

*Masculine Compromise: Migration, Family, and Gender in China*. By Susanne Y.P. Choi and Yinni Peng. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016. Pp. x + 179. \$29.95.

*Rural Origins, City Lives: Class and Place in Contemporary China*. By Roberta Zavoretti. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press. Pp. xviii + 202. \$50.00.

### **Migratory struggles and the intersection between gender, class, and place in China: A review of two books**

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In 2016, more than 245 million people moved and resided away from their places of household (*hukou*) registration in China. The phenomenal internal migration has been a key feature that characterises the Chinese society in the post-socialist era. China's "floating population" has garnered extensive academic and public attention. Scholars have explored how China's rapid social, economic, political and institutional changes have configured the flow and dynamics of the internal migration, and how the migration constitutes and informs social transformations in China. Given the abundance and breadth of existing research, it is quite brave to write books to provide fresh empirical evidence and advance theoretical debates on the nature, causes, and consequences of the largest ever non-wartime migration in human history. Therefore, it is all the more impressive that the two books covered in this review make highly original contributions, by depicting the lived experiences of China's internal migrants with unprecedented nuances, by offering an "insider" view of the personal and intimate backstage of the public "problem" of peasant migrant workers (*nongmin gong*), and by reframing what constitutes the concepts of "migration" and "migrant".

In *Rural Origins, City Lives: Class and Place in Contemporary China*, Zavoretti explores the heterogeneity of migrant experiences in Nanjing, which is vividly illustrated by her choice of title—framing "origins" and "lives" in the plural. Zavoretti reveals the role played by place, not as a geographical location but as discursive social relations and practices, in constructing the ideations and experiences of social class in contemporary China. In doing so, she problematises the hegemonic construct of "peasant migrant worker" as a social category, and she exhibits the ways in which migrants enter and exit distinctive social spaces in blurring what many perceived to be fixated social boundaries: rural vs. urban *hukou*, outsider vs. local native, "low-quality (*suzhi*)" vs. "high-quality" citizen, and social underclass vs. middle class. Drawing on in-depth ethnography, Zavoretti teases out the sense of ambivalence as rural migrants

navigate their everyday lives around, through and beyond their prescribed “place” in urban China.

*Rural Origin, City Lives* is organised around five empirical chapters. In Chapter 1, instead of taking “migration” for granted as a form of geographical mobility, Zavoretti makes a refreshing start by deconstructing the label “peasant migrant worker”, which reveals the political, cultural and institutional logics underlying the label. Chapter 2 focuses on how rural migrants subjectively construct their individual personhood and make sense of widespread stigmas such as “outsider” and “low-quality citizen” that are imposed upon them. Chapter 3 veers away from the dichotomy between “rural” and “urban”, “outsider” and “local native”. Zavoretti argues that the rural-urban distinction is formulated not through segregation but through dialogical interaction between migrants and urban natives. Chapter 4 explores the role played by money—in terms of earning, spending, and consumption—in making the intersection between class and place. Departing from Simmel’s conceptualisation that money is univocally “indifferent” and “colourless”,<sup>1</sup> Zavoretti argues that consumption is not an act of individual fulfilment in China’s post-socialist neoliberal marketplace, but rather “an expanding social and discursive space where unequal social relations are played out”. Chapter 5 illustrates the contestation between two “China dreams”. From the top down, the state prescribes an ideal vision of “high-quality” citizen that aligns with the collective national good. On the ground, given the state’s ideological framing, rural migrants’ pursuit of upward social mobility, as argued by Zavoretti, is no longer driven by aspirations for individual personhood, but by a need to fill the gaps of “lacking” and “under-achievement” arising from being “low-quality” citizens. This is an intriguing proposition made by Zavoretti, as it challenges scholars to consider the context-embedded nature of the motivations and meanings underpinning migration and social mobility.

In *Masculine Compromise: Migration, Family, and Gender in China*, Susanne Choi and Yinni Peng draw attention to the subjective experiences of male internal migrants in China. The book provides unique insights into how China’s internal migration has transformed the Chinese patriarchy by restructuring the foundation and altering the operative logics of patriarchal power. Migration scholarship has a long history of examining the public life and labour-force participation of migrant men. This has led scholars to highlight the need to “feminise” migration studies by focusing on the experiences of female migrants and conducting inter-gender comparisons between women and men.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop, Choi and Peng have “rediscovered” the migrant man who is rendered both visible and invisible by popular stereotypes

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<sup>1</sup> Simmel, G. (1964 [1902]). The metropolis and mental life. In K.H. Wolff (ed./transl.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (pp. 409–24). New York: Free Press.

