

# Gender Inequality and Economic Growth in China:

A Feminist Political Economy Perspective on Wage Inequality,  
Occupational Segregation and the Role of the State.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to establish how the revival of traditional gender norms has contributed to high levels of occupational gender-segregation and rising gender-wage inequality in China. Contrary to neoclassical economic modernisation theories, China's exceptional growth, since the

early 1980s, has been accompanied by a rise in gender-wage inequality. Proponents of these theories typically argue that increased economic growth and market competition play a positive role in reducing discrimination and gender-based inequalities. Instead this thesis shall outline how occupational segregation, identified by the literature as the primary cause of gender-wage inequality, has been a prominent feature of China's economic transition and integration into the global economy.

This thesis begins by outlining how a feminist political economy perspective can add to our understanding of China's economic growth, through highlighting the limitations of gender-blind analyses of economic development. By incorporating gender within our analyses we are better able to assess men and women's uneven integration into the global economy, and the structure of the Chinese labour market. This chapter shall set out the case for why a study of growth and wage inequality should focus attention on the states shifting conceptions of gender and promotion of traditional gender roles.

The literature contains a rich source of economic analyses detailing the relationship between an increasingly gender-segregated labour force and gender-wage inequality. In particular, charting the distribution of men and women across different sectors and occupations has allowed scholars to assess the differential impact of increased foreign direct investment (FDI), trade liberalization, and industrial upgrading on men and women's wages. However, aside from highlighting cohort specificity within different sectors and occupations, these macro-economic analyses fail to explain how and why gender segregation occurs. Whyte and Parish's observation that the degree of occupational segregation, up until the 1990s, was relatively low suggests a relationship between segregation and China's process of economic reform and opening. However, I shall argue that in order to explain the prevalence of gender segregation it is necessary to go beyond a purely economic analysis to examining the transformation of gender norms within society. It is the construction of 'naturally' determined gender roles which underpins the gender-typing of different sectors. While, with regards to hierarchical segregation, the re-emergence of an inside/outside division of gender roles, and traditional conceptions of motherhood, have hindered women's career development.

My arguments are premised upon the view that gender segregation is neither the benign outcome of individual preferences nor the result of 'natural' biological difference. I take the view that the majority of gender differences are socially constructed, and subject to variation across time and space. Chapter three constitutes my defence of this position, addressing arguments on each side of the debate. A key question for feminist economists then is how and why a shift towards gender essentialism has occurred? I shall argue that the state has been central to this process, promoting an essentialist view of women's natures and re-orienting women's roles towards the domestic sphere. This of course raises the question of why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would be complicit in the undermining of women's position within the economy. To do this I shall demonstrate how gender inequality has been a resource for economic growth.

I shall then conduct a detailed analysis of how an essentialist gender narrative is advanced by the Chinese state. With particular consideration to the "Leftover" women campaign and notions of motherhood, I shall demonstrate how the official state discourse, in combination with disadvantageous social policies and labour regulations, have supported discriminatory hiring practices and the channelling of women into lower-wage occupations.

What my thesis intends to make clear, is that the promotion of gender inequality has served the interests of the Chinese state, contributing to its key goals of promoting economic growth and social stability. My findings do not contradict feminist arguments that increased equality can be beneficial

to growth and innovation, but instead highlight that under certain economic structures and models of development, gender inequality has actually been a resource for market growth. In such cases feminist arguments need to instead begin from the position that gender equality holds intrinsic value and should be prioritised is a matter of social justice.

## Chapter One: Theoretical perspectives

Feminist scholars, critical of gender-blind accounts of globalization, have sought to highlight how gender is embedded within the logic of global capitalism. This is in order to better assess the reasons behind the uneven integration and valuation of men and women's labour within different parts of the global economy.<sup>1</sup> These scholars criticize the erasure of gender when characterizing economic processes at the macro-level, leaving gender to describe only intimate social relations within the domestic sphere. The erasure of gender at the macro-level is typically predicated on the assumption, that human activity is solely, or predominantly, driven by narrowly defined economic interests. As such, these theories fail to consider how gendered power relations, the construction of different gender roles and distribution of domestic responsibilities, underpin the gendered structure of the labour market – specifically employment ratios, opportunities for career progression and occupational segregation. Therefore it is the intention of this thesis is to bring conceptions of gender into a macro-level analysis of China's economic development. Within the feminist literature, there is a rich body of research concerning the ways in which constructions of gender and sexuality are integral to the organisation of labour and it is important to consider how this impacts economic growth.

The bulk of scholarship produced within the field of gender and development, focuses on how men and women are impacted differently by economic restructuring and globalization. However, some feminist economists, such as Seguino and Acker have focused on the way in which economic development has in of itself been a gendered process – as men and women are employed into different types of work and gender differences become a resource for globalizing capital. This I shall argue has been evident in China's export-manufacturing sector, as well as the growing beauty and service economies where characteristics such as gender and physical appearance have been commodified and capitalized upon.

It was the seminal work of Joan Acker which provided one of the major advances in feminist international political economy, highlighting the ways in which gender processes and ideologies are embedded in globalizing capitalism. According to Acker, certain gender stereotypes persist because they resonate with the new restructuring of globally integrated labour markets, in which transnational firms seek to move production to where they can source the lowest-wages.<sup>2</sup> In an ethnographic study on the making of gendered workers in Mexico's global factories, Leslie Salzinger finds that gendered structures of meaning impact the structure of the labour market, through "shaping demand and preferences for specific categories of workers, which are based on deeply

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1 Gottfried, H. (2013) *Gender, Work, and Economy: Unpacking the Global Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press p187, 194

2 Gottfried, H. (2013) *Gender, Work, and Economy: Unpacking the Global Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press p198

embedded expectations about gender-appropriate work.”<sup>3</sup> In focusing on the social construction of gendered workers, Salzinger demonstrates how and why micro-level gender analyses become important for the study of global economic processes. Across the developing world women are segregated into poorly paid export-manufacturing jobs through the reproduction of the trope of “productive femininity”.<sup>4</sup> The trope of productive femininity references a feminised assembly-line worker and applies to usually young working-class women who are viewed as “docile, cheap to employ and able to endure boring, repetitive work, whether or not women see themselves in these ways.”<sup>5</sup> This thesis shall discuss how gender stereotypes have underpinned the channelling of men and women into different occupations, and the important role a feminized export-manufacturing sector has played in China’s economic development.

In focusing on the role of the state, it is not the intention of this thesis to imply that the social construction of gender norms is simply a one-way top-down process. This is far from being the case. However, a focus on the role of state is warranted. Along with the prominent role played by the state in economic restructuring, the understandings of gender which are incorporated by the state into public policy and labour laws help set the structural constraints within which employers’ operate and female workers’ economic and employment choices are made. With any analysis of gendered economic outcomes, it is important to leave room for individual agency. However, the purpose of this paper is to shed light on the social and economic context and structures within which individuals choices are both shaped and made.

## Chapter Two: Wage Inequality

### i. *The Growing Gender Gap*

The unusually clear point of change in China’s economic trajectory, is highlighted by Hannum as an unusual opportunity to investigate the socio-economic impact of reform and opening up on changing trends in gender equality.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1980s, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the CCP began the promotion of economic outcomes determined by the market and policies favouring foreign direct investment (FDI) and export-oriented manufacturing. This process begun initially with the establishment of four Special Economic Zones (SEZs), followed by the further opening of fourteen coastal cities in 1984 to overseas investment.<sup>7</sup> Following these initial reforms, the year 1992 is viewed by Berik et al. as another watershed moment, when the pace of reform accelerated during the process of China’s entry to the World Trade Organization. While in the 1980s the Chinese leadership had sought “a reform with no losers” within a socialist system, following Deng’s 1992

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3 Ibid. p199

4 Ibid. p199

5 Acker, J. (2004) ‘Gender, Capitalism and Globalization’, in *Critical Sociology* 30:1 p34

6 Hannum, E. (2005) ‘Market Transition, Educational Disparities and Family Strategies in Rural China: New Evidence on Gender Stratification and Development’, in *Demography* 42:2 p279

7 Shu, X., Zhu, Y. and Zhang, Z. (2007) ‘Global Economy and Gender Inequalities: The Case of the Urban Chinese Labor Market’, in *Social Science Quarterly* 88:5 p1308

southern tour, the CCP endorsed the “full-fledged march towards capitalism”<sup>8</sup> and accelerated steps towards integration with the global economy. As well as huge scale economic restructuring – involving measures such as decollectivisation, marketization, fiscal decentralization and the relaxation of mobility restrictions – transition also, crucially, entailed the ideological reprioritization of economic growth over other social and political goals.<sup>9</sup>

Since reforms began, China has been one of the world’s fastest growing economies. GDP per capita has risen from US\$182.50 in 1979, to US\$7,590 in 2014<sup>10</sup> and net inflows of FDI into China increased from US\$11.156 billion in 1992, to US\$289.097 billion in 2014. However, the benefits of China’s phenomenal growth were not spread evenly; by the mid-1980s, scholars had already begun writing about how the growth of economic inequality, and by the late 1990s it had become evident that, despite raising living standards for both men and women, economic reforms had caused gender-wage gap to grow substantially.<sup>11</sup>

Compared to other transitional economies the gender-wage gap in China is still relatively small. However it is no exaggeration when Leta Hong Fincher proclaims that women in China “are losing ground fast.”<sup>12</sup> Gustafsson and Li’s show that the gender earnings gap in urban China grew slightly from 15.6% in 1988 to 17.5% in 1995, with a similar pattern documented by Knight and Song. But following the accelerated pace of reform in the mid-1990’s a much greater increase in gender-wage inequality is observed; according to Zhang et al. from 1988 to 2004 the gender-wage gap increased from 14.7% to 22.6%.<sup>13</sup> Data from China’s own National Statistics Bureau also shows the gender-wage gap to have grown dramatically over two decades. National surveys show that in 1990, the average salary of urban women was 77.5% of their male counterparts. However, by 2010 urban women’s average wages had dropped to just 67.3% of men’s. In rural areas the situation is worse, as in 2010, rural women were earning on average only 56% of men’s annual income.<sup>14</sup>

