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Carine Guerassimoff

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Report

Gender and Migration Networks: New Approaches to Research on Chinese Migration to France and Europe

CARINE PINA-GUERASSIMOFF

MIGRATIONS-SOCIÉTÉS, a MAJOR FRENCH PUBLICATION ON MIGRATION, has devoted one of its latest volumes to women in migration in a special issue (Rigoni and Séhili 2005). The contributions draw attention to a new and important phenomenon — the growing presence of women in international population movements — and raise, once again, the delicate question of the lack of French research on this topic, including the scant amount of work done on one of the main migration movements to France and Europe in the last decades: that from the People's Republic of China. This new flow of migrants has many interesting characteristics, including a growing involvement of women. Researches on this topic have tended to adopt an institutionalist approach, examining themes like the “migration system,” defined as two or more places connected to one another by flows and counter-flows of people. Lately some studies have defined migrant networks as sets of inter-personal ties that connect movers, former movers and on-movers between countries of origin and destinations. In addition to the existing approaches and methodologies, this Report proposes to look at the place and role of women migrants, in studying the phenomenon of Chinese migration.

Carine Pina-Guerassimoff is Associate Fellow at Laboratory SEDAT-UMR 7135, CNRS/ University of Paris 7; Fellow at Institut für Asienkunde, Hamburg with a Clemens Heller grant from the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme/Fritz Thyssen Foundation. She wishes to acknowledge the help with this Report from Professor Christine Inglis, Director, Multicultural and Migration Research Centre, University of Sydney. Her email address is guerassimoff@free.fr

Women Migration and Chinese Migration

Women as Actors in the Migration Process

Since the end of the 1980s, works on migration history or women's history have shed light on the quantitative and qualitative importance of women in migration flows since the 19th century. Michelle Perrot and Nancy Green (Green 2002: 105–120) point out that such findings have seriously challenged the commonly held notion that men migrate and women stay behind to look after the home. New studies have brought out the fact that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, women migrated from Europe to the “new” territories (America); Italian women in particular moved within Europe itself; and women arrived in Europe from North Africa, then Asia and other continents.

As Nancy Green explains, the early approaches paid much attention to the plight of the woman migrant who had to fend for herself living with the double stigma of being a woman and an immigrant. Then in Europe, under the influence of microstoria (analysis) and prosopography (methodology) (Revel 1996), a more individual approach — also a more optimistic one — depicts women not as an object but as a subject in migration. Such analysis and methodology have brought about a rethink on migration and its traditional concept (man being attached to immigration-production and woman to immigration-reproduction) that obscures the fact that even as a migrant “dependant,” women occupies a central economic position. These studies have also brought to light certain interesting issues such as the categorization of women migrants, the changing image of women from sedentary to mobile beings, the impact of globalization etc. All these seem to be particularly relevant to the research on Chinese women's migration to France and Europe over the last two decades.

Renewal of the Chinese Migration Flow to France and Europe

Since the 1980s, mainland China has considerably relaxed the restrictions on the movement of its citizens abroad. In 2003, 220 million people crossed the frontiers and Chinese authorities said they issued 4,000,000 passports; the Chinese tradition dating from the 19th century of departing for overseas destinations has been revived (Guerassimoff-Pina 1997). If North America is still the first destination for these new migrants, Europe — and France in particular — is becoming once again a valued destination. Recent studies in France and in Europe (Guerassimoff-Pina et al. 2002; Guerassimoff-Pina 2003; Gao and Poisson 2005) have revealed some major characteristics of these new Chinese migrants.

(a) Places of origin

Zhejiang remains the principal sending area of Chinese immigrants in France and Europe but other regions are gaining importance. In 1995, Chinese official data

estimated 300,000 persons left China from Zhejiang (240,000 from Wenzhou and 60,000 from Qingtian). These numbers were based on the passports issued and as such, were very likely to be smaller than the actual departures. In France, the MiRe (Interministerial Research and Study Mission) fieldwork of 2000 (Guerassimoff-Pina 2002) found that the new comers from Zhejiang (573 persons) were still the most numerous. In the sample, the Zhejiang population was slightly dominated by the Rui'an group (216 persons), followed by Wenzhou (210 persons), Qingtian (84 persons), Yongjia, and Wencheng. The 1980s–90s new Zhejiang migrant flows demonstrated the vitality of the old migration centers (*qiaoxiang*, ancestral homeland in China) (Zhuang 2000). The data furnished by ASLC (Association for Language and Cultural Support) in 2003–2004 concerning Chinese migrants registered as asylum seekers in this association also showed that they were predominantly from Zhejiang. Of the 5,831 in the sample, 2,782 came from this province. Members of this community have integrated international mobility into the economic strategies of the family or the village to improve the welfare of the community. Because of the ongoing migration, networks have been formed which help the migrants and potential migrants gain information especially regarding social and economic opportunities in France. Emigration has become a way of life for the community. It follows a pattern of its own, is often motivated by different economic and political reasons from those of the first migrants, and occupies a specific transnational space.

