學術討論

Gender Positivism and Modernity : Exploring Problematic Aspects of Social Science Research on Chinese Marriages

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The economic reform era (1978–present) has provided a wealth of quantitative information about Chinese gender issues.① In this respect it has presented a strong contrast with the Maoist decades when the official discourse was packed with ideological claims of the emancipatory impact of the revolution on women but lacked much empirical evidence, particularly reliable data. Twenty-five years ago the likelihood of a large-scale survey of 1,400–1,500 couples that assessed the decision-making

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① The author would like to thank Kandice Hauf, Weili Ye, and Marilyn Young for their critical reading and suggestions, and Yu Chien-ming for her encouragement and patience. Some of the basic research on marriage studies discussed in this essay was done with the support of a grant from the Committee on Scholarly Communication with China. During the 1993–1994 academic year I was affiliated with the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), which facilitated extensive contact with sociologists and demographers working on gender research. This affiliation also enabled me to attend a number of academic conferences, including the one hosted by the Population Research Institute of CASS entitled "Women's Status in Contemporary China."

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power of husbands over important family matters or of a statistical analysis of the extent of arranged marriages among different age groups would have been unimaginable.② In contemporary China, however, such studies are commonplace. Indeed, even many previously unmentionable topics, such as premarital pregnancies, extramarital affairs, and sexuality have become the subjects of scholarly attention. Such survey research potentially can be extremely valuable for understanding social change processes and developing pertinent policies to address social problems.

Yet, a close examination of the findings of a number of survey research projects reveals some perplexing problems. For instance, according to a relatively well-known Chinese survey of 780 women who relocated from the poorer areas of southern and southwestern China to the prosperous east coast province of Zhejiang in the 1980s in order to improve their marriage prospects and standard of living, 97% came to Zhejiang of their own volition, 98.34% married there voluntarily, and 96.33% were satisfied with their husbands and in-laws.③ To what extent are these optimistic findings trustworthy? More generally, what do they tell us about the nature of women's lives in China nowadays and about the ways in which women participate in survey research?

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② The large-scale survey of the Population Research Institute of CASS on the status of women included questions on the decision-making power of husbands over important family matters. The sample in each of 10 provinces included 1,400–1,500 people. The findings of this survey are discussed in various essays included in Sha Jicai, ed., *Dangdai Zhongguo funü diwei* [The status of women in contemporary China] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1995). For the results of the survey on arranged marriage, see Zhongguo funü shehui diwei diaocha ketizu, eds., *Zhongguo funü shehui diwei gaiguan* [A general survey on Chinese women's social status] (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1993), particularly pp. 196–201.

③ This survey was utilized by Li Huijing in her article, "Cong Zhejiang 'Wailainü' kan nongcun funü diwei de bianhua" (Looking at changes in the status of rural women on the basis on Zhejiang migrant women), in *Dangdai Zhongguo funü diwei* (The status of women in contemporary China), ed., Sha Jicai, pp. 179–186.

This article addresses these questions by first exploring the revival of social science survey research in China, then examining and analyzing the results of the Zhejiang migrant women survey in greater depth, and lastly considering the difficulties experienced by women who are asked to participate in these studies. It argues that many questions are raised by this and other similar studies that compromise the validity of their findings about women in contemporary China. After presenting several explanations for these problems, this article maintains the prime concern should be directed at the lack of sensitivity evident in both the design and execution of these survey research projects to the nature of the political, social, and cultural processes which shape the lives of women and profoundly affect how they respond to survey questionnaires.

Sociology and Survey Research

An important distinguishing feature of the reform era in China has been the resurgence of social science research, particularly large-scale social surveys. Indeed the volume of these social investigations has been so immense that it has seemed to rival the fervor that lasted from the late twenties to the mid-thirties, when some nine thousand projects were reportedly completed.④ While these contemporary surveys have been conducted by scholars from a number of disciplines, sociology has been at the center of the effort. Indeed, it seems surprising that the discipline could have produced such an enormous explosion of social science information

④ This figure seems high and most likely includes a broad array of social investigations including those carried out by scholars and social service institutions (i.e., Y.W.C.A., P.M.U.C.). It was originally published in a Chinese source authored by Huang Shaolun, which was cited by Li Hanlin, Fang Ming, Wang Ying, Sun Bingyao, Qi Wang. "Chinese Sociology," 1898–1986, *Social Forces* 65, 3 (March 1987): 623.

