

Gendered Tales of Urban Adventures: Media Representations of Migrant Workers in the 1980s and 1990s in China

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A striking number of media representations of migrant workers has sprung up in the past three decades when the Open-Up policy has fostered unprecedented social mobility. The new formation of the new subject in the popular media—migrant workers—is concomitant with China's gradual involvement with globalization since the first half of the 1980s. One of the remarkable characteristics of globalization is that there is not only the physical circulation of goods, commodities and capital across national boundaries, but also exists an invisible exchange of bodies and affects, known as libidinal economy in the post-socialist China. People might think of male labors in construction sites, garbage dumps or the heavy industry in the first place when talking about migrant workers. Nevertheless, the empirical experiences show a striking phenomenon that the earliest representations of migrant workers in the Chinese popular media before mid-1990s are all about women migrants. In the following paragraphs, I will choose three important media representations of urban adventures to close examine the rise of the female migrant stories and what it suggests in globalizing China. The three media products are the 1984 state-sponsored award-winning film *Girls from Mt Huangshan* (黄山来的姑娘), the 1991 sensational TV series *Girls from Out of Town*(外来妹), and the 1995 popular CCTV drama *Sisters' Ventures in Beijing* (姐妹妹妹闯北京).

All of the three media products demonstrate absence and impotence of the male. This signifies a decline of the patriarchal political power metaphorized by strong and robust men, who usually are symbols of high-level productivity and the mainstay of the modern nation. The rise of the female image, which manifests pliancy, flexibility and capability of quickly adjusting to the new socio-economic transformation, subversively weakens the dominance of the male's wounds-and-endurance formula in the traditional migrant narrative, and at the same time creates new prototypes of migrant women to represent official discourses of feminism, nationalism and socialist values in the new global order.

The shift from male-dominant stories to female-dominant ones also illustrates two essential features of biopolitics in the post-socialist era: (1) a controlled yet less heavy-handed insertion of bodies into production of light industry as opposed to the traditional machinery of production; (2) production of immaterial labor characterized by domestic services and affective labors. The film and TV series that I choose to discuss here suggest an important shift of biopower from industrial production to postindustrial reproduction of life in the globalized age. Women's replacement of men's advantaged role in media representations of migrant workers informs China's epical turn from priority-to-politics to priority-to-economy, as well as its repositioning in the world arena of globalization.

1. Absence/Impotence of Men

It is very notable that male images lose their places in the popular representations of migrant stories from the 1980s to the mid-1990s. In the three visual texts that I choose here, we can find not only the facts that men in migrant narratives are either absent or impotent, but also there exists three different types of depowering of men. In the following

paper, I will scrutinize the three types and further explore the political and cultural implications of men's absence and impotence in migrant workers representations.

(1) *Girl from Mt Huangshan* and the Decline of Political Patriarchism

Possibly the earliest representation of migrant workers in the Chinese popular media in the Reform era is a film titled *The Girl From Mt Huangshan* 黄山来的姑娘, produced in 1984. This film won many domestic awards including Cultural Bureau Best Film Award (1985), Golden Rooster Best Actress in the Leading Role and Best Actress in the Supporting role (1985). The film tells a story about a young woman from the rural area of Anhui province going to metropolitan Beijing to work as a maid in order to pay off her older brother's debts and support her little brother's education. The film structures around the protagonist Lingling's (played by Li Ling) services for three different families. As a state-sponsored "main melody" film (zhuxuanlü dianying 主旋律电影), the three families that hire Lingling are meticulously chosen. They represent intellectuals, workers and officials respectively—the three major residents in the city and also leading classes in the power system. Interestingly, the three families all manifest absence of the male dominant. In the first intellectual family, the father never appears, and the only man of the family—the older brother goes abroad frequently. Most of the scenes about this family focus on the mother and the daughter. Lingling fills in this incomplete family as a helping hand. Though regarded as inferior and insignificant, Lingling in fact is very essential to the family for she is the only labor in the family and more importantly, saves the life of the daughter. The seemingly trivial domestic service that Lingling provides actually involves what men are supposed to do for the family. Here, a rural maid shows physical power that is not less than

that of men, and to a large extent, acts as a keeper and a protector of the urban family. The bumpkin Huangshan girl's entry in an ordinary Beijing family in this film has many implications here. It first indicates the burgeoning of social mobility in China as well as the accompanying commercialization of the human labor. Furthermore, it also implies changes of power relations between men and women, and urbanites and rural migrants. In a deeper level, the film suggests a new China on the move, and a national attempt to shake off traditional burdens of the rural-urban dichotomy, class antagonism and the bias against gender. Constantly conflicting with the women of the family, Lingling quits the job and finds another family to work for.

