

Gendered Reforms: The Impacts of the 1990s Economic Reforms  
on Gender Roles of Southern Jiangsu, China

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## Abstract

This study investigates how the economic and social reforms of the 1990s, particularly those related to the Reform and Opening-Up, contributed to intensified gender oppression in southern Jiangsu, China. Focusing on a rural community of Yushan Town, a town in Kunshan, this research combines oral history methodology and thematic text analysis to examine the lived experiences of eight female migrant workers during the period 1991–2000. By using unstructured interviews and analyzing recurring themes with MAXQDA software, the study captures how structural and cultural transformations reshaped women's roles in labor and domestic lives.

Four recurring themes emerged: (1) employment disparities in privately-owned enterprises, where women were underrepresented and relegated to low-wage or auxiliary roles; (2) the decline of merit-based employment due to the collapse of the Danwei system, leading to patriarchal hiring practices and diminished opportunities for female workers; (3) the revitalization of Confucian gender norms, which culturally and morally encouraged women to sacrifice careers for domestic responsibilities; and (4) the rural-to-urban migration of women, which, while motivated by economic aspirations, often resulted in increased vulnerability to labor exploitation due to educational and gender-based constraints.

The findings reveal a complex intersection of market liberalization and cultural retraditionalization, which jointly undermined previous gains in gender equality and reinforced patriarchal labor structures. While limited in geographic scope, this community-focused study provides a microscopic historical perspective that highlights how national economic reforms can manifest in localized gendered outcomes. It fills a gap in the existing literature by offering empirical evidence from a single rural site, thus laying groundwork for future comparative studies across diverse regions of post-reform Southern Jiangsu, China.

*Keywords:* Oral History, Reform and Opening-up, Gender Disparities, Gender Inequality, Eastern-China, Confucianism, Rural development.

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## 1 Introduction

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the Chinese Central Bureau, led by Deng Xiaoping, launched the Reform and Opening-Up, a historical period that symbolized the rejuvenation of China's economy through active market reforms and transformative political changes. The process readjusted China's economic pursuit from the consummation of a command economy, which focused on heavy industries, to adaptation to a controlled market economy that facilitates light industrial production and economic investments through market trades.<sup>1</sup> Within the initial stage of Reform and Opening-Up, marketization took place accompanying various societal changes. In this process, collectively-owned enterprises began to operate with the market's order, and the market power was gradually decentralized. With that, the economy of China, especially that of the southern Jiangsu area was invigorated and the social structures and norms were

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<sup>1</sup>Guoqiang Tian and Xudong Chen, *China's Reform: History, Logic, and Future*, 1st ed. (Springer Singapore, Oct. 2022), XXXI, 457, ISBN: 978-981-19-5470-2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5470-2>.

also altered, leading to more openness and social vitality.<sup>2</sup> Later, in the second half of the 1980s, policies encouraging the development of private enterprises, which often originated from the disintegration of the former collectively-owned enterprises began to emerge, and these enterprises soon occupied much of the market shares of southern Jiangsu China.

Entering the second stage of reforms in the 1990s, these dynamics were intensified by the central government's emphasis on faster economic development. One emphasis was the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's "socialist market economy" model, which refers to an economic system with marketized economic relations yet the firms still essentially operate under governmental controls. Specifically, the expansion of this system into rural areas triggered rapid industrialization and urbanization of rural areas of southern Jiangsu, as cultural anthropologist Fei Xiaotong mentioned in his description of the economic history of the Southern Jiangsu area.<sup>3</sup> According to his Sunan model of economic construction, the Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs), emerging private firms that were physically or economically embedded mainly in rural towns or villages powered the economic growth and rural urbanization in southern Jiangsu.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the southern Jiangsu area experienced significant economic developments throughout the 1990s with the accelerated privatization of industries and increased market competition. In fact, the annual average real growth rate of these enterprises over the 1990s amounted to 19%, which means that each year the enterprises expanded at a rapid pace. At the end of that expansion in 2000, 70% of South Jiangsu's industrial output was produced by rural enterprises.<sup>5</sup> Also, the ninth 5-year plan lasting from 1996 to 2000 emphasized improving people's social well-being and constructing a modernized nation, therefore playing a decisive role in China's marketization reforms.

Within that process, the gender roles, especially the gender status of rural residents of southern Jiangsu, did not remain unchanged but rather experienced continuous fluctuations with the dynamics and changes in social norms. There has been scholarly attention on gender equality in rural China, especially on how the post-1990 economic and social reforms have contributed to the changes in previous gender roles. Research across various fields, such as labor economics, social structure studies, migration analysis, and cultural studies, has shown that various intersectional factors contributed to the marginalization of women, particularly by weakening their influence and participation in previous workplaces. Furthermore, a combination of factors such as the dismantling of collective welfare, the decrease in female labor salaries, and the resurgence of traditional Confucian gender norms collectively restricted women's social status in post-1990 Southern Jiangsu society.

<sup>2</sup>Guoqiang Tian and Xudong Chen, *China's Reform: History, Logic, and Future*, 1st ed. (Springer Singapore, Oct. 2022), XXXI, 457, ISBN: 978-981-19-5470-2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5470-2>.