as it had been officially abolished from Chinese academic halls during most of the Maoist decades. Once relegitimized in 1979, sociology flourished, as indicated by the speedy establishment of numerous sociology institutes at the national, provincial, and municipal social science academies and 12 university based sociology departments.⑤ No doubt, the rapidity of this revival was due in large part to the strength of sociology as a discipline in China before 1949. Commencing in 1914 with an introductory course at St. John's University, sociology took hold in China with great vitality, and by the 1940s China possessed the third largest concentration of sociologists in the world after North America and Europe.⑥

The reestablishment of sociology in China in the reform era was hailed as an essential component of China's modernization effort.⑦ Indeed this point was stressed by veteran sociologist Fei Xiaotong in his speech to the 1980 meeting of the Chinese Society of Sociology.⑧ Other sociologists argued that socialist countries, like capitalist ones, experienced social problems, and it was the role of sociology in China to both help heal the

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⑤ The twelve university departments were established at Beida, Renda, Shanghai, Nankai, Zhongshan, Nanjing, Fudan, Shandong, East China Normal, Wuhan, Central China University of Science and Technology, and Guizhou Institute of Nationalities. For more information of this revival of sociology as a discipline in China, see "Observations on Sociology in China," in *China Exchange News*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 2–11; and Ming Yan, "Sociology in China: Its Past, Present, and Future," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 22, 1 (Fall 1989): 3–29.

⑥ Some Chinese sources argue that sociology began in China in 1898 with the publication of Yan Fu's translated excerpts from Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology* in Tianjin's *Guowen bao*.

⑦ This assertion was embedded in most of the discussion of the early 1980s about the reasons for reviving sociology. See, for instance, Du Renzhi, "Quanmian kaizhan shehuixue yanjiu wei shehui zhuyi fuwu" (The comprehensive development of sociological research is in the service of socialism), *Shehui kexue zhanxian* 1 (1980): 113.

⑧ R. David Arkush, *Fei Xiaotong and Sociology in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1981), p. 293.

wounds from the Cultural Revolution and to correct the social problems that stood in the way of China's attainment of modernity.⑨

The reestablishment of sociology was also accompanied by much discussion in the 1980s about the need to develop scientific methods. Hu Qiaomu, the head of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, emphasized that sociology was a brand of science at the meeting to celebrate the reestablishment of sociology as a discipline in China.⑩ Echoing his sentiments, as well as those of Fei Xiaotong, many younger scholars also stressed the importance of developing sociology in China along scientific lines. In their view, sociology should be combined closely with the natural sciences, particularly mathematics, and rely heavily on the use of measurements and statistical analysis. Indeed, the spread of computers had made such a trend inevitable, it was argued.⑪ To this end, some newly trained sociologists advocated that quantitative studies based on survey research should take precedence over qualitative sociological investigations.⑫

Such an approach, however, raised some difficulties because it seemed so perilously similar to Western sociological methodologies that had come under heavy criticism during the Maoist decades. Indeed, the major justification for the abolishment of sociology in China in 1952 had been because the superiority of Marxist historical materialism had rendered sociology

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⑨ See, for instance, Wang Kang, "Shehuixue jinxi," [Sociology past and present] *Shehui kexue zhanxian* [Front line of social sciences] 4 (1980): 124.

⑩ R. David Arkush, p. 280.

⑪ See, for instance, Wang kang, pp. 121–122.

⑫ For arguments on the importance of conducting survey research, see Gu Xiaoming, "Women de shuhuixue shi Makesi zhuyi shehui diaocha yanjiu de xuekehua" [Our sociology is making Marxist social survey research a professional discipline], *Shehui xue congkan* 1 (1981): 25–26; and Feng Shiying and Cheng Hansheng, "Yizhong kexue de tongji diaocha fangfa – chouyang diaocha" [One type of scientific statistical survey method – sample surveys] *Zhongguo keji luntan* 3 (1986): 34–40.

irrelevant.⑬ Some reform era theorists dealt with this dilemma in their writings by upholding the Marxist critique of the European philosopher Auguste Comte's brand of sociology as a "bourgeois pseudoscience" while at the same time arguing that sociology should not be regarded as a simple extension of historical materialism. Rather, it was necessary, they believed, to establish sociology in China as a concrete science that would guide social investigation.⑭ Other Chinese social scientists, however, found greater compatibility between Marxism and sociology. To this end, they offered bold defenses of the legitimacy of Western sociological methodologies, particularly positivism. For instance, in his sociology textbook for university students, Wu Duo argued that positivism should be valued as a scientific methodology.⑮ Sociologists Gu Xiaomin and Yuan Yayu also maintained that Comte's positivist method was important and valuable for contemporary Chinese sociology; indeed, in Gu's view it constituted one of the "treasures" of western sociology.⑯ As the reform era progressed, the influence of Marxist historical materialism in social science research declined while that of positivism grew. In the process, positivism became closely intertwined with the imperatives of Chinese modernity and the role of sociology in furthering that cause.

