

SHAPING RURAL MIGRANT WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT: THE ROLE OF HOUSEMAID AGENCIES*

LEILA FERNÁNDEZ-STEMBRIDGE

Abstract. Although since reforms rural-urban geographic mobility is no longer as much impeded by the *hukou* system, new institutional mechanisms have emerged that likewise impede the equal participation of rural migrant workers in the urban labour market. Given the daunting challenges implied in rural-urban migration flows, the burgeoning of labour fairs, job advertisements in the media, and intermediate service centres offer migrants some respite. Migrant women in particular can participate in the domestic service labour sector through the 'housemaid agencies', which often appear as ineffective, but may also offer significant possibilities for migrant women to find a job in China's cities. In this paper the author examines the activities and functions of these housemaid agencies and the role they play in shaping the employment opportunities of migrant women. Most of the information is based on fieldwork achieved between 1998 and 2001 in Beijing and Shanghai. The aim is to assess the extent of these agencies' benefits to migrant women's work opportunities.

Introduction

Since Reforms, China's rural-urban dualism has been reflected not only in regional terms but also at the human resources level. Both geographic disparities and labour distribution contribute to a segmented institutional framework, in turn resulting from Mao's institutional legacy of the household registration system (*hukou*), as well as the different phases of economic growth. Created in the 1950s as an instrument distinguishing urban from rural inhabitants, the *hukou* system grew to become a control mechanism aimed at limiting the migration of peasants into the urban areas. Under this system, urban workers were the only citizens benefiting from the social services offered by the urban work unit (*danwei*) and with access to rationing

* I thank Zhang Yanhai and Tian Ye for their assistance and Profs Tamara Jacka and Arianne M. Gaetano for their comments.

coupons and other basic goods, while the rural population was systematically excluded from such privileges.

Although since Reforms rural–urban geographic mobility has no longer been so heavily impeded by the *hukou* system, new institutional mechanisms have emerged that hinder the equal participation of rural migrant workers in the urban labour market. These mechanisms include an array of certificates—the labour certificate (*wugong zheming*), labour permit (*jiuyezheng*) and urban labour permit (*chengshi jiuyexukezheng*)—in addition to the documents issued by the Public Security Bureau, such as the provisional residence permit (*zanzhuzheng*) and the registration document for temporary workers (*linshi gong dengji biao*); or the family planning departments' certificates such as the sterilization certificate (*jiayu zhengming*) and the health certificate (*jiankang zhengming*).

Leaving the countryside and moving to the urban areas entails considerable cost, both at the material level (land abandonment, transportation, accommodation, etc.) and at the psychological level (family abandonment, adaptation to a different life, in some cases learning the dialect of the destination area, etc.). In addition, searching for a new job contributes to an anguish provoked by the lack of job skills faced by most migrant workers—although some have professional experience, the majority have previously been engaged in farming—and a dearth of information about jobs.

Given these daunting challenges, the burgeoning of labour fairs, job advertisements in the media and intermediate service centres all offer migrants some respite. Migrant women in particular can participate in the domestic service labour sector through the 'housemaid agencies' (*baomu jieshaosuo*, hereafter BJs), which regulate the allocation of human resources in this particular labour market and orient the newly arrived migrant women.

Although to Western observers the BJs may appear as just another 'institutional barrier' to the free flow of labour, they may also offer significant possibilities for migrant women to find a job in China's cities. While these centres tend to overconcentrate migrant women in the domestic service sector, thus limiting their access to other higher-paid or higher-skilled jobs, today there is also increasing competition between migrant women and laid-off (*xiagang*) women, who may both be serviced by the BJs. Although both labour forces respond to different profiles, unfair competition (laid-off workers tend to be favoured to the detriment of migrant workers) becomes more evident with time. The inevitable result is that a 'micro (service) labour market' is developed, while the job choice for migrant women becomes increasingly restricted, due basically to a number of factors: the exist-

tence of laws and regulations specific to the rehiring of laid-off women workers; the lack of other alternatives for migrant women's employment, in turn caused by gender discrimination, gender ideology or even discriminatory laws; the structural limitations of the BJs themselves; and the lack of alternatives or competitors to BJs. At first sight, the combination of all these factors makes the BJs appear ineffective. But as migrant workers face formidable obstacles because of the *hukou* and the existence of a dualistic labour market, and there are few resources and services available to help them find employment, at least the BJs could be viewed as an exception for migrant women.

Migrant women have little protection in the urban labour market, and few advantages. BJs offer some benefits. In this paper I will examine the activities and functions of BJs and the role they play in shaping the employment opportunities of migrant women. Most of the information is based on fieldwork carried out between 1998 and 2001 in Beijing and Shanghai. The aim is to assess the extent of the BJs' benefits to migrant women's work opportunities. Three main aspects are analysed: first, the influence of labour dualism over China's urban labour market; second, the development and functioning of two types of BJs (state-owned vs non state-owned) and their role in the formation process of China's urban labour market; finally, a brief summary of the main findings.

Dualism in China's Urban Labour Market

The reform of the employment system is perhaps the most pressing and problematic issue of the economic reforms undertaken in China during recent years. At the XVth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in September 1997, Prime Minister Zhu Rongji announced the decision to reform the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) within three years. Yet the subsequent directive to 'keep the big [SOEs] and let go the small [SOEs]' (*zhuada, fangxiao*) maintained the priority, even during this economic transition, of avoiding a disproportionate unemployment rate, which could provoke social instability and therefore a loss of legitimacy of the CCP.