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8 Berik, G. Dong, X. and Summerfield, G. (2007) ‘China’s Transition and Feminist Economics’, in *Feminist Economics* 13:3-4 p 3

9 Berik et al. *China’s Transition and Feminist Economics*, p8

10 The World Bank. *Overview per country, GDP per capita*. Available online: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?end=2014&locations=CN&start=1960&view=chart> [Accessed 14/07/2016] The World Bank. *Overview per country, Foreign direct investment*. Accessed online: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?locations=CN> [Accessed: 14/07/2016]

11 Zurndorfer, H. (2015) ‘Men, Women, Money, and Morality: The Development of China’s Sexual Economy’, in *Feminist Economics* 22:2 p14

12 Fincher, L. H. (2014) *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*. London: Zed Books Ltd p35

13 Liu, H. (2011) ‘Economic Reforms and Gender Inequality in Urban China’, in *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 59:4 p840

14 Yao, Y. (2015) *China Daily USA. Pay gap still wide between men and women*. Available online: [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2015-03/13/content\\_19803414.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2015-03/13/content_19803414.htm) [Accessed: 10/07/2016]

Although, Chinese women have benefitted from an overall increase in wealth and living standards, the rise of gender-wage inequality is still a matter of great concern. More money, in absolute terms, does not in of itself automatically translate into greater empowerment or economic security for women – particularly given women’s growing participation in sectors of the Chinese economy such as export-oriented manufacturing, where work is often exploitative, underpaid and precarious. Instead it is necessary to pay attention to changes in relative income as both a determining factor and indicative of women’s relative social standing, bargaining power and autonomy. As an indicator of gender-equality MacPhail and Dong look beyond income-based measures, to focus on the gendered division of domestic tasks, time spent on domestic labour and household decision-making power. Their multivariate regression analysis indicates that it is the level of women’s wages, rather than their hours of employment, which is the key factor in determining women’s household status. “Namely, women who earn higher wages are able to reduce their domestic labour hours and responsibilities.”<sup>15</sup> Their study supports the feminist argument that improving relative wages, rather than expanding women’s employment, should be the policy priority for improving women’s well-being, and thus this is why the gender-wage gap is the focus of this thesis.<sup>16</sup>

The impact of economic reform has of course not impacted all women equally. Variations in the levels of observed income inequality may occur, as researchers collect data from different locations, demographics and within different sectors. Given the sizable regional variations in economic development and pace of reform, this issue is particularly prevalent when studying gender inequality in China. Moreover, as household inequality has increased there has been an equivalent growing disparity between women of different socio-economic backgrounds. The work of Appleton et al. demonstrates this by tracking the evolution of gender-wage inequality across the entire distribution of wages. In doing so, it becomes clear that changes are seldom uniform for all quantiles and often vary across survey intervals.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, between 1997 and 2004, Liu observes a widening gender-wage gap at the bottom of the earnings distribution, but a narrowing gap at the top.<sup>18</sup> One of the clearest indicators of social stratification is the growing number of domestic workers employed within private households – in a nation where, prior to transition, the employment of servants had been considered taboo.<sup>19</sup> China’s gender-wage gap is therefore increasing at the same time as the country holds one of the top positions globally for the percentage of women in senior business management roles.<sup>20</sup>

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15 Berik et al. *China’s Transition and Feminist Economics*, p11

16 Ibid. p1

17 Appleton et al. (2012) ‘Understanding urban wage inequality in China 1988-2008: Evidence from quantile analysis’, *Discussion Paper Series, Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit*, No. 7101 p14

18 Liu, H. *Economic Reforms and Gender Inequality*, p841

19 Gottfried, *Gender, Work, and Economy*, p249

20 Yiu, E. (2013) South China Morning Post. *Mainland Chinese women top the world in holding senior business roles*. Available online: <http://www.scmp.com/news/article/1185834/mainland-chinese-women-top-world-holding-senior-business-roles-survey-shows> [Accessed: 12/07/2016]

## ii. Explaining Growing Gender-Wage Inequality

In contrast to the Socialist era, in which equality was ostensibly a dominant principle of the economy, economic reforms have led to the emergence of new social classes and economic stratification across Chinese society.<sup>21</sup> As outlined above, one impact of this has been a growing increase in gender-wage inequality, which in turn presents a challenge to neoclassical economic theories which have argued that increased market competition and modernization would reduce discrimination and rewards to non-productive characteristics, such as gender. The following section shall review competing arguments within the literature to identify the predominant driving forces behind China's growing gender-wage gap.

State owned enterprises (SOEs) and rural communes, under central planning, underpinned China's high female labour force participation and low gender-wage gap. Prior to China's economic transition, most working age women were in full-time employment and earned on average more than 80% of the pay men received.<sup>22</sup> It has been argued that the reform and dismantling of SOEs had had critical implications for gender-wage inequality. As previously stated, before the mid-1990s the gender-wage gap had been relatively stable, only increasing by a small amount. However, the enactment of the nationwide Labour Law in 1995 notably decentralized decision-making, giving employers greater discretion in wage-setting. In enabling employers' greater flexibility to reward productivity, decentralisation was intended to increase efficiency and market competition. However, a number of scholars have argued that it also increased the scope for discrimination against female workers.<sup>23</sup>

According to the Chinese government's own surveys conducted in 2010, 10% of women, as opposed to 4.5% of men, declared that they had been victims of discrimination in the workplace. Out of these women, 70% reported discrimination based on their gender; including unfair dismissal (mainly following marriage or pregnancy), a relatively low salary compared to male colleagues performing the same work, the absence of a promotion due to their gender or general "disdain regularly displayed towards them in the workplace."<sup>24</sup> Another survey, by the Women's Research Institute, found that over 86% of female college students have been unfairly treated due to their gender, while the Shanghai-based China Financial Information Centre, found that 50% of women surveyed reported suffering gender discrimination in the workplace regularly, with only 3% of women claiming to have never suffered from it.<sup>25</sup> If the tendency for employers to discriminate against women in wage-setting has increased during China's economic reform and opening up, this would directly undermine the neoclassical economic argument that market competition is a force inclined to minimize

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21 Wichterich, C. (2009) *Trade – A Driving Force for Jobs and Women's Empowerment? Focus on China and India*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Department for Development Policy p5

22 Berik et al. *China's Transition and Feminist Economics*, p11

23 Chen, Z. et al. (2013) 'Globalization and Gender Wage Inequality in China', in *World Development* 44 p258, Berik et al. *China's Transition and Feminist Economics*, p13, Ng, Y. C. (2006) *Gender earnings differentials and regional economic development in urban China, 1988-97*, Research Paper, UNU-WIDER, United Nations University (UNU) p1 Shu, X. and Bian, Y. (2002) 'Intercity Variation in Gender Inequalities in China: Analysis of a 1995 National Survey', in *The Future of Market Transition* 19 p268

24 Attané, I. (2012) 'Being a Woman in China Today: A Demography of Gender', in *China Perspectives* 4 p9

discrimination and the rewarding of non-productive characteristics. Becker has argued that as gender discrimination has significant efficiency costs, increased market competition should punish discriminatory wage-setting, in turn narrowing the gender-wage gap.<sup>26</sup>

Dong and Zhang argue that because wage regressions have not typically encompassed a complete list of proxies for worker productivity determinants, it is contentious whether the wage gap can be attributed to employers' discriminatory attitudes towards women. The typical finding within the literature that differences in observed productive characteristics can only explain a fraction of the gender-wage gap, has led to a general acceptance that women face wage discrimination, stemming from increased market competition.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, Dong and Zhang suggest that what is largely overlooked is the possibility that, under central planning, the government's commitment to women's emancipation may have in fact created wage subsidies for women whereby they were over compensated relative to men, in relation to their differences in productivity.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, a rise in market competition would actually widen the gender-wage gap during transition to greater reflect differences in productivity. This is in line with Becker's theory that rising competition punishes discriminatory wage setting, dissuading employers from rewarding irrelevant characteristics such as gender.<sup>29</sup> It is also in line with Women in Development theories which argue that, during the early stages of transition, women typically lose out due to their lower education and the increased burden of social reproductive care placed upon them by the retrenchment of welfare provisions.<sup>30</sup>

Dong and Zhang's estimates indicate that, within Chinese manufacturing enterprises, employers' discriminatory wage-setting is not a significant source of the gender-wage gap, with both SOEs and private firms paying workers largely according to their marginal productivity. They argue however, that these empirical findings do not rule out other forms of gender discrimination, which may indeed serve to lower women's wages relative to men's. Instead these findings illustrate the importance of understanding how economic transition may affect the gender difference in productivity, which is identified as "the ultimate source of the gender wage gap".<sup>31</sup> It is also necessary to include the caveat these results are limited only the manufacturing sector. It is possible that discriminatory wage setting occurs to a greater degree across different sectors and industries, or within different regions.