Survey Research on Gender Issues

As Scholarly attention to gender issues grew during the course of

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⑬ Wang Kang, "Shehuixue jinxi," p. 123.

⑭ Pan Yunkang, "Sociology and Historical Materialism," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 22, 1 (Fall 1989): 31, 39, 41.

⑮ Wu Duo, *Jianming shehuixue* [Concise Sociology] (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1986), p. 11.

⑯ Yuan Yayu, ed., *Shehuixue – lishi, lilun, fangfa* [Sociology – history, theory, method] (Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, 1986), p. 25; and Gu Xiaoming, p. 26.

the economic reform era, it increasingly was influenced by a positivist methodological orientation. The original impulse to examine gender issues came from a general longstanding Chinese preoccupation with marriage and family matters. As sociology institutes and departments were set up around the country, many contained a marriage and family section or concentration. Although they pursued some qualitative research projects, the bulk of their work was concentrated on conducting surveys, which in the 1980s were relatively inexpensive to finance. The "Five Cities" research survey, which examined changes in family composition, functions, and roles, stands as a paramount example of studies in the early years of the reform era.⑰ It is estimated that in the 1980s, 13.7% of all sociological research in China dealt with marriage and related family matters.⑱ The work of sociologists was augmented by that of other social scientists, particularly economists and demographers, who began to conduct survey research about Chinese marriage issues.⑲ At about the same time, the All-China Women's Federation research sections also began to undertake large-scale quantitative studies, as exemplified by Tao Chunfang's survey project on the status of Chinese women, which was the most comprehensive study of women's lives at that time.⑳

To be sure, social science research on gender issues did not only deal

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⑰ Wuchengshi jiating yanjiu xiangmu zu, eds., *Zhongguo chengshi jiating-wuchengshi jiating diaocha baogao ji ziliao huibian* [Chinese urban families – a collection of materials and reports on the survey of families in five cities] (Jinan, Shandong renmin chubanshe: 1985).

⑱ Zhou Guihua, "Cong jinhou de Zhongguo shehuixue de yanjiu xuanti qingxiang fenxi" [An analysis of the research subjects of Chinese sociology after its reestablishment], *Shehuixue yanjiu* 2 (1989): 10–14.

⑲ See, for instance, Tan Ren – *Hunyin jingjixue* [A study of marriage economics], (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1992).

⑳ Zhongguo Funü shehui diwei diaocha ketizu, eds., *Zhongguo funü shehui diwei gaiguan* [A survey Chinese women's social status] (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1993).

with the more respectable topics of marriage, education, work, and family issues. With the passage of time, the increased contact of Chinese social scientists with scholars outside China along with greater public attention to some new social issues, such as divorce, sexuality, prostitution, prompted a widening of scholarly focus. Perhaps the most notable quantitative study of this nature was done by Liu Dalin, who conducted a survey of 20,000 Chinese respondents about their sexual practices.㉑

The decision of the Chinese government to host the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 directed even greater Chinese scholarly attention to gender issues. Faced with the prospect of thirty to forty thousand foreigners making the trek to Beijing to attend overlapping government and non-government conferences on pressing issues facing women around the world in the late twentieth century, the Chinese government specially encouraged scholarly research and publication on women's issues. Between 1993 and 1995, the number of Chinese women's studies centers mushroomed, a series of academic conferences on gender related issues were held, publishers increased their new listings on women's topics, and various research institutes initiated major research projects on gender issues. Perhaps most notable in this last respect was the initiation of a large-scale research project on women's status in contemporary China by the Population Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The project consisted of three components: a large scale survey of couples (approximately 15,000) in ten provinces that was conducted in October 1991; the convening of an international conference entitled "Women's Status in Contemporary China" from October 31-November 4 1993 in Beijing where the results of the Population Research Institute's survey were presented along with other relevant studies; and publication

㉑ Lin Dalin, *Zhongguo dangdai xingwenhua* ["Sexual Behavior in Modern China"] (Shanghai, Sanlian shudian: 1992).

of a volume in Chinese and English of fifteen of the revised papers from the conference.

