

# **The changing dynamics of labour migration in China and Mexico**

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## **Introduction**

Migration is a dynamic demographic process, changing over time as it responds to economic, socio-cultural, demographic and political conditions at origin and destination. Moreover, through the cumulative experience of the actors involved in creating migrant networks in the origin and migrant communities in the destination, it takes on a life of its own as it transforms the economic and social landscape of both areas. Zelinsky (1971) posited the existence of a ‘mobility transition’, with the rate of out migration tracing an inverted U-shape through time: in the short-to-medium run agricultural development in rural areas might increase migration by providing resources to potential migrants (Martin 1993), while in the long run a demographic transition and the convergence of wage rates might cause it to fall (Hatton & Williamson 1998).

These long term changes are usually accompanied by reconfigurations of several aspects of the migration system. As the volume of migration increases, it can become more or less selective of particular attributes such as age, education, or gender. Areas of origin and destination can become more concentrated or more diffuse. Migrants can specialize in particular occupations or find jobs throughout the economy. They can engage in circular migration, maintaining a base in their area of origin, or move permanently to the destination. The trajectory of any particular migration system over time will be uniquely determined for each circumstance, making generalizations difficult, but this difficulty should not dissuade us from the attempt, for understanding of the nature of the system and its likely evolution over time is important for the formation of appropriate policies.

Nowhere is the task of understanding the dynamics of a migration system more urgent than in contemporary China, which is experiencing the largest migration in human history and which faces hard choices regarding labor markets, urbanization, and rural poverty and human rights that are impacted by migration policy. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the potential dynamics of Chinese labor migration, drawing from experience with the dynamics of international labor migration systems, especially Mexican labor migration to the United States. If the plausibility of this analogy is accepted, it can be very useful for focusing our attention on potential changes in the profile of Chinese labor migration, for not only has there been a great deal of theoretical attention paid international migration generally, but the long duration of labor migration from Mexico to the United States – over four decades in its

current, most intense phase – makes it ‘the largest sustained flow of migrant workers in the contemporary world’ (Massey et al 1994: 705), and has generated an enormous multidisciplinary literature upon which to draw.

This chapter will identify major changes in the profile of Mexico-U.S. migration, show how they were related to changes in factors affecting the origin, the destination, and the migration process, and contrast those to parallel factors in China that may affect the migration system there. It will not argue that the same factors are operating in China nor that similar results will emerge, but rather that the penetration of capitalist relations, interacting with uniquely Chinese institutions and conditions, will create parallel, though perhaps different, outcomes. Examination of these factors and their outcomes in one context will create ‘markers’ that can be anticipated in another. The last section of the chapter will use these markers to generate hypotheses concerning potential changes in the profile of Chinese labor migration.

### **The nature of Chinese labor migration**

The major type of migration happening in China today is temporary labor migration, by which is meant a system of migration in which workers leave their homes for a period of time to work as low-skilled wage laborers. A temporary labor migration system exists when economic opportunities in the place of origin are limited while opportunities in the destination are only temporary, either because of the nature of the job or because of official restrictions on permanent stay. Both of these conditions are present in contemporary China: surplus labor exists on a massive scale in rural areas as a result of labor having been bottled up on the communes until the economic reforms of the early 1980s, and permanent settlement is forbidden for all but a few rural dwellers by the *hukou* system of household registration. Chinese cities have required migrants to obtain a bewildering array of documents to be legally resident, have restricted the jobs in which they could work, have charged high fees for the education of their children, and have provided only minimal accommodations on the fringes of cities or at their worksites where they can live. These constraints are reinforced by a long-standing prejudice of urbanites toward peasant workers (*mingong*), a prejudice as strong and effective as ethnicity in other countries. The combination of temporary migration, a large gap in living standards between sending and receiving areas, and restrictions against settlement

makes internal migrants in China ‘like immigrant labor in other settings ... eager to earn money at any price, grateful for the chance to live in the city, vulnerable to threats of deportation, subject to enormous competition, and powerless because of the state’s unwillingness to offer them rights, welfare, or security’ (Solinger 1993: 98).

By definition, all migrations require the crossing of some boundary, whether county, provincial, or international; that the boundary crossed in this case is within a single (though very large and diverse) country rather than across an international boundary is less important than the insight that contemporary labor migrations involve “a move between two worlds, even if it is within a single region or country’ (Sassen 1999: 135). The comparison of Chinese labor migration to international migration has been increasingly endorsed by other leading scholars of Chinese migration (Cai 2001; Davin 1999; Fan 2004; Mallee 2000; Xiang 2005).