The second major group of PRC migrants who arrived in the mid-1990s came from the northeastern provinces. They totalled 286 (out of 987 persons) in the MiRe sample, originating from Liaoning (133 persons), Shandong (73 persons) and Heilongjiang/Jilin (52 persons). The most quoted cities of residence were Qingdao and Yantai (Shandong), and Fushun and Shenyang (Liaoning). In the ASLC data, the order of importance was the same with 693 from Liaoning, 429 from Shandong and 139 from Heilongjiang/Jilin. None of these localities was identified as *qiaoxiang*. It would seem that this migration flow was closely linked to the deep economic crisis affecting the old industrialized regions.

A very different range of Chinese localities made up the third group, sustaining the idea of an increasingly popular migration trend in Chinese society as a whole (Pieke and Benton 1998; Nyiri and Saveliev 2002; Lascko 2003). Big urban centers like Shanghai, Tianjin and Beijing have been furnishing a growing number of migrants to France and Europe together with arrivals from regions that were not, until recently, known to be places of origin of participants in international migration such as Guangxi, Hebei, Jiangsu and Jiangxi. The ASLC data for 2003–2004 showed that there were 51 persons from Hebei, 72 from Henan, 16 from Hunan and 21 from Sichuan. One can also find in Europe Fujianese migrants who have a long tradition of migration overseas but until recently had mainly gone to Southeast Asia and North America. Their numbers seem to have

grown in recent years. In the ASLC data for 2003–2004, they accounted for 1,046 persons. The profiles of all these migrants varied greatly: highly-qualified white collar workers, qualified and unqualified workers, merchants, peasants etc. Several factors have been responsible for the growing migratory trend among the Chinese: the opening of Chinese society to the outside world, a general rise in the standards of living, and a more widespread circulation of information, in particular migration information (Guerassimoff-Pina 2004). These new population flows have also been marked by a mobility made possible by the connection with other nodes of Chinese communities abroad, apart from the one of departure.

(b) *Circular movements between migrants and other nodes of Chinese communities*

The majority of Chinese migrants in France have maintained close links with the *qiaoxiang* and with other new Chinese communities. Such links are based primarily on family ties and other social networks that have been generated by, but are also a result of migration strategies, giving rise to a closely-knit and dynamic migration system between China and European destinations. Recent fieldwork projects undertaken in France and Europe have shown that new Chinese migration flows are largely still part of the so-called chain migration, supported by the existence of a network. While it concerns mainly Zhejiang migrants, today some migrants from Dongbei (Northeast China) have also followed this pattern. After arriving in France, the migrants maintain close links with China, where most of them still have close family members, such as spouses (47 percent of the MiRe sample) and above all children (90 percent), as well as parents and siblings. However, such links are also affected by what we call the “migration contract” which may be translated as a financial debt. The great majority of the respondents in the MiRe sample had borrowed money to finance the journey out of China. The remittances sent back to China by migrants in France mainly serves to repay the debt (of the 652 respondents who sent money to China, 526 did so to repay their debt), at least initially. There is also a busy exchange of goods, mainly going from China to France, in clothes, medicine, foodstuff and cigarettes, which are less expensive in China than in France, and which are sent to help the migrants save money.

The fieldwork carried out in France in 2000 also revealed linkages existing between Chinese migrants in France and those living in other European countries, often referred to as “interpolarity,” and defined as “information and emotional links maintained by members of different poles of the migratory space belonging to a particular group” (Ma Mung 2000:145). This is not a new situation. These poles were established throughout the 20th century when members of the Chinese communities in South Europe who had earlier lived in France, the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe moved to other European destinations when new economic and other opportunities arose, contributing to the creation of a European network.

New Chinese migrants arriving in the 1990s used these old links and added new ones. Such contacts were primarily made up of family members (sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, cousins) and secondarily of friends. Most of them belonged to the Zhejiang group in particular from Rui'an; Italy, Spain and Portugal are the main destinations.