Despite this indication that low unemployment is a priority for the Party, reality suggests otherwise. The latest SOE reforms have in fact transformed (or contributed to the transformation of) the process of labour distribution in China's urban areas. In particular, surplus labour from former SOEs has become visible and, despite the 'protection and support' offered by their respective local governments,

laid-off workers in effect are the sign of a new reality: a labour market that is 'growing out of the plan'.¹ Laid-off workers, in essence, are unemployed. Thus, the urban labour market dualism considered here starts from the premise that China is dualistic *in essence*, but urban China has now *inevitably* become dualistic, precisely as a result of SOE reforms.

As economic reforms are introduced and labour mobility evolves, the sectoral allocation of labour increasingly becomes a crucial determinant of disparities, and therefore of a persistent dualism. In other words, while labour mobility increases and the less capital-intensive sectors develop, dualism is persistently being reproduced.

As shown in the China migration literature, even if in the last years migration pressures have contributed to a weakening of geographic rural–urban dualism (not always necessarily reflected in economic terms), there are still differences in labour absorption between local and non-local workers in urban areas. It is true nonetheless that non-local workers have always tended to be concentrated in particular areas of employment, while over time they have also taken over some areas previously dominated by locals—e.g. production-line jobs in state-owned textile factories, once undertaken by urban women, are now dominated by rural migrant women.

The new trends reflect in some sense important shifts in the traditional labour system.² First, the ownership structure has become more diversified lately: the proportion of the state-owned sector in the total value of industrial output is about 41 per cent, while the collective-owned enterprises represent almost 9 per cent and the non state-owned enterprises, including share-holding corporations, foreign-funded enterprises and enterprises with funds from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, add up to about 42 per cent.³ Second, urban jobs are no longer urban-inclusive (through the preferential hiring system of urban workers) or rural-exclusive (excluding rural workers from the traditional circulation of labour distribution).

But dualism remains and is even more pronounced for rural migrant women: despite the relaxation of geographic constraints these

¹ The idea of 'growing out of the plan' was first used by Prof. Naughton to identify the progressive emergence of a market economy out of the planned economic system. For more details, refer to Barry Naughton, *Growing Out of the Plan. Chinese Economic Reform 1978–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

² Part of the distinction shown here is based on Cai Fang, 'Eryuan laodongli shichang tiaojian xia de juyue tizhi zhuanhuan' (The transition of the employment system under a dualistic labour market), *Zhongguo shehui kexue*, No. 2 (1998), pp. 4–14.

³ *Zhongguo tongji nianjian* (China Statistical Yearbook) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 2003), p. 461.

last years, the sexist 'démodé' attitudes have re-emerged, reducing the rights and opportunities for some migrant women to work in highly paid jobs. Social constructions of gender have tended to reinforce these prejudices even more: employers refuse to hire women for jobs demanding high levels of labour productivity, preferring to 'orient' them rather towards child and/or elder care services.⁴ As surplus labour increases in the urban areas, urban laid-off women also enter domestic service, creating some competition with rural migrant women, who have always had more chance of finding a job within the domestic service sector. Although this could be envisioned as a 'transitional competition phase' between urban and rural women, it does somewhat affect the employment allocation of migrant women: while the domestic service market was once an 'exclusive' source of job creation to them, since the late 1990s it has been 'shared' with (laid-off) urban women.

Local officials and representatives from re-employment centres (*zai-jiuye zhongxin*) usually confirmed that fewer than half of laid-off workers were women in the late 1990s.⁵ However, both the mass media and the official statistics usually showed women to have higher rates of unemployment than men. Indeed, local governments openly encouraged laid-off women workers to undergo special training programmes (*peixun zhidao*) and to adopt a less negative attitude with regard to self-employment or less prestigious jobs in areas such as recycling, the retail trade, street-vending, serving at restaurants ... or the domestic service sector. The latter is of special interest here, as it is usually regulated by the housemaid agencies (BJs). Although the BJs have been traditionally assigned as intermediate centres for migrant women, they have also become strategic points for local laid-off women. An examination of the functioning of these centres will help clarify such trends: first I describe the development of the BJs, to show their institutional influence over labour distribution; next I focus on the structure of typical state-run BJs and private BJs, so as to explore the dichotomy produced in an emerging urban labour market.

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, *China: Human Development Report. Human Development and Poverty Alleviation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 52.

⁵ Interviews A/24/S, 28/S and 4/B in Shanghai (May 1998) and Beijing (July 1998).