Of all the contemporary examples of international migration, I have argued that the case most relevant for comparison with China is that of undocumented migration from Mexico to the United States (Roberts 1997). The Mexico-U.S case is particularly relevant because of three factors in addition to those common to international labor migration generally. The first is the relative proximity of sending and receiving areas with wide disparities in earnings, which permits regular visits home and the maintenance of strong village-based networks. The second is that both countries devised a land policy based upon an agrarian revolution that gave farmers a plot that could not be sold or mortgaged, but had to be cultivated or forfeited. This system of land tenure, combined with surplus labor and limited access by small farmers to the inputs required for commercial production, changed the function of the land from that of an economic unit to a base for a variety of household activities, including farming, raising children, agricultural sideline activities, local wage labor and (because of proximity) circular migration. The last is the imposition of free trade in agriculture upon this inefficient peasant farming, in Mexico by the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) and in China by the World Trade Organization (WTO).

### **Changes in factors affecting origin, destination and the migration process**

Mexican migration to the U.S. is now more than a century old, with the most intense period beginning about four decades ago. Scholarly examination of the process began shortly

after, and more recently a series of articles has identified continuities and changes in the process over time. This section will summarize their conclusions and identify factors at the origin, the destination, and those affecting the migration process that have influenced the evolution of the Mexico-U.S. migration system. These will be contrasted to parallel factors in China that may affect the migration system there.

The migration system linking Mexico and the United States took root in the 1960s at the end of a guestworker program and accelerated rapidly during the 1970s. Massey, Durand and Malone (2002: 66) call the period from 1965 to 1986 ‘the era of undocumented migration’, over which ‘the profile of a Mexican migrant remained remarkably constant’. During this period, according to Cornelius (1992: 156), ‘Mexican migration to the United States consisted mainly of a circular flow of mostly undocumented, mostly young adult males who left their immediate relatives behind in a rural Mexican community to work in seasonal U.S. agriculture for several months (normally six months or less), and then returned to their community of origin’. Massey, Durand and Malone add that most migrants had low levels of educational attainment, came from a few states concentrated in the central area of Mexico and worked in only a few states in the U.S., especially California and Texas.

But that system underwent significant change: ‘in a few short years it was transformed from a seasonal, undocumented, and regionally specific flow in which rural males predominated into an urbanized and substantially female population of permanent settlers who were increasingly dispersed throughout the United States’ (Durand, Massey & Parrado 1999). Cornelius identified four changes that occurred in the profile of the migration stream: (1) increasing education and skills among migrants, (2) increasing diversification of sending areas (and, as shown in subsequent research, receiving areas), (3) an increasing proportion of women and children and (4) increasing settlement in the destination. He hypothesized that these changes could be explained by the economic crisis in Mexico that affected all areas of the country and brought in new sending areas, by a shift in the composition of demand for migrant labor in the U.S. to year-round jobs requiring more skilled labor, by passage of legislation that legalized many migrants, and by the maturation of migration networks. These changes can be categorized into factors affecting the origin, factors affecting the destination, and factors affecting the migration process. The following sections will discuss similarities

and differences in these factors between the Mexico-U.S. and Chinese systems of labor migration.

### *Factors affecting the origin*

The first stage of Mexican migration to the United States began when the proportion of the population dependent on agriculture was still high, as it is in China today. Total fertility rates in Mexico stayed above 6 until the mid-1970s, producing in 1980 a pyramid-shaped age structure typical of developing countries, and ensuring rapid growth of the labor supply for the several decades to come. But unlike China with its relatively equal landholdings, agricultural development in Mexico had created a bi-polar farm structure consisting of large capitalist farms with mechanized production of commercial crops and small subsistence units that provided only a portion of household subsistence. Many of these small farms were on *ejidal* land which, as in China today, was owned communally but farmed individually. By the early 1990s, of the 27% of the Mexican labor force still working in agriculture, half of their labor was spent in the cultivation of low-profit corn and beans, so that the sector generated only 9% of GDP but contained two-thirds of Mexico's poor (Latapí et al 1998). The elimination of input subsidies and price guarantees being imposed by NAFTA and the dismantling of the *ejido* system have exacerbated the decline in income and agricultural employment.