<sup>2</sup> Donato, K. M., Gabaccia, D., Holdaway, J., Manalansan, M., & Pessar, P. R. (2006). A glass half full? Gender in migration studies. *International Migration Review*, 40(1), 3–26.

pertaining to masculinity in a migration context. *Masculine Compromise* provides a timely correction to the feminist approach to migration studies. Drawing on the life stories of 266 migrants, most of whom are men, it breaks away from the stereotypical masculine migrant identity and unveils the emotional and intimate interior of male migrants' lives. In doing so, it brings into focus the relational construct of gender. While most existing research is concerned with "left-behind" families, Choi and Peng's research captures the recent increase in the number of men who migrate with their families or else form families in urban destinations.

*Masculine Compromise* is comprised of five empirical chapters, which encompass distinct facets of the family lives of migrant men, ranging from union formation to conjugal negotiation, from the division of housework through fatherhood to the fulfilment of filial piety. This multifaceted approach to the intersection between migration and gender makes an important statement. As argued by Choi and Peng, it would be all too simplistic to reduce masculinity and patriarchy to a single dimension of male domination. Rather, patriarchal masculinity takes distinctive forms, derives its power from different material and ideological foundations, and operates by diverse logics in distinct sets of family relations.

Following an overview of the context and core concepts of the book, Chapter 3 documents a transitional state of Chinese individualism. Choi and Peng demonstrate how migration has afforded some Chinese men a sense of autonomy in navigating their intimate lives. Yet, echoing nationally representative evidence,<sup>3</sup> they also show that the autonomy of migrant men is constrained by the difficulty of crossing the rural-urban boundary and by their material dependence on parents. Chapter 4 focuses on conjugal negotiations over "big" and "small" decisions in the family. Choi and Peng contend that the magnitude of family decisions is differentiated not by the amount of money involved, but by the degree to which they relate to and may jeopardise hegemonic patriarchal ideals. In Chapter 5, Choi and Peng identify four modes of negotiation over the division of housework in post-migration families, namely extended exemption, strategic avoidance, selective acceptance, and active participation. Their cases illustrate that the negotiation over domesticity is not a linear trade-off between men and women; instead, they report fine-grained distinctions in how migrant men's (dis)engagement with housework is subjectively rationalised. Chapter 6 explores how migrant men "do" fatherhood from afar. Above and beyond existing research on the pragmatic strategies of distance parenting, Choi and Peng draw attention to the emotional labour of "digital parenting". Chapter 7 focuses on how migration reconfigures the fulfilment of filial piety

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<sup>3</sup> Hu, Y. (2016). Marriage of matching doors: Marital sorting on parental background in China. *Demographic Research*, 35, 557–580.

in that migrant men are seen to compensate for their physical absence and lack of care provision for parents by adhering more closely to the symbolic dimensions of filial piety such as displaying obedience and showing respect.

There is great value in reviewing the two books side by side, not only because they address a common subject matter, but also because they closely complement each other. Both books deal with intersecting challenges—between class and place in *Rural Origins, City Lives* and between gender and class in *Masculine Compromise*—faced by internal migrants in China. Underlining the individual agency of migrants, both books draw attention to the incessant acts of “doing” gender, class, and place as migrants strive to maintain, dissolve and transform social relations with their intimate partners, children, parents, employers, and urban “others”. As is nicely articulated in both books, a large part of this “doing” is achieved through the act of “undoing” by way of resisting and (re)appropriating imposed social stigmas. Together, Choi, Peng and Zavoretti warn against the danger of categorisation. They show that class and patriarchy are not reified social orders, but dialogical interactions between attempts to classify and struggles against classification.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear from both books that class and gender are mutually constituent, and social mobility and geographical migration are closely interwoven in post-socialist China, although the concept of intersectionality is not explicitly discussed in the books. While the focus of *Masculine Compromise* is on masculinity and mobility, the major finding of the book that migration—the physical and symbolic displacement it entails—helps turn the Chinese patriarchy on its head is particular to the “migrant class” rather than those who stay put and adhere to patrilocal tenets. Thus, as Choi and Peng argue, “masculine compromise” is enacted to serve dual purposes—one sustains the intimate relationship between family members, and the other informs migrant men’s “class struggle” in the urban space. For Zavoretti, both class and place are gendered and sexualised in patrilineal China. Furthermore, the authors of both books have paid considerable attention to the discrepancy and interplay between ideals and social realities: ideals of manhood and middle-class citizenship on the one hand, and structural barriers that force migrants to negotiate, modify and forgo their ideals on the other.