The second family is typical working class. The woman works in a factory and her husband used to be her colleague and is currently chosen to work for a magazine as an editor in another city. He promises to his wife that he will soon take her with him when he settles down. Lingling works as a babysitter when the husband is away. Lingling and the wife live happily together like sisters with the hope that the male host will come pick up the wife soon. However, the male head of the family never shows up and at the end abandons his wife. The absence of the man in this family indicates not merely a loose structure of the family as suggested in the first intellectual family, but more importantly the destruction and collapse of the family value.

Leaving the second family due to the financial reason, Lingling comes to an official family, in which the grandfather is a former high-ranked officer in the central government and the grandmother is a calligrapher. Now the grandfather retires and lives with their granddaughter. In this family, the only man is old and steps down from power, and the

generation of the parents is missing. Lack of capable and powerful mainstay of the family, this grandparents-granddaughter family structure symbolizes a weakened socio-political system of the nation. The disappearance of the middle generation hints at a gap between the two times, and calls for a transition. More importantly, the open-minded younger generation represented by both the urban granddaughter Xingxing and the rural maid Lingling, who together get into entrepreneurial business, informs the coming of China's neoliberal age at its full blossom.

Allegorically, the three incomplete families depicted in *The Girl from Mt Huangshan* indicate the decline of the patriarchal system of the nation as well as shifting power relation between young reformists and old conservatives. Viewing the nation as a large family with a strong driving head, we can find that since the 1980s, China has no longer emphasized its political control over social issues; instead, it has focused its development on economic aspects, loosening policies and encouraging changes and reforms on the system. The whole society has been undergoing an all-round restructure. Thus it has to ease its despotic image in order to ideologically let innovated and sometimes even subversive ideas in. As a result, a strong-headed image of the nation is no longer relevant to the China's new situation of economic development. Traditionally, the man is associated with the root of the China's agricultural civilization, and the woman is a pliant existence to be in accordance to the male power (as manifested in the water metaphor of the woman). Interestingly, the flexible and floating characteristics of the female image can be innovatively used as a revolutionary motif for the new era. Facing the gradual permeation of globalization into China since the early 1980s, despotic nationalism, which is long

represented in male narratives has given way to the neocapitalistic development of economy informed in the narratives of women migrants.

(2) *Girls from out of Town* and Economic Inferiority of Men

In 1991, a national hit television series *Girls from out of Town* 外来妹 caused a sensation throughout China. This ten-episode TV series, made by Guangzhou television station and aired on CCTV, created many “firsts,” including first TV series to depict migrant workers’ lives, first work to discuss labor-management relations, and first time that a mainland TV production invited Hong Kong actors to join. From the perspective of media production alone, this TV series is a manifestation of opening-up and reforms. It later in 1992 won Best Television Series of the “Feitian” award¹. *Girls from out of Town* describes a group of young girls from a poor village in Hunan province coming to Guangdong for better jobs and opportunities.

This TV series’ focus, as its title suggests is the women migrant workers. Men, however, portrayed in contrast to women, signify important structural transformation and new economic gendering in the neoliberal age. Along with the descriptions of female migrant workers’ upward climbing in the social and economic ladder, this TV series also depicts men’s frustrations and failure in the seek of better lives and opportunities. The male protagonist—Zhiqiang, the love interest of the successful migrant girl—Xiaoyun, used to be a model pacemaker in the countryside, cannot find a job in the Economic Special Zone because factories hire women workers only. He does not give up hope at first, and finds a

¹ “Feitian” Award is the highest level of the national television award. It established in 1980 and gives awards annually. It is sponsored by state administration of radio, film and television.