The Female Factor in the Chinese Migration Flow to France and Europe

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the migration of Chinese women to Europe has been more significant numerically than that of men. Of the 987 persons interviewed in the MiRe survey, 536 were women and 451 men. The trend seems to have originated in Dongbei. In the MiRe sample, women made up 72 percent of the respondents from Liaoning, 60 percent from Shandong and 65 percent from Heilongjiang. If the data given by ASLC for 2003–2004 revealed a slight reversal with a total of 2,854 women and 2,977 men, the proportion of women migrants was still very high for this region. For example, of the 693 registered migrants from Liaoning, 497 were women and 196 were men. Of the 429 from Shandong, there were 267 women versus 162 men.

The MiRe sample also revealed a relative aging of the migrant population. Migrants between the ages of 30 and 39 made up the largest group (44 percent), followed by those aged between 20 and 29 (29 percent), only slightly more than those between 40 and 50 (28 percent). Chinese women from Dongbei seemed to be setting the trend. Migrants between 40 and 49 represented 38 percent of the Liaoning group and 53 percent of those from Heilongjiang and Shandong. Regarding the marital status declared by respondents in the MiRe sample, 703 were married before they left China, 221 were single and 57 were divorced. Ninety percent (759) had children, most of whom remaining in China (at the time of the survey).

One can also see a growing diversification in the professional categories. Nevertheless, entrepreneurs (153 women versus 169 men in the MiRe sample), artisans, and traders were still the most important and these normally arrived from Zhejiang. For many of them, as explained in the respective studies by Zhang (2001) and Xiang (2005), mobility was a necessary way of life, but increasingly fierce economic competition and an uncertainty in the economic sphere in China have also accounted for this trend. Workers were the second largest group in the sample. The third group was made up of salespeople or employees of whom women were more numerous than men. The fourth group was composed of people who declared that they had no regular occupational activities in China (e.g. students and housewives). Company staff and executives accounted for 15 percent of the MiRe survey and were essentially women coming from Dongbei. They had been active in the public-sector companies established in North China. They either

faced lay-offs or had already been dismissed. Although many of them had previously been well qualified, their qualifications were no longer considered sufficient in the new Chinese economy, or they were deemed to be too old to retrain. Dongbei women interviewed by Florence Levy (Levy 2005), who were entrepreneurs before leaving China, revealed they had lost too much of the necessary *guanxi* to continue their activities. All this shows that an uncertain economy in China was one of first reasons for their decision to migrate. Other groups, though smaller, were becoming more and more important. They included nurses, teachers, engineers, doctors and other white-collar workers.

New Chinese migrants in France and Europe have mainly found jobs in the ethnic economy (garment, catering, restaurant, nannies, and building industries). Their bosses are mainly from their own dialect groups from Zhejiang, but also include those of Teochew origins, and some Cambodian Chinese. Others work in garment factories owned by Turkish migrants. Many Chinese women in particular, are employed in the garment industry. Those from Dongbei also find employment as nannies in Zhejiang families. These families often have no social networks to help them take care of their young children. French childcare institutions do not cater to their working hours and often because these families are in a vulnerable situation vis-a-vis the law, they do not dare seek help from “official” French organizations. This kind of work is very unpopular: bad working conditions, hard work, and low-paying. One can also say that on the whole Dongbei women are very unhappy working for the people from Zhejiang, who have a “bad reputation” of coming from a peasant background. Some actually say that they prefer to go into prostitution — for better monetary reward — to working as nannies (Gao and Poisson 2005: 81).

Despite these fragments of information concerning new Chinese women migrants in France and Europe, the picture is still incomplete. More research is needed to construct a socio-demographic profile of these women and to ascertain their role in the migration process.

Proposed New Approaches to the Study of Chinese Women Migration

To establish the reality of contemporary Chinese women’s migratory dynamics, to comprehend the reasons and modalities which characterize it, and to understand its organization over time and space, it is necessary to use new concepts which provide different perspectives on the role of gender in Chinese migration.

Chinese Women Migrants in Historical Studies

The historiography of migration of Chinese women shows a preliminary categorization of women’s roles which seems to follow a kind of chronology. This classical

approach reveals a changing role in diverse time sequences in the migration process. While very useful, such a categorization does not give a complete picture of the Chinese women migrants.