In studying the consequences of agricultural development in Mexico, it is clear that its effect was to increase migration, not slow it. Intense migration to the United States began in several states of central Mexico where commercial production and agricultural change was raising production costs and reducing labor requirements (Roberts 1982). A major review of migration theories applied to the Mexico-U.S. case found that 'the highest probabilities of out-migration are observed in rural communities undergoing rapid economic growth and development ... *The economic transformation of the countryside creates rather than prevents international migration*' (italics theirs) (Massey & Espinosa 1997:968).

The factors that have produced large numbers of migrants in China are very different from those that existed in Mexico during the early years of migration. Farms in China are small, with the average household cultivating only one-sixth hectare of land, and so far there is little consolidation of farm plots into larger units that would facilitate mechanization. Total

fertility rates fell rapidly through the last decades of the century, producing a vertical age structure for 2000 that is quite different from Mexico's at a similar stage in its migration history. Instead, China's surplus rural labor is a legacy of the pre-reform period, when rural labor was contained on the communes.

In 1978, before the impact of the economic reforms, Chinese agriculture employed 74% of the labor force; by 2000, the proportion had fallen to 46%, but the number of workers had grown even as the proportion fell. Because of a large decline in labor requirements, 152 million of the 328 million agricultural workers were estimated by the Ministry of Agriculture to be redundant (Aubert & Li 2002). During the late 1980s and early 1990s many found jobs in rural enterprises, but employment there declined and migration became the principal source of off-farm labor. Working for wages was clearly better than farming: a 1995 survey found that daily income from farming was 9.4 *yuan*, while it was 12.7 *yuan* from working in TVEs and 17.4 *yuan* from migration (Knight & Song 2003). Farming was made even less desirable by high taxes and fees imposed by cash-strapped local governments, leading to protests and rural violence in several provinces. Yet despite all of these problems, most Chinese living in rural areas still do not want to give up their farm because of the security it offers, giving them a place to go when sick or unemployed (Nielsen, Smyth & Zhang 2004).

Given the constraint of retaining land rights, the key to further reductions in agricultural labor in China would be the development of rural markets for labor, machinery and especially land use that would permit farmers to keep their land and work elsewhere. This happened not only in Mexico, where it led to consolidation and large scale farming, but also in Taiwan, where there emerged instead part-time farming on small plots, facilitated by mechanization, government subsidies, and a dispersed industrial base providing employment in rural areas.

Rural factor markets for labor and agricultural equipment are undeveloped in China: little agricultural labor is hired, and many migrants return once or twice a year to work on their own farms. This has constrained migration, with one fourth of the households in one survey who wanted to migrate unable to do so because they couldn't spare the labor from farming (Knight & Song 2005). Land rental is still rare, but growing: while only 3% of land was rented in 1995, a 1999 survey of by the Ministry of Agriculture found 14% of the land in

six provinces was rented, two-thirds requiring no payment but only the obligation to meet the grain quota (Kung 2002).

If China follows the path of Mexico, social and cultural change in rural areas may have as profound an effect on migration as economic change. For young people in rural areas of both countries, migration offers the potential for escape from the drudgery of farm work and the constraints of village life. A Mexican survey conducted in 1989 found that ‘the younger generation of workers in high-emigration communities is not disposed to taking hometown agricultural jobs, even at higher than the prevailing local wage, and even if such jobs could be available year-round’ (Cornelius & Martin 1993: 503). Similarly, farming is perceived to be a dead end for young Chinese workers entering the labor force: a survey of young migrant workers in three cities of coastal China found that 72% would choose to stay in the city even if their earnings in agriculture were equivalent to what they earned in the city (Wang 2003).

Factors affecting the origin areas – demography, agrarian structure, agricultural technology, rural development and cultural change – worked together in Mexico to decrease the amount of labor used in agriculture. There are several important differences in these rural factors in China that could work in an opposite direction, such as agrarian structure, or at least not be as severe, such as demography. But what seems certain is that labor requirements in agriculture will fall: in just the years between 1979 and 1988 labor requirements dropped 31% (Rawski & Mead 1998), but they are still very high compared to those of more developed neighbors. It is clear that China just begun the process of substituting crops and technologies and developing rural factor markets that will give farmers flexibility in their allocation of labor to agriculture, and that the potential for the release of rural labor is immense.