temporary job in a suburb farm to raise ducks. Though got hired, Zhiqiang does not really get involved in the urban life. His role is still a peasant, living outside of town and doing agricultural work. Not only economically left behind, Zhiqiang also lags behind culturally. He cannot appreciate Xiaoyun's urban-girl look and vehemently criticizes her curled hair and perfume. Xiaoyun's gradual adaptation to the urban life and success at work make him even more frustrated and self-contemptuous. He feels humiliated when Xiaoyun buys him a suit and gives him money. Their relationship, in which he used to be the protector and dominant in the countryside, now totally flips over. In the process of their rural-to-urban migration, Zhiqiang loses his power and advantage as a man while Xiaoyun obtains confidence and career success. She carries out the urban dream and becomes a role model for young rural migrants. As a contrast, Zhiqiang leaves the city in dejection and returns to the countryside. In the final episode, Xiaoyun becomes a factory director and goes abroad to do business with foreigners. She not only achieves her urban dream as an ordinary rural migrant, but also in a higher level embraces globalization as an international participant who has an acute mind on the new trend of the world. On the contrary, Zhiqiang loses all the desires of going out, marries an illiterate countrywoman, has a son, and works in the field. His final image of inertness and narrow-mindedness in this TV series reminds people of Lu Xun's classic character—Runtu, a vivacious and cheerful country boy turning numb and indifferent. This TV series vividly depicts a cruel reality in migration and urbanization: men's muscles lose power in the new form of production in urban market economy. Their economic inferiority to their gender counterpart, as well as their social awkwardness as manifested in the TV series establishes a representational mode on media that men are inevitably depowered in China's socio-economic transition toward a market mechanism.

This representation formula makes room for the woman image, which used to be weak, dependent and suppressed, and more importantly creates a unique gendered representation mode in the migrant narrative, that is—“the legend of migrant women workers (dagongmei chuanqi 打工妹传奇).” Following this mode evoked by this TV series, on the print media, there emerged many self-help and self-improvement books of how a migrant woman achieves success, such as *China's No. 1 Woman Migrant Worker—The Legend of Anzi* (中国第一打工妹：安子传奇, 2007).

(3) *Sisters' Ventures in Beijing and Wounded Migrant Men:*

Four years after the sensation of *Girls from out of Town*, CCTV broadcast a new show of women migrants—*Sister's Ventures in Beijing* 姐妹妹妹闯北京 (starring Zhao Wei 赵薇). Moved from the Southern China of Economic Special Zone to the cultural and political center Beijing, this TV series describes a group of migrant women's experiences in the metropolitan capital of China in the mid 1990s. Unlike *Girls from out of Town*, which mainly focuses on migrant workers' pursuits in the economic aspect, this TV series looks at their lives from a more comprehensive perspective. It touches upon a wide array of migrant issues, such as the household registration system, power/money-power/sex exchanges, discriminations on rural migrants, precarious conditions, identity problems and so on. It also depicts women migrants' experiences in a variety of realms including the entertaining industry, restaurant business, the construction enterprise and domestic services.

Around female protagonists are male migrants, who support these girls, yet also bring troubles to them. Compared to female protagonists' success, male protagonists are

incapable, unconfident and unsuccessful. The two male protagonists—Little Light Bulb (Xiao diandeng) and Peter seem sophisticated and capable, and do help their love interests start their lives and careers in the city in the beginning, but they in fact are wounded men with very frustrating and traumatic backgrounds. Little Light Bulb is dumped by his ex-girlfriend, who comes to Beijing for college on his financial support but after graduation marries an old professor with mobility-impairment for a Beijing household registration (hukou). Though the film portrays Little Light Bulb as a persistent and adventurous rural migrant, it does not provide him with a happy past or an optimistic future. Juxtaposition of his girlfriend's betrayal and his bitter resolution to pursue a better life in the city makes him a tragic hero. Unlike the representations of women migrants, which usually convey encouraging messages of self-realization and financial success, Little Light Bulb's urban adventure ends up being accused for cheating in work and using bad materials for the construction project. Little Light Bulb is betrayed by his accountant, and the legal trial that he has to handle is very likely to destroy what he has earned after innumerable hardships. The TV series concludes with an open ending, not providing the final result of Little Light Bulb's trial, which somewhat neutralizes the permissive tone of the protagonists' migrant experience.