<sup>3</sup>Xiaotong Fei, *From the soil: the foundations of Chinese society rural recovery / Xiang tu Zhongguo, xiang tu chong jian = From the soil: the foundations of Chinese society rural recovery* (Qun Yan Publish, Beijing: Qun Yan Chu Ban She, 2016), ISBN: 9787519300494.

<sup>4</sup>Xiaoping Shen and Laurence J.C. Ma, "Privatization of rural industry and de facto urbanization from below in southern Jiangsu, China", *Geoforum* 36, no. 6 (Nov. 2005): 761–777, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2005.01.005>.

<sup>5</sup>Xiaoping Shen and Laurence J.C. Ma, "Privatization of rural industry and de facto urbanization from below in southern Jiangsu, China", *Geoforum* 36, no. 6 (Nov. 2005): 761–777, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2005.01.005>.



Figure 1: Range of Southern Jiangsu Area

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Labor Market Reforms and the Marginalization of Female Workers

Studies such as Gender Inequality and Social Structure in Urban China elaborated on how labor market liberalization during the 1990s disadvantaged female workers. In the pre-1990 period, although marketization had already taken place in Southern Jiangsu, the state-owned enterprises and institutions named work units (Danwei) still occupied a great proportion of the market, enabling many female workers to continue operating production. In a Danwei, which could be a factory complex, school, hospital, or any type of highly specialized organization under governmental control or supervision, people worked based on their specialties rather than social stereotypes.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the Danwei system was considered “conducive” to gender equality due to its multi-functional characteristic of serving as both a productive and a reproductive medium.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the collective lives in Danwei achieved greater gender equality since it linked the productive and reproductive aspects of civilian lives, constructing workers in Danwei in a communist environment. As Stockman stated, Danwei was considered a small society that conferred a particular social identity to its members.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it was a system in which its members were functioning not merely as laborers, but also as components of this extremely large household. With these, Stockman suggested that the gender status of residents in the newly urbanized areas of China was largely equalized by Danwei since women were en-

<sup>6</sup>Norman Stockman, “Gender Inequality and Social Structure in Urban China”, *Sociology* 28, no. 3 (Aug. 1994): 759–777, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038594028003007>.

<sup>7</sup>Norman Stockman, “Gender Inequality and Social Structure in Urban China”, *Sociology* 28, no. 3 (Aug. 1994): 759–777, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038594028003007>.

<sup>8</sup>Norman Stockman, “Gender Inequality and Social Structure in Urban China”, *Sociology* 28, no. 3 (Aug. 1994): 759–777, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038594028003007>.

couraged to actively participate in the Danwei productions. Stockman pointed out in the article that the marketization reforms, which induced the decline of these Danwei, had eroded the existing trend toward equality and resulted in greater gender inequalities in the workplace.<sup>9</sup> This is because women were often seen as inferior labor sources due to their responsibilities for family concerns, such as reproduction or household affairs, which results in lower payments and employment rates.

This disparity could be seen from another study that addressed the gender earning gap and difference in employment rate in the period 1989-2004. Liu in the study suggested that between 1989 and 1997, the gender earnings gap widened by 5 percent.<sup>10</sup> This indicated that as the process of economic reforms proceeded, women were gradually devalued by capitalistic companies due to their disadvantages in production. Despite the gap stopping its expansion in 1997-2004, the employment gap continued its growth: the employment of the less educated women declined significantly, while the employment of men remained stable.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Min Qin et al. found that female migrant workers who were originally from rural or suburban areas in Jiangxi earn significantly lower wages compared to their male counterparts. In fact, the male migrant workers earn 26% higher hourly wages than the female migrant workers, despite similar educational backgrounds or working experience (in the study, the participants were all with lower educational backgrounds).<sup>12</sup> In the study, Min Qin et al. focused solely on the gender disparities among migrant workers because, as they mentioned, migrant workers occupied a significant share of the labor market, especially for those laborers who generate less income.<sup>13</sup> This partly explains the critical difference in hourly wage between the two genders, since men were "predominant in the construction jobs" that were popular in the 1990s Southern Jiangsu.<sup>14</sup> According to Rukai Gong et al. the construction industry became exceedingly popular since the 1990s in China and shared a large portion of the GDP value.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the average income of migrant workers, who were often male increased significantly, expanding the gap between the average hourly wage

<sup>9</sup> Norman Stockman, "Gender Inequality and Social Structure in Urban China", *Sociology* 28, no. 3 (Aug. 1994): 759–777, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038594028003007>.

<sup>10</sup> Haoming Liu, "Economic Reforms and Gender Inequality in Urban China", *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 59, no. 4 (July 2011): 839–876, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1086/660006>.

<sup>11</sup> Haoming Liu, "Economic Reforms and Gender Inequality in Urban China", *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 59, no. 4 (July 2011): 839–876, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1086/660006>.

<sup>12</sup> Min Qin et al., "Gender inequalities in employment and wage-earning among internal labour migrants in Chinese cities", *Demographic Research* 34 (2016): 175–202, ISSN: 14359871, 23637064, visited on 06/15/2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26332032>.

<sup>13</sup> Min Qin et al., "Gender inequalities in employment and wage-earning among internal labour migrants in Chinese cities", *Demographic Research* 34 (2016): 175–202, ISSN: 14359871, 23637064, visited on 06/15/2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26332032>.

