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**Arianne Gaetano,**  
**Out to Work: Migration, Gender**  
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ERIC FLORENCE

In this volume, by looking at domestic labour and service work in offices and hotels the author sets out to study what kinds of cultural, social, and political impact mobility brings to bear on the identity and agency of rural migrant women and how mobility shapes gender roles and relations. The book aims to shed light on whether and how migrant women's migration improves gender equality in post-Mao China. In her endeavour, Arianne Gaetano draws on multifaceted and longitudinal methods that enable her to explore the complex and changing interplay of structure and agency by considering rather long periods over the course of her informants' lives and by documenting how these people reflect differently at these various stages on their experience of migration. The ethnographic study was conducted through fieldwork carried out in Beijing and in each of the 11 key informants' hometowns from 1998 to 2000 and in 2002, and annual trips in 2006–2010 and 2012, combined with frequent contact through email, cell-phones, airmail correspondence, and instant messages. Gaetano anchors her work upon a solid body of scientific literature in the field of migration and gender studies, as well as in social theory (structure/agency). This enables her to produce a fine-grained ethnography of the life trajectories of rural migrant women. She manages to simultaneously take into account the structuring role of three sets of forces: at the macro level, the historical transformations of gender norms and roles, the role of the Party-state in shaping gender relations in contemporary China, the ideological and institutional construction of rural-urban differences, etc.; at the meso level, forces such as the patrilineal-patrilocal family system or the gender-based division of labour; and micro forces such as the aspirations and goals embodied by migrant women themselves. Providing ample space for the unfolding of the narrative of migrant women's experiences, she shows vividly how the measure through which migrant women are empowered is "situational, contextual, and also temporal" (p. 9).

Chapter One (pp. 14–27) provides a broad and useful historical overview of the political-institutional as well as discursive structures that have both produced and legitimised the service sector and more particularly the domestic worker labour market in post-Mao China. The author highlights the excessive concentration of migrant women workers within the informal and unregulated sector of domestic services. Gaetano also points to the core role of the state-sponsored provision of a "cheap and flexible female rural migrant labour force" in guaranteeing economic growth: by "maintaining the urban labour force, particularly urban working mothers," female rural migrants have contributed to maintaining high levels of urban consumption in the midst of state retreat from social welfare provisions (p. 25). While post-Mao economic reform and opening have provided rural migrant

women with myriad possibilities "for self-determination and wage work," she points out, the Party-state, neoliberal forces, and the rural patriarchal system have joined to strongly constrain the conditions for realisation of self-determination (p. 27).

Through a migrant-centred ethnography, Chapter Two (pp. 28–45) explores rural migrant women's complex mixture of aspirations for pursuing a more independent and self-determined life outside the village and their willingness to conform to their gender duties within the family. Gaetano argues that the combination of urban-rural and gendered differences in post-Mao China provides room for the empowerment of rural migrant women while also producing "particular gendered patterns of migration that reflect and also perpetuate such difference and inequality" (p. 29). This chapter also documents the process of devaluation of rural life and agricultural work, which is anchored within historical representations of modern China and also strengthened within the broad ideological and institutional patterns of post-Mao political economy. The author could have further stressed and documented in this section how much this devaluation and rejection of the rural and over-evaluation of urban lifestyles and standards of consumption are also strongly reinforced as the migration process unfolds and becomes increasingly institutionalised over time, impacting social norms and gender roles in the village and in the places of destination and turning migration into the only desirable venue for social recognition and emancipation.

The next chapter (pp. 46–58) looks at the role of network (*guanxi*) building in both facilitating and constraining rural migrant women's migration, identity, and agency, while Chapter Four (pp. 59–69) explores the manifold impacts of rural migrant women's closer proximity to urban culture and lifestyles on the shaping of their identity and on their social status.

Chapter Five (pp. 59–80) then proceeds to examine how rural migrant women fared in the informal and rather depreciated urban domestic sector, looking at the everyday experiences and everyday forms of resistance and engagement with authority in the domestic services sector on the one hand and in the office cleaning and hotel service sector on the other hand. Within the domestic services sector, while the blurring of living space and working space strongly limits migrant women's freedom, Gaetano neatly describes the everyday tactics migrant women deploy to evade such constraints and negotiate alternative spaces in order to avoid the isolation that comes with domestic service labour. In the office cleaning service sector and hotel service sector, a paternalistic attitude of employers extending their supervision outside the labour space to the private space of migrant women has enacted a mixture of solicitude and normative pressure on migrant women and enabled reassuring "parents of their daughters' physical and moral well-being" (p. 73). In the following chapter, the author documents how in the face of stigmatising stereotyping that stresses their otherness and supposedly embodied sense of inadequacy to urban lifestyles and civility, migrant women actively engage in attempts to enhance their personal quality. But this chapter also shows how migrant women managed to invest the public sphere so as to escape the exploitative and oppressive conditions of their work. The changes in traditional patterns of courtship, marriage, and family relationships as a result of migration is the focus of the next chapter (pp. 99–130), which is followed by a brief concluding chapter (pp. 131–136).

A truly important insight of this very clearly written volume is to provide readers with some sense of proximity with the lives of migrant women in post-Mao China. It provides a complex, dialectic, historical, cumulative, and multi-layered understanding of female migrants' agency where individual agency is conceived as being shaped by socio-spatial differences and gender

norms, but also by those same people's biographies and trajectories (p. 43). It shows that the human experience of migration may never be fully shaped by or reduced to a simple mono-causal narrative.