As a paralleling representation of male migrants who is struggling in disillusionment, a tragic anti-hero is also created: Peter, the agent of a rural-migrant-turned-singer, looks gentle and decent, actually obtains his job and Hong Kong identity through a sexual deal with an old, rich and divorced woman. Here, the TV series shakes the traditional idea on gender in the migrant narrative. It might be the earliest depiction of the male migrant worker as a sex toy in contemporary small-screen production. Traditionally,

women are imagined as subjugated objects of sexuality in the rural-to-urban migration. Prostitutes, mistresses and bedded-maids are easily found in cinematic and literary representations of women rural migrants. This TV series however creates a male dependent image who trades his body for financial well-off and an urban identity. His spiritual struggle in the course of his relationship with the singer Milan suggests a fleeting hope of self-reliance. But his final give-up informs the ultimate fall of the male migrant in the materialistic and alienated city. Furthermore, Peter's wavering between dignity and material pleasure and his choice of money over morality at last also imply a tear of the spirit from the body. The struggling wounded men in the migrant worker representations subvert the traditional gender narrative and empower the female migrant workers, who in various representations are portrayed as guards, enlighteners and pioneers of China's rural-to-urban migrant movement. In the following paper, I will be further exploring how the popular media sets up three key prototypes of "New Women" in the age of economic revolution in the migrant narrative.

2. Prototypes of New Women in the Age of Economic Revolution

Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms starting from 1978 marks a new era in Chinese modern history due to its remarkable development of series of neoliberal policies in urban reforms, including privatization, marketization and decentralization. This post-Mao period of capitalist development is widely regarded as an age of "economic revolution" (jingji geming 经济革命) as opposed to the previous decade of "Cultural Revolution." The nation turns its focus from political struggles to economic development and leads to new rural-urban relations. Millions of peasants go to the city for better lives and opportunities, which

has politically shaken off the rigid household registration system, economically promoted the economic growth, and culturally complicated traditional social ethics and values. The phenomenon of migrant workers came to people's attention through not only social news but also literary and cinematic representations. The migrant narrative, which though has existed as long as a century had been neglected, now figures prominently first in popular media. This narrative mode in the Reform era vividly demonstrates the transitional characteristics of Chinese society since the 1980s. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the state interestingly and profoundly adopts the woman image to create new discourses of feminism, nationalism and socialist values in the new global order.

The three media products that I choose for discussion here show a trajectory of how China transits from a highly restricted and comparatively enclosed socio-economic system to a free and open market society. The migrant narratives in the three popular media products provide three prototypes of women migrants in the age of economic revolution. The representations of the three "new women" demonstrate prevailing winds of fashion and squalls of political necessity in China's social transformation. Dilemmas and unease are also represented in migrant narratives, yet in the state-sponsored popular media, they usually lead up to a consensus or a utopian expectation rather than confusions, negations or criticism. The three types of migrant women in the three popular media products suggest popular ideologies of different periods, and are marked by strong time characteristics.

Girl from Mt Huangshan creates a migrant maid, who is an epitome of morality. In this film, the maid, Lingling represents the highest level of ethics. She exemplifies both

traditional and contemporary moralities. This representation is associated to the social context of the mid-1980s, when urbanization and marketization just came into the political agenda and was monitored by previous socialist ideology.

In contrast, *Girls from out of Town*, no longer focuses on the ethical aspect of the migrant workers phenomenon. It portrays a group of women fighters, who seek economic success. Their desires of making money and becoming urban girls are very notably depicted in the TV series. It was 1991 when *Girls from out of Town* was showed on CCTV. Less than one year later, Deng Xiaoping went on the famous “Southern Tour,” which remarkably accelerated China’s economic and political liberations. This TV series serves as an overture to the central government’s firm commitment to socio-political reform highlighted by an unprecedented rural-to-urban migration and full-scale capitalist practices. Going with this trend, the emphasis on economic aspect in popular representations of migrant workers has become prominent. *Girls from out of Town* indicates an ideological turn in the urban reforms from moral and political correctness to pragmatic aspirations and advocacy of economic success.