<sup>14</sup> Rukai Gong et al., "Real estate expansion and manufacturing wage increase in China: From the perspective of labor reallocation", *China Economic Quarterly International* 2, no. 1 (2022): 70–83, ISSN: 2666-9331, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ceqi.2022.03.002>, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666933122000053>.

<sup>15</sup> Rukai Gong et al., "Real estate expansion and manufacturing wage increase in China: From the perspective of labor reallocation", *China Economic Quarterly International* 2, no. 1 (2022): 70–83, ISSN: 2666-9331, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ceqi.2022.03.002>, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666933122000053>.

among the two genders of migrant workers. In addition, Min Qin et al. pointed out a large gender disparity in the work participation rate, with females significantly less employed.<sup>16</sup> Less educated female workers began to be marginalized by the labor market with reduced salaries and employment opportunities since the 1990s, and the gender disparities have continuously expanded even after.

Furthermore, women, married women in particular, faced heightened barriers to career advancement and reduced job mobility. This is because they were seen as inferior sectors of the labor force due to their family roles: they bore the duty of being mothers, which was seen by the capitalist system as inefficient.<sup>17</sup> Also, the pregnancy of women became a heavy burden to those who were married, since a large portion of family responsibilities (reproduction) were conferred to them. Thus, it is more likely for them to undergo involuntary terminations or shift to family-centered, lower-status employment. In a longitudinal study that examined the gender gap in job mobility in six urban cities of coastal China, it was shown that the gradual formation of a labor market and the decline in the state's effort for gender equality (represented by the decline of Danwei) contributed to widened gender gaps in job mobility.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, Cao Y. and Hu C.Y. suggest that married women were less likely to change jobs for career advancements or personal choices (other than males), but were more likely to undergo family-oriented job changes and forced career terminations.<sup>19</sup> With that, they argued that this issue had intensified and increased in scale in the 1990s, while they did not indicate a clear potential cause of it.

## 2.2 Reinforcement of Traditional Gender Roles through the Decade

One potential cause of the gender gap in salaries, employment opportunities, and job mobility might be the revitalized influence of traditional Chinese norms. The Reform and Opening-Up not only brought marketization reforms but also symbolized the shrinking of Maoist communism and the aligned policies. With the decline of Maoist ideals after mass marketization took place in the 1990s, traditional Chinese social norms, especially Confucianism "began re-inscribing traditional gender roles, aggravating gender oppressions. As Zhengyu Sun discussed in his article, entering the 1990s, the public regarded Confucianism as a benchmark that connected them to the traditional Chinese culture under the strong influx of Western values.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Confucianism was used as a tool to culturally compete with the novel concepts of neoliberalism and laissez-faire ideals in the marketization process. Furthermore, the revival of Confucianism was a result of cultural reconstruction after the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>16</sup>Min Qin et al., "Gender inequalities in employment and wage-earning among internal labour migrants in Chinese cities", *Demographic Research* 34 (2016): 175–202, ISSN: 14359871, 23637064, visited on 06/15/2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26332032>.

<sup>17</sup><empty citation>.

<sup>18</sup>Y. Cao and C.-Y. Hu, "Gender and Job Mobility in Postsocialist China: A Longitudinal Study of Job Changes in Six Coastal Cities", *Social Forces* 85, no. 4 (June 2007): 1535–1560, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2007.0065>.

<sup>19</sup>Y. Cao and C.-Y. Hu, "Gender and Job Mobility in Postsocialist China: A Longitudinal Study of Job Changes in Six Coastal Cities", *Social Forces* 85, no. 4 (June 2007): 1535–1560, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2007.0065>.

<sup>20</sup>Zhengyu SUN, "Chinese Marxist Philosophy Since Reform and Opening-Up", *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 13, no. 3 (2018): 430–448, ISSN: 16733436, 1673355X, visited on 06/15/2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27073804>.

According to Zuyan Zhou, as one of the most representative collective identities of China, Confucianism was regarded as the foundation of moral standards.<sup>21</sup> By advocating this ideology, the public attempted to offset the undeniable impacts of the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, Confucianism revitalized in the Chinese society as both a resistance to Western cultures and a headstone of moral cultural reconstruction.<sup>22</sup>

However, other scholars suggest that the revival of traditional rhetoric and propaganda accompanying the rise of Confucianism legitimized patriarchal hierarchies, which portrayed female "sacrificing" for family stability as progressive and 'cost-effective' in terms of economic production. Under the context in which the society pursues optimal productivity and economic efficiency, women were seen as martyrs who should stand out and were morally obliged to sacrifice for their husbands or other males in the household in order to liberate the maximum amount of labor force into the market.<sup>23</sup> This ideological notion again aggravated the gender gap in works. According to Tania Angeloff and colleagues, the revival of traditional hierarchies widely inflicted a differentialist ideology that defined femininity as gentleness and beauty, and emphasized the "returning of females into their natural roles of housekeeping".<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Xingqiang Du state that traditional norms such as the Three Obedience and Four Virtues(Three Obedience: obey father before marriage, husband in marriage and son in widowhood; Four Virtues: Women's Virtue, Women's Clothing, Women's Appearance, Women's works) for women obliged them to follow patriarchic orders.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, he argues that quotes such as "Virtuous women would not engage in arguments" significantly restricted women from participating in both social activities and economic productions in the 1990s.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the traditional social norms experienced a revitalization from this aspect as well: that is, the norm of "man breadmaker, women housekeeper" re-emerged gradually, as the reform propaganda emphasized family responsibility and aligned femininity with passivity and supportiveness to a family.