It was at this conference that the Zhejiang study of the massive migration of women mentioned at the beginning of this article was presented. It stood out as a pioneering attempt by scholars to grapple with a major social process that had been unleashed by the reform policies. For almost a decade, the press had brought this topic to public attention through numerous accounts of both the dangers faced by extensive female migration, such as Anhui live-in nannies who stole from the trusting Beijing families who hired them, and of the dangers unmarried women might encounter, such as being inadvertently lured into a marriage trafficking scheme that would force them into potentially undesirable marriages in poor and remote villages. It was hard to tell from these journalistic accounts how many of the women involved in migration did so primarily as laborers or as aspiring brides and how many involved in marriage trafficking did so against their will or were just unhappy with the results.

The paper presented by Li Jinghui at the demographer's conference and subsequently included in the volume on women's status explicated the marriage dimension of female migration from impoverished counties of central and southwestern China into Zhejiang between 1984 and 1989 by utilizing the results of several survey research projects. Drawing upon the Hangzhou University Institute of Demography sample survey (1990) of 780 migrant women and their husbands, and the Xiaoshan Municipal Family Planning Commission survey of 2,510 migrant women (1988), this study attempted to shed light on major characteristics of the large-scale influx of would-be brides in those years, which was estimated to be of massive proportions, around 100,000.㉒ Li Jinghui's essay contained four major

㉒ Li Jinghui reports the number as 97,427 but Wang asserts that by the end of 1990, more than a hundred thousand migrant women had married in Zhejiang. Li, p.

contentions about this enormous internal migration of women. Firstly, it argued that this migration was stimulated by two factors: a shortage of young women in the rural areas of Zhejiang (as high as 157.4:100 among 20–34 year olds) and a large income gap between Zhejiang and the natal communities of these women, 71.3% of whom came from Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Hunan. Indeed by 1989 the per capita net income in rural Zhejiang was more than 400 yuan above the national average, approximately 450 yuan above Hunan's level, and more than double that of the rural areas of Guangxi, Sichuan, and Guizhou.㉓

Li Jinghui's second major point was that the overwhelming majority of these women came to Zhejiang of their own volition, some 97% according to a survey by Hangzhou University, and more than 98% of 2,510 women surveyed in the one county of Xiaoshan.㉔ While the author does not present a specific account of how the women came to Zhejiang, she does argue that the success of the pioneering women in marrying into homes with higher living standards and income served as a positive model for subsequent migrants.

Li's third and fourth major contentions concern the relatively higher educational levels of these women and the quality of their marriages. She presents figures that show that most of the nonnative women marrying into Zhejiang families have more years of schooling (6.8) than their Zhejiang counterparts (6.1) and than the national average (5.4).㉕ In her view, this characteristic is an essential feature of population migrations an explains why these women are able to resist the hold of traditional local marriage

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179; Wang, p. 59.

㉓ Li Jinghui's chart does not provide information on Yunnan, which is among the poorest provinces in China. Her statistics are taken from the State Statistical Bureau, 1990. Li, table 1, p. 180.

㉔ Li, table 3, p. 183.

㉕ Li, p. 181.

customs and rise to the challenges of their new families and communities. Thus, they are able to overcome initial misgivings of their husbands and in-laws and develop good relations with both. According to the Xiaoshan survey, only a small percentage of these women reported any marital tensions in these relationships.

Although Li Jinghui tackled a very important subject, her study does not seem to have grasped the major social dynamics of this migration process and fails to grapple with some main issues women in this situation face. For women of little means to marry into communities as total strangers with no social support system has to entail hardships and difficulties. While Li Jinghui notes that in the Maoist decades, women from south China normally married within a 15 km range as a way to strengthening family linkages, she does not explore what is at risk for women who have moved so far from their natal families during the reform era. Indeed, migrant women's experiences stand in stark contrast to those of women from affluent areas who commonly refuse to marry out of their natal villages because of a perceived loss of social status. Clearly, these young women coming into Zhejiang are vulnerable outsiders with no strong defenders available to come to their sides in disputes with husbands, in-laws, or neighbors.

Many questions have been left unasked in this study as well. Why, for instance, is the ratio between men and women so askew? What happened to all those Zhejiang women? Do they generally move away from the poorest communities, with the result that outsiders generally marry into poorer communities? Do the Zhejiang women who opt to stick around generally end up with the most desirable men, leaving the less educated, less well-off, and less able for these migrant women? Answers to these questions would provide a much fuller understanding of the social complexities involved in these large female population shifts.