The first group in the categorization includes women who stay behind in their homes performing domestic functions — economic, educational, cultural, and social — to enable the men and families to realize their goals of migration. In some cases, women's immobility was the reason for the male migrants to come home — many non-married men went home to choose a wife from the home village (Chen 1940). The second group consists of women who migrate with their husbands. Studies which concentrate on Chinese women in the destination countries are very recent; they are usually found in works on Southeast Asia or the United States (Yung 1995; Pfeffer 1999; Warren 1993). Such works take into account women's roles especially in economic activities inside and outside the home. Already in the 19th century, Chinese women were real actors in the migration network; they played a part in maintaining cultural and family cohesion, both being essential elements of the migration network (Ling 1998). The third group includes women who leave home alone. In the 19th century, these migrants were made up of students and prostitutes, two categories with particular forms of contractual mobility. Such categorizations or classifications, mainly found in historical studies, provide useful and interesting background knowledge for the research on the contemporary Chinese migration phenomenon.

Theoretical Concepts on Circulation, Contract and Gender

The 1980s is notable for a renewal of theoretical interest in labor migration and women. Researchers sought to provide a better understanding of the reasons, means, and consequences of international migrations. Amongst the new concepts of that period, three seem to be particularly relevant to the study of migration of Chinese women.

The first one is circulatory migration. In focusing on the physical mobility of migrants, their itineraries, their mode of transport and their affective and emotional use of space, the circulatory migration approach looks at networks and channels, and notions such as the chain and migration system. The concept of circulation has been applied, with success, to the new Chinese migration to France and Europe. However, it has not been used to study Chinese women and the role of gender in migration. And yet Chinese women's involvement in circulatory migration is essential for the understanding of the logic, origin and organization of Chinese migration itself.

The second concept, that of migration transaction, looks at the contractual element. Neo institutionalist economic and sociological analyses, derived from the theory of the "New Economy of Labor Migration" (Guilmoto and Sandron 1999),

are opposed to the classical economical theory, and maintain that the migration decision is not the result of rational individual choices, but rather the product of a collective strategy involving the family, and may be village. This approach depicts people who leave and people who stay as sharing their gains from migration in accordance with the logic of co-insurance. In this way, migration is seen in terms of a set of contracts, implicit or explicit, which form the basis of a migration transaction between the migrants and their families (non-migrants). The *raison d'être* for existing migration networks appears to be both to ensure the success of the migration exercise and to guarantee the non-migrants a return on their "investment," made in sending a member of their community abroad. This guarantee is also upheld by a set of norms, values and mechanisms of control and is based on the efficient functioning of migration networks or channels.

The third concept is that of gender. For French feminists, this corresponds to "social relations between sex categories." It is concerned not with specific biological (male and female) but social (men and women) categories. Gender involves the social organization between the sexes and takes into account the power relations between men and women, and the fundamental asymmetry in the two groups' hierarchy. It helps to investigate relations between the two groups in various social organizations (family, community, markets and here, migration) in terms of an unequal reallocation of resources, responsibility and power between men and women. Gender becomes an indispensable tool in researching migration of Chinese women. As well as underlining the specificity of women, traditionally passed over in silence in a patrilineal society, it helps one to understand a complex phenomenon (migration) with a new set of problems. Gender already plays an important part in new studies on migration of Chinese women (internal as well as international), such as those undertaken by Delia Davin (1999) and Jan Ryan (2002).

Putting together these three concepts for analysis in future studies will open up new perspectives on migration of Chinese women as well as Chinese migration in general.

Methodological Propositions in Studies of Migration of Chinese Women

A full understanding of migration is contingent upon the adoption of a trans-level analysis, using a multidisciplinary approach, and combining various methods.

(a) Trans-level analysis

People on the move are agents of culture and economy. They move as individuals, corporate or state bodies to realize certain goals. The individual, through embodied practices, becomes the mobile agent of trans-level activity, and occupies and moves through the places of inter-level negotiations. Spatial movement can be understood as a transfer, not only from one place to another, but also from

one social unit or neighborhood to another. The sociological analysis of international migration identifies three levels as relevant: (i) the macro-structural level which looks at political-economic-cultural structures on the level of the international system, the country of origin and the country of destination, (ii) the meso-relational level which assesses the density, strength and content of social relations between non-migrants and movers within units in the areas of origin and destination, and (iii) the micro-individual level which looks at the degree of freedom or autonomy of a potential mover (Faist 1997). The aim is to observe migration of Chinese women at all three levels which necessarily involves integrating research conducted in the field of migration in various academic disciplines.

(b) *Multidisciplinary approach*

Migration is investigated by a large number of Social Science disciplines and three of them have been very active in the last decade in bringing out new perspectives on international migration in general and migration of women in particular.

An historical perspective seems now to be a major approach in bringing about the understanding of the organization of networks and channels in Chinese migration since the 19th century. Historians have also brought to light women's position in migration by showing why, for socio-cultural reasons, the place and the presence of women had not been given much attention. Historical studies trace the changing image of women in migration and introduce the necessary comparisons between different groups in migration through the ages.