There is a body of existing literature that attempts to address how the Reform and Opening-Up, especially the economic transformations in the 1990s has aggravated gender oppression through labor market discrimination and cultural retraditionalization. Stockman in his article discusses the significance of the Danwei system of which its decline within the marketization process in the 1990s led to reduced gender equality in employment and work. In addition, two

<sup>21</sup>Zuyan Zhou, "Dao and Reconstruction of Cultural Identity in Contemporary Chinese Literary and Mass Media Products", *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 28, no. 2 (2016): 223–284, issn: 15209857, 2328966X, visited on 06/15/2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24886579>.

<sup>22</sup><empty citation>.

<sup>23</sup>Norman Stockman, "Gender Inequality and Social Structure in Urban China", *Sociology* 28, no. 3 (Aug. 1994): 759–777, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038594028003007>.

<sup>24</sup>TANIA ANGELOFF, MARYLÈNE LIEBER, and N. Jayaram, "Equality, Did You Say? Chinese feminism after 30 years of reforms", *China Perspectives*, no. 4 (92) (2012): 17–24, issn: 20703449, 19964617, visited on 06/15/2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24055501>.

<sup>25</sup>Xingqiang Du, "Does Confucianism Reduce Board Gender Diversity? Firm-Level Evidence from China", *Journal of Business Ethics* 136, no. 2 (2016): 399–436, issn: 01674544, 15730697, visited on 06/15/2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24736138>.

<sup>26</sup>Xingqiang Du, "Does Confucianism Reduce Board Gender Diversity? Firm-Level Evidence from China", *Journal of Business Ethics* 136, no. 2 (2016): 399–436, issn: 01674544, 15730697, visited on 06/15/2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24736138>.

other studies that implemented quantitative analysis of the gathered data about the employment rates and earnings to determine the gender disparities elicited by the Reform and Opening-Up had similar conclusions to Stockman. With research done from multiple perspectives, it can be seen that female workers were marginalized in the labor market, receiving less monetary income and job opportunities.

On the other hand, the revitalization of traditional culture and social norms, especially Confucianism followed the decline of Maoist ideals in the urbanizing 1990s. As market reforms advanced, Confucianism reemerged as a cultural counterbalance to neoliberal values and a moral headstone after the Cultural Revolution. Scholars argue that this resurgence reinforced patriarchal hierarchies, casting women as moral agents expected to sacrifice for family stability and economic efficiency. This ideology portrayed female domesticity as both culturally virtuous and economically strategic, discouraging women's workforce participation. Traditional values like the Three Obediences and Four Virtues further confined women to passive domestic roles. The reform-era propaganda, while promoting productivity, subtly re-established the "man as breadwinner, woman as homemaker" norm. Thus, the resurgence of Confucian values in the 1990s played a significant role in legitimizing gender inequality in China's labor and social spheres.

However, there remains a need for more regionally specific studies, especially focused on rural areas of the highly developed zones like Southern Jiangsu, where the rapidly changing economic dynamics may have uniquely shaped experiences among different genders. In the Southern Jiangsu area, migrant workers from each rural community might have a specific pattern of migration: with the majority of a community's labor force migrating to the same city. Also, the destination of their migrations may vary significantly among each community. This means that, for each community, the pattern and destination were different, which highlighted a need for a single-community-based case study, since the results produced using multiple communities might be influenced by those factors. In addition, the literature discusses how uneducated or less-educated female workers faced reduced employment opportunities, and migrant female workers from the Southern Jiangsu rural areas constituted a large portion of that population. Therefore, a study that focused solely on a certain rural community and investigates how the economic and social reforms in the 1991-2000 period contributed to increased gender oppression in the Southern Jiangsu region might fill this gap. In order to adequately address the identified gap in the current academia and provide specific research results that focus on the proposed case of inquiry, the researcher formulated the following research question: *How did the economic and social reforms in the period 1991-2000 contribute to new or intensified forms of gender oppression in the southern Jiangsu region of China?*

### 3 Methodology

The Method of my study directly addresses this research question: How did the economic and social reforms in the period 1991-2000 contribute to new or intensified forms of gender oppression in the southern Jiangsu region of China? With that research question and the notions relating to it, the researcher presupposed

that the collective memories acquired from the investigated community, which is Yushan town is reliable. Also, the researcher assumed that there would be bias and inaccuracies of facts due to the deterioration of personal memories over time. In addition, the researcher hypothesized that recurring themes and historical events would emerge among the viewpoints of female migrant workers involved in this study, serving as collective memories of that social group in the 1990s in Yushan town.