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25 All-China Women's Federation. (2016) *Chinese Women Still Suffer Gender Discrimination*. Available online: <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/survey/1603/2239-1.htm> [Accessed 14/07/2016]

26 Ng, *Gender earnings differentials*, p1

27 Dong, X. and Zhang, L. (2009) 'Economic transition and gender differentials in wages and productivity: Evidence from Chinese manufacturing enterprises', in *Journal of Development Economics* 88 p144

28 Ibid. p146

29 Ibid. p146

30 Hannum, *Market Transition, Educational Disparities*, p275

31 Dong and Zhang, *Gender differentials in wages and productivity*, p154,155

The segregation of women into relatively low-skill, low-productivity occupations therefore is the main source of gender-wage inequality within China; a country whose labour market is highly segregated.<sup>32</sup> This is the case for both horizontal and vertical forms of gendered segregation. Horizontal segregation concentrates men and women into male- and female-typed occupations, usually along a “manual-non-manual divide”. Vertical segregation on the other hand is a form of “hierarchical inequality, specifically men’s domination of the highest status occupations within the manual and non-manual sectors of the economy.”<sup>33</sup> While Dong and Zhang find no statistically significant evidence that that women were underpaid relative to their productivity in Chinese manufacturing enterprises, they do find that workers in female-dominated firms receive lower wages and are less productive. This they claim could be a manifestation of other forms of gender discrimination in hiring and promotion causing women to be channelled into certain firms, industries or occupations. Furthermore, “the male-female difference in productivity is also attributable to gender inequality in domestic responsibilities and pre-market human capital investment.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore they argue that it is important for future research to understand the forms of discrimination which are “consistent with the equality of the gender gaps and productivity” as these cannot be easily eliminated by market competition.<sup>35</sup>

A study on education and occupational attainment by Bauer et al. reveals that discrimination in recruitment and promotion is a causal factor in gendered differences in occupational attainment. Their study finds that being a women has significant effects on occupational attainment even after controlling for age and education.<sup>36</sup> As the next section shall explore, it has been well established within the literature that discrimination against women in hiring and promotion has served to create a highly segregated labour force, where women are channelled into particular industries or occupations, with negative consequences for gender-wage equality.

### *iii. Gendered Segregation and the Impact of Trade and Investment*

Trade liberalization is widely seen by proponents of neoliberal economists, such as Jagdish Bagwati, as a driving force behind increased gender equality as well as economic growth and poverty reduction. The market is regarded as the best mechanism for the distribution of wealth and the narrowing of gender gaps, due to the assumption that as trade produces growth this will create opportunities for women in education, access to better jobs, higher incomes and more opportunities for female entrepreneurs. However, these assumptions have proved highly controversial, especially amongst feminist economists who highlight growing inequality as an adverse consequence of an

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32 Bauer, J. et al. (1992) ‘Gender Inequality in Urban China: Education and Employment’, in *Modern China* 18:3 p358

33 Gottfried, *Gender, Work, and Economy*, p43

34 Dong and Zhang, *Gender differentials in wages and productivity*, p155

35 Ibid. p155

36 Bauer, J. et al. (1992) ‘Gender Inequality in Urban China: Education and Employment’, in *Modern China* 18:3 p360

economy which, obsessed with growth, subordinates social concerns to competitiveness. Feminists stress that the price of competitive advantage often comes in the form of discrimination against women and gender-wage inequality.<sup>37</sup>

Gender and development scholars argue that as economic globalization entails the shift of labour-intensive jobs to developing countries in search of cheap labour, women in these periphery economies often end up occupying the worst jobs of the global capitalist system.<sup>38</sup> Participation in international production is associated with increased gender segregation in the labour force, as women make up a large proportion of the unskilled labour required in export-oriented manufacturing and service sectors. This perspective holds that in China's segregated labour market, the expansion of the export manufacturing sector has widened the gender-wage gap, as trade liberalization has engendered increased competition to attract and maintain FDI, which in turn creates a downward pressure on wages and a tendency towards increased labour exploitation, as expressed in a 'race-to-the-bottom'.<sup>39</sup> FDI is associated with the same systemic gendered segregation of labour that we see in most export-oriented firms, regardless of ownership. However, as export-oriented FDI is more globally mobile than domestic investment, workers in foreign invested firms have less bargaining power to raise wages. Therefore when capital is more mobile in industries primarily employing women, Braunstein and Brenner claim that the bargaining effect will put a downward pressure on women's wages as a proportion of men's.<sup>40</sup>

Another link can be drawn between FDI and gender-wage inequality, in relation to industrial upgrading within a gender segregated job market. Braunstein and Brenner argue that when upgrading differs by industry, the impact on average wages will differ according to gender. Berik's study of Taiwan illustrates that increased capital intensity positively affects both men and women's wages, but widened the gender-wage gap in favour of male workers. Likewise, Fussell, in a study of the Mexican maquiladora industry, argued technological upgrading prompted employers to seek more male labourers as women were perceived as largely unqualified for such work. Therefore as a rise in the capital intensity of foreign-invested firms creates greater demand for skilled workers, it men can be expected to accrue greater benefits. The results of Braunstein and Brenner's study shows that the relationship between FDI and gender-wage inequality shifted between 1995 and 2002. While working in provinces with a higher proportion of FDI as a share of investment increased women's wages to a greater extent in 1995, in 2002 men gained the relative advantage. These results are seen to reflect the shift of foreign-invested enterprises to higher productivity and more domestically oriented production. On the whole, this shift has favoured men, increasing the gender-wage gap, as women are less likely to be employed in capital intensive, high-skill production.<sup>41</sup>

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37 Wichterich, *A Driving for Jobs and Women's Empowerment?* p1

38 Shu et al., *Global Economy and Gender Inequalities*, p1310,1311

39 Ibid. p1311

40 Braunstein, E. and Brenner, M. (2007) 'Foreign Direct Investment and Gendered Wages in Urban China', in *Feminist Economics* 13:3-4 p214

41 Ibid. p231

China is likely to continue to be a popular destination for FDI, with the shift towards higher productivity and domestically oriented production showing little sign of abating. Therefore, unless efforts are made to counter gender segregation in China's urban labour market, Braunstein and Brenner warn of the likelihood that technological upgrading and continuing trends in FDI and trade will bestow increasingly fewer wage benefits to women relative to men. To the extent that women are concentrated in less-skilled jobs, their results suggest that employment segregation is the key aspect in the relationship between trade liberalization, FDI, and the gender-wage ratio.<sup>42</sup>

## Chapter Three: Why Does Segregation Occur?

### *i. Essentialist vs. Constructionist views*

The arguments contained within this thesis are based on the premise that gender segregation is not the benign outcome of individual preferences and 'natural' biological differences between men and women. Grapard states that "certain fundamental beliefs and attitudes about men and women's *natures* are important determinants of the specific social institutions developed in different political and economic regimes."<sup>43</sup> As these attitudes are articulated differently within different regimes, they will of course have varying impact on men and women's relative positions, in terms of political and economic power.

*"The essentialist view argues that men and women have fundamentally different biological natures. Biology thus dictates different and distinct male and female abilities, interests, emotional reactions, and tastes and preferences in general. In accordance with this view, it is possible to classify academic subjects, attitudes toward children, sports, technology, and alternative ways of thinking as being either masculine or feminine, as if differences between men and women were dictated by genes and chromosome rather than being expressions of culturally determined, learned behaviours."*<sup>44</sup>

Essentialism, in its most conservative form, views women's 'nature' as determining their responsibility and special aptitude for child care, performing domestic chores, and their ability for providing most of the emotional and caring labour inside and outside the home. As Grapard highlights, and this paper shall explore in greater detail, one likely consequence of seeing women as *naturally* more interested in the home and family is that women who participate in the paid labour force are disadvantaged;<sup>45</sup> ending up segregated into the most repetitive and tedious low-skilled jobs or receiving lower pay because either the nature of their jobs encourages interruptions in their work experience, or they are paid less on the assumption that they will be less committed to their work than a male worker unburdened by domestic responsibilities.

In contrast, a social constructionist view argues that, although biological differences do of course exist, the vast majority of observed differences between genders is socially produced and the cause of the most important differences in political and economic outcomes cannot be attributed to

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p221

<sup>43</sup> Grapard, U. (1997) 'Theoretical Issues of Gender in the Transition from Socialist Regimes', in *Journal of Economic Issues* 31:3 p669

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p669

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

inherently natural differences. Apart from women's ability to give birth and breast-feed, "our social, economic and cultural roles do not follow directly from biological differences."<sup>46</sup> The fact that a given occupation may be held by men in one particular society and by women in another refutes the claim that the division of labour reflects a natural distinction based upon men and women's inherently different capabilities. Taking this argument further, there have been a number of observed occasions where gender-typed occupations have switched from being predominantly male to female and vice versa.<sup>47</sup> Reskin's use of queuing theory to explain gender segregation, explains how occupational feminization occurs when the rewards to a particular job changes; such as when previously male-dominated occupations undergo de-skilling, or earnings decline relative to all other jobs.<sup>48</sup> A prominent example of this has been the feminization of agriculture across developing economies, China included.

Furthermore, the gendered segregation of labour cannot be viewed as the outcome of inherent differences between men and women, if we are to consider gender itself as being socially constructed and thus subject to variation across time and space. Exactly how gender is defined is subject to variation, but most feminist analysisists of gender and globalization employ a definition similar to the following by Acker:

*"[Gender] is defined as inequalities, division, and differences socially constructed around assumed distinctions between female and male. Gender is a basic organising principle in social life, a principle for allocation of duties, rights, rewards, and power, including the means of violence. Gender is a factor in organizing daily life for individuals, families, communities and societies as large structures... gender is neither an essential attribute of individuals nor a constant in social life, but consists of material and symbolic aspects of existence, constantly produced and reproduced in the course of ongoing social activities and practices."*<sup>49</sup>

The real question for social constructionists is not about nature but about power. Grapard asks, "In whose interest is it to elaborate on the sexual difference and turn it into systematic female disadvantage whether we look at the domestic sphere or at the labor market?"<sup>50</sup> Likewise we must consider why is it that female-typed work is less respected and almost always pays less than male-typed occupations? Why is there a systemic devaluation of women's caring and reproductive labour despite it being the necessary foundation on which all other economic activity is built? The answer to these questions cannot be found in men and women's biological natures but in the mode of capitalism which has developed under a system of patriarchy.