However, with the deep penetration of the urban reforms, there emerged more and more conflicts between economy and family. The strong wave of rural-to-urban migration greatly deconstructs the traditional social order, in which family values stand in the center. Nevertheless, the pursuit for economic well-off and desires of climbing social ladders in the city become obstacles for preservation of family values. Thus, a harmonization and synchronization of economic liberation and long-existent familism are called for. *Sisters Ventures in Beijing* emerged in such a complex cultural and political context. It provides the

third prototype of women migrant workers, which reconciles the conflict between going-out pursuits for financial success and the essential idea of Confucianism--family. This prototype in the migrant narrative later bifurcate into two important genres: (1) *jianghu* 江湖 tales of migrant workers, which focuses on brotherhood, sisterhood, and horizontal comradeship; (2) the new-year's blockbuster 贺岁片, which attempts to suture the rupture between inevitable rural-to-urban migration driven by economic liberation and family values that are the essence of Chinese civilization.

(1) The Epitome of Morality

The year of making *The Girl from Mt Huangshan* is around a key time of China's socio-economic transition. Since 1978, China has opened up to the outside world and groped its way to prosperity and well-off of the whole society. However, the full embrace of the neoliberal economic and political policies is intervened and supervised by the conservative socialist ideology of the past era.² Instead of depicting the desires of making money in the city, which in fact is the real and vital motivation for rural girls to go on their urban journey, this film focuses on the moral aspect of women migrant workers. Lingling is portrayed as an innocent migrant girl with the highest moral integrity. In the first intellectual family, she quietly immerses herself in the tedious housework. As a migrant worker, she is depicted as a manifestation of honesty and tolerance. When the daughter of the family unjustly suspects Lingling of having stolen her expensive sweater, Lingling does not say anything but buys a same sweater for her. More impressively, Lingling determines to quit the job after being wronged multiple times by the family. However, just before she

² In this film, it is clearly embodied in the unintentional classist representations of the three families.

leaves the family, she finds the daughter of the family suddenly getting really sick. Without any hesitance, she takes her to the hospital and takes care of her till she recovers. Lingling manifests the most generosity and kindness that one could possibly have in this case. She in every sense epitomizes the highest standard of morality and integrity.

In the second family, Lingling further manifests her selflessness and kindness. Her relationship with the woman of the house is not like employer-employee but like sisters. When she finds that the woman host has been abandoned by the husband and cannot afford hiring her any more, she still takes good care of the woman and her newborn son. Even though others try to persuade Lingling to find another family to work for, she stays. The film creates an extremely high-minded migrant woman image, whose urban adventure is nothing to do with money, rather a realization of moral integrity.

In the last family, Lingling continues to perform innocence, honesty and sincerity. Moreover, in addition to provide great domestic services, Lingling follows the grandma to learn calligraphy, and reads newspapers to broaden her horizon. Through the praise of the grandfather of the family, Lingling's drawbacks as a rural migrant—ignorance and lack of education, are made up for by her studiousness. At the end, Lingling evolves to an almost perfect person, who according to her friends, "has been to Beijing and are good at cooking, and more importantly, whose calligraphy is even better than most higher-educated people." In this film Lingling's urban experience to some degree is a process of self-improvement and self-cultivation. The economic purpose of going to the city is largely understated; instead, virtues and ethics in the new social order are greatly emphasized.

This implies the state's conservative commitment to urban economic reforms and its surveillance over political and economic liberations to come.

Like most representations of migrant workers going to the city, this film also has formulaic contrasts between rural migrants and urban residents in various aspects. However, the contrast here between Lingling's unsophisticated yet sincere ways of getting along with people and urbanites' calculating and snobbish manners greatly highlights the value orientation of the mid-1980s, that is, pursuits of financial success and development of moral integrity are equally important. The intensified emphasis on the moral aspect in this film in a deep level conveys certain worries about the possible side effects of market economy as well as China's urbanization. Different from the attitudes in most literary representations of that time, which often provide an ambiguous attitude towards the newly launched urban reforms and gradually changed social ethics of commodity economy, the popular media representation of migrant workers deploys the fact of social evolvement to a neoliberal order and at the same time always provides optimistic if not perfect solutions to many problems.