Development and Structure of the Housemaid Agencies
(Baomu Jieshaosuo, Bjs)

Here I aim to show how a deeper understanding of the BJs' functioning can lead to a better appreciation of the rural migrant women workers' status in China's urban labour market. Although there are no official data available on job centres, it is possible to state that there are at least a few thousands across the whole country, and these can be roughly divided into four categories:

1. Labour markets (*laodong shichang*). These provide services only to local urban job seekers.
2. 'Talent' labour markets (*rencai shichang*). These play an intermediate role between university-educated citizens (both local and non-local) and employers.
3. Domestic service introduction agencies (*baomu jieshaosuo*). These provide services to migrant workers, particularly women seeking work in the domestic service sector.
4. Others. These include the so-called 'illegal labour markets' (*feifa laowu shichang*), where (mostly male) migrant workers offer their skills for small jobs (carpentry, painting, repairing, etc.) in street-improvised meeting points.⁶

Generally, categories 1 and 2 are formal and state-owned. They are listed in official documents and advertised in local journals and newspapers. In theory, all districts (*qu*) and neighbourhoods (*jiedao*) have a *laodong shichang* and a *rencai shichang*. As for category 3, the diversity is enormous. Some BJs are under the direct control of local governments, whereas others are created through private initiative and are therefore not necessarily declared at the official level.⁷ The creation

⁶ For a deeper discussion on this topic, refer to Leila Fernández-Stembridge, 'Illegal labour markets (*feifa laowu shichang*) in China: specific cases of Beijing and Shanghai', article presented at the XIIth EACS (European Association of Chinese Studies) Conference, 'Festivals: the Chinese at work and play', Edinburgh, Scotland, 10–13 September 1998. Unpublished.

⁷ Measuring migration flows in China differs according to the sources used, as human flows often include the so-called 'floating population' (*liudong renkou*), i.e. those persons who rarely declare their address changes, due to the temporary character of their change of destination. Much was written on the floating population in the 1990s. For more details, refer to Kam Wing Chan, 'Hukou and non-hukou migration and implications', article presented at the Seminar on 'Rural labour and migration in 1990s China', University of California, Irvine, United States, 26 April 1997; Elisabeth Croll and Huang Ping, 'Migration for and against agriculture in eight Chinese villages', *The China Quarterly*, No. 149 (March 1997), pp. 128–146; Leila Fernández-

of these centres was provoked by the massive migration flows of the 1980s and 1990s. Their initial aim was to help newly arrived rural migrants to find a job in the destination area, and discourage them from seeking jobs either on their own or through illegal channels. That is why local governments initially did not stop their emergence, as they contributed greatly to the limitation of excessive population movement and instability and its potential social risks (infrastructure stress, public health risks, crime, etc.). Ironically, the emergence of these centres was often in itself uncontrolled. Many local people considered migrant women an important income source, and sought to tap this income source by creating private BJs, often without declaring their initiative to the local authorities. Over time, it seems that local authorities have decided to limit the profit-seeking activities of BJs that lack direct links with either the Women's Federation or the Industry and Commerce Bureau, and have therefore closed down many of them.⁸

In the 1990s, labour supply (migrant workers) became an important force for the acceleration of labour demand (local employers) in China's cities, contributing to the emergence of specific urban labour markets such as the BJs, i.e. a market including cheap labour in the domestic service. Nevertheless, since their very beginning BJs have proved to be selective and limited, despite the exponential growth of different types of BJs and their rising competition. That is to say, although the BJs were responding to economic demand and helped expand that demand for domestic workers, at the same time the institution of the BJs limited the allocation of human resources within the domestic service sector.

The research resulting from the fieldwork I undertook in Beijing and Shanghai in 1998 and in 2001 shows that the BJs can be both enabling and limiting of migrant women's job opportunities in an otherwise restricted labour market. It is very difficult to characterize these centres from a general standpoint, because state-owned and non state-owned BJs have emerged and developed in different ways. The former have generally been set up under the local authorities' regulatory framework, whereas the latter have tended to grow in a spontaneous way, as a result of market and migration pressures.

Stembridge and Taciana Fisac, 'An overview of the floating population phenomenon in today's People's Republic of China', in Verner Draguhn and Robert Ash (eds), *China's Economic Security* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998), pp. 19–53.

⁸ Some of the BJs I interviewed in Shanghai in 1998 no longer existed when I returned in 2001. The neighbours told me they had been closed down by the local authorities for 'economic irregularities', among other reasons. Refer also to footnote 24.

Despite the divergence, all BJs (both state-owned and non state-owned) have their own particular regulations (*jieshao guiding*), aimed at achieving an understanding between the contractor and the future employee. The trends shown below in one state-owned BJ in Beijing and around 25 non-state-owned BJs in Shanghai are not sufficiently significant and representative to constitute a blueprint. But at least they provide an indication of how rural migrant women may receive preference in finding a job within a discriminatory and restricted labour framework.

Case Study of a State-Owned BJ: the Beijing San Ba Housemaid Service Corporation (Beijingshi san ba jiaowu fuwu zong gongsi)

The San Ba Housemaid Service Corporation is run by the All China Women's Federation (*Zhongguo Funü lianhehui*). It is located in Chongwenmen (southeastern Beijing) and used to be right next to Chongwenmen's so-called 'illegal labour market' (*feifa laowu shichang*), where male migrant workers patiently waited to be hired (usually by private employers) as cooks, carpenters, painters, etc.⁹

The name of the corporation, 'San Ba' (8 March), refers to International Working Women's Day. The corporation was created in December 1983, at the beginning of a period of rapid urban economic growth which resulted in greater demand for domestic labourers, and therefore a significant increase in job opportunities for women. Although between 1983 and 1985 the corporation offered services for a diverse array of jobs (in the retail trade, catering, etc.), since 1986 it has specialised exclusively in domestic labour. Industrial (SOE) reforms inevitably affected the San Ba Corporation (see Figure 1): initially, small services declined abruptly (1983–1985) and were replaced by a huge demand in the domestic labour sector (1986–1989) as increasing job opportunities for urban couples meant that they were unable to take care of their child at home, in tandem with an upsurge of migration flows to the city. This meant that both employers and future employees (rural migrant women) required the intermediate services provided by job centres such as the San Ba Corporation. Nevertheless, since the first half of the 1990s there has been a decline in the demand (remaining more or less constant since then), as alternative newly created BJs have emerged, thus ending the monopoly of this corporation.