## *ii. Supply vs. Demand*

Across the globe, women are persistently segregated into relatively lower-skilled, less productive and lower paying occupations, which fail to accurately reflect their relative capabilities and educational

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46 Ibid. p670

47 Ibid. p678

48 Shu et al., *Global Economy and Gender Inequalities*, p1315, 1316

49 Acker, *Gender, Capitalism and Globalization*, p20

50 Grapard, *Theoretical Issues of Gender in Transition*, p670,671

attainment. The causes of this generated intense debate between feminist scholars who differed in favour of supply- and demand-side explanations. Supply-side explanations place the emphasis on individual choice, resulting from cultural differences in occupational aspirations, whilst disregarding the social circumstances which constrain such choices, e.g. costs of child care and relative pay levels. This argument assumed that women, being more nurturing in nature, freely gave primacy to family over paid work and thus segregation appears as the benign outcome of aggregated individual decisions. However, Bose and Bridges-Whaley observe that undermining supply-side theorists main assumption is the fact that female dominated jobs are often no easier to combine with family responsibilities.<sup>51</sup> Migrant labour in China's export-manufacturing sector for example, is characterised by long working hours and illegal mandatory overtime within a "dormitory labour regime."<sup>52</sup> Demand-side theorists, such as England and Folbre on the other hand, argue that employers' discriminatory policies and practices contribute to gender segregation and emphasize female workers responses to structural features of the labour market.<sup>53</sup>

Cindy Fan's study on rural-urban migration in transitional China, explores how male and female migrants are channelled into gender-segregated jobs. She states that, though gender segregation in the labour market is also widely observable in western industrialized economies, in the Chinese case segregation must be understood in relation to the specific institutional and socio-cultural changes which occurred during transition.<sup>54</sup> According to her study, partly due to the government's system of household registration (Hukou), the urban labour market is only open to rural migrants "to the extent that targeted groups are channelled to low-paying jobs" which are "not desired by urbanites" and are gender-segregated.<sup>55</sup> Fan claims that Tam's study in 2000 of a factory in Shenzhen, where 99% of the assembly-line workers are women, illustrates that as marketization has been superimposed onto a formally planned economy, "social control remains prevalent and is, in fact, conducive to a capitalist and exploitative mode of accumulation."<sup>56</sup> Whereas the socialist model sought to mitigate social stratification, in the course of pursuing economic growth the state has instead advanced processes of segmentation and segregation.<sup>57</sup> Her study, emphasises the structural constraints which influence individuals' decision-making, supporting demand-side arguments discussed above. Fan states that the targeted sorting of migrants by gender into different occupations, is widely known amongst migrants and thus shapes their economic ambitions. Furthermore, the sorting process is further

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51 Gottfried, *Gender, Work, and Economy*, p58

52 Ngai, P. (2004) 'Women workers and precarious employment in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, China', in *Gender and Development* 12:2 p30, 34

53 Gottfried, *Gender, Work, and Economy*, p58, 59

54 Fan, C. (2003) 'Rural-Urban Migration and Gender Division of Labor in Transitional China', in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27:1 p35

55 Ibid. p27

56 Ibid. p27

57 Ibid. p27

reinforced by social networks, which are the migrant's primary source of information about the urban labour market.<sup>58</sup>

Though often rendered invisible within the dominant discourses on globalization and economic development, gender is identified by Acker as a resource for globalizing capital, as firms seek out new sources of low wage labour.<sup>59</sup> Examples of gender segregation above illustrate that women are channelled into labour intensive export-manufacturing as they are the "cheapest and most compliant labour."<sup>60</sup> But why is this the case? If occupational segregation was simply the result of an economic rationale for seeking the lowest labour costs, then based on the ability to pay them less, women would always replace men in the production of knowledge and things instead of being channelled into specific occupations.<sup>61</sup> Instead pervasive gender stereotypes shape considerations of men and women's suitability for different economic roles. Wichterich for example cites that preference in these labour intensive industries is given to women "because of such stereotypical characteristics as 'nimble' fingers, docility and the ability to concentrate for long periods."<sup>62</sup> Loscocco and Wang found that Chinese women were also highly concentrated in occupations that can be considered extensions of their assumed gender roles, and emphasized stereotyped female attributes. For example, in China, 99.1% of workers in paid domestic work are female.

As a result of discrimination, women are excluded from certain occupations, due to the stereotypical belief that they lack the strength, skills and intellectual capacities to handle certain types of work. This discrimination is compounded, and stereotypes reinforced, by the fact that while women still bare the majority of domestic responsibilities, they more likely to take time out of the labour force and "cannot devote as much time as men to their education, training, or to keeping up with innovations in industry." Moreover, Jennings Walstedt identifies some resistance from supervisory personnel to teaching female workers new skills, thus denying them the ability to move to more productive and higher paying work.<sup>63</sup> The rest of this thesis shall be focused on how and why gendered stereotypes have re-emerged to a greater degree in post-communist China. Gender segregation in local labour markets, is neither the simple consequence of abstract economic forces, nor is it only the result of employer preferences and gendered organizational cultures. The state is also directly implicated. In the following sections I shall demonstrate how the CCP has contributed to the reinforcing of traditional gender roles in Chinese society, through the use of state media, labour legislation, and the structuring of welfare provisions. I shall explore in greater detail and provide support for the claim by Gottfried that at both national and local levels, the Chinese state "invokes and evokes gender rhetoric to mobilize and train men and women for different kinds of work."<sup>64</sup> However, it is necessary to first consider why the state might be inclined to promote traditional

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58 Ibid. p35

59 Acker, *Gender, Capitalism and Globalization*, p20, p6

60 Burda, J. (2007) 'Chinese women after the accession to the world trade organization: A legal perspective on women's labor rights', in *Feminist Economics* 13:3-4 p263

61 Gottfried, *Gender, Work, and Economy*, p33

62 Wichterich, *A Driving for Jobs and Women's Empowerment* p4

63 Jennings Walstedt, J. (1978) 'Reform of Women's Roles and Family Structures in the Recent History of China', in *Journal of Marriage and Family* 40:2 p390

gender roles; especially since this represents a clear departure from the socialist ideology of gender equality and has negative consequences for women's empowerment.

## Chapter Four: Explaining the complicity of the state: Is gender inequality always bad for growth?

Seguino argues that an accurate understanding of the sources of Asian economic growth requires an analysis of the macro-level effects of gender inequality, claiming that "women's disadvantaged status, which works to lower their relative wages, has been a stimulus to investment, exports, and by extension economic growth."<sup>65</sup> This runs contrary to mainstream assessments by institutions such as the World Bank, which stated in 1993 that income equality had been central to the region's success.<sup>66</sup>

The evidence Seguino presents indicates that those Asian economies with the widest gender-wage gaps experienced higher rates of growth. "Women's low wages stimulated export sales, providing foreign exchange necessary for these economies to pursue their import substitution and modernization programs."<sup>67</sup> It is my argument that her analysis can be extended to China, where a theory of gender inequality as a source of economic growth is also applicable. China's export-manufacturing follows a similar pattern of gendered segregation and as such its industrialisation must also be viewed as a gendered process. Pun Ngai documents that in Shenzhen, where a high proportion of garment and electronic industries are located, "over 90 percent of the total labour force are female and under twenty years old."<sup>68</sup> Shenzhen's economic growth and its rising position in the global economy are particularly dependent, according to Ngai, on the extraction of labour from female rural migrants. Shenzhen's export-processing industries have depended upon female labour as it is "the cheapest and most compliant".<sup>69</sup>

Seguino argues that the Asian practice of segregating women into labour-intensive export-manufacturing industries served to artificially lower their wages relative to men's. This is in line with Bergmann's well established crowding thesis, the premise of which is that discrimination against women in hiring and promotion leads to an increased labour supply for traditionally female-typed jobs. The crowding of women into these industries and occupations both decreases the marginal product of their labour and lowers average wages for those jobs.<sup>70</sup> Seguino gives examples

64 Gottfried, *Gender, Work, and Economy*, p244

65 Seguino, S. (2000) 'Accounting for Gender in Asian Economic Growth', in *Feminist Economics* 6:3 p27-8

66 Ibid. p32

67 Ibid. p51

68 Burda, *Chinese women after accession to the world trade organisation*, p262

69 Ibid. p263

70 Gottfried, *Gender, Work, and Economy*, p61 and Dong, Zhang p155

of how state policies in Taiwan and South Korea have perpetuated gender norms and stereotypes which have disadvantaged women in the labour market, whilst ensuring the availability of a cheap labour force. In Taiwan the state promoted home-based work through its “Living Rooms as Factories program”, coupled with “Mother’s Workshops” designed to reinforce traditional values. In contrast, the Korean government reinforced gender norms by condoning “the marriage ban” – the common practice of requiring women to quit work upon marriage.<sup>71</sup> Though states role is country specific, it’s complicity in the perpetuation of gender norms is a phenomena also reflected in the Chinese case.