Choi, Peng and Zavoretti advocate for a relational approach to gender and class. Both books contend that the marginality of rural migrants does not arise from reified social categories, but through the encounter between social categories in material reality and in social imaginaries. The authors hint at an innovative conceptualisation of social marginalisation—not as a form of exclusion but as a form of oppressive inclusion,

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<sup>4</sup> Tyler, I. (2015), Classificatory struggles: Class, culture and inequality in neoliberal times. *The Sociological Review*, 63(2): 493-511.

although this is not explicitly stated in the books. It is a pity that in their book, Choi and Peng were only able to interview a small number of migrant couples, and their empirical evidence is largely based one-sidedly on migrant men. Choi and Peng's efforts are nonetheless plausible in highlighting the overlook of men's subjective perspective in migration studies. Ideally, scholars would need to examine the narratives of both female and male members of the family to triangulate and comparatively assess the gendered construction and moderation of interview narratives. For Zavoretti, her empirical evidence vividly delineates migrants' subjectivity, in terms of how individuals make sense of their lived experiences and aspirations. She does an exemplar job in examining the encounter between rural migrants and urban natives. However, this leaves the reader curious to learn more about how rural migrants interact with and disengage from their rural places of origin, beyond conceptualising the rural origins merely as a symbolic signifier.

Despite their commonalities, the two books adopt vastly different theorisations of "migration", which represent the two mainstreams in existing scholarship. Taking a more conventional approach, Choi and Peng conceptualise migration in terms of geographical distance, sociocultural displacement, and the crossing of physical and symbolic boundaries. In contrast, Zavoretti provides a rather provocative contention by treating migration as an ideological project in itself. The project is in part built on the state's top-down prescription of an ideal version of "success". Zavoretti argues that, by anchoring internally mobile citizens to their rural places of origin, the creation of a distinctive "peasant migrant worker (*nongmin gong*)" identity plays a key role in engineering social stratification in post-socialist China.

With an emphasis on space and place, the dimension of temporality is largely missing in the two books. As the second generation of rural migrants come of age and the third generation begins to emerge, it would be pertinent to examine the generational change of internal migrants and its implication for broader social changes in China. Moreover, the heterogeneity of rural migrants' lived experiences arises in part from the fact that the migrants are at different life-course stages. Therefore, considerable diversity exists in the structure and dynamics of the migrants' family and social relations, and cultural values.<sup>5</sup> Of particular note is the scarcity of focus on the life stage of childhood from children's own perspective in a migration context. In both books, some attention has been paid to the role played by children in adult migrants' lives. However, children's subjective aspirations and lived experiences are only seen through the adults' eyes and the concepts of gender and sexuality remain absent in that children are all too often treated as "genderless" subjects in migrant families.

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<sup>5</sup> Hu, Y. (2016). Impact of rural-to-urban migration on family and gender values in China. *Asian Population Studies*, 12(3), 251-272.

In their books, as in most existing research, Choi, Peng and Zavoretti have focused on rural-to-urban rather than urban-to-urban migration. In 2016, around 40 million out of the 245 million “floating population” were inter-city migrants. This is a large sub-population that should not be overlooked. Although it is not totally clear how Choi, Peng and Zavoretti arrived at their analytical decision to focus on rural-to-urban migrants alone, the assumption is widespread in existing scholarship that rural-origin migrants are disadvantaged and deprived to a greater extent than their urban-origin counterparts. This assumption is precisely what Zavoretti tries to problematise in her book. Analysing rural-origin and urban-origin migrants side by side would have created the comparative leverage to disentangle whether the “classificatory struggles” reported by Zavoretti and the “masculine compromise” reported by Choi and Peng are tied to geographical displacement or symbolic border-crossing (between rural and urban space and status), or the interaction between the two.

Although the empirical substance of the two books is specific to the Chinese context, the insights offered by the books speak to broader debates in the study of migration, social class, gender and sexuality, and urbanism in an international context. As the empirical research that informs the two books is based on regional convenience samples, one needs to be cautious as to how far the findings may be generalisable. Nevertheless, Choi, Peng and Zavoretti raise a number of fascinating hypotheses for future scholars to test using nationally representative datasets. Rich in detail and lively in style, the engaging ethnographic and qualitative accounts serve the purpose of the books well to destigmatise prevalent stereotypes and showcase the diversity of the “floating population” in post-socialist China. The books are written in an accessible style, which deserve to be read widely beyond the academia.