#### *Factors affecting the destination*

The second set of factors that affected the Mexico-U.S. migration process were economic, social and political factors in the destination. During the first decades of intense labor migration, the U.S. economy became increasingly dependent upon migrant labor in areas such as agriculture, construction, food processing and low-skill services. Migrants were perceived to be taking jobs from residents, to be using social services paid for by residents’ taxes, and to be a burden on local communities. In 1986 the Immigration Reform and Control Act was

passed, forged as a compromise between the interests of employers, organized labor, migrant interest groups and those who felt the country had ‘lost control of its borders’. Its passage heralded ‘the new era of Mexican migration to the U.S.’, the era that lasts until the present time (Durand, Massey & Parrado 1999).

In China, the economic impact of migration on urban residents seems to be less of an issue than it has been in the United States. Most Chinese migrants, such as those working in construction, other types of manual labor, petty retailing, and services are not in direct competition with urban residents for jobs: a recent book on the labor market in China concludes, ‘migrant and non-migrant workers are highly imperfect substitutes or even complements: migrants do the jobs that non-migrants shun’ (Knight & Song 2005: 113). For the most part, the current dialog on economic issues reflects positively on migrants, who are seen as major contributors to economic modernization at the national level and to the material lives of urbanites at the local level.

But the social position of migrants in urban China is as difficult as that of Mexican migrants in the U.S: Jacka (2006: 241) finds ‘this local urban versus outsider rural divide constitutes a form of ethnicity and is as significant as the divide between the local population of developed nations such as the United States and Australia, and their ethnic immigrant populations’. As in the U.S., the balancing of economic and social concerns reflected in policy and enforcement is the major factor affecting migrants in the destination. The rest of this section of the chapter reviews Chinese attitudes and policies toward migrants and their reflection in the evolution of the *hukou* policy and enforcement.

While limited migration has been permitted in China since 1984, it was not until recovery from the economic downturn of 1989-1990 that the growing numbers of migrants became a major issue. By then, the Chinese press ‘generally portrays a homogeneous and rather threatening image of rural migrants as large masses flowing into Chinese cities. A more simplified narrative structure of such press accounts was that overwhelming poverty pushed migrants from the countryside, forcing them to “pour blindly” into the cities, which disturbed social stability and thus called for the urban authorities to take strong measures (control or expulsion) to restore social order’ (Florence 2004: 48). The 1990s was a period when rural migrant labor was considered to be *mangliu*, or a ‘blind flow’, and the reception given

migrants by urbanites was generally hostile, reflecting perceptions about their contribution to a variety of problems accompanying the economic transition (Davin 2000).

Within this context, the state tried to gain control of migrants in the city with an interlinked web of work and residence permits, but they were both costly and confusing to migrants, and the vast majority did not possess them all (S. Zhao 2000). In Beijing, five different certificates were issued by five different agencies: ‘in ordinary times nobody regarded them as violating legal provisions, but with the advent of special occasions, such as important celebrations, those migrants without a complete set of the five certificates would be regarded as “law or regulation breakers” and would be harshly treated and expelled’ (Li 2003: 135).

But these draconian measures were increasingly at odds with the interests of other agencies of the government, and there existed competition and intergovernmental conflict over the collection of fees and taxes. Rather than work together to weave a tighter regulatory net, those charged with regulating migrants were often at cross purposes. The Ministry of Agriculture, local governments and labor export companies were all beneficiaries and promoters of migration in high out-migration rural areas. Landlords, who are mostly peasants receiving high rents for substandard dwellings on their property, were unwilling to check the birth control certificates of migrant women as required by family planning authorities. Social scientists in academia and government research agencies played a major role in changing urban perceptions of migrants, arguing that migration was not ‘blind’ but organized (S. Zhao 2000), that migration controls hindered the development of an efficient labor market (Cai & Wang 2003), and that these controls prevented China from utilizing its comparative advantage in labor (Y. Zhao 2000). Another important achievement of academic research was “the establishment of a migrant-centered narrative which focuses on migrants’ experiences and problems” in the media (Xiang & Shen 2005).

The contrast between the economic contributions of migrants and their treatment has led to policy changes at the national level. At the end of the 1990s and for the next several years, regulations were modified to make it easier to migrate to towns and small cities, to allow children to inherit *hukou* status from their father, to give investors and those who buy housing permanent residence, and even to reform major categories of *hukou* status (Wang 2005). In 2002 the State Council said that migration of rural surplus labor into urban areas is

not a social problem but a normal consequence of economic development; that migrants are in the working class (*gongren jieji*) and not peasants (*nongmin*); and that policies should be fair, with formal contracts, no delayed wages, no arbitrary fees and safe working conditions (Huang & Pieke 2003). In 2004 Premier Wen Jiabao stopped on a trip in Sichuan to meet a pig farmer, the wife of migrant construction worker owed more than a year's pay, and promised that he would be paid. The interview was covered by more than 60 reporters, causing local governments in migrant receiving areas to require companies to establish wage funds before beginning construction (Kuhn 2004). The National Labor Medal was awarded to a migrant worker for the first time in 2004 (*Xinhua* 2004), and according to the 'Spring Breeze' action of 2005, only ID cards are required for migrants to work in a city (Liu & Cai 2005).