This research implements a mixed methodology composed of oral history and thematic text analysis. In Paul Thompson's book *Voice of the Past: Oral History*, oral history was defined as a practical and widely applicable method in historical research that could be used to obtain primary information about the past through the conduct of interviews.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, oral history not only involves the gathering of primary information about historical events, but also includes the analytical process of the information acquired and the ultimate discovery of collective memories among the interviewed population.<sup>28</sup> In other words, oral history research is seen as an "eclectic deployment" of different theoretical frameworks, as its process requires interdisciplinary tools such as narrative analyses, unstructured interviews or memory analyses.

In the oral history research process, unstructured interviews were the main tool used by the researchers to gather primary information from the victims of historical events.<sup>29</sup> In this study, various discussions about presupposed topics relating to Reform and Opening-Up and gender equality among the working populations of Southern Jiangsu were conversed, and all the discussions were done after acquirement of informed consents from the participants. Taking a rural community in the Yushan Town area as a case of inquiry, the researcher focused solely on the residents of that area, gathered information through unstructured interviews, and analyzed the recurring themes emerged from the interview transcriptions via MAXQDA, the main analytical tool in this study.

The second part of this research is a thematic text analysis. In thematic analysis, the researcher identifies common themes or text codes from a specific dataset via a qualitative approach, and thus constructs links among individual experiences to unveil the collective memories about a historical period or time.<sup>30</sup> In this study, the researcher recorded all the unstructured interviews conducted and transcribed them with the explicit consents from the participants. With that, the researcher could extract the texts in the transcription documents and input them as datasets into MAXQDA, an analytical tool. Therefore, a list of recurring themes could be generated within this process. In other words, the thematic analysis was incorporated into the oral history process to analyze the transcriptions and generate both quantitative and qualitative data, which validates the results.

By combining both oral history and thematic analysis, the researcher designed a methodology that aims to provide a more comprehensive understand-

<sup>27</sup>Paul Richard Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The voice of the past : oral history* (New York, Ny: Oxford University Press, 2017), ISBN: 9780199335466.

<sup>28</sup>Paul Richard Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The voice of the past : oral history* (New York, Ny: Oxford University Press, 2017), ISBN: 9780199335466.

<sup>29</sup>Paul Richard Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The voice of the past : oral history* (New York, Ny: Oxford University Press, 2017), ISBN: 9780199335466.

<sup>30</sup>Amber Wutich et al., "Metatheme Analysis: A Qualitative Method for Cross-Cultural Research", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (2021): 160–178, <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211019907>.

ing toward the economic development of Southern Jiangsu in the 1990s and the social well-being of female migrant workers from rural areas. With oral history, a perspective other than the official statistics and economic index was present, which allows for a multi-aspect review of China's developmental history.

### 3.1 Oral History Interviews

To appropriately address the research topic, the researcher implemented oral history research as a tool for acquiring qualitative data, which is the perceptions of female workers from a rural community of Yushan town on the impacts of the Reform and Opening-Up to their careers. Oral history according to Paul Thompson could be defined as an “interactive methodology” that involves conversations with human subjects and the acquisition of oral information through talks.<sup>31</sup> By holding a conversational interview that is dissimilar from the traditional questioning-and-answering process, the researcher would be consistently having dialogues with the participants, who would ideally introduce their personal experiences or anecdotes to address the topics of discussion. In simpler terms, the oral history interview was structurally organized by the researcher, who first did preliminary background research on the topics discussed and then guide the conversation.

Conversely, the primary narratives or information gathered from the interviews depended largely on the participants. They selectively recalled personal memories, stories, and experiences, often shaped by their own beliefs and perspectives.<sup>32</sup> As a result, the interviews reflected individual interpretations of the broad topics introduced, which aligns with the goals of this research. These personal viewpoints were later revisited and analyzed collectively during the thematic text analysis phase.

#### 3.1.1 Sampling

This study focused solely on the perceptions of female migrant workers from a rural community in Yushan Town. As the case of inquiry, Yushan town is a rural town in Kunshan, Suzhou that based its economy mainly on agriculture. Through the process of Reform and Opening-Up, the majority of Yushan's labor force migrated to the Developmental Zone of Kunshan, where industrial development experienced rapid growth. The researcher chose to only focus on the female migrant workers from that area in order to reduce inaccuracy due to geographical differences: the administration and social conditions of each rural town in Southern Jiangsu may vary, and this may affect the legitimacy of the results. As Xiaotong Fei mentioned, each community in Sunan (Southern Jiangsu) had its unique demographical and social characteristics.<sup>33</sup> Within this framework, the researcher employed snowball sampling—a method that starts with a small group of initial participants, who may then refer others to join the study. A significant number of participants were reached through personal household

<sup>31</sup>Paul Richard Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The voice of the past : oral history* (New York, Ny: Oxford University Press, 2017), ISBN: 9780199335466.

<sup>32</sup>Paul Richard Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The voice of the past : oral history* (New York, Ny: Oxford University Press, 2017), ISBN: 9780199335466.

<sup>33</sup>Xiaotong Fei, *From the soil: the foundations of Chinese society rural recovery / Xiang tu Zhongguo, xiang tu chong jian = From the soil: the foundations of Chinese society rural recovery* (Qun Yan Publish, Beijing: Qun Yan Chu Ban She, 2016), ISBN: 9787519300494.