The political perspective has rarely been adopted in studying Chinese migration. Host states continue to depict women as secondary (dependant) migrants, which has led to Chinese migration being seen as a male phenomenon, a view which loses touch with reality today. China, in particular, is an outstanding example. Since the last century and especially since 1978, all measures and legislation have been adopted and pursued with male migrants, rather than migrants of both sexes, in mind. Reconsidering women's position in international migration would draw attention to the question about relations between state authorities and women migrants in a world which may be described as global, where the state, rather than losing its control over the migration waves, could pursue a policy of orienting, organizing, and using the migrant flows.

Using the sociological and anthropological perspectives is a classical approach to examining the meso and micro levels of the migration flows and organization. These perspectives provide firstly a better understanding of the individuals in migration. Secondly, they allow us to take into account the level of family structure and social organizations that have a major impact on the migrant's choice of destinations, and his/her relations with and obligations to the non-migrants. This approach also investigates the ways in which links in the networks are built (Kuah-Pearce 2004).

Applying the trans-level analysis (a) and multidisciplinary approach (b) at the same time necessitates the use of diverse methods(c).

(c) *Combining quantitative and qualitative methods*

Quantitative and qualitative methods complement one another in migration studies. Data survey and fieldwork have to be used simultaneously. As Denzin (1970) has suggested, using data obtained from two or three different methods enhances one's ability to interpret findings. Specifically in relation to the analysis of Chinese women migrants to France and Europe, two main data sources seem relevant.

The first group of data obtained during the MiRe survey using a sample of 967 questionnaires collected in the program "Chinese Circulatory Migration in France and in Europe," investigates the gender roles in the migration flow to Europe. Some responses collected during this survey have not been examined in detail. These data need to be complemented by those collected in the surveys of migrants conducted by associations such as ASLC. In addition, qualitative questionnaires on the life accounts of individuals which will throw light on the results obtained from the first sample should also be collected.

Our previous research on Chinese migration flows to France and Europe has drawn our attention to a second set of sources that can also be very instructive for studying Chinese migration: administrative sources linked to immigration policies particularly those in relation to the issue of asylum seeking.

It appears that, in at least two main European countries, France and Germany (Giese 2003), large numbers of Chinese new migrants — women included — are claiming political asylum. In 2003, OFPRA (French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons) registered 5,294 Chinese asylum files in France, and the Bundesamt, 2,387 in Germany (OFPRA 2003; Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2005). In Germany, China has become one of the 10 major countries of origin of asylum seekers. In both France and Germany, the admission of asylum seekers swung between 1.5 percent and two percent of the total applications. The majority of Chinese asylum seekers were women. In 1999, for example, data furnished by OFPRA showed that men's applications were 49 percent of the total vis-a-vis 51 percent for women. (In 1990, the proportion was 60.5 percent for men and 39.5 percent for women.) In Germany, the majority of applications were from men between 20 and 40 years of age but the data have still to be examined in full.

Since the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, Chinese asylum seekers have been the main issue in the sensitive debate on immigration and asylum especially in France. There is a fairly strong position taken by those who equate asylum seeking with illegal immigration. A second position, just as simplistic as the first, asserts that asylum seeking is totally different from labor

migration. Because of the polemic that has exacerbated the controversy, the study of asylum seekers has become almost a taboo subject. Partly because of the European countries' close-door policy relating to economic migrants, seeking asylum has become the last resort for migrant workers in particular in prolonging their stay in the host countries. As such, one can be classified as an asylum seeker but has actually taken a migratory journey of a labor migrant, is confronted by the same mechanisms of the migratory economy (involving smuggling and indebtedness), and obligated to pursue the same way of making a living in the host country as a laborer. Such mechanisms are linked to the migratory process, rather than the reason for migration. The examination of asylum files provides a great deal of interesting socio-demographic data and detail relating to migratory journeys. The asylum seeking process is also the basis for the existence of a myriad of "middlemen" who act as bridges between the migrants and the administration. They can be men and women working for organizations that give help to new comers, translation officers, social service workers etc. Conducting interviews with these "middlemen" can enhance one's understanding of a particular group of humanity (including Chinese women migrants) traditionally known for being out of reach.

To quote Maurizio Gribaudi (2001: 29), "The reassessment of women's role implies also amending all interpretations of migration." The study of the place of Chinese women in global migration is the key to a deeper understanding of Chinese migration as a phenomenon with its own dynamics in time and in space.

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