⁹ This market was closed after the CCP's fiftieth anniversary in 1999, and migrant workers are no longer allowed to remain here. New buildings are now in construction instead.

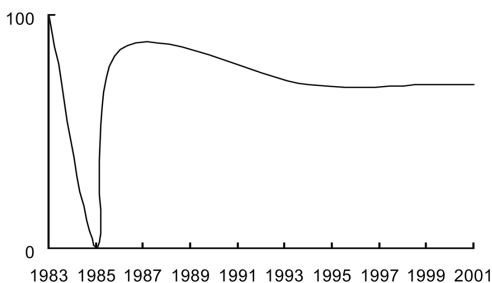


Figure 1. The San Ba Corporation's Intermediate Services: Demand Evolution (%). *Source:* Interviews in 1998 and in 2001

According to the information provided by the representatives of the corporation,¹⁰ on average there are about 5,000 newly arrived migrant women per year (around 600 per month) requesting the corporation's intermediate services.¹¹ Since its creation, there have been approximately 75,000 newly signed contracts between local employers and migrant women employees. The total annual number of listed employers has been around 120,000. It seems that the data disparities between employees and employers occur because: (a) local employers register their names but do not necessarily always use the corporation's services immediately; (b) the data on migrant employees are not comparable, because the corporation only considers the newly arrived, excluding the use of cumulative rates.

It is important to note here that access to the corporation's services is limited to migrant women (men are excluded), and since the 1990s preference has been given to those with a household registration (*hukou*) from Anhui, Henan, Gansu or Sichuan provinces. This is an improvement when discrimination is rampant in other sectors of the labour market, but ultimately reflects a gender ideology that is not beneficial to women in terms of equal opportunities in the labour force, as it reinforces the association of women with domestic labour, a 'dead-end' and low-paid job. Men seem to have more alternatives within the construction, repairing or retail trade sectors, either through the intermediate labour agencies operating between their province of origin and the destination area, or otherwise through their fellow-villagers (*laoxiang*).

¹⁰ Interviews 4/B (July 1998) and 4'/B (July 2001).

¹¹ Since SOE reforms, there has also been a slight increase in registered laid-off women workers in the corporation: roughly speaking, every month between 100 and 200 local laid-off women workers request the corporation's mediating services.

As far as the geographic distinction is concerned, San Ba's criterion for selecting these four provinces is that they are poor provinces with a significant surplus labour problem and therefore a higher rate of migration. Indeed, the vast majority of migrant workers in Beijing do come from these four provinces: according to the Beijing population census carried out in 1997 by the Public Security Bureau (Gong'anju)¹²—which considered around 80 per cent of the floating population at the national level—the majority of migrant workers moving to Beijing came from the following provinces: Hebei (573,000), Henan (300,000), Anhui (200,000), Sichuan, Shandong, Gansu and Zhejiang (100,000).

Nevertheless, official data show that the four provinces considered here are not the poorest provinces in the country. The comparative analysis shown below (Table 1) proves that Guizhou and Shaanxi provinces are far less developed, and should therefore be given priority too. According to this analysis, Anhui, Sichuan and Gansu are among the least developed provinces (ninth, twelfth and fourteenth positions, respectively), whereas Henan is among the eight most developed.

There are other domestic labour centres in Beijing that provide the same type of services to workers coming from other provinces, such as the Beijing Labour Services Centre for Migrant Workers (*Beijingshi wailai renyuan jiuze fuwu zhongxin*), located in Beijing's West Train Station (*xikezhan*). The selection there is much less restricted and offers job opportunities to migrant women from Guizhou and Shaanxi provinces, among others.

The San Ba Corporation is regulated under the Ministry of Labour's guidelines, based more particularly on the 1995 and 2001 Regulations (*Jiazheng fuwuyuan gongzi piaojun*—'Income Standards of Workers in the Domestic Sector'). The regulations and labour contract established by the corporation are clearly explained in three different documents, briefly summarised below:

1. 'Norms of Behaviour for the Housemaid in Beijing's San Ba Service Corporation' (*Beijingshi San Ba jiawu fuwu fuwusi gongsi jiating fuwuyuan zhouzi*): domestic workers are compelled to strictly observe the regulations and laws set by the state, as well as by the corporation. This

¹² Beijing's 1997 population census is the latest and most complete publication including migration flows between the capital and other origins/destinations. Despite being apparently outdated, it reflects a trend that remains representative today. The 2000 nationwide population census remains an incomplete instrument in this specific field.