The challenge for the reform period of the mid-1980s was the contradiction between the household registration system, which strictly limits people's mobility, and the great demand of labor circulation. This film aptly provides an idealistic alternative, that is Lingling's return to her rural hometown. Grown sophisticated and strong in the city, Lingling brings business back to her rural hometown—providing good-quality vegetables and meat to Beijing. Her final settlement in the countryside technically is a combined result of her urban experience, which makes her smart and open-minded, and the advantaged

natural resources in the rural area. It however conceals the real situation of most migrant workers—staying in the city at all expenses. This film employs such a narrative strategy to dodge the inevitable conflict between the household registration system and great mobility required by the new economic form. The woman migrant worker image on the screen of the 1980s to a large degree was a subscribed representation that has to perfectly stand for both new values of the post-Mao socio-economic order and traditional ideals of socialism. Morality, therefore comes in as a lever to balance the power of each side.

As the earliest representation of migrant workers in popular media, *Girls from Mt Huangshan* focuses on the moral aspect of the multi-layered phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration as well as its economic and political influences. It creates a prototype of migrant workers in the migrant narrative, that is, migrant workers as epitome of morality. It emphasizes to reconcile conflicting ideologies of socialist planned economy and neoliberal liberations. Therefore, it fails to explore the other essential issues of rural-to-urban migration, such as rural people's motivation to go on an urban journey, and their struggling adaption to the urban life. The questions why rural people go to the city and whither they remain unanswered until the 1990s, when the state showed more firm commitment to neoliberal urban reforms and launched more effective policies to promote eco-socio-political developments in a more global context.

(2) Seekers of Economic Success

Girls from out of Town starts its story with a very ritualistic opening sequence, in which a large group of rural young people is holding torches in the dark to go to the ancestral temple. After the mayor of the village hands out the leaving permits to them, they kowtow

to the memorial tablet of the ancestors. Then dawn comes, these rural young people cheerfully go on their migrant journey to the southern city. This short opening sequence is highly symbolic and contains rich information about the rural-to-urban migration in the early 1990s. First, the ritualistic gathering of rural young people before they leave the countryside strongly suggests the significance of the act of going-out. Ethnographical portrayal of the ritual before dawn and the morning setoff of the young migrants metaphorically imply a huge social transition from traditional agrarian system to industrial urbanization. Leaving the countryside for the city is no longer a sporadic and individual thing, but a collective action. The torches in the dark illuminate the path of rural China's economic and political liberations in the post-Tian'anmen era. Yet the permit of "leaving the village" (chucun zhengming, 出村证明) hints at the lingering control of the population policy. This opening sequence is quickly intercut to the montage of glistening skyscrapers in Hong Kong and a sequence of Hong Kong businessmen talking about stock market and the price of gold. The TV series in its very beginning successfully creates a climax in which the earnest desire of going out and the strong lure of money in the metropolitan come across and spark the fire.

Unlike *The Girl from Mt Huangshan*, which hesitates to emphasize economic pursuits of migrant workers, this TV series from the beginning comes straight to the point that the purpose of going to the city is primarily economic. The pursuit of the money is not immoral but pragmatic. Right after the scenes of the ritual and the Hong Kongers' business talk, the TV series cuts to a documentary-like sequence, in which the train packed with migrant workers comes into the Guangzhou Rail Station and a journalist interviews some of the

migrant workers for their reasons of coming to Guangdong. Not surprisingly, the interviewees all answer: “we’re coming to make good money.”