While legal obstacles to migrants working in cities are being removed, housing and children's education remain major barriers to integration and settlement. Buying a house is prohibitive for all but the richest migrant entrepreneurs, so that most migrants live in poor quality rented rooms on the fringes of cities (Wu 2004). Chinese migrants are even more disadvantaged than their Mexican counterparts regarding the education of their children, for Mexican children born in the U.S are entitled to citizenship and guaranteed an education even if born in Mexico. In China, it wasn't until 1998 that cities were required to educate the children of persons not registered there, and since that date they have charged prohibitively high fees for the children of migrants. Many of the estimated seven million migrant children attend migrant schools, which are cheaper but of poor quality (Kwong 2004).

#### *Factors affecting the migration process*

The last set of factors that affected the dynamics of Mexican migration were changes in the migration process linking origin and destination. These changes included better information about employment opportunities and life in the U.S., easier and cheaper contact between persons in Mexico and the U.S. due to improvements in transport and communications, and most importantly, the maturation of migration networks. Migration networks reduce the costs and risks of migration, providing network members with 'social capital' that reinforces migration from particular sending areas and concentrates it in particular destinations in a process of cumulative causation (Massey et al. 1994).

The importance of networks for Chinese migrants has been emphasized by a number of scholars (Cai 2001; Ma & Xiang 1998; Zhao 2001). Eight interprovincial flows between origin and destination exceeding one million migrants were identified in the 2000 census (Liang forthcoming). Informal networks between these areas have been institutionalized in formal linkages, such as migrant centers representing county and provincial governments in major destinations.

Nevertheless, compared to Mexico, the formation of migrant networks is just beginning, and there are many parts of rural China from which few people migrate to work elsewhere (Ma 2004). More than one-third of the 4,000 households in a 1995 survey in eight provinces wanted to increase their migration, but had not done so because of lack of contacts (36%) and information (25%). Of those who didn't want to continue migrating, 17% said it was too insecure and 9% listed the costs and hardships of travel. Most had not even considered migration as an option, suggesting a lack of information was the single biggest constraint (Knight & Song 2003). As networks mature, these constraints will ease significantly.

### **Potential changes in the profile of Chinese migration**

If migration in China were to respond to changes in the factors identified above in a fashion similar to that linking the U.S and Mexico, we would expect to see the following changes in the profile of Chinese migration over the next two decades: more migration to the coastal cities, both because of the intensification of migration from current sending areas and the spread of migration to new areas, greater occupational diversification within destination areas leading to higher education and skills of migrants, more women and families in the migrant stream, and more settlement. Each of these potential changes in the profile of Chinese migration will be briefly explored.

#### *The magnitude and regional specificity of migration flows*

There is little dispute that the magnitude of Chinese migration is large and growing, with the most rapid upsurge beginning in the early to mid-1990s and increasing since then (Goodkind & West 2002). The 2000 census showed that 79 million migrants had crossed county boundaries and 42 million provincial boundaries (Liang & Ma 2004), and our examination of

factors affecting the origin, destination and migration process points overwhelmingly to increased migration in China over the next two decades.

More and more migration is interprovincial rather than local. Comparison of the 1990 and 2000 censuses shows an increase in interprovincial migration from 32% to 54% of the total, much of it directed toward the dynamic coastal regions of the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province and the Shanghai-Jiangsu-Zhejiang region of the lower Yangtze River. (Liang forthcoming). Much of this migration is from the four major sending provinces of Anhui, Hunan, Sichuan (including Chongqing) and Jiangxi, which together have 280 million people and thus the potential to send even more migrants. Fan (2005: 21) finds ‘increased migration selectivity to only a few destinations and/or from only a few origins’ during the 1990s, and calls this phenomenon “spatial focusing”.