Most importantly, however, many of the statistics from this study seem suspect. Indeed, it seems almost inconceivable that approximately 100,000 women from the rural areas of such places as Guizhou and Yunnan traveled such great distances entirely of their own volition, married into Zhejiang families voluntarily, and found their marriages satisfactory. How did they manage to make arrangements for the trip? What was the impact of their ignorance of the Zhejiang local dialect on their mate selection process and marriage relationship? It seems likely that a certain proportion came through the marriage trafficking channels either as kidnapped victims or more likely on the instigation of family members.㉖ One should not assume that all wished to run away, but certainly most of the unhappily married did so as soon as possible. For those who stayed put, the use of the word "voluntary" in reference to either their coming to Zhejiang or their decision to marry is questionable. In short, all of Li's statistics cry out for further disaggregation.

The most suspect statistic is that 96.33% of the women answered that they are happily married, simply because it is so out of kilter with the general state of marriage in contemporary China. A study of marriage in rural Shandong, for instance, reported only half of the marriages between migrant women and men of Linxian county were stable because the couples could not get along well.㉗ In addition to information occasionally gleaned from such scholarly studies, the attention paid to marriage problems – ranging from constant bickering and sexual incompatibilities to wife

㉖ Serious attention has been paid in the press to the problem of kidnapped women who are sold as wives to farmers who are unable to find a spouse in the surrounding communities, but to my knowledge it has not been the topic of any major scholarly research project.

㉗ Zhang Liping and Fan Ping, "Chuantong nongye diqu de hunyin tezheng-Shandong sheng Lingxian diaocha" [Marriage characteristics in the traditional agricultural regions of China – an investigation of Lingxian county in Shandong], *Shehuixue yanjiu*, no. 5 (1993), p. 97.

battering and divorce – in newspapers, magazines, television, films, fiction, and theatrical productions gives a general impression that marriage troubles are quite common in contemporary China. Thus, it is difficult to imagine that marriages between Zhejiang men and migrant women could be more harmonious than is generally the case. If indeed these marriages are less contentious, one might well suspect it is more likely due to wifely passivity then to the existence of a harmonious relationship. By marrying an outsider, the Zhejiang husband possesses greater social power in his marriage relationship, especially as he cannot easily be held accountable for his wife's wellbeing by her relatives.

The perplexing problems manifested in Li Huijing's study are illustrative of a general phenomenon in Chinese survey research on marriage related issues. Some sociologists, for instance, privately voice much skepticism about findings related to arranged marriages or women's power over issues of reproduction, income management, or women's self-esteem. In short, the findings of many survey research projects on gender issues obsures more than they clarify about the realities of women's lives in contemporary China. Yet, paradoxically, these results are based on surveys completed not just by men, but by women as well. Indeed, some studies are based primarily on female responses. What has gone wrong?

Explanations

In attempting to explain why one should approach survey results with caution and how their quantitative information can be so untrustworthy, the first concern is for the potential problems that might result from the faulty construction of sample populations and statistics. Insufficient attention in the past as been paid to conducting a random sample, and Western social scientists have expressed concern about the problems Chinese face in even

creating a representative sample.㉘ Or in other cases numerical evidence is twisted out of context or not put into a proper context in order to prove a certain point. Li Huijing's argument about the strong educational background of the non-native women may well fall into this category. Unfortunately no information was provided about how the sample was selected so we can only wonder about its representativeness. However, information gleaned from a survey of Wencheng county which is located in a poorer mountainous area of northern Zhejiang where 3,354 migrant women settled down shows a different educational profile. In contrast to Li Huijing's statistic that only 4.91% of the nonnative women coming to Zhejiang were illiterate, for this one county of Wencheng, 26.77% of the migrants were illiterate. Similarly, only 19.11% of the Wencheng immigrants attained a junior high school educational level in contrast to Li Huijing's figure of 43.48%.㉙ Such a contrast raises many questions about the reliability of Li Huijing's sample and her claims about the role of education in female migration.

The problem with poor statistics and samples, which stems in part from the immaturity of sociology as a field of research, is generally recognized in China today and is being addressed. Students enrolled in graduate programs are trained to set up random samples, and they use the same computer programs to analyze their survey data as their American counterparts. Meanwhile, some social scientists are trying to hold up higher standards for the collection of data.㉚ Thus, this problem

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㉘ Melanie Manion, "Survey Research in the Study of Contemporary China: Learning from Local Samples," China Quarterly 139 (September 1994): 741–765.

