rural areas declined by six percentage points over the five year period. One explanation for this trend is that the de-collectivization of

[3] The restructuring (privatization, merger or bankruptcy) of SOEs started around the mid-1980s climaxing in the mid-1990s; losses from the restructure lead to high levels unemployment. Data collected by Brooks and Ran (2004:22) has shown layoffs from SOEs and collectives of 25.5 million in 1998–2001.

agriculture after the end of Mao's regime lead to rural labour surpluses. This combined with some relaxation of the household registration system (*hukou)* saw a surge of young migrant workers from rural providences to urban hubs for factory employment (Pun, 2005:5). In early 2000s women constituted a considerable proportion of the rural migrant population, approximately 40 percent of migrants nationally, and this number was higher in many providences (Zhang, 2002). This high proportion of rural to urban migrants has incarnated a new working class - the *Dagong* class.

One powerful reflection of how constraints on women have changed compared to men is through the re-sexualisation of workers in factories since the downfall of SOEs. Changing worker identity underpins this re-sexualisation, for example, under Mao the common political rhetoric for worker was *Gongren* referring to a 'non-peasant' and asexual subject (Pun, 2005; Lee, 2007). In contrast *Dagong* is usually seen as a lesser identity, even demeaning because it means, "working for the boss" or "selling labour" (Pun, 2005; 2007; Hong, 2011:211).

However, *Dagongmei* is a gendered term used to describe the large numbers of factory workers who are women in their early teens to twenties from rural areas migrating to urban centers. The *Dagongmei* are transient labor willingly to participate in physically exhausting jobs within urban factories for an average of five years before returning home where they typically marry and have children (Pun, 2005)[4]. The common use of *Dagongmei* implies women's identity has become subordinated by, even dependent on, 'working for the boss'. Indeed, the idea that the *Dagongmei* are 'selling labour' invokes connotations of women giving their bodies and time to be subordinated by the factory system. Pun (2005, 2007) underscores the challenges in constructing women in factories as one unified identity. She argues the term *Dagongmei* is only

[4] State laws as well as familial pressure to marry young, act as barriers to permanent relocation for those born in the countryside.

a ‘mirage of identity’ and no more than a ‘power project’ by the authorities to encourage the feminization of the work force in the service of the new capitalist and export-lead global division of labour (Pun, 2005:134). Indeed, Pun’s (2005:134) ethnographic fieldwork in factory spaces clearly highlights the differences between women in the workplace today, for example, in terms of ‘class, locality, family age, and stage of lifecycle’. *Dagongmei,* although clearly a heterogeneous group, is an example of the ways in which Chinese society today has associated young women in the productive economy with the highly gendered factory system.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide and extensive analysis of the well documented and various ways in which women face discrimination through labour processes and migration to global factories in China (see for example Lee, 1998; Sargeson, 1999; Pun, 2005). However, it is within factories that the realignment of gender biased constraints are most visible, for example, in the way that factory life consumes and embeds the lives of women controlling their interactions in both the public and private sphere. In *Generating the dormitory labor system: production, reproduction, and migrant labor in south China* Ngai Pun (2007) uses the dormitory labour system to highlight the way that women’s mobility is shaped. Pun (2005, 2007) uses the example of a joint-venture company in the Shenzhen province to emphasize how the dormitory labour system is a site of control over women’s time. She draws attention to how this repressive system exacerbates the unequal burden women face in engaging with the labour force, for example;

> The dormitory labour system is…maximizing production and profits through the efficient control of mostly female migrant labor while generating hidden costs for the reproduction of the labor force, physical strain of long hours without sick days, incidences of abuse, and psychological pressure relating to relocation and isolation borne by the migrant women workers (Pun, 2007:255).

Here Pun (2007) highlights that while men may also face poor conditions as factory labourers they do not face the additional burden of reproductive responsibility. Under Mao women faced similar constraints in terms of pressure to balance the productive and reproductive economy. However, these pressures have become more intense for migrant women in capitalist factories, particularly because of the withdrawal of the Maoist socialist welfare system which has not been replaced by a new and adequate system of social security[5]. Against this background, the next section reflects on the wider implications of changing gender inequalities within the labour market.

4. Revisiting the Triple Role Framework

One interpretation of the re-sexualistaion of factories is that, alongside high levels of gender discrimination within factories, gender norms outside the labour market have evolved. Young women are expected or at least encouraged to become part of the *Dagongmei* regardless of the physical and emotional strains. One contributing factor is the increasing pressure for daughters to earn income beyond their own needs to support their aging parents through intergenerational resource transfers. Indeed, evidence shows that recent patterns of social change reflects new parental investments in daughter's as if they have the potential to earn as much as boys. As Zhang (2007:693) shows, daughters are encouraged by parents to pursue the advancement of their own careers often as part of the family strategy to support them in old age. China is a rapidly aging population, official statistics show that the proportion of the Chinese population aged 65 years and over increased from 4.9 percent in 1982 to 9.1 percent in 2005 (BBC, 2013; Liu et al. 2010). Where there is no social welfare outside the family, especially rural China, the intergenerational transfer of income from children to elderly parents is becoming more critical for familial survival and upward social mobility.