Seguino recognises that her findings appear to conflict with research by Rodrick, Larrain and Vergara, and others who claim that increased income equality has been an important promoter of economic growth. However, income distribution data used by such analyses are measured at the household level, so cannot account for intra-household variations in earnings or income distribution.<sup>72</sup> Seguino’s results suggest it matters for capitalist growth *who* bears the inequality. Supporting arguments that equality is important for economic growth is the fact that although low wages stimulate investment, high levels of inequality can produce the opposite effect due to the relationship between inequality and social instability. Investors typically prefer a stable political environment. Otherwise, if low-wages were the only determining factor, the poorest nations would always be the ones with the highest levels of investment. Seguino therefore questions why gender inequality does not lead to the negative consequences predicted by mainstream analyses of income inequality and growth. She hypothesises that a likely possibility is that women “who have internalized gender norms and stereotypes that circumscribe their economic status relative to men may be less likely to protest their conditions.”<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, she states that “labour peace in capital-intensive industries, where unrest might be costly, was bought at least in some countries with high wages for men and exclusion of women from these jobs.”<sup>74</sup> Thus the political conflict anticipated by other forms of income inequality doesn’t materialize.

When economic restructuring required the downsizing and privatisation of SOEs, the Chinese government was clearly more concerned with male unemployment as a potential cause of social instability – evidenced by the increased percentage of retrenched female workers and the “Women Return to the Home” campaign. Likewise some universities have responded to the growing number of women in certain professions by introducing entrance requirements and quotas in favour of men. Not all women in China have quietly accepted the states discriminatory policies, nor do they necessarily fit the mould of ‘docile’ employees. However, I agree with Seguino’s hypothesis that the internalization of gender norms and stereotypes mean women are less likely than men to protest their economic status. If we consider how the norms of masculinity and femininity are centred on the notion of the male breadwinner and female care-giver, then it is not hard to see how unemployment or a lower wage might have a more detrimental impact on a man’s sense of their own masculinity and self-worth. To reduce the social repercussions of female unemployment the state invoked a different gender role for women, based on traditional conceptions of femininity which placed women’s socially valued duties within the domestic sphere. With economic

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71 Seguino, *Accounting for Gender*, p34,35

72 Ibid. p46

73 Ibid. p51

74 Ibid. p51

restructuring, gone were the images of women patriotically out working in the fields and factories. Now the state was to define their worth first and foremost as mothers and wives.

As well as export-manufacturing, the service sector – in particular China’s booming beauty economy – is another area where gender inequality appears to have been a source of economic growth. As shall be discussed, the idea of market competition punishing rewards to supposedly unproductive characteristics such as gender and physical appearance appears over simplistic in a market where women’s bodies and sexuality are commodified and capitalized upon.

## Chapter Five: The Resurgence of Gender Essentialism

Acker asserts that, in Eastern Europe, transitions from socialism to market capitalism appear to have entailed changing notions of gender.<sup>75</sup> The same phenomena is apparent in China’s economic transition. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in three urban Chinese retail settings, Amy Hanser argues that a new gender narrative serves to legitimate new inequalities in urban China, as essentialist views of gender are central to the gender-typing of different occupations. As Grapard states, it is also the case that “certain fundamental beliefs and attitudes about men’s and women’s *natures* are important determinants of the specific social institutions developed in different political and economic regimes.”<sup>76</sup> As these attitudes are articulated differently within different regimes, they will of course have varying impact on men and women’s relative positions, in terms of political and economic power. Therefore, in order to understand increased gender-segregation within China, we must look at changing constructions of gender – with a particular focus on the narrative advanced by the state and in state media. This thesis shall focus primarily upon changing portrayals of femininity. But there is of course another side to this picture, which warrants greater examination in future research. In the context of China’s shift from a socialist system to a market economy, new images of masculinity have also arisen, as Chinese men come to identify their manliness with wealth, power and professional status.<sup>77</sup>

While women were once praised for “holding up half the sky”, they are now applauded for their physical beauty and qualities as good housewives.<sup>78</sup> In the 1960s China’s “iron girl brigades” were models of a socialist future; teams of female agricultural and industrial workers were portrayed as key actors in the building of China’s “iron rice bowl”. However, in the context of China’s economic reforms, this image came to be rejected as an “unnatural” product of the country’s failed experiment with socialism. In contrast, a model female worker today is likely to literally be a model. According to Hanser, increasingly young urban women are drawing upon the “rice bowl of youth”, and converting their beauty and youth into employment opportunities.<sup>79</sup> Berik et al. similarly observe that since the 1980s, China has been moving away from a socialist culture which rejected displays of gender

<sup>75</sup> Acker, *Gender, Capitalism and Globalization*, p35

<sup>76</sup> Grapard, *Theoretical Issues of Gender in Transition*, p669

<sup>77</sup> Zurndorfer, *Men, Women, Money*, p5

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p4

<sup>79</sup> Hanser, A. (2005) ‘The Gendered Rice Bowl: The Sexual Politics of Service Work in Urban China’, in *Gender & Society* 19:5 p582

difference “to one which encourages and celebrates” it.<sup>80</sup> In particular we see that the emphasis on “femininity and beauty as an essential feature of women’s gender identity”<sup>81</sup> has increased, along with traditional conceptions of motherhood.

As the primary function of a supposed ‘natural’ distinction between male and female-typed occupations cannot be to match men and women with jobs best suiting their inherently different abilities, Grapard claims that instead “an important function of the distinction is to make an arbitrary, socially constructed job assignment appear natural and hence provide a rationale and an explanation for the ‘natural’ differences in pay, opportunity, and status between men and women in the labour market.” Although the CCP still presents itself as the deliverer of women’s liberation, in reality the socially defined gender roles in Chinese society are rarely challenged.<sup>82</sup> Instead, adherence to the idea of men and women’s dichotomous spheres of influence, inside and outside the home, has risen between 2000 and 2010. The majority of those questioned agreed with the phrase “Men are turned towards society, women devote themselves to their family.” This is an increase from 50.4% of women and 53% of men in 2000, to 54.8% and 61.6% respectively in 2010. There is also growing adherence to the idea that for women “a good marriage is better than a career”; 37.3% of women surveyed in 2000 to 48% in 2010.<sup>83</sup>

The complicity of one particular organisation, has played an important role in the resurgence of gender essentialism in China; the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF). It is the country’s largest and most prominent women’s organisation. However, as the head of the ACWF is appointed by the CCP it is actually part of the government.<sup>84</sup> As an organisation of state feminism, the primary task of the ACWF is the promotion and implementation of party policy. This often leads it to assume a double voice – “an official voice addressed to women and a women’s voice addressed to the government.”<sup>85</sup> This is evidenced in the ACWF’s compromises with the CCP and its ambivalence towards certain forms of gender discrimination. Whilst it often fights blatant gender discrimination, I shall demonstrate that the ACWF has been responsible for the promotion of certain gender norms which are harmful to women’s equality. Jie Yang also argues that the ACWF compromises with the government in its complicity with more minor episodes of gender exploitation.<sup>86</sup> An example of this can be found in the ACWF’s role in relation to China’s growing beauty economy and the organisations silence on women’s early retirement age.

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80 Berik et al. *China’s Transition and Feminist Economics*, p 20

81 Ibid. p20

82 Zhou, J. (2003) ‘Keys to Women’s Liberation in Communist China: An Historical Overview’, in *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 5:1 p67

83 Attané, *Being a Women in China Today*, p8

84 Zhou, *Keys to Women’s Liberation*, p4

85 Yang, J. (2011) ‘Nennu and Shunu: Gender, Body Politics, and the Beauty Economy in China’ in *Signs* 36:2 p344

86 Ibid. p344

### *i. Motherhood*

With transition to a market economy, the family once again became the basic unit of production. This shift has heightened the effect of traditional gender roles on the division of domestic labour, reinforcing the role of women as *mothers*.<sup>87</sup>

A wealth of studies on the gendered implications of economic restructuring bare evidence to the fact that women bore a disproportionate share of the cost of SOE reforms. They detail how, as a result of the downsizing of SOEs in the late 1990s, women were laid off at much higher rates than men, experienced greater difficulty in finding reemployment and swelled the ranks of precarious informal employment.<sup>88</sup> The downsizing and privatization of SOEs caused a wide-scale gendered process of retrenchment and unemployment, as women constituted 60% of those laid-off. Encouraged by slogans such as “Women Return to the Home”, women were encouraged to quit their jobs in order to make way for men in an increasingly competitive labour market. They were often sent into early retirement, and were given fewer opportunities than men for retraining or reemployment. Wichterich notes that when women did receive training it was usually for informal employment, in traditionally female-typed occupations such as domestic labour.<sup>89</sup> In this process of economic restructuring, we see that the state invoked traditional gender roles in order to re-orientate women towards the domestic sphere. Such a campaign can only be deemed appropriate within the context of a revival of traditional gender norms.