Figure 2: The Oral History Research Being Conducted

visits and the researcher's community networks. Before being selected, potential participants were asked a few preliminary questions to assess their eligibility. For this study, only female workers from Yushan Town who had migrated and worked in urban areas were chosen, ensuring that all participants had firsthand experience with migrant labor conditions. Yushan town was a suburban town which had approximately 2,000 residents, and the chosen community is one of the three communities in this area, with about 500 residents. In total, eight interviews were conducted. Of the participants, seven had not completed high school, and one had. Their ages ranged from 55 to 80, with most having begun working at the age of 15 or 16. Before the interviews took place, all participants provided informed consent, which included the right to withdraw at any time. They were also encouraged to express their genuine and unfiltered views and were reminded that their relationship with the researcher should not influence their responses during the interviews.

Due to the peculiarities of oral history, no formal set of interview questions was provided to participants.<sup>34</sup> Instead, a set of discussion topics was

<sup>34</sup>Paul Richard Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The voice of the past : oral history* (New

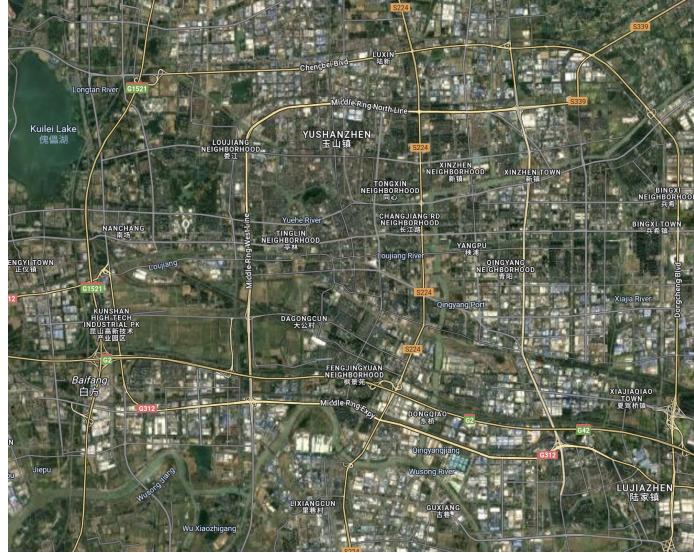


Figure 3: Geographical Range of Yushan Town

prepared to serve the role of guiding questions. Specific records of these topics are included in Appendix 1. At the start of each interview, the researcher first collected basic demographics of the participants to gain a general understanding of their social and economic background and potential social roles. The conversation then proceeded with open-ended questions based on the pre-established topics, followed by tailored follow-up questions designed to elicit deeper descriptions or memories. These follow-up questions varied depending on the participant's personality, past experiences, occupation, or socioeconomic status. For example, interviews with participants who had worked in construction included more questions about how the Reform and Opening-up period affected that industry and shifted their working experiences. Interview lengths ranged from 25 minutes to 1 hour, depending on how willing participants were to share. 4 interviews were conducted in Mandarin and analyzed in the original language to preserve the original narrative style, which is a key consideration in oral history research.<sup>35</sup> The other 4 interviews were conducted in the Yushan dialect and were translated into Mandarin for analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed, with prior informed consent obtained from each participant. The audio recordings were all destroyed immediately after transcriptions of them were done to protect participant privacy.

### 3.1.2 Thematic Analysis

For the analysis of oral history, the researcher used MAXQDA as the major tool for analyzing the qualitative data acquired in the form of texts. MAXQDA was chosen for its ability to reorganize, classify, and categorize large volumes of textual data, making it suitable for handling archival documents. Additionally,

York, Ny: Oxford University Press, 2017), ISBN: 9780199335466.

<sup>35</sup>Paul Richard Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The voice of the past : oral history* (New York, Ny: Oxford University Press, 2017), ISBN: 9780199335466.

MAXQDA supports the analysis of audio and video files, enabling its use with oral history records. This provided the researcher with convenience when conducting a thematic analysis on data obtained from interviews. Thematic analysis refers to a qualitative method of identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurring themes across a dataset. In this study, thematic analysis was applied to the dataset to identify key themes and patterns specific to the source.

The thematic analysis was conducted in one dataset which is composed of the interviews. For the interviews, the researcher categorized a total of 8 interviews into three smaller groups based on their durations, with each group codified and analyzed on MAXQDA directly. Therefore, the researcher was able to retrieve the common codes that frequently appear within each interview and combine these codes into overarching themes. However, transcriptions of the interviews were still compiled for the researcher to verify the resulting themes generated.



Figure 4: The Oral History Research Being Conducted

### 3.2 Limitations

The researcher chose to base the study's theoretical framework on oral history, and this implies that there exists bias due to inaccuracies of human memories. Since the investigated historical period has a 30-year distance from the contemporary period, it is not guaranteed that the participants' responses through the unstructured interviews were historically precise. In other words, their memories might be distorted over the years, and some specific point in time may not always be true. Thus, the researcher had to critically evaluate each transcription of the interviews with reference to historical documents such as newspapers, in order to determine their reliabilities.

Another limitation of this study is its scope of inquiry. The chosen case study is relatively small in scale, so the recurring themes identified may reflect patterns of change specific to this community (Yushan Town) and may not be applicable to other communities or suitable for broader generalization. As a rural community at Kunshan that had around 500 residents in the 1990s, the chosen community at Yushan town differs in social structure and industrial development degree from the surrounding communities. Hence, the results and findings generated may not be applicable to all communities in China. However,

it is expected that the results generated would be applicable to rural communities with cultural or demographic background similar to Yushan town.