This same spatial focusing existed during the early stage of Mexico-U.S. migration: the majority of migrants came from just a few states in the central part of the country and went mainly to Texas and California. But as the rural situation worsened and the entire country went into crisis during the 1980s, migration spread from the traditional sending areas in the central states to the periphery. Even indigenous people from the southern state of Oaxaca who did not speak Spanish began joining the migration stream in significant numbers during the 1980s.

In China, the process of cumulative causation in high-migration provinces might cause their relative contribution to the total number of migrants to continue to rise in the short run. But if China follows the path of Mexico, whether by crisis or simply the steady deterioration of rural conditions, we can expect to see the spread of migration to other origin areas, including those poor provinces with large numbers of ethnic minorities.

Another major change in the regional specificity of Mexico-U.S. migration is its spread to non-traditional receiving areas. Between 1990 and 2002, the number of Mexican migrants outside the four traditional receiving states of Texas, California, Illinois and Arizona increased five times, compared to just 87% within those states (Passel 2004). While this spatial diversification requires a level of prosperity in nontraditional receiving areas that China is still far from achieving, already one of the earliest migration streams, originating in the Wenzhou region of Zhejiang province, has begun a ‘diffusion path’ of migration to small cities after having concentrated in big cities like Beijing (Xiang 2005).

### *Occupational diversification and education*

Mexican migrants to the U.S. during the 1960s worked predominantly in agriculture. They diversified into restaurants and construction during the 1970s and 1980s and were working in every sector of the U.S. economy by the end of the 1990s. A similar occupational diversification is being witnessed in China, from construction and factory work to more jobs in retail and services. Migrants have long provided goods and services to urbanites in the cities, and their variety and sophistication is increasing yearly. Service jobs are especially important for women migrants, with 40% of the women migrants in Beijing working in the service sector in 1997 (Guo & Iredale 2004).

Factory work is likely to become more skill-intensive as China produces more high-technology goods, and factories are already demanding at least a middle-school education for their workers. Returns to elementary and middle-school education were found to be positive for migrants (de Brauw & Giles 2005), and this message is traveling back to the villages as ‘migrants write home exhorting their siblings to stay in school’ (Murphy 2002: 100). Because a larger proportion of women are engaged in factory work, higher levels of education increased the likelihood of the migration of women more than it did the migration of men (Zhang, de Brauw & Rozelle 2004). Thus we see that occupational diversification is related to the gender division of migrant labor, which will be discussed in the next section.

### *Women and families*

The third and fourth of the changes in the Mexico-U.S. migration process – more women and children and more settlement – are of critical importance and are closely related, for it is women who are the foundation and often the motivation for settlement.

While the first phase of Mexican migration to the U.S. was dominated by men, during the second phase there has been a ‘feminization of the Mexican migrant flow ... accelerating sharply in the 1990s’ (Marcelli & Cornelius 2001: 111). Similarly, during the early stages of Chinese migration the overwhelming majority of migrants were men, and women were much less likely to engage in interprovincial migration. That profile began to change during the 1990s, between 1995 and 2000 the probability of women’s migration doubled relative to men, and for the youngest cohort was equal (Zhang, de Brauw & Rozelle 2004).

The reasons that motivate women to migrate are different from that of men. This is especially true in China: in Tianjin female migrants ‘were breaking through the limitations put upon them by men, tradition and the state. The female migrant interviewees shared a common perception that the greatest gains from working in the city were the significant differences they had made in their own lives and destiny’ (Zhang 1999: 38). For migrants to Shenzhen, ‘not that economic reasons were unimportant (but) ... these rural young women came for the no less important goals of escaping from parental control and various familial responsibilities’ (Lee 1998: 73). Young women came to work in Beijing “‘because I had nothing to do at home (*mei shi gan*)’”. This is a common response among both married and single young women that ... points to the marginalization of young women in the rural economy’ (Jacka 2006: 133).

The young women working in China’s factories are often called *dagongmei*, which ‘has the connotation of “maiden workers” who work while waiting to be married off’ (Lee 1998: 128). Not only does the research by the authors above challenge this assumption, but the second half of the common stereotype – that when these female migrants return they marry, bear children and never migrate again – is no longer true. Jacka (2006: 9) notes ‘there are thousands of rural women living in Beijing and other cities who are older than the typical *dagongmei*, who are married and have children, and who are either self-employed or who care for their children while their husband earns an income’. One-third of the migrant workers in Beijing, Wuhan, Suzhou and Shenzhen were accompanied by a spouse in 1995 (Knight, Song & Jia 1999), and similar results were found in Shanghai two years earlier (Roberts 2002).