Table 1. Labour Export Provinces: GDP Per Capita and Floating Population

<i>Provinces</i>	<i>GDP pc (Rmb)</i>	<i>Ranking (according to GDP pc level)</i>	<i>Floating Population (%)</i>
Hebei	6,079	4	7.3
Jilin	5,504	6	22.3
Heilongjiang	7,243	3	12.8
Zhejiang	10,515	1	25.0
Anhui	4,390	9	105.0
Jiangxi	4,155	11	63.0
Shandong	7,590	2	0.6
Henan	4,430	8	62.3
Hubei	5,899	5	4.1
Hunan	4,643	7	52.4
Guangxi	4,356	10	72.4
Sichuan	4,029	12	84.4
Guizhou	2,215	15	19.6
Shaanxi	3,707	13	5.1
Gansu	3,137	14	19.9

Sources: Zhongguo tongji nianjian (China Statistical Yearbook) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1998), p. 65; *1995-nian quanguo 1% renkou, quanguo fenge* (National Volume of the 1995 1 Per Cent Population Census) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1997), pp. 542–553.

Labour import provinces (i.e. those where immigration exceeds out-migration) such as Beijing, Shanghai or Guangdong have been excluded from this analysis. For the sake of simplicity, I have chosen GDP per capita as a wealth indicator for each province. The percentages on the floating population are calculated on the basis of the information provided in the *1995-nian*: ((total residents-total registered) x 100 / total residents.)

All data refer to the late 1990s in order to avoid a mismatch with the 1997 population census.

implies self-respect, self-esteem and trust, and constantly maintains high moral professional standards. There is a set of restrictions relating to the worker's mobility (she has to ask for permission when she goes out in the street or decides to stay out for the night, etc.) and her relations with fellow-villagers and relatives (she is not allowed to bring them into the employer's apartment). There are labour contract cancellation procedures (having to inform the employer at least seven days in advance if she wants to cancel), as well as an annual revision of her legal documents. The domestic worker has to inform the corporation if the employer has an improper attitude towards her.

2. 'The Obligations of Employers in Beijing's San Ba Service Corporation' (*Beijingshi San Ba jiawu fuwusi gongsi yonghu xuzhi*): employers

are compelled to observe Beijing local regulations as well as those of the corporation. This document in particular states the different procedures required to register with the corporation. Employers are required to show a proper attitude when the labour contract negotiation with the future employee takes place. References are made to the labour contract signing procedures. The employer should respect the employee's work and human integrity.

3. 'Beijing's San Ba Service Corporation Service Contract' (*Beijingshi San Ba jiaowu fuwusi gongsi fuwu hetong*): the labour contract (referred to here as a 'service contract'—*fuwu hetong*) includes the rights and obligations of both parties (employee and employer), as well as conflict resolution procedures. Objectively speaking, the contract is a win-win situation, without any potential bias being observed towards any of the parties involved. I should point out here that both the national Labour Law and the literature on labour relations and labour contracts do not always necessarily assume a win-win situation. This clarification is necessary for a better understanding of San Ba's aim: to provide the least possible losses for both interested parties.

Generally speaking, the corporation's regulations are tightly linked to three different elements: required permits, fees and wages.

1. Required permits: the newly arrived migrant women need to have three different updated documents: an ID card (*shenfenzheng*), a work permit (*jiuyezheng*) and a special card (*ka*) issued by the corporation. A fourth document, a temporary residence permit (*zanzhuzheng*), is required only for permanent workers (*guding gongren*), i.e. those domestic labour employees who have worked with the same employer for at least three months. In these cases, the address that appears on their permit is the employer's.¹³

2. Fees: as a non-profit organisation, the corporation is compelled by the central government to charge relatively low fees to both the employer and the employee. Thus, since its creation in 1983 the changes in the fees have been insignificant, due to so-called 'social

¹³ Since 16 February 2001, non-local workers have been required to renew and update their temporary residence permit by paying the sum of 180 Rmb (apart from other administration fees). This renewal process allows temporary residents to remain in Beijing on a legal basis. The new requirement is officially stated in the 'Propaganda Scheme on the Change of the Temporary Residence Permit at the District Level' (*Guanyu zai quanshi genghuang zanzhuzheng de xuanchuan tigan*), issued by the Public Security Bureau on 5 June 2001.

Table 2. Fees Charged by the Beijing San Ba Corporation: Comparison between 1998 and 2001 (Rmb)

<i>Fees</i>	<i>Employee</i>		<i>Employer</i>	
	1998	2001	1998	2001
Introduction (<i>jieshao fei</i>)	20 (+10)	20 (+10)	20 (+10)	20 (+10)
Registration (<i>dengji fei</i>)	0	2	0	2
Administration (<i>shouxu fei</i>)	0	0	20	20
Deposit (<i>yajin fei</i>)	50*	0	100	300
Extension of the contract	0	20	0	20
Total	70 (+10)	42 (+10)	140 (+10)	362 (+10)

Source: Interviews 1998 and 2001.