㉙ Li Huijing, p. 202, and Wang Jinling, "New Characteristics of Marriages Between Zhejiang Farmers and Women from Outside the Province," *Social Sciences in China*, vol. XV, no. 2 (Summer 1994), p. 61.

㉚ For instance, Sha Jicai, in his oral presentation at the "International Seminar on Women's Status in Contemporary China" (October 31 -November 4 1993), noted that the results from four out of ten provinces surveyed for the project on women's

with survey research is starting to show signs of improvement.

A more serious problem concerns the general reliability of the respondents. Sociologist Chen Yiyun in a recent article has focused on this issue, arguing that many incorrect answers are given in surveys about marriage issues precisely because marriage and family are less subject to public scrutiny than any other part of social life. Based on her personal experiences conducting surveys, she feels that most Chinese find it difficult to be candid about such matters with strangers. Chen also believes that many people answer these surveys based on what they think they ought to say. She contends:㉛

> ··· social morality places a high value on love in modern marriage. When people answer questions about motives for marriage, they all conform to stereotype and give love as the just answer. In reality, who is willing to admit that they themselves marry for money, or a house, or a household registration, motives that are not socially approved.

From Chen's perspective, the main problem is that such surveys are designed for a society that is highly educated and where people are free to express their true feelings without concern of state repercussions. So in Chen's view, the fact that China lacks such conditions makes people unwilling to be frank, especially about "private" family matters.

For Chen Yiyun, the best solution to such problems is to abandon survey research for the present. She is suspicious of quantitative sociology with its emphasis on scientific methodology and mathematical calculations. Chen herself has chosen to put most of her energies into social work,

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status in contemporary China had to be excluded from the analysis because of faulty statistics.

㉛ Chen Yiyun, "Out of the Traditional Halls of Academe: Exploring New Avenues for Research on Women," in Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White, eds., *Engendering China; Women, Culture, and the State*, p. 71.

which allows her to use her vast knowledge of women's problems to good avail while at the same time to further her understanding of the realities of women's lives.㉜

Chen Yiyun may have too easily given up on survey data. Researchers in other countries have altered their methodological approach to survey work on women's issues and achieved good results. British sociologist Ann Oakley, for instance, developed a new model for survey research that is based on developing a potentially long-lasting relationship with her female respondents. She argued that the commitment of the researcher to form such a relationship motivated interviewees to participate with sincerity.㉝ Or in the words of American scholar Sandra Harding, it is necessary "to place the researcher on the same critical plane as the research subject."㉞

Such an approach poses a strong challenge to a positivist knowledge-gathering methodology which emphasizes rationality, impersonality, and objectivity. Guided by a belief that befriending the respondent might well contaminate the evidence, most social scientists have relentlessly retained a scientific approach which emphasized their role as gatherers and analysts of objectively verifiable information. In so doing, they have often developed questionnaires that show little sensitivity to the problems women face. Imagine, for instance, the migrant woman who is asked to give a positive or negative answer to the question of whether she is happily married. As a subordinate person in the marriage, household, and community, why should she bother to provide a candid response, particularly when the

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㉜ Chen, p. 78.

㉝ Ann Oakley, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms," in Helen Roberts (ed.), *Doing Feminist Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 30–61.

㉞ Sandra Harding, ed., *Feminism and Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 181.

researcher seems somewhat detached and remote. But were the researcher to start from the premise that the entirety of the migrating experience was filled with difficulties, and was willing to develop an understanding and engaged relationship with the respondent, the chances of gathering more textured, nuanced responses to such questions would be increased.

Of late, there have been a few hopeful signs that Chinese social scientists are beginning to take women's perspective and experiences into account in the design and execution of their survey projects. Several papers presented at the international conference on the flow of rural labor in China, which was held in Beijing in late June, 1996, revealed painstaking attention to the collection of reliable data from female migrant workers in Guangdong through close work with a core group from a larger sample and through extensive study of these women's experiences. Similarly, certain women's studies centers in China have undertaken research projects involving quantitative studies which challenge the work of mainstream Chinese social scientists on gender issues.

This work in conjunction with that of scholars in other parts of the globe has shown that it is possible to gather reliable results from survey research if steps are taken to develop a more sensitive, engaged approach, one that will stimulate the development of an interactive and equal relationship between scholar and subject. Moreover, researchers need to contextualize the data they collect about women's situations, and be inclusive of their emotions and their relevant experiences. Such an approach potentially can yield a wealth of valuable information about the nature of women's lives in contemporary China and serve as a valuable asset for developing effective social policies.