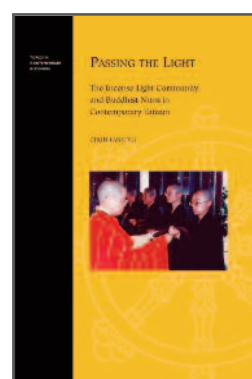
A note of criticism and a suggestion regarding an otherwise very accomplished and fine-grained ethnographic study: while the author does not fail to underline the role of post-Mao era ideologies, and particularly the discourse on the putatively low level of "quality" (*suzhi*) of rural people, as a "tool of domination" (p. 98), one would have expected further engagement with existing scholarship that stresses the role of the labour-market and state institutions in shaping rural migrant women's subjectivities,<sup>(1)</sup> or with studies that highlight the role of Party-state sponsored institutions in shaping or formatting migrant workers' narratives of their migration and work experience. Tamara Jacka, for instance, has highlighted the fact that the specific goals pursued by these institutions – the Migrant Women's Club where Gaetano has carried out fieldwork is one of these – and their understanding of class and gender differences strongly shaped the kinds of narratives and representations produced by migrant women via the mediation of these institutions.<sup>(2)</sup> There is a need to more closely relate the role of institutions to the shaping of narratives and of subjectivities, even though these institutions are never either entirely saturating subjectivities or the sole forces to be taken into account in these processes. Similarly, Gaetano notes the ubiquity of catchphrases such as "self-development," "improving quality," or "challenging oneself" in rural migrant women's rationales for migration. The interest here may lie in investigating further in which respect such narratives are linked intertextually to various forms of public narratives or if they may be related to patterned institutional practices aimed at specific publics. Moreover, what do these narrative tropes of self-transformation mean for the people who draw on them, and how are these actually related to their specific biographical trajectories? These questions are left untouched. Also, the political nature of people's choices related to migration decisions is on the whole left undiscussed, as is the inevitability of migration decisions linked to the devaluation of the countryside and to the production of a politics of desire related to urban consumption and lifestyles. These "choices" are political precisely because they appear so inevitable and are expressed in such ubiquitous forms, for as Lisa Rofel has argued, in post-Mao China power "operates precisely in those realms it has made liberatory" (the labour market and employment choices, for instance).<sup>(3)</sup>

Secondly, while Gaetano does highlight the indignities as well as the economic uncertainties migrant women face, on the whole the migrant women she has interviewed hold a positive view of migration, and in her conclusion, Gaetano argues that "over the long term, migration especially empowers some rural women and advances gender equality by enabling greater autonomy in courtship and marriage" (p. 134). One would have hoped for some space to also be devoted to the tales of rather unsuccessful, disillusioned, or resentful migrant women. Similarly, it would have been worth discussing the overall rather positive outlook on migration and life outside the village obtained through the author's ethnographic work in the domestic services, office-cleaning, and hotel service sectors and confront these insights with recent scholarship on the manufacturing and construction sectors, which provide a far more bleak and precarious picture regarding workers' conditions and expectations for the future. This would have enabled a discussion of the specific features of work sectors as well as the degree to which the overall optimistic outlook provided within this volume may or may not be related to the biographic trajectories of the author's key informants.<sup>(4)</sup>

That being said, this volume will be highly appealing to scholars interested in migration and gender studies. It will also be very useful as a textbook or assigned reading for students of contemporary China and of migration.

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1. See for instance Yan Hairong, "Neo-liberal Governmentality and Neo-humanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labour Recruitment Networks," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2003, pp. 493-523. For a critical appraisal of the association of "suzhi" discourse with neoliberal governmentality, see Andrew Kipnis, "Neoliberalism Reified: Suzhi Discourse and Tropes of Neoliberalism in the PRC," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 13, No. 2, June 2006, pp. 383-400.
2. Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration and Social Change*, Armonk, NY, M. E. Sharpe, 2006, 329 pp.
3. Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999, pp. 29-33.
4. See for instance, Pun Ngai, *Migrant Labor in China: Post-Socialist Transformations*, Cambridge, UK, Malden, MA, Polity Press, 2016, 204 pp.



**Chün-fang Yü,**  
**Passing the Light: The Incense**  
**Light Community and Buddhist**  
**Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan,**  
Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press,  
2013, 264 pp.

## AMANDINE PÉRONNET

This is an essential publication for anyone wishing to gain a deeper understanding of female monasticism in Buddhism. It offers the reader an immersive look into Incense Light (*Xiangguang*), a community of nuns formed in Taiwan in 1974, where the author carried out a lengthy period of fieldwork. A historian by training, in her previous works Chün-fang Yü had mostly focused on the transformation and development of Buddhism in the pre-modern era. With its contemporary setting, *Passing the Light* constitutes a break from this tradition. It is, in addition, the author's first study of the nuns and their approach to modernity.

While many twenty-first century works have examined the phenomenon of the growing number of women among the monastic orders of Taiwan, few have touched on the ways in which one of these communities can be transformed by globalisation. This is what Chün-fang Yü has set out to do by studying the missions that these nuns are undertaking in education and in their practice. She points out – and this is the book's connecting thread – that the nuns have fashioned their own approach to Buddhism due to a lack of pre-existing traditions upon their arrival. Their community is therefore a very real example of the reinvention of contemporary Buddhism. Drawing upon a variety of sources, the book seeks to resolve a paradox: how the members of the community are preserving tradition while simultaneously distancing themselves from it. The book's appeal lies in the fact that the author is able to link her vast knowledge of the history of mutations in Buddhism to an in-depth study of a contemporary phenomenon.