* The employee can recover this fee when she decides to return to her province of origin (presenting the required documents). The corporation representatives justify this fee on the grounds that they have responsibility for the employee's well-being. It is a way of keeping a link with her while she is working for a Beijing employer.

acceptance' (*shehui xiaoyi*) standards, i.e. in order to avoid social tensions or the spread of a negative image of the institution. Nevertheless, in the last few years, fees have undergone slight changes in favour of migrant women workers and to the detriment of employers (Table 2). While in 1998 the total amount of fees paid by migrant women workers was about 70 Rmb (+10 Rmb penalty if the labour contract was ended before the scheduled date), in 2001 these were reduced to 42 Rmb. With regard to employers, there has been about a three-fold increase in only three years: in 1998, they paid the corporation about 140 Rmb (+10 Rmb penalty), whereas in 2001 the total reached more than 360 Rmb.¹⁴ This increase may be explained by two very positive reasons: (a) it encourages migrant women to use their ser-

¹⁴ During the interviews, no specific reason was given for this threefold increase in such a short time period. Had inflation pressures been particularly important in recent years, it could be easily understood, but deflation has prevailed since 1997. Thus, this variation could be linked to two other reasons. From an economic point of view, the corporation may need to guarantee its own 'economic survival' (compensating the low fees charged to women migrant workers); from a social standpoint, it could be viewed as a means of protection of future employees, involving a more serious commitment from the employers.

vices, thereby reducing unorganised migration; (b) it helps guarantee respect for migrant women's work, avoiding potential abuses. Despite the corporation's 'socially accepted' internal policy, the representatives of the corporation do not hide their interest in encouraging the growth of other small private BJs: they are interested in further developing a market economy, increasing competition and therefore pushing for the fluctuation of prices (nowadays, prices are fully set by the state in this corporation, thus they are too low and do not create any profits for the corporation).

3. Wages: basic wages are set by the corporation in accordance with the basic living standards of Beijing households. From then on, they vary according to working experience—'new workers' vs 'old workers' (*xin fuwuyuan* vs *lao fuwuyuan*, i.e. the newly arrived vs those having worked previously in other Beijing households)¹⁵—as well as on the type of job performed (Table 3). These wage rates have not varied much since 1998. Note that the wage disparity between rural and urban workers in the city has always been particularly significant: the average monthly wage of local workers in the domestic service sector (*jumin fuwuye*) in Beijing in 1997 was already about 730 Rmb (8,720 Rmb per year).¹⁶ Needless to say, laid-off women, or any urban women using the BJs, tend to have a higher wage scale than migrant women workers.

Summing up, although official and state-owned BJs are rigidly controlled and regulated, they provide a market-orientation basis for the newly arrived migrant women, who benefit from low fees but also encounter very small income growth. I proceed now to describe the

¹⁵ In theory, the so-called 'old (domestic service) workers' (*lao fuwuyuan*) are those who have spent a considerable amount of time in Beijing, with previous job experience in the domestic sector. In practice, it is the time that counts, rather than the job experience. For instance, during an interview in July 2001 I witnessed the negotiation between an employer (A) and an employee (B) from Sichuan. As they could not agree on the wage level (A offered 200 Rmb per month while B asked for at least 300 Rmb), one of the corporation representatives immediately looked at B's date of arrival in Beijing, as it appeared on her card (in the corporation, all future employees have to wear a card with their name, province of origin and date of arrival in Beijing, but with no information on working experience). Without any reference to her previous experience in the domestic sector, the fact that she had been in Beijing for about four years gave her enough credit to be paid more than 300 Rmb per month initially. On a general basis, wages are set between the employer and the employee before signing the contract, using as a reference the initial wage paid to 'new workers' (*xin fuwuyuan*) and negotiating from then on.

¹⁶ *Beijing tongji nianjian* (Beijing Statistical Yearbook) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1998), p. 95.

Table 3. Wages (in Rmb) and Job Positions

<i>Job Position</i>	<i>Minimum Wage</i>	<i>Monthly Increase</i>	<i>Maximum Wage</i>
Housemaid (including care of the elderly and household maintenance) (<i>jiating fuwuyuan</i>)	260	10	360
Care of the children (<i>jiating baoyuyuan</i>)	260	10	380
Care of sick people (<i>jiating huiyuan</i>)*	260	10	460
24-hour care of sick people in hospitals (<i>huiyuan</i>)	28 Rmb per day (if the sick person is a woman) 30 Rmb per day (if the sick person is a man)	—	—

Source: Interviews 1998 and 2001.

No information is provided on basic conditions for accommodation.

* Within this group, the wage range is between 260 Rmb and 460 Rmb, according to four different types of job positions: those who take care of partially disabled women (260 Rmb initially, with a 10 Rmb monthly increase, and a maximum monthly wage of 380 Rmb); carers of partially disabled men (280–20–400); carers of totally disabled women (320–20–420); and carers of totally disabled men (340–20–460).

general trends of private BJs, which follow market forces in terms of both labour demand and supply, as well as in terms of prices.

General Trends of Non State-Owned BJs in Shanghai

Shanghai has always been a migration city.¹⁷ In fact, its population density is far superior to the rest of China's cities: according to official sources, there were already 3,853 persons per sq. km.

