
While the female industrial workers whose stories are the subject of this book think of themselves as belonging to an unlucky generation, Liu’s analysis seeks to uncover the gendered structures that disadvantaged them, rather than attributing their misfortunes to fate or troubled times. She writes of a generation who grew up with the People’s Republic, and went to work in the factories of Nanjing, including in the city’s renowned textile mills. Most lost out on educational opportunities due to the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). But their lives as socialist workers were cut short by the advent of economic restructuring, and the majority were laid off from their jobs and “returned home,” either becoming full-time carers for their families, or finding new work, often in the growing informal economy.

Much of the book focuses on an institution central to the trajectory of these women’s lives: the work unit (danwei). Prior to this book, the gendered character of the work unit has been little explored, and here Liu makes a major contribution. She shows how the intersection of formal and informal dimensions of the organization of the work unit contributed to trapping many women in types of work that were less valued and they thus became the first to face the axe when restructuring was launched.

Liu shows how gendered distinctions between “heavy” and “light” work, as well as the designation of jobs performed by men as “skilled,” resulted in a workforce horizontally segregated by sex. Segregation was also vertical, in that men were more likely to be Party members and to be able to move into cadre positions. Ironically, these types of segregation meant that women were more likely to continue in shift work, which was almost impossible to combine with family responsibilities the work unit did little to lighten. Thus women’s familial roles came into conflict with any ambition they may have had to excel at work, and especially after bearing children, they often sought out lower status positions within the work unit so as to be able to juggle work and family life. Liu also shows how women’s advancement was constrained by their lack of opportunities to develop good connections (guanxi) with superiors, due both to the generally lowly status of their work and to double standards on sexual behavior that constrained their interactions with men. The threat of negative gossip about women who
spent too much time with men at work was widely felt, as one of Liu’s interviewees put it, “People don’t gossip about men, only women” (p. 64).

Liu’s account also shows how the work unit took on attributes of the Confucian patriarchal family, subjecting women to gendered forms of surveillance and reinforcing gender norms that imposed burdens of care on them. “The socialist work unit operated as an arbiter of women’s careers and personal lives and continued the patriarchal function of pre-socialist institutions,” she writes (p. 86).

The data for the study is life-history interviews with 33 female workers, most aged above 35, and including 27 who had been laid off from their jobs in Nanjing’s industrial sector. Liu also conducted shorter interviews with 20 of her informants’ daughters, most still in education when she spoke to them. Liu’s Nanjing-based fieldwork started from personal contacts, but despite her “insider” status, her position as a researcher based outside of China created barriers to finding interviewees. Whether her informants gave her a “public account” that put more weight on what ought to be said or a “private account” that revealed individual stories depended in large part on how they saw their relationship with Liu and with the intermediaries who had introduced her.

In the interviews, Liu used a creative approach to raise sensitive subjects with her interviewees. She showed the women short written vignettes describing fictional stories of sexual harassment experienced by women workers, then asked for them to choose among options open to the woman in question and give their thoughts about the situation. This proved to be a productive strategy, in that even those women who found recounting their life stories to be difficult had much to say in relation to the stories. In response, they often brought up similar incidents from their own experience or those of their friends and acquaintances.

The book comprises a series of thematic chapters tracing the women’s lives, with a predominant focus on their experience of employment and redundancy. Beginning with a brief account of growing up in the Maoist era, the next two chapters focus on the work unit, examining gender, work and life in this institution. The following two chapters analyze the process of redundancy, and the women’s solutions to it. The substantive chapters conclude with a short analysis of the daughters’ reflections on their mothers’ experiences and their own ambitions for their working lives. In this part, Liu shows a generation that has “internalized ambivalent and confusing ideas” (p. 145), striving to achieve more comfortable working lives
than their mothers' through pursuing education, while at the same time relying on gendered expectations of advancement through marriage.

While Liu’s thematic structure highlights common threads emerging from the interview material, a sense of the individual stories of these women, their lives as they saw them, was hard to piece together from the interview excerpts. By the end of the book, I couldn’t recall any single character emerging from this material, as the life histories were cut up to provide illustrations of the thematic arguments. This approach fails to make use of the narrative structure of the women’s accounts, and somewhat homogenizes their experiences. A slightly longer book might have covered both the thematic ground and given the reader a feeling for the individual women’s voices and lives.

Previously only available in hardback (2007), this book has now been released in a paperback edition. It is short and clearly written, and thematic chapters could well be used separately. It will make a welcome addition to courses on gender and work, in China and beyond, and should be read by all those who study the work unit and its contemporary descendants.

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