The collapse of SOEs and retrenchment of the public sector had further implications for women than the loss of jobs. Importantly it entailed the loss of the system of social security, basic facilities and welfare provision, known as the ‘iron rice bowl’. A result has been the re-privatization of reproductive work, which had previously been integrated into the *danweis* under the Communist regime in order to break up the traditional gender division of labour and encourage greater female participation within the workforce. However, Wichterich states that “the developing market economy has not provided a substitute for the comprehensive social security net, and most of the care work has been shifted back to the responsibility of private households and onto the shoulders of women.”<sup>90</sup> The impact of this has been a strengthening of traditional notions of motherhood to the detriment of women’s employment prospects. Where women hold more domestic responsibilities than men they are more likely to be engaged in temporary or home-based work and have to take time out of the labour force. For low skill female workers this means they are more likely to be in informal work where they hold less bargaining power and as a result are more likely to suffer lower wages and poor working standards. The restructuring of SOEs and retrenchment of welfare provisions has been accompanied by an increased emphasis on China’s Confucian cultural heritage by the government. According to Dong, Liu and Zheng, “While promoting the Confucian ethic of filial piety may offer a way to free government from spending fiscal resources on eldercare provision, it is likely to reinforce the traditional familial gender norms.”<sup>91</sup>

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87 Rai, S. (1988) ‘Market Economy and Gender Perception in Post-Mao China’, in *China Report* 24:4 p464

88 Berik et al. *China’s Transition and Feminist Economics*, p12, Jie Yang p346

89 Wichterich, *A Driving for Jobs and Women’s Empowerment*, p4

90 Ibid. p4

Shirin Rai observed that higher-linguistic ability and grades had failed to get female graduates of the German language course at Hangzhou University the better jobs in the hotel or travel industry “because management did not think that women could devote their full energies to their jobs and also care for a family. Maternity leave and benefits were also additional costs that the managers were not willing to meet (Personal Interviews).”<sup>92</sup> For women who do make it to the top of their prospective fields, entrenched gender roles often require women to make a trade-off between their professional and personal lives. Interviewing a 42 year old unmarried physicist, Rai recounts how the woman’s single status was considered the price she had to pay for academic recognition; “had she been married she could not have afforded the time or the energy to do well in her profession which requires ‘mental and physical strain, perseverance, courage, and determination’ – all these being exceptional for women.” So long as traditional values of motherhood enforce the notion that women are primarily responsible for childcare and domestic duties, employers will continue to invoke such rhetoric as an excuse for not hiring women for more ‘demanding’ jobs.

Even government initiatives on gender equality carry traditional notions of motherhood. The September 15 white paper on ‘Gender Equality and Women’s Development in China’ contains many laudable initiatives which show a strong government commitment to the improvement of women’s health, education and living standards. However, it also contains language which is problematic from a feminist perspective, and entrenches essentialised notions of gender. The white paper highlights the establishment of the National Working Committee on Children and Women in 1990, while the State Council and local governments are said to hold working meetings on children and women, for the implementation of women’s development. The grouping of ‘women’ and ‘children’ is problematic in two respects. Either it can be seen to infantilize women, placing them in the same category as children; a vulnerable grouping in need of protection. Alternatively, the association reinforces traditional notions of motherhood and the view that childcare is primarily a woman’s responsibility. The ACWF promotes a number of projects intended to improve child welfare but it can be argued that this is not the best government department from which to do so, or at least not without greater sensitivity to the matter.<sup>93</sup> Whilst child welfare is certainly a feminist issue, the state should avoid its portrayal as only a *women’s* issue.

## ii. Leftover women

It was the work of Leta Hong Fincher, in her book *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Equality*, which drew public attention to the complicity of the state in areas of gender discrimination. “In China, the derogatory term “leftover” woman, or *shengnü* (剩女), is widely used to describe an urban young professional woman in her late twenties or older who is still single.”<sup>94</sup> The ACWF, an organization intended to “protect women’s rights and interests”, has taken “a leading role in the

91 Dong, X., Liu, L. and Zheng, X. (2010) ‘Parental Care and Married Women’s Labor Supply in Urban China’, in *Feminist Economics* 16:3 pp.169-192 p175

92 Rai, *Market Economy and Gender Perception*, p466

93 All-China Women’s Federation. *Projects*. Accessed online: <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/projects/project/0/187-1.htm> [Accessed online 12/07/2016]

94 Fincher, *Leftover Women*, p1

campaign to pressure urban, educated women in their mid- to late twenties to stop being so ambitious and get married.”<sup>95</sup> Since the ACWF defined the term, in 2007, as a single women older than twenty seven the Chinese state media has aggressively promoted the “leftover” narrative “through articles, surveys, cartoons and editorials stigmatizing educated women who are still single, often referring to a “crisis” in growing numbers of educated women who “cannot find a husband”.”<sup>96</sup> In March 2011, the ACWF posted an article entitled “Do Leftover Women Really Deserve Our Sympathy?” containing the following passage:

*“Pretty girls don’t need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult. These kinds of girls hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is, they don’t realize that as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellow pearls.”<sup>97</sup>*

Another article, originally posted on the official Xinhua News website in 2008, and reposted on the ACWF website in the same year, urges women to lower their standards or they will end up lonely forever: Entitled, “Women Marrying Late Shouldn’t Blindly Let ‘Late’ Become ‘Never’”:

*“In waiting for true love to appear, women squander their precious youth.”<sup>98</sup>*

Preying on women’s insecurities over marriage, these articles send the message that women’s youth and beauty is more valuable than their education, economic security, and personal achievements. The “Leftover” women campaign is clearly identified by Fincher as an attempt to prevent educated urban women from delaying marriage any further, even at the expense of their education, careers and in some instances their personal happiness. According to Fincher’s analysis most of these messages are variations upon the same theme: “stop working so hard at your careers; lower your sights and don’t be so ambitious; don’t be so picky about who you marry.”<sup>99</sup> Other stigmatizing reports which have been recycled frequently in the media, include the Xinhua News report “China’s ‘Leftover Women’ Unite This Singles Day”, which states that “more than 90 percent of men surveyed said women should marry before 27 to avoid becoming unwanted.”<sup>100</sup>

Of course the real irony of this campaign is that China’s one-child policy and a traditional preference for sons have combined to produce a surplus of *men*. This severe imbalance in the sex-ratio is viewed by the government as a potential threat to social stability. There is certainly a double standard towards single men and women. Despite single men far outnumbering single women, there is little pressure for them to marry early, with men in their thirties being considered to be in their prime whilst a women of the same age is depicted as being of lesser worth.<sup>101</sup> Fincher argues that “In one

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95 Ibid. p2

96 Ibid. p2

97 Ibid. p3

98 Ibid. p15

99 Ibid. p15

100 Ibid. p17

101 Ibid. p5, 22

sense, “leftover” women do not exist. They are a category of women concocted by the government to achieve its demographic goals of promoting marriage, population planning and maintaining social stability.”<sup>102</sup>

China’s women have made tremendous progress in education over the past few decades. According to the Third Survey on the Social Status of Women, carried out by the National Statistics Bureau and ACWF, women are now both outnumbering and outperforming men at undergraduate university level. Yet Fincher accuses the state media’s “leftover” women narrative of taking this huge accomplishment and turning it into an object of mockery. “The image of the educated woman, supposedly too smart and intimidating to attract a husband, appears repeatedly in cartoon images”<sup>103</sup>, while female PHD students are derogatorily referred to as the ‘third gender’. As well as promoting a narrative which devalues women’s academic achievements, the Ministry of Education has introduced, for certain programs, gender-based quotas favouring men in college entrance exams. In 2012, “Beijing’s China University of Political Science and Law required women to score 632 points to gain entrance to science courses, whereas men only needed 588 points.”<sup>104</sup> An official at the university told the New York Times that higher requirements were justified in the field of criminology and that “Female students must account for less than 15 percent of students because of the nature of their future careers.”<sup>105</sup> Gender differentiated entry requirements have also been a response to women heavily outnumbering men in some arts and language faculties. However, there are no such similar efforts made to increase the numbers of women in technical fields where they still lag behind.<sup>106</sup> This suggests that quotas are less about equal representation than the channelling of men and women into stereotyped gender roles.

As with women’s remarkable progress in higher education, one would also think that the state media should be celebrating any increase in China’s relatively low levels of female homeownership; as a sign of women’s increased emancipation and a way of ensuring their own economic security. However, in April 2013 Xinhua News ran a column stigmatizing these women by concluding that they were unlikely to ever find a husband. It is linked to a parallel campaign by state media which has propagated homeownership as an expression of masculinity, in order to ensure demand within the property market. Fincher argues that, as a measure of socio-economic wellbeing, it is important to consider the distribution of wealth through assets as well as income distribution. The core focus of her work is the argument that the “leftover” women campaign has contributed to the social pressure faced by women to act against their own economic interests when it comes to negotiating in whose name a new property will be registered, due to fear of missing out on marriage. Though more than 70% of women help finance the purchase of their marital home, only 30% of these deeds include the wife’s name. This means that Chinese women have lost out in the country’s property boom. Moreover, sole ownership of the marital property in the husband’s name reducing the woman’s

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102 Ibid. p6

103 Ibid. p25

104 Ibid. p34

105 Ibid. p34

106 Tatlow, D. K. (2012) The New York Times. *Women in China Face Rising University Entry Barriers*. Available online: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/world/asia/08iht-educlde08.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/world/asia/08iht-educlde08.html?_r=0) [Accessed 09/07/2016]

bargaining position on domestic and financial issues. In a worst case scenario, the fear of losing her home and economic security in the event of a divorce can leave many women trapped in abusive relationships. Fincher's book goes to great pains to emphasize that in a country with high levels of domestic abuse – 50% of Chinese men surveyed in a UN report had physically or sexually abused their partner – the government's campaign to discourage women from investing in their own economic security can have disastrous consequences for some women.<sup>107</sup> The “Leftover” Women campaign serves to show that the CCP's commitment to gender equality is subordinate to other demographic and social goals.

### *iii. Labour Protection Regulations*

On March 8 2015, there was an obvious contrast between how US-based search engine Google and Chinese search engine Baidu chose to mark International Women's Day. Google's front greeting page contained a collage honouring female astronauts, athletes, musicians and scientists. Meanwhile, Baidu's front page featured a dainty princess doll, twirling on top of a music box. Whilst the former depicts women as successful within a variety of fields, in an attempt to breakdown gender stereotypes, the latter drew criticism from many female commenters on Weibo for depicting women as a beautiful ornament, fragile toy, or plaything.<sup>108</sup> A reading of China's labour regulations would suggest that the CCP's view of women often verges on the latter.

