

Book Review

***New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China.* By Hairong Yan. (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008. pp. 328. ISBN 978-0822343042.)**

In this innovative and entertaining ethnography, Yan examines post-Mao migration as an ethnographic site. Focusing her project on “interpreting the world” Yan skillfully debates issues of development, modernity, neo-liberalism, post-socialism (2008:23) and consumer citizenship in the process of post-Mao reform. Treating “...post socialism as an unstable process in which the emerging hegemony of capitalism in China must deal with living socialist legacies, claims, and structures of feeling that surround the current relations of production and sociality” (2008:13), Yan focuses on the discursive power experienced during the rural to urban migration of domestic workers in post-Mao China.

The fieldwork for the book was undertaken between 1998-2000 by Yan, who also incorporates the views and experiences of her own parents and draws upon her fluency in Mandarin to develop a rich ethnographic tapestry. Noting that she interviewed 104 migrants (2008:27) and “thirty-five or so” employers (2008:54) as well in Nanjing, Tianjin, Hefei and Shanghai, Yan successfully conveys the importance of maintaining trust with her informants, noting that she never interviewed domestic workers and employers in the same households (2008:55). Yan also maintained contact through reunions and embeds her experience having worked as a Chinese interpreter who was privy to numerous meetings between US economists and Chinese officials in the ethnography. She is well positioned to analyze the keywords used by economists to refer to post-Mao reform processes such as “structural adjustment”, “global governance”, “efficiency”, “development” and the like. In addition to examining the emic dimension of the terms used by the elites, Yan is also easily able to develop thick descriptions of salient Mandarin concepts such as “*ren*” and “*suzhi*”.

She includes gripping informant testimonies of the deferential master-servant relationship and the falsehood of fictive kin or familial

relationships through a generational lens of two cohorts of migrants from the late Mao period of the 1970s and the later migrants of the 1980s-90s. Yan's use of case studies and numerous informant testimonies, poems, journals and media reports gives a great deal of texture to the ethnography. Juxtaposed against this are rich informant testimonies from the female migrants themselves. For example, one migrant recalled how her employers referred to her as one of the family and yet in practice treated her as an outsider: "When they would bring goodies back from their daughter's home, they would share the goodies among themselves and urge each other to eat more. They would never ask me to eat, even if they couldn't finish it. Sometimes when fruit began to rot, they would ask me to eat it" (2008:214). In another example, Yan notes the classic and well known predicament of the domestic worker's labor sustaining two families and yet in the process, she cares for her employer's family more than her own (2008:215). Her family depends on her wages that she sends home; for example, in Wuwei almost 1/3 of households are dependent upon the wages sent home by migrants and many villagers complain that farming is a losing effort (2008:226). Through sending wages home, the migrant worker earns her family's respect for the economic contribution that she is making (2008:215), yet in the employer's home her value is very low. For example, the *Baomu's Diary and Her Employer's Response* outline the suffering of the female migrant and that her employer does not see that suffering. In the margins of the worker's personal diary, the employer writes: "What if you're hungry?...What's wrong with making you look after the child when you're not yet full? Remember you're not one of our family. You're only a *baomu*. We have paid you and you have to work!" (2008:218).

Demographic change is a fact of labor migration and Yan notes that the Chinese rural areas developed the classic layout of larger proportions of children and elderly (2008:222). As in India, Yan's informants also note how major festivals and events are no longer well attended and are shrinking year by year and the countryside seems to have been "dismembered" (2008:222). One of Yan's informants notes that Chinese New Year was a major event and that "sometimes there were almost a hundred of us...now just a few youngsters get together-only three or five, at most seven or eight" (2008:227). Yan also contributes a generational analysis of Post-Mao migration by examining two cohorts of women who migrated in late-

Mao period of the 1970s and the neo-liberal period of the 1980s-1990s. She begins her analysis by introducing the concept of *ren*, "...a possessor of socially validated and meaningful personhood or subjectivity" (2008:35) that is only realized through social action. *Ren* is essentially inculcated and learned behavior. Only about three to four thousand women migrated from Wuwei to the cities in the 1970s but by 1993, this number had increased to 263,000. In order to reduce the gap between country and city, the post-Mao state determined to achieve rapid industrialization and this rapid process left rural female migrants vulnerable. While the 1970s generation of women faced food shortages, patriarchy, and a devaluation of their productive work (2008:32-33), the subsequent cohort experienced even more significant social ruptures.

Successfully captured are the tensions between status mobility and superficial class "transformation" and the harsh reality of being a migrating domestic worker. It is also notable that although she employs a Hegelian analysis of the power of discourse, she also retains a healthy skepticism toward Hegel's idealism (2008:120). For example, she is very clear that post-Mao reforms have "...violently destabilized old structures of identity and security" (2008:200).

In my view, Yan presents a rich and fascinating ethnography that exposes the lived realities of women migrants in post-Mao China. I think that Yan does quite forcefully and eloquently show the importance of discourse in shaping society, while at the same time recognizing that neo-liberalism is not a finished project, nor a just one. Yan's ethnographic humanism offers an exciting path forward for other anthropology to continue its fascination with the exploration of emic categories in transforming global economies.

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