[5] For a comprehensive overview of the changing patterns of childcare provision see Cook and Dong, 2011.

Consider the widely documented impact of the One Child Policy (OCP), which has been a factor in China's declining poverty levels but has rapidly aged the population[6]. During 1960s-70s fertility dropped to under three children (compared to 5.8 children per woman under Mao), and since the late 1970s has declined further to well below replacement levels, 1.98 in rural China and 1.22 in urban areas in 2001 (Riley, 2004:11). For the larger families of pre-1960s resources were prioritized to sons, particularly education[7]. Today, in the face of the OCP constraint, families without sons raise their daughters 'as boys' in the sense that they will be expected to provide support for aging parents (Zhang, 2007:681). Research by Zhang (2007:690) reveals that the common practice of favoring son in the distribution of household resources is starting to change and parents are 'making equal commitment to the general wellbeing of their daughters'. On one level, the impacts of the OCP has forced families to revise the traditional son preference and foster new relationships and 'invest' in their daughters.

Indeed, evidence implies parents now have strong incentives for well-educated daughters, often outweighing the desire for a 'breadwinning' son. For instance, Zhang (2010:681) in a series of interviews with parents in the area of Zhongshan discovers that,

> Strong consensus was that daughters growing up in the low-fertility context can be economically valuable to their parents, even as much as sons…Two sisters saved their income and sent money home regularly. In just two years their parents were able to pay off some family debts and build a new two-

[6]The one-child policy was introduced towards the end of the 1970s in order to curb rapid population growth. In 2013, the law was relaxed so families are now allowed two children if on of the parents is an only child. After the OCP took effect the traditional preference for sons, a modern desire for fewer children and the advancement of ultrasound scanning and other technologies able to identify the sex of a fetus has lead to increasing sex imbalances between boys and girls (The Economist, 2010).

[7] In 1985, the Chinese government removed state funded higher education, forcing University applicants to compete for funding based on academic ability.

> story house. When telling me about this family, Zhongshan villagers emphasized this couple's two daughters were much more filial and useful than most sons in these days. This example confirms that investment in a daughter's future can also be beneficial and that a daughter can be just a valuable as a son.

In light of these shifting gender norms, there is space to be concerned for the wellbeing of Chinese women. Zhang (2007) implies that restructuring relationships between parents and their daughters has been beneficial for gender inequalities. However, Zhang (2007) fails to account for the fact that gender inequalities have not diminished overall but rather re-aligned, shifting the burden away from childbearing responsibilities to providing resources for their parents in old age. Traditional gender norms have not changed enough that men are taking on reproductive responsibilities where women are entering the workforce, thus the burden of the reproductive economy remains shouldered by women.

Liu et al. (2010) have used empirical evidence to support this conclusion and has estimated the impact of care for elderly parents on the allocation of married women's labour time in rural areas using data derived from the China Health and Nutrition Survey from 2000 to 2006. The results show Chinese women must confront competing demands for care, not only from their young children but also elderly parents (Liu et al, 2010). Strikingly, the estimates show variance in labour market outcomes between caring for parents and caring for parents of their spouse. Parental care has no effect on the caregiver's employment status and working hours, but care for parents-in-law is shown to have a 'statistically significant, sizable, negative effect on the caregiver's probability of employment and hours of paid work' (Liu et al. 2010:185). Thus, these results offers a good example of how the intersection of women's identities, for example, a married with elderly parents-in-law, can lead to unequal inequalities between households, particularly in terms of hours of employment, leisure and individual development.

5. Conclusion

This essay has focused on the inequalities women face in engaging with the labour market because of the extensive restructure of China's economy after Mao. This period has seen a steady rise in female migrants employed in private, foreign-owned or join-venture factories. Some commentators claim the rise of female participation in modern urban factories has created opportunities for women to escape their patriarchal rural family structures. However, in reality, the lives of female migrants are heavily embedded in their traditional rural roots, where gender norms enforce the view that women are the primary caregivers to the young and old. Indeed, the re-sexualisation of the *Dagongmei* in the post-Mao era reflects the high levels of inequality in today's gendered factory workspaces and re-enforces patriarchal gender norms that women do 'certain kinds of jobs'.

Today, families responding to the constraints of the OCP view daughters as an important aspect of their strategy for survival in old age. Gender inequalities, as constraints on women's time, have re-aligned by shifting burden away from childbearing responsibilities to providing resources for aging parents. The extent to which women are constrained by the burden of both of these reproductive duties is highly dependent on the intersection of women's identities, for example, married mother with aging parents-in-law. Thus, supporting the claim that 'everything' in contemporary China has changed, including gender inequality.

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