YuFan Wang's analysis of the Chinese legal system, reveals that laws which appear to mark the CCP as a progressive champion of women's rights often contain “disturbing references to women's particular ‘physiological characteristics’”<sup>109</sup>, focusing upon the ‘biological difference’ of women in a way which serves to deepen gender stereotypes and facilitates employment discrimination. On the surface, China's health and labour protections appear a sincere effort to ensure equitable working conditions. However, due to an “unjustified focus on the ‘social characteristics’ of women” the Labour Protection Regulations are viewed by Wang as the root cause of the majority of discrimination faced by women workers today.<sup>110</sup>

The first article of the Labour Protection Regulations, specifically sets out its purpose is to “reduce and solve special difficulties encountered in labor and work...by female...workers due to their physiological characteristics”.<sup>111</sup> This focus on the physiological differences between men and women implies that whilst men are suitable for all types of work, women are somehow disabled and in need

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107 Fincher, *Leftover Women*, p146, 164

108 Huang, S. (2015) *The New York Times*. *Baidu Users Object to Women's Day Logo*. Available online: <http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/09/baidu-users-object-to-womens-day-logo/> [Accessed online 10/07/2016]

109 Wang, Y. S. (2009) ‘The Triumph of Confucianism: How a Subjugated Legal System is Failing a Generation of Chinese Women and Girls’, in *Cardozo Journal of Law and Gender* 15:3 p692

110 Ibid. p715, 709-710

111 Ibid. p710

of special protections. For example, as well as specifying policies that benefit women – such as protections against wage reductions or the cancellation of employment contracts during pregnancy – many provisions also restrict the type of work women are permitted to perform. Articles 5, 6 and 7 ban women from work considered high intensity labour, such as underground mining, on the basis of their gender rather than through assessing individuals physical capabilities, and restricts the types of work they can perform whilst menstruating and breast-feeding. These regulations of course stand in direct contrast to the “iron woman” image of Mao’s era, and according to Wang “resurrect the Confucian spectre of sagely paternalism.”<sup>112</sup> These regulations highlight the pervasiveness of the idea that women are by nature inferior to men, based upon the traditional belief that women are weakened by their “reproductive responsibilities”, and presume that women need to be given extra care and protection.<sup>113</sup>

China’s current protective measures for women, are actually reminiscent of labour laws in the United States during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Muller v. Oregon*, the Supreme Court similarly used women’s reproductive capacities to uphold a state law limiting the legal working hours for women. Espousing a perspective similar to that found in the PRCs labour regulations, the Court argued that “woman’s physical structure and the performance of maternal functions place her at a disadvantage in the struggle for subsistence”.<sup>114</sup> It is this patronizing, paternalistic logic which inspires policies, such as local governments’ introductions of wider parking spaces for women, which though ostensibly for the benefit of women, undermine their capabilities and support a narrative enabling discrimination.<sup>115</sup>

One reason employment discrimination has resurged is because all the benefits bestowed upon women by the Labour Protection Regulations translate into costs for employers. Laws intended to protect female workers have therefore become a convenient and economical excuse for discriminating against them. As costs associated with childcare are borne entirely by the mother’s employer this serves to reinforce the view that women bare sole responsibility for the care of children.<sup>116</sup> China has comprehensive anti-discrimination laws in place. However, there has been a clear lack of commitment to enforcing existing legislation. It was only in 2012 that China’s first successful gender discrimination lawsuit was filed. Meanwhile, the regulations in of themselves codify some of the paternalist and sexist attitudes towards gender which underpin workplace discrimination.

Even with an increased commitment to enforcement, current labour regulations will be limited in their ability to eliminate discrimination whilst government policies and state propaganda continue to promote essentialist views of gender whereby women are seen as ‘naturally’ more suited to

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112 Ibid. p710

113 Ibid. p715

114 Ibid. p716

115 The Wall Street Journal. (2014) *China’s Pink Women-Only Parking Spots Spark a Backlash*.

Available online:

<http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/07/21/chinas-pink-women-only-parking-spots-spark-a-backlash/> [Accessed 08/07/2016]

116 Wang, *Triumph of Confucianism*, p710-711

domestic and nurturing roles. Instead of looking to biological differences and women's supposedly inherent vulnerabilities, the state needs to recognise that the source of women's disadvantages within the labour force, and their need for extra regulatory protections, is systemic and socially constructed. It is primarily the result of deeply ingrained social attitudes towards women's capabilities and domestic responsibilities, patriarchal organisational structures, and women's reduced access to resources and key social networks due to unequal socio-economic and political power.

#### *iv. Parental Leave*

Different welfare models have the potential to either reproduce or transform traditional gender norms, with paid parental leave being a prime example. Recent feminist research in Western Europe draws attention to how social policy has made it easier for women to remain within the workforce without challenging the gendered division of labour within the household. Established upon a strongly gender differentiated model of the family, "health care provisions, paid leave policies, public support of institutions providing infant and child care and the availability of part-time work"<sup>117</sup> have all been aimed solely at the accommodation of mothers' double role in order to make it more manageable for *women* to be both worker and parent. Meanwhile the state has not considered it problematic that *men* were also parents.<sup>118</sup> In China, this is also the case as policies intended to increase women's participation within the labour force, actually serve to reinforce the traditional division of labour. The focus should be instead upon crafting parental leave policies with the deliberate aim of striking a balance between work and childcare which is equally distributed between both genders. As such feminist literature has moved to focus greater attention on the ways in which childcare provisions and parental leave support the configuration of gender roles within couples, and the importance of egalitarian parental leave as a method for achieving a more equal distribution of childcare and by extension gender-wage equality.<sup>119</sup>

Based upon a cross-country analysis of parental leave policies in Europe, Castro-Garcia and Pazos-Moran argue in favour of increasing men's involvement in childcare to the same level as women's as an essential step towards eliminating differentiated gender roles and wage inequality. In Sweden for example it was found that "women earned 4.5 percent less for every month spent on parental leave, while men earned 7.5 percent less. However, for each additional month a man took leave, the mother's wage increased by 6.7 percent."<sup>120</sup> Short periods of guaranteed paid maternity leave promotes gender equality by reducing the number of women who lose their jobs and drop out of the labour market when they have to take time off following childbirth. However, extended and multiple periods of absence from the labour force undermine their prospects for promotion and career development. Crucially, the imbalanced use of parental leave between men and women has been found to negatively impact all women's salaries, not just mothers', "as all women are affected

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117 Grapard, *Theoretical Issues of Gender in Transition* p674

118 *Ibid.* p674

119 Castro-García, C. and Pazos-Moran, M. (2016) 'Parental Leave Policy and Gender Equality in Europe', in *Feminist Economics* 22:3 p52

120 *Ibid.* p53

by the consequent “statistical discrimination”.<sup>121</sup> Thus, Castro-Garcia and Pazos-Moran predict an increase in the use of parental leave by women (and not by men) will negatively impact gender equality, whilst an increase in the use of leave by men will have a positive impact.<sup>122</sup>

In spite of the evidence that extending maternity leave alone is likely to increase the gender wage gap, local governments across China have been doing just that (beyond the already generous national mandate of 98 days) following the end to China’s one-child policy, in order to encourage women to have more children. This has not been accompanied by equivalent increases in paternity leave. In Beijing, fathers are entitled to only 15 days leave, whereas mothers can extend their leave to up to 7 months.<sup>123</sup> Likewise, in Shanghai the 128 days maternity leave available to women is accompanied by only 10 days transferable leave.<sup>124</sup>

Reports from across China, suggest that it is common for Chinese women to face questions in job interviews over their plans to have children, with candidates routinely being rejected if considered likely to become pregnant in the following few years. One female job-seeker with strong work experience told the ACWF that after getting married she became less popular within the recruitment market, stating: “Nearly every company has asked my fertility plans and an executive recruiter even asked ‘are you planning to have a baby in three years’? Compared to working ability and experience, it seems that a woman’s fertility is what matters most.”<sup>125</sup> This situation does not only affect women seeking jobs, but also those who fear pregnancy could adversely impact their future promotion prospects.

## v. *Discrimination in Recruitment*

The results of surveys accounting for the levels of gender discrimination in employment and recruitment vary wildly. In part this attests to the difficulty in accurately measuring certain forms of ‘hidden discrimination’ and well as varying levels of understanding amongst participants in regards what actually constitutes gender discrimination. For example, while some employers may openly advertise roles as open only to men, more covert practices are much harder to prove, such as the disregarding of women’s resumes and the role of gender-bias in employers’ evaluations of individual capabilities. However, despite the large variation between studies, it is clear that gender discrimination is commonplace within the Chinese labour market. In 2013, eight female students

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121 Ibid. p 53

122 Ibid. p53

123 Reuters. (2016) *Beijing extends leave for new parents as China hopes for more children*. Available online: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-family-idUSKCNOWR0ML> [Accessed: 08/07/2016]

124 All-China Women’s Federation. (2016) *Shanghai Extends Parental Leave to 10 Days*. Available online: <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/news/china/1602/1546-1.htm> [Accessed 08/07/2016]

125 Wang, Y. (2016) All-China Women’s Federation. *Experts Voice Concern over Married Women Facing Discrimination at Work*. Available online: <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/features/employment/1604/437-1.htm> [Accessed online: 12/07/2016]

from across China wrote to their local governments to report job listings they viewed as discriminatory. Together they found 41 such cases, 80% of which were advertisements for white-collar jobs that were not physically demanding.<sup>126</sup> In the same year, 20 women from across China shaved their heads in protest, to voice their anger against discrimination in admissions standards at universities.<sup>127</sup>

In a study of online job advertisements, Kuhn and Shen found that explicit gender discrimination is common in China. During their 20-week sample period, one third of the firms advertising on the job board placed at least one job advertisement stipulating a preferred gender.<sup>128</sup> One of the strongest relationships observed in the data was a negative skill-targeting relationship; as a job's skill requirements increased, the share of ads stipulating a preferred gender declined. They also found that the direction of firm's gender preferences, was highly correlated to requests for other non-productive characteristics, particularly beauty, height and age. Putting these two patterns together Kuhn and Shen argue that "Chinese firms mostly use targeted job ads to divide their pool of less skilled positions into "male" versus "female" jobs while largely abandoning these distinctions at higher levels."<sup>129</sup> This observation is reflective of findings that while the gender-wage gap is increasing amongst lower skilled workers, there are a significant number of women at the top who have found great success in China's economic development.