Without any embarrassment, this TV series celebrates the charm of money and stresses the importance of the economic success in migration. Like *The Girl from Mt Huangshan*, it is a representation of women migrants. What makes it sensational and liberating at the early 1990s is that it boldly creates an unprecedented prototype of women migrant workers—seekers of economic success. Traditionally, women are not expected to make money or financially support the family. However, as early as in the mid-1980s, media representations like *The Girl from Mt Huangshan* inventively depict a morally ideal woman who takes financial responsibility for the family (paying off debts for her older brother and paying educational expenses for her younger brother) and performs an epitome of morality to both migrant workers and urbanites in the materialistic city. What the film leaves unsaid is migrant women’s materialistic desires for their own life improvements and the real-existent intention of realizing one’s value through seeking economic success. *Girls from out of Town* picks up on the unsaid aspect of the migrant worker phenomenon and creates a gallery of smart and hardworking pursuers of economic success. In this TV series, two sets of pursuers are depicted—one positive and the other negative. Zhao Xiaoyun and her fellow migrant workers in the toy factory represent the positive group of seekers of economic success, who have learned the rules of money-making in the city, compete for promotions and struggle for higher salaries in appropriate ways. The TV series describes in great detail how these women migrants look for and grasp any chance to earn a better living. Relatively well-educated girls like Zhao Xiaoyun get promoted through her outstanding performance in managing manufacturing lines. Low-educated yet diligent girls

like A Lan make money through moonlighting after work. Migrant workers issues such as labor-management disputes, working overtime, after-work moonlighting and jumping ship are fully explored for the first time in popular media. As a contrast, the dark side of the money-driven migration is also depicted in this TV series. A Fang and Xiuying represent the negative images of migrant women workers, who trade their bodies for opportunities and money. A Fang, a former supervisor of a manufacturing line desperately seeks promotion by sleeping with the nephew of the manager, who turns out to be a playboy and abandons her after knowing she gets pregnant. Xiuying, with the hope of making a fortune in the city, slips into prostitution. A Fang's tragic abortion, which results in permanent infertility, and Xiuying's regretful statement about her lost in the acquisitive city, on the one hand, conveys a sympathetic attitudes towards women migrant workers who are traumatized by both their own shortsightedness and over-utilitarian efforts as well as the inexorably ruthless world of the city; and on the other hand it also signals a judgmental warning that the financial aspiration often jeopardizes life and future of migrant workers.

(3) Economic Pursuits VS. Family Values

The Girl from Mt Huangshan and *Girls from out of Town* draw an interesting parabola that profoundly illustrates the complicated and even paradoxical relationship between economic pursuits and family values. *The Girls from Mt Huangshan* subtly brings up this topic through talks between Lingling and her fellow migrant friends, in which they express aspirations for better living conditions and financial well-off. They long for a modern urban living with automobiles, motorcycles, washers and elevators in daily life. Moreover, when Lingling's second employer seems to be no longer able to afford a maid, her elder friend not

only persuades her find another family as soon as possible but also helps her look for one. Though the film depicts Lingling as a moral saint who does not work for money, but for conscience and love, other migrant maids' attitudes towards the urban adventure is quite clear, that is to make money. It is hard for a film to avoid the theme of economic pursuits when depicting migrant experiences. The early representation tactfully emphasizes Lingling's impoverished rural family and her responsibility for the family. As a migrant worker, she has economic needs, yet the motivation is not that individualistic but very much manifests traditional family values. This film meticulously interprets the economic-pursuits-family-value relation and tactfully hides the contradiction between them.

As a media prelude of the economic booming and the high tide of rural-to-urban migration, *Girls from out of Town* is suffused with messages of individualism and capitalism, which completely challenge the traditional ideas of family and the social structure of socialism. It however does not try to balance the individual's economic pursuits in the city and the pre-reform-era ideologies of collectivism, classism as well as the socialist rural-urban dichotomy. Its particular emphasis on "going out" and strong encouragement on pursuing economic success cinematically establish a rupture between strong economic desires in reality and longings for family as well as old life style in mind.

This issue were seriously responded and profoundly explored in the 1995 media production *Sisters' Ventures in Beijing*, which by its title stresses a concept of family ideal. This 30-episode TV series basically depicts the friendship among three girls, who are from different parts of China. Two of them, Xiaoxue and Milan are rural migrants. The TV series deploys its plots around the idea of sisterhood. It particularly addresses the issues of the

tension between cityward movement and family values, as well as individual economic pursuits vis-à-vis love, duty and morality.