A survey of rural women conducted in 2000 illustrates the diverse patterns of female labor migration, showing that 62% of the female migrants who had returned to Anhui and Sichuan did not engage in their first migration until after the average age of marriage of 21.7, and by this age more than half were married when they migrated for the first time. The proportion who were married on subsequent migrations was even higher, so that of the total of first through third trips engaged in by women, two-thirds were accomplished while they were married. About half of these women migrated alone and half were accompanied by their husbands, indicating that one-third of women migrant returnees in Anhui and Sichuan had migrated as couples (Roberts et al 2004). Since migrant couples are more likely to engage in long-term migration and settlement and thus not to have been included in the rural sample, it is likely that an even greater proportion of all migrants came as couples.

The biggest potential constraint on the migration of married women is their responsibility as mothers. Yet children do not appear to constitute an insurmountable barrier to migration, for four out of five married migrants in the sample had children by the time they took their first trip. The care provided by grandparents was the critical factor that relieved this constraint, with three-fourths of the women who had children by their first migration leaving them with grandparents, most commonly paternal grandparents. In addition, about one fourth of the women migrating with their husbands brought their children with them, contributing to the issue of schooling for migrant children discussed earlier (Roberts et al. 2004).

Gender and marital status interact strongly with occupation in the destination. More than half of the single women migrants from Anhui and Sichuan were factory workers, but for married women factory work was the predominant occupation only for those on their first trip and unaccompanied by their husbands, while women on later trips or migrating with their husbands worked in a variety of occupations. Multivariate examination revealed that married women working anywhere but factories were far more likely to migrate with their husbands. This is partly due to the type of accommodation associated with the job, for factories frequently provide same-sex dormitories for workers. A related explanation is that some types of jobs, such as home repairs, vending and food preparation permit couples to work together efficiently and earn more money (Roberts et al. 2004).

Overall, the findings above demonstrate a remarkable diversity of migration patterns among rural Chinese women, as opposed to the simple *dagongmei* stereotype. Women are migrating married and single, with and without their husbands and their children. Marriage and subsequent childbearing occur during their early 20's for both migrant and non-migrant women, but these life events no longer form insurmountable barriers to migration. This diversity of migration patterns is in sharp contrast with that of Mexican women, whose migration to the U.S. is mainly linked to that of their husbands and other male family members.

### *Settlement*

The last of the trends in Mexican migration is increasing settlement in the destination. While the majority of migrants in both Mexico and China do not express an intention to stay, 'settlement has a funny way of creeping up on immigrant workers' (Hondagneu-Sotelo

1995:1). Marcelli and Cornelius (2001) estimate the proportion of the migration stream who returned to Mexico fell 28% from 1980 to 1992, and relate this to the feminization of migration. Massey, Durand and Malone (2002) calculate that the annual probability of return migration fell from .25 to .07 between the two major periods of Mexican migration, implying a rise in the median duration from 2.4 years to 8.9 years and a quadrupling of the migrant population resident in the U.S.

For reasons of autonomy and freedom discussed earlier with regard to young Chinese migrant women, Mexican women enjoy more autonomy in the U.S. than in their rural villages, and are more likely than men to express a preference for staying permanently. Pessar (2003: 29), in a recent review of gender and U.S. immigration, says 'research shows consistently that gains in gender equity are central to women's desires to settle, more or less permanently, to protect their advances. In contrast, many men seek to return home rapidly to regain the status and privileges that migration itself has challenged'. These desires translate into reality: 45% of Mexican women stayed in the U.S. more than 10 years compared to only 26% of Mexican men (Reyes 1997).

The narratives of Chinese migrant women in the city express a profound ambivalence regarding place of origin: 'while these narratives express a yearning for the countryside of one's past, they also suggest an understanding of the countryside as the past; as a place and a period in one's life that one has lost or left behind' (Jacka 2006: 125). While men tend to think of their rural home as the primary locus of their identity, 'migrant women tend to see a future in the city as holding greater potential for development than life in the countryside' (Jacka 2006: 160). For this reason, 'significant, and possibly growing, numbers of migrant women wish to stay away from their "home" in the countryside for as long as possible, despite the discrimination and hardships they face in the city' (Jacka 2006: 141). Of migrants surveyed in Hebei, more women than men envied the urban life, wanted their families with them, and 'were more eager to abandon rural life and settle in the cities' (Song 1999: 88). Some single women hoped to find urban boyfriends and eventually settle in the city (Zhang 1999).