Limitations induced by bias due to snowball sampling from the researcher also exist. The researcher is personally associated with the community in Yushan. In fact, the researcher had been a resident of this community for more than 5 years, and the initial participants were recruited through his personal connections, which might induce bias due to subjectivity. In addition, the implementation of snowball sampling limits the variations in jobs and social status of the participants: in this study, the participants were in general possessing a lower social status, and would be classified in the low-income class. Because of that, the study may not adequately address the gender disparities among the high-income households.

## 4 Results & Discussion

Through thematic text analysis conducted with MAXQDA, the researcher was able to identify 4 recurring themes from the total of 8 unstructured interviews recorded. The recurring themes were: Employment disparities in the privately-owned enterprises, Decline of merit-based and effort-based employment, Growth of "women belongs to households" trend, and Rural-to-Urban Migration of female workers.

### 4.1 Recurring Theme 1: Employment Disparities in the Privately-Owned Enterprises

Through thematic text analysis, several mainstay industries of Yushan Town could be identified. Yushan Town's economy was mainly based on the construction and manufacturing industries in the 1990s, with a particular focus on light industrial production and manufacturing. In more than half of the interviews, gender disparities in the employment sectors of privately owned enterprises in Yushan were discussed by the interviewees. Different from the situation of the Danwei, which are the state-operated institutions or firms, the employment and wage standards displayed significant disparities among genders. In other words, it is found that males are the favored labor sources, while females occupy a relatively small portion of the employment in the major industries of Yushan town. As Interviewee 3 stated in her response, about 70 % of the employees at the local circuit board factory— a firm that mainly focused on circuit board assembling which she had worked with throughout the 1990s— are males, and the rest were females. According to her, it was "novel" for females at that time to participate in the production of circuit boards, as anything relevant to electronics and engineering was seen as more favorable to male workers. In addition to that, she also pointed out the following aspects of the factory lives of female workers "We seldom go out of (the workplaces)... but it is common for the men to take a short break for smoke."

Interviewee 3's points correspond to those of Interviewee 5's. As a female employee who has participated in the construction industry of Yushan since 1995, Interviewee 5 mentioned a significant disparity in the employment of construction companies. As she recalled, due to the features of the common types of work in the fields, the operational parts of construction companies had predomi-

nantly male employees, as most companies possessed a standard that males were physically stronger, thus they should be hired to improve productivity. With that, she suggested that female migrant workers from rural areas like her were usually employed only in logistics and receive three-fourths of a male worker's salaries, which is "about 50 Yuan per day."

Therefore, certain gender disparities in the private firms of 1990s Yushan Town could be identified. Among the mainstay industries of Yushan that were developing rapidly in the 1990s, female migrant workers with lower educational levels had a lower proportion of employment and were more restrained in workplaces. In addition, their roles in the construction industry were rather minor and auxiliary, which limited their incomes.

#### **4.2 Recurring Theme 2: Decline of merit-based and effort-based employment**

Throughout the 1990s, the state-operated firms and collectively-owned enterprises experienced continuous decline. In 1995, the Central Bureau of China enacted the 9th 5-year plan, which emphasized accelerating economic development through expanding private firms. As a result, the state-operated Danwei shrinks in scale and production, and this leads to a decline in the merit-based and effort-based employment and payment system. Specifically, since the Danwei were officially regulated and were obliged to implement an effort-based and non-discriminatory salary system, the salaries disparity among males and females in Danwei was minimized. However, the decline of Danwei directly caused regressions on this equality, which further led to gender income inequalities.

In the interview with interviewee 2, it could be seen that the progress of economic reform had transformed the Danwei in Yushan significantly. In her descriptions, she left the state-owned hotel in Yushan in 1996, a year after the 9th 5-year plan was announced and implemented in Southern Jiangsu. Interviewee 2 consistently compared work life in the hotel and her following experiences of working as a saleswoman, which she viewed as having to work more diligently while receiving fewer payments and social recognition. Moreover, she stated that "as long as I know... males working in the sales are really advantageous...we have same salaries, but fewer commissions overall." This indicated that the effort-based system established by the Danwei had collapsed under the developing market economy.

Interviewee 4's experience provides a more nuanced understanding of what Interviewee 2 revealed. According to interviewee 4, her occupation in the construction sites as a warehouse keeper was "granted," and she could not have gotten that position without her husband. Specifically, she suggested that it is not because of her capacity at the job but because of her husband's role as a field manager that urged the management of the company to give her the job. This shows that the employment in the mainstay industry of Yushan, which is the construction industry is not merit-based, but based on patriarchic nepotism: women's skills and abilities were overlooked and merely considered while appointing staff.

Interviewee 1's description displayed opposite patterns than the mentioned responses because of her consistent experience of working as a "barefoot doctor", a kind of doctor based in the suburban areas that requires less educational certificate, but more on the results of their medications. Thus, she "always

received the same pay for the same work," and her income level continuously increased accompanying the inflation in the late 1990s.