¹⁷ According to the official data, in 1996 there were 130,100 migrant workers moving to Shanghai—(*Shanghai tongji nianjian* [Shanghai Statistical Yearbook] [Shanghai: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1997], p. 42). These data do not entirely reflect reality, as both the local authorities and the media (and even taxi drivers!) openly speak of an 'invasion' of at least 3 million temporary migrant workers per year to Shanghai (this comment prevails by 2003). This means that the floating population represents at least a fifth of Shanghai's total population (which is around 13 million persons).

in 2000.¹⁸ This human congestion may be in part explained by the significant economic achievements in the last decades, resulting in most cases in higher levels of labour demand and therefore in attracting increasing numbers of migrant workers, concentrated in the construction and domestic labour sectors.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Shanghai (together with Beijing) is also the city with the largest number of local regulations impeding the free job mobility of non-local workers.²⁰

This means that control of in-migration has been a greater priority for local authorities than attracting migrant workers to jobs that local workers refuse to do. In fact, almost every neighbourhood committee in Shanghai has traditionally accounted for at least one labour centre addressed to local citizens in search of a job. In addition, as a result of migration pressures since the 1990s, Shanghai local authorities have created an increasing number of labour centres addressed only to migrant potential workers, mainly BJs. Unfortunately, there is no official list available on the total number of BJs (both state-owned and non state-owned)—local authorities openly ignore their total number. Thanks to the emergence of a spontaneously established social network with some of the migrant women, I managed to interview almost 100 migrant women workers in about 25 BJs, mainly in the northern and central areas of Shanghai. Most of them were private, with the exception of three that were collective owned (i.e. under the supervision of neighbourhood committees). Although about 40 per cent of the BJs (around ten) claimed to be legally recognised, they did not seem to receive any specific support from the local authorities. While in 1998 their services were silently tolerated by the authorities, by 2001 most of them had disappeared. Apparently

¹⁸ The city's average was about 500 persons per sq. km.

¹⁹ As I cannot discuss the evolution of Shanghai's migrant population in detail in this article, for a clear and precise explanation please refer to Wang Wuding *et al.*, *Jiushi niandai Shanghai liudong renkou* (Shanghai's Floating Population in the 1990s) (Shanghai: Huadong Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 1997).

²⁰ For instance, Shanghai's local government was the first to identify three sectors of employment, the so-called A, B and C jobs, allowing migrant workers to perform only the A jobs (low-skilled, dirty, tiring and low-paid jobs). The B jobs ('window sector'—*changkou hangye*—where there is direct contact with the public) and C jobs (governmental and official) were reserved for local workers. Later on, other governments (Beijing and Guangzhou, in particular) followed this same trend. On this topic, refer to Wang Wuding *et al.*, *Jiushi niandai Shanghai*; and see also *Xin fagui yuekan* (Monthly Journal on New Laws and Regulations), various issues: this journal is published in Shanghai and regularly includes local regulations on migration and the labour market.

most of the private owners had moved out as a result of the housing reforms and the subsequent construction of new buildings.

Most privately owned BJs in Shanghai have their own internal regulations (usually written on a large paper hanging up on the wall) and strongly compete with each other (in some cases, they are almost facing each other in the same street). Nevertheless, they generally tend to follow a very similar pattern, including the following:

1. A brief description of the services provided (to guarantee a fair agreement between both contracting parties).
2. The types of jobs and minimum monthly wage standards. Migrant women can be hired as: housemaids (*jiawu*), 400 Rmb; to care for children (*dai xiaoer*) and/or sick and/or elderly persons (*jiaogu bingren he laoren*), 400 Rmb; as waitresses in small restaurants (*yinshidian fuwuyuan*) 400 Rmb; for hourly jobs (*zhongdiangong*), 10 Rmb per hour; to do laundry (*xi yifu*), 30 Rmb per hour; etc.
3. Fees paid to the BJs. Most BJs charge a standard introduction fee (*jieshao fei*) of about 10–20 Rmb to both employee and employer. There may be extra fees, but only on special occasions, e.g. when the contract is cancelled before it is over, or when the migrant woman returns to the BJ after a long period of absence.
4. Required documents (for both the employer and the employee): an ID card (*shenfenzheng*) seems to be enough. The temporary residence permit (*zanzhuzheng*) and the working permit (*jiuyezheng*) are not necessary.
5. Labour contract requirements. Not all BJs offer a written labour contract. In these cases, both parties rely on verbal agreements. When the BJ has a written labour contract model, the following information is specified: ID card number; address of the residence and work unit of the employer; job performed by the employee; monthly wage, excluding accommodation and food (the employer has to guarantee minimum living standards to the worker); number of days off per month; norms of behaviour for both contracting parties (respect and commitment, etc.).

Although many Shanghai privately owned BJs openly receive both male and female migrant workers, local employers (the so-called *laoban* or 'bosses') using the BJs' services generally only search for female workers. Put differently, there are no exogenous variables such as the government's gender segmentation of the labour market but, rather, it is employers who contribute to clear and defined labour discrimination, in favour of the women workers in this case.

The local authorities generally show neither specific nor explicit support for the non state-owned BJs, nor do they necessarily penalise

them for their (presumably 'informal', i.e. undeclared) activities.²¹ After all, the BJs are offering a fundamental service to migrant women, and by implication contributing to stability: labour is selectively distributed, thereby causing fewer pressures on the SOEs' laid-off local population searching for a job in other parts of Shanghai's service sector (where migrant workers generally tend to concentrate). Of course, the owners and managers of the BJs also benefit from the fees paid by employees and employers.