The only evidence concerning settlement in the cities of China comes from successive urban floating population surveys that allow comparison of the duration of migrants over time. The duration of stay for Shanghai's floating population was relatively stable between

1988 and 1993, with between 69% and 71% staying less than one year. But the proportion of rural labor migrants staying less than a year fell from 73% to 51% between 1993 and 1997, while those staying from one to five years rose from 24% to 39%, and more than five years from 4% to 10%. Based upon analysis of the entire floating population in these surveys rather than just labor migrants, Liang (forthcoming) concludes ‘the increasing duration of residence indicates that substantial portion of migrants are clearly settling in Shanghai’.

## **Conclusion**

It has now been forty years since the beginning of undocumented labor migration from Mexico to the United States, during which the profile of the migration stream has changed in significant ways. This chapter uses the changes in that profile to identify factors at the origin, the destination and the migration process that have affected its evolution over time, and looks to parallel factors in China that might influence the dynamics of migration there.

Understanding these dynamics is critical to the development of appropriate policies and will have significant impacts upon some of the most important issues facing China today, including rural poverty, the pace and character of urbanization, the evolution of the labor market and human rights.

But before the usefulness of the analogy can be appreciated, the reader must be persuaded on two issues. First, is the analogy to international migration generally and the Mexico-U.S. example in particular appropriate? The first section of this chapter examines the relevance of the comparison, and is addressed particularly to Chinese scholars relatively unfamiliar with the evolution of western migration theory over the past two decades. (A similar argument was made in an earlier paper (Roberts 1997), but was addressed instead to western scholars trying to understand Chinese migration. Since then a long decade of has passed, during which the process has changed considerably).

The second potential objection is that even though labor migration across international boundaries may provide a relevant theoretical model, the factors operating in the two systems are so different that it would be inappropriate to apply the results of one to the other. The reader is conceded this important point: the goal of the analysis is not to say what will necessarily happen, for there are too many variables and actors, but rather to identify particular types of factors that will play a major role in the process, though they might have a

different effect in the two cases. The impact of rural factor markets is a case in point: they are relatively developed in Mexico, allowing smallholders to continue agricultural production while migrating, but not in China. If rural factor markets in China become more developed, this will facilitate migration; if not, agricultural production will suffer, carrying its own set of consequences. The development of rural factor markets is thus an important ‘marker’ for the evolution of migration.

The four major changes in the process of Mexican migration to the U.S. were more migration from more origins to more destinations, occupational diversification and intensification of education and skills, more women and children, and more settlement. Although there are some important differences between Mexico and China regarding the factors at the origin that have influenced these changes, the overall outcome will probably be the same – less labor needed in agriculture, large cohorts entering the labor market and dissatisfaction with farming as an occupation and the village as the locus of one’s future plans. Likewise, the migration process is likely to develop in a similar manner, with networks both deepening and widening. This too will increase the intensity of migration, and can cause spatial and occupational focusing followed by diversification. Networks can have paradoxical effects, so again it is not the specific prediction that is important, but instead the necessity of paying close attention to the evolution of migrant networks and the role of local and national governments and private recruiters in facilitating or hindering the operation these networks.

Factors at the destination offer the potential for the greatest divergence between the two processes. The comparison drew attention to the interplay of economic and social factors which are very different in the two countries. The United States is a ‘country of immigrants’, so that anti-immigrant groups must find other grounds for opposition, while China has a long tradition of a ‘place-embedded social control paradigm’ that allows abrupt changes in government policy in reaction to perceived problems. In China’s booming economy there is little competition between migrants and locals, but that can change rapidly with economic conditions and with increases in migrants’ human capital. Settlement is easy in the U.S. once the border has been crossed, and every child once there is entitled to an education. In China housing and education are the two biggest obstacles to settlement. *Hukou* policy is central to these issues, with recent changes favoring relaxation, the integration of migrants and efficient labor markets.

In one regard, the process in China is moving much faster than it did in Mexico: more women are coming at an earlier stage in the process, more single women are coming to work in industry and more married women are coming without their husbands. This is partly due to differences in the labor markets in the two destinations: if the U.S.-Mexico border area is considered part of the destination, the difference narrows, and the service sector in urban China was non-existent before migrants moved in. But Chinese women seem to have seized the opportunity to change their lives in ways that Mexican women never did. Their desires for themselves and their families will have a major impact upon the future of Chinese migration.

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