### **4.3 Recurring Theme 3: Growth of "Women Belongs to Households" Trend**

In almost all interviews, the influence of the revitalization of Confucianism and traditional Chinese social norms could be seen. Among 5 of the 8 participants, a tendency to sacrifice personal career pursuits for family purposes was displayed. Despite various reasons, it could be inferred that the majority of working females who migrated from the rural areas were significantly influenced by the traditional Confucian norms of "woman house-keeper, man bread-maker." From the interviews, it is likely that this revitalization of traditional norms is elicited and promoted in two ways: one is that the market had been a driving force at narrowing the market share of female labor force, reducing their salaries and job opportunities; the other is the presupposed mindset of these female workers cultivated by Confucianism educations.

As discussed in previous themes, female workers with lower educational levels that migrated from the rural area of Yushan had reduced job opportunities and salaries as economic developments progressed in the 1990s. With the mainstay industries being the construction and manufacturing industries, the market gradually inclined to employment of males, who were perceived as physically superior and possessing more potential productivity. As a result, female workers who faced reduced job opportunities encountered a dilemma. That is, if they continued actively participating in the labor market and workplaces, it is likely that their households overall receive less income with no one taking care of the household businesses (in this case, it is found that all husbands of the participants participated in works throughout the 1990s); on the other hand, if they exit the labor market and quit their jobs, they had abandoned their economic independence and relied on their husbands, i.e., to become housewives. The 5 participants all expressed similar beliefs on this crucial decision: that they are willing to sacrifice themselves for the family, and this is more important than their economic independence.

Many could be seen from this belief, as it is urged by various factors. Firstly, it is worth noting that Confucianism and traditional Chinese norms, which are part of "the four olds" (old culture, old ideas, old customs, old habits) were not thoroughly eliminated in the Cultural Revolution. From the 5 participants' beliefs, a strong influence of these Confucian norms that revived in the 1990s could be spotted, as there were explicit indications in Confucian writings that women should sacrifice their own freedom for the purpose of family unity and happiness. Moreover, there are beliefs under Confucianism that women should take responsibility of the households, and men should be responsible for generating income or anything external to a family range. This again urged female migrant workers to "drop out" from working, as they faced significant pressure from social opinions. As interviewee 4 suggested, females would be "talked behind" if they left the family affairs for their jobs. From this, it could be inferred that family responsibilities were imbalanced among genders and was seen as "female responsibilities" in that period, and the comeback of Confucianism contributed significantly to that.

#### **4.4 Recurring Theme 4: Rural-to-Urban Migration of Female Workers**

Among the 8 participants, 7 of them migrated from the community in Yushan to Kunshan's development zone, which is a rapidly-urbanizing area. Their migration was driven by a search for a potentially higher income, a better life quality and, most importantly, more job opportunities. However, through the interviews it could be seen that the female migrant workers might have been too idealistic on the situation since they turned out to be clustered in low-skill and low-wage sectors of employment. As a result, they were often exposed in a situation that makes them vulnerable to the exploitations of a capitalistic system. According to interviewee 6, who left Yushan town at 1991 and went for employment in the plastic factory, she and her companions migrated from Yushan, dreaming of prosperity in the development zone. However, the fact that most migrant workers lacks educational backgrounds and the gender disparities in workplaces reduced their job opportunities, limiting them in low-wage employments, often temporary works.

### **5 Conclusion**

By using oral history as a research methodology, the researcher was able to acquire primary information and perspectives on how the 1990s economic reforms affected the lives of female migrant workers in Southern Jiangsu area, or even potentially intensifying the existing gender disparities. After conducting 8 one-on-one unstructured interviews, the researcher then transcribed and analyzed the texts with MAXQDA. With that, 4 recurring themes were identified, each revealing a potential aspect for which the economic reforms influenced the existing gender status. Firstly, a favoritism of male workers and under-representation of female workers could be discovered in the private sector of employment, especially the mainstay industries such as construction and manufacturing. Moreover, the collapse of Danwei induced a decline of merit-based employment, undervaluing female productivity despite workers from both genders having lower educational levels. Thirdly, the investigated women in the 1990s were significantly influenced by Confucianism ideals, seeing their dropout on career as a needed sacrifice for family unity and stability. Lastly, the rural-to-urban migration of workers further exacerbated the imbalanced gender status, limiting women in the low-wage sectors of employment, thus making them frail to the exploitations of labor market.

#### **5.1 Future Implications**

Despite producing insightful results that addresses the current research gap effectively, this study has its limitations, and these limitations could potentially be resolved with improvements on future studies. As discussed above, this study has a unique case of inquiry with a social structure that distinguishes it from most adjacent communities. Therefore, the results may only be applicable when investigating Chinese communities with similar social structures. As a result, future studies could incorporate investigation on multiple communities with a comparative approach, therefore determine the impact of the 1990s economic

reforms on gender status under different social and geographical backgrounds.

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## 6 Appendix

### 6.1 Guiding Interview Questions:

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your working experience?
2. How do you think your life has changed since the Reform and Opening-up?
3. How has women's participation in work or the economy changed during your lifetime?
4. In your opinion, how has economic development in southern Jiangsu affected women's independence or status?
5. How did men and women share responsibilities in families in the 1990s?
6. What do you think has changed most for working women in your area in the 1990s?