

Anthropology Book Forum

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Gaetano, Arianne M. 2015. *Out to work: Migration, Gender, and the Changing Lives of Rural Women in Contemporary China*. University of Hawai'i Press. 184 pp.

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Out to work: Migration, Gender, and the Changing Lives of Rural Women in Contemporary China (2017) is an ethnographic study of Chinese rural women's experiences of migration into the city at an age of market socialism and globalization. By focusing on the life stories of a group of rural women born between 1976 and 1984 who migrated to Beijing between 1993 and 2000 to work as domestic workers or hotel housekeepers, Arianne M. Gaetano pays special attention to the problem of agency and empowerment. The main argument of the book is that "migration promotes agency and advances gender equality by creating more opportunities for young rural women to make money, learn new skills or further their education, earn recognition and respect for their contributions to their rural households and communities, and exercise greater control in matters of marriage and family" (132). This positive stance invites critical scrutinization, which this review tries to conduct via an examination of its specific approach of field work. Despite this book's insightful account of rural women's experience, I argue that this project could be more comprehensive if it had claimed more clearly the limitation of such an overly optimistic conclusion as a result of choosing highly homogenous interviewees.

In order to locate the particular points of agency and empowerment, Gaetano examines the workings of migrated rural women's' experiences on three levels. On a macro level, Gaetano considers the hidden inequality and marginalized voices in China's miraculous national project of modernization, prompted under market socialism and globalization. On a meso level, these migrated rural women's interactions with the household and the division of labor by sex in the work field are explored. On a micro level, the personal trajectory of each woman's survival story

from a rural woman to a fortunate successful urban sophisticate is examined. Particularly, the emphasis on the micro-level exemplifies Gaetano's "bottom-up" methodology in understanding these rural migrant women "who have heretofore been largely ignored or silenced" (13).

With these three directional focuses, the book is organized into six chapters. The first chapter deals with the macro-historical background of the rural women's migration enabled by the policy of "reform and opening." The second chapter explores the micro-level of individual women's decisions of migration and their subsequent negotiations with the household on the meso-level. The third chapter discusses the workings of social networks of kin and the principle of reciprocity. The fourth chapter highlights migrant women's participation, creation and obstacles while at work. The fifth chapter pays attention to the process of "urbanization" on individual migrant women, especially of their interaction with consumer culture. The sixth chapter considers the influence of migration on women's life trajectory and "how this transforms traditional courtship, marriage, and family" (12).

The task Gaetano sets for herself was no doubt an exciting one: to search for evidence of agency and empowerment in the state-wide system of social stratification and transformation. This style of scholarship has also been widely welcomed by scholars with a feminist perspective since locating and presenting the possibilities of agency that individuals can exert are practically empowering to women, indicating traces of hope. However, I would like to point out that even though it is understandable for a writer to defend one's stance by diminishing or slightly ignoring the other side of the coin, it shall make a stronger claim if the other aspect is also articulated in the book. To present "agency" of migrant women, this book presents rare cases of migrant survivors' stories, those who successfully achieved class-transgression. However, this book does not include the vast majority of migrant women's tragic fates while contextualizing the whole picture.

The limitation of this book's research is defined by the approach and the availability of interviewees. As Gaetano describes, of the thirty migrant women she interviewed, the ones she got close with were "all unmarried and under the age of twenty-five," and the ones she was able to maintain regular contact with are also the younger ones, the ones who are familiar with "airmail letters, e-mails and instant messages, cell-phone texts" (5). Three factors are at work here: first, marriage is a key factor of migrant women's eventual settlement and with interviewees being "unmarried" it automatically denotes more space of mobility and possibilities for them; second, a young age also plays a vital role in migrant women's personal desires and aspirations, which are

identified as significant in the class-transgression process; third, the familiarity to technology also limits the interviewees to young and promising migrant women with more possibilities. One of the most-mentioned stories in the book is the story of Qiaolian, who first worked as a domestic worker and then successfully gained education and was then a teacher in Beijing. This trajectory is only possible due to the fact that Qiaolian is smart, young, and unmarried, and even with some luck involved in her situation as well. On the contrary, the group of migrant women that are left out of the picture, therefore, are the ones who are older, unfamiliar with modern technology, or already married -- and these are exactly the ones that truly sees no hope and future but sells the body and dignity to the modern city at a minimum wage.

Overall, Gaetano does admit that this project alone is “inadequate” to detail the specificities of migrant women’s dilemma. Nevertheless, there is no other analysis of its limitation other than this one sentence in the conclusion chapter. The endeavor of this book to locate moments of agency of migrant women and presents them not as powerless victims is admirable. However, by focusing on the more promising migrant women (the younger, the smarter, and the unmarried) and not articulate the severe situation of the older, the more “uneducated,” the married, Gaetano has weakened her argument. This project can be strengthened with a more detailed articulation of its limitation.

Works Cited:

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