Discriminatory job advertisements are in open violation of Chinese labour laws. However, there is a clear lack of commitment from the government when it comes to enforcing anti-discrimination legislation. Even the Ministry of Labour in Beijing has posted an advertisement reading: "Seeking an office clerk. Female, decent height and appearance. All five facial organs must be in the right place".<sup>130</sup> The discrimination we observe doesn't just appear out of nowhere but bares direct relationship to the additional costs of hiring women and socially constructed gender norms. In both these respects, the government plays an important role. The increased prevalence of gender discrimination can also be linked to the growth of China's service industry, as shall be examined within the following chapter. It is not uncommon for service employers to explicitly advertise for women who are young, beautiful and feminine.<sup>131</sup> The cause of this, it can be argued, is that the shift to a market-economy and the development of consumer capitalism has made the commodification of femininity and female sexuality a profitable business.

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126 Zhang, L. (2014) Asia Society. China File. *No Women Need Apply*. Available online: <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/features/no-women-need-apply> [Accessed 07/07/2016]

127 Ibid.

128 Khun, P. and Shen, K. (2013) 'Gender Discrimination in Job Ads: Evidence from China', in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 128: 1 p287

129 Ibid. p288

130 Wang, *Triumph of Confucianism* p714

131 Fincher, *Leftover Women*, p38

## Chapter Six: Consumerism and the Commodification of Gender Difference:

A growing service sector and creation of a consumer society in China, has created new opportunities for the commodification and marketization of gender difference. In looking at the beauty economy and aviation industry, this chapter shall demonstrate how women's beauty and sexuality can be considered economic multipliers, and the impact of this for gender-wage inequality.

### *i. The Beauty Economy*

Jie Yang state that, "With the rampant development of consumerism, the post-Mao official gender ideology celebrates femininity as increasingly associated with beauty, youth and sexuality"<sup>132</sup> During this process women's bodies have become increasingly sexualized and commodified, whilst bodily characteristics – such as the appearance of youth, slimness and fitness – have "acquired new importance as tokens of class and status distinctions."<sup>133</sup>

Within China's burgeoning beauty economy we see the convergence of foreign and domestic constructions of gender. In the 1990s, when gender differences were re-emphasized, new images of femininity penetrated China, influenced by Western norms and models. Western-based transnational corporations have strongly influenced the new consumer culture in China, shaping new conceptions of femininity in the transition to a market economy. Within the literature, the beauty economy, refers not just to the sale of beauty related products and services but also to advertisements, attractive sales assistants, television and anything which links women's beauty to the economy.<sup>134</sup> "Highlighting the fact that the female body sells products, beauty sells products, and eroticism and sexuality sell products, the discourse reinforces the essential role of the female body, feminine beauty and feminine youth in developing consumer capitalism in China."<sup>135</sup> With the expansion of the beauty economy, gender and sexuality have played a central role in the development of consumer capitalism within China. Increasingly, beauty has come to be the defining feature of femininity, a concerning trend for the direction of gender equality – evidenced by the popular belief amongst a growing number of female university students that good looks were more important than academic achievement as a means of securing a bright future. Jie Yang claims that this trend is reversing the socialization of the Mao era, in which gender differences were downplayed in order to maximize the use of female labour and mobilize women to do whatever men could do. In contrast, since the 1980s, the state's has played a complicit role in helping to promote the re-establishment of sexual differences, which are commodified and exploited under consumer capitalism.<sup>136</sup>

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132 Yang, *Nennu and Shunu*, p336

133 Ibid. p336

134 Wichterich, *A Driving for Jobs and Women's Empowerment*, p8 Yang, *Nennu and Shunu*, p334

135 Ibid. p335

136 Ibid. p344,352

The ACWF has fought against some aspects of the beauty economy which negatively impact women. In 2005, the organisation submitted a proposal to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee, advising it to prevent government departments from involvement in beauty contests, to limit media reporting on contests and set a minimum age for participation. However, on the other hand, feminists such as Zhang Xiaomei, who is an associate member of the ACWF, have actively promoted the beauty industry without paying appropriate attention to its contributions to gender inequality.<sup>137</sup>

According to Yang, the rapid expansion of China's beauty economy has been driven not only by aspirations for economic growth but also by the state's concern for social stability. In order to absorb some of the shockwaves of urban economic restructuring and gendered SOE layoffs, a national reemployment project was established in 1995. In this context, the ACWF lauded beauty salons – which are characterized by “labour-intensive, flexible operations and massive market potential”<sup>138</sup> – as an efficient way to reemploy laid off women. This is in spite of the prevalence of exploitation within the beauty industry, including low wages, sexual harassment, irregular work schedules and lack of job security.<sup>139</sup> When gender segregation is considered to be the main cause of gendered wage inequality, one can question whether the solution is to promote reemployment within a female dominated industry where wages are typically lower. Furthermore, as a feminist organization the ACWF should be more sensitive to the problems arising from the promotion of an industry which relies on the essentializing and commodification of gender, including the promotion of beauty as the defining feature of femininity, in order to increase consumption.

## ii. Aviation Industry

China's booming aviation industry serves as a useful case study for analysing how commercialization and market competition has led to occupational gender-segregation and the commodification of women's aesthetic and emotional labour.<sup>140</sup> In efforts to gain a competitive advantage, Chinese airlines have resorted to adopting some of the most “retrograde and sexist employment practices”<sup>141</sup> of which Western airlines were historically associated with. In this growing industry, international competition is fierce and an important way in which Chinese airlines have sought to differentiate themselves is through their cabin crews. “Compared with operators in the West, Chinese airlines

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137 Ibid. p345

138 Ibid. p346

139 Ibid. p347

140 Foster, D. and Ren, X. (2015) ‘Work-family conflict and the commodification of women's employment in three Chinese airlines’, in *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 26:12 p1570

141 Ren, X. (2015) Independent. *The sexist truth about China's booming aviation industry*. Available online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/the-sexist-truth-about-china-s-booming-aviation-industry-a6689496.html> [Accessed 20/11/2015]

appear to be more dependent upon young and attractive female cabin staff”<sup>142</sup>, selecting workers on the basis of physical characteristics and deploying workers appearances as part of their brand image. An illustration of this has been the hosting of nationwide pageant-type recruitment events to select flight attendants. Newspaper advertisements have been reported, requiring applicants to be “aged between 18 and 25, slim, attractive, have good skin, a height between 1.65m and 1.75m, a pleasant personality and a good smile.”<sup>143</sup>

The industry is a major employer of women but they are concentrated within low-skilled service roles. Their work environment leaves few, or any opportunities to take contractual leave or pursue career development. Men, not only dominate the higher status, and higher paid jobs, they also frequently hold more senior positions as stewards. In 2013, women accounted for just 13.4% of senior executives in Air China and female pilots accounted for just 1.1% of the country’s total. Female frontline employees in the aviation industry experience significant job insecurity. The precariousness of their occupational status and intense workload is in part due to the excess of labour available to replace them – reflective of Bergmann’s crowding thesis. However, as with any role entailing aesthetic requirements, age and appearance limit their opportunity for long term career development.<sup>144</sup> Finally the increased sexualisation and commodification of female bodies is not only problematic in that it promotes the segregation of low skilled workers into work characterised by informalisation, lack of career progression and low pay. It also has numerous ramifications for women’s progression to high-skill occupations, through the promotion of gender stereotypes damaging to the perception of professional women’s workplace capabilities.

## Conclusion

The shift to an essentialist gender narrative has been a fairly a neglected factor in the story of China’s economic development. There is a tendency for feminists to promote economic equality on the basis that it is unequivocally good for economic growth. It is after all an appealing argument for making gender equality a policy priority. However, the inconvenient truth we must address is that under certain economic structures and models of development, gender inequality has been a significant resource for market growth. In China, occupational segregation and women’s disadvantaged status served to lower female workers wages, constituting a competitive advantage in the export-manufacturing sector. Women’s unpaid care labour also absorbed the burden of welfare retrenchment during economic restructuring. Moreover, the essentializing and commodification of gender difference has played an important role in boosting consumption and China’s growing service industries.

So long as it has served the interests of market growth, the CCP has been at best ambivalent towards, and at worst has actively promoted the resurgence of traditional gender norms. Gender equality has never been a top priority for the CCP. Even during the socialist era, the CCP alternated between progressive and innovative campaigns often followed by retrogressive periods during which feminist goals were undermined.<sup>145</sup> It is arguable that to some degree women’s inequality has always been viewed by the party as a means to an end. Therefore, gender equality – economic, political and

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142 Ibid.

143 Ibid.

144 Ibid.

social – needs to be argued for from the position that it is intrinsically valuable and a matter of social justice. Only once this is accepted can we expect a consistent government commitment towards women's equality. Acceptance of the fact that gender inequality has been a resource for economic growth, is also necessary in order to debunk theories that increased market competition alone is the solution. Once this is acknowledged we can seek real solutions for how to create more inclusive models of economic development, which work for both growth and gender equality.

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145 Jennings Walstedt, *Reform of Women's Roles*, p390

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