In this TV series, rural people's journey to the city is of an escape in the first place and then an adventure for money and opportunities. Xiaoxue comes to Beijing in order to escape from an arranged marriage back in her hometown. Milan leaves the country to get out of poverty and narrow-mindedness. Both their rural hometowns are much of a backwater, which remains a lot of old and out-of-dated social norms. Compared to the film *The Girl from Mt Huangshang*, in which the protagonist Lingling also comes from Anhui province, this TV series depicts the countryside of Anhui province as a highly constrained and somewhat suffocated place rather than a beautiful and bountiful area as suggested in the film. Therefore, Xiaoxue's journey to the city is shadowed by a rural trauma, which makes a strong tension between her and her rural hometown. Her brave run-away to some degree means more than an escape, but a goodbye to the backward countryside or even an abandonment of the family. In contrast, Milan comes to Beijing with the support of her mother. On the surface, her urban journey does not seem like an escape or a break from the family. It however turns out to be so when Milan keeps away from her mother when her mother comes to Beijing to see her and wants to take her back to the rural hometown. The TV series spends three episodes to depict Milan's hide after her failure in the pursuit of her dream as a singer. The mother-daughter hide-and-seek suggests a crisis of the family bond. The family ideal is broken in both Xiaoxue and Milan's cases. However, the breaks of the connections between the city and the country, and individual pursuits and family values are not allowed because if it is the case the urbanization would be much more devastating than constructive. The tradition that China is pound of for centuries and the new social

transformation which is responsible for all the breaks and ruptures in social structures and ethnic relations have to sustain altogether for the stability and harmony of China's society. *Sisters' Ventures in Beijing* ideologically provides a vision of horizontal comradeship among migrant workers to alternate the traditional linear family bond. Migrant girls share happiness and suffering like family members. On the one hand, it advocates the migration to the city and encourages individuals' pursuits of money and fame. On the other hand, a new family-like bond is created in the urban adventure and reminds people of family values. There is a profound plot in the TV series: Xiaoxue's establishment and devotion to a migrant-workers-themed restaurant called "Sisters' Home," which exclusively hires rural migrant girls. The restaurant is obviously more of a sorority-like organization than a commercial unit. Xiaoxue does not care much about how much profit it can make, instead, she dedicates to help migrant girls settle down in Beijing and earn livings in her restaurant. When it faces financial crisis, Xiaoxue's first reaction is not to worry about debts and operation of her own investment, but the benefits and livelihood of those women migrant workers that she hires. The labor-capital-management conflict is replaced by sisterhood and comradeship among migrant girls. Xiaoxue's Sisters' Home Restaurant is a manifestation of both a migrant worker's success as an entrepreneur and a family value holder that declares the sustaining of traditional ideals. It soothes over the contradictions between the nation's economic development and its inevitable devastation of its tradition and order.

Sisters' Home Restaurant is where family values and individual development join up. The going-out rural migrants though leave families behind, organize new a family in the city. In this new form of the family, they give love, care and sincere help to each other like

traditional family members. It implies that the break of old family concept, which emphasizes attachments and get-together-ness may be mended and compensated by the new relationships among fellow migrant workers. In addition, the rural-to-urban migration is a win-win movement, which maximizes benefits for both individuals and the nation. For individuals, they broaden their horizons, elevate their living standards and get better opportunities in the city. For the nation, it gets guarantees of workforce so that the country's GDP goes up steadily.

Sisters' Ventures to Beijing started a retrospect on the issue that later turned out to be very important to China's adjustments to the domestic socio-political system and its repositioning in the world arena—the complicated tension between great social mobility and the traditional family value. After the mid-1990s, the genre of the “new-year's blockbuster” emerged and has provided a nationalistic narrative mode to address this topic. Due to the scope of the paper, I am not able to discuss it in detail here.

3. Conclusion

Chinese social mobility in the globalized era has been regarded as the largest human migration in the world. “Migrant worker” has been a buzzword for more than a decade. Scholars have begun to reflect this migrant workers phenomenon from a variety of perspectives and provided different viewpoints on rural-urban dynamics as well as ethical, environmental and educational issues in China. However, few has looked into the migrant worker phenomenon from the cultural perspective or examined the representations of migrant workers in literature, film and popular culture. My research here strives to join the conversation by presenting its rich complexity through examinations of the ways in which

various media have portrayed migrant workers, especially women migrant workers in the transitional period of globalized China.

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