In the 1990s, some BJs were advertising their services on the radio. As it became too expensive they decided to stop this advertising system, relying more on word of mouth: 'fellow-villagers introduce fellow-villagers, employers introduce employers' (*laoxiang jieshao lao-xiang, laoban jieshao laoban*).²² Thus, social networks (*guanxi*) have always been a basic instrument for the economic survival of the BJs. The fact that this informal mechanism is so effective also gives an idea of the (presumably good) quality of the services of the BJs: the majority of BJs I visited were always fairly packed with migrant women, mostly in the early mornings and late evenings, when the *laoban* were not at work. The number of employers was usually far below the number of potential employees. Of course, the over-supply of workers also reflected the decreasing possibilities of local workers hiring housemaids: the rapidly increasing flow of laid-off workers among urban households reduced the pool of potential employers. In fact, about half of the BJs stated that they were seeing an increasing number of laid-off women workers offering their services as housemaids.

In sum, non state-owned BJs have tended to be conditioned not by the supply of workers (migrant women), which is permanently guaranteed, but rather by the demand for workers (employers). This dependence is inevitably linked to the whole process of SOE reform, which private BJs can simply do nothing about.

It appears, therefore, that the ownership structure of the BJs determines in large part the labour conditions of migrant women workers, each with varied consequences:

²¹ It remains unclear why most of the BJs have been removed (most of them now replaced by private residences). According to the neighbours, most of them closed down voluntarily. Considering the imposition of tougher restrictions on migrant workers in Shanghai since 2001, there may have been a combination of reasons: governmental (general dismantling of private BJs), economic (new housing construction) or personal (BJ managers may have gone into other private businesses).

²² Interview 5/S1 (May 1998).

1. State-owned BJs are based on a more rigid structure whereby migrant women are restricted not only by requirements regarding permits, but even in their job choice (only as provided by the BJs) and labour mobility (lack of income growth). Nevertheless, the employees have some guarantee of legal protection and safety in the form of labour contracts.
2. Non state-owned BJs have a less rigid structure with fewer restrictions. In particular, they require only an ID card, and do not penalize women migrant workers wishing to go back to their province of origin. Thus they offer employment for lower overall cost to the employee. However, their legal protection tends to be weak and therefore subject to possible abuse from the employer, without relevant back-up ensuring that the pertinent judiciary authorities will solve potential emerging conflicts. Of course, this does not mean that state-owned BJs have the full capacity to protect their migrant workers. Ultimately, it is the courts that have authority to decide lawsuits. After all, the status of domestic work is not entirely clear in the legal statutes: BJs are not a union or a formal employer.

In other words, neither type of BJ is perfect for migrant women searching for a stable job and an income. Nevertheless, they can be viewed as an instrument for reallocating migrant women workers who lack the informal channels to find a job, and in most cases involve less hassle and cost. The degree to which the BJs will be able to continue to provide this benefit to migrant women depends upon the extent of pressures emerging as a result of the SOE reforms. BJs may turn to providing jobs not only for migrant women but also for local women, in response to both local government directives and market competition. Local governments have adopted preferential policies favouring local workers, and this could ultimately lead to a systematic dismantling of 'migrant-oriented' BJs, shifting their focus more to laid-off women.

Although BJs seem to be key intermediate service centres providing job opportunities to newly arrived migrant women, there are other institutions that play a similar role. These include:

1. Interprovincial governmental agencies. These do not charge any fees to either the employer or the employee. These agencies are particularly formal, as all potential workers need to have four certificates as a rule: an ID card; a work permit; an education certificate (*wenhuazheng*); and a health certificate. They search for potential migrant workers in their provinces of origin following the

demands of the destination areas' employers. The process is a little slow, but does include legal guarantees for both contracting parties. They mainly place (women) workers into domestic service, but also serve the construction sector, where they recruit primarily migrant men.

2. Private labour agencies. These concentrate on temporary (*linshigong*) and seasonal jobs (*jijiegong*), mostly for women migrant workers. They differ from the private BJs in that they concentrate on other services such as restaurants, take-away food or laundry. They charge very high fees to both employers and potential employees. For instance, if the woman migrant worker is going to work by the hour, the labour agency will charge her a total amount of 60 Rmb (10 Rmb for registration fees +20 Rmb for formality fees +30 Rmb for administration fees), but if she keeps her links with the agency for more than two months, the agency's services will be free. In some cases, she will also need to pay a 100 Rmb deposit fee (returned to her when the contract is over).

There is evident competition between BJs and other labour agencies. This competition is a direct result of general economic changes since Reforms, and more particularly since labour market reforms. In general, the interaction between labour demand (employers) and labour supply (employees) fluctuates according to the extent to which migrants can find better alternatives in a segmented and discriminatory labour market: the more choices migrants have in the labour market, the more expensive will their labour be, as a direct result of a less abundant labour supply. Geographical mobility for migrant workers is no longer impeded by the *hukou* system, but once they have arrived in the city, formal restrictions (i.e. the various certificates) and occupational segregation (e.g. the division of jobs into A, B and C categories)²³ accentuate the social insecurity of women migrant workers, who may need to rely on alternative sources of income, such as prostitution or show-girl activities.²⁴ Ultimately, even the BJs—either official

²³ Refer to footnote 20.

²⁴ In a recent visit to Guizhou province, in particular to Anshun county, I had the chance to attend an erotic performance by an itinerant group of migrant women from Anhui and Hunan. The (lady) boss confirmed that their job was not specifically legal but claimed that a blind eye was turned by the local authorities, with a maximum stay of three days in every destination. Their access to big cities is more restricted, but that does not mean they do not have erotic shows there as well. Apparently the girls (17 years old on average) preferred this profession to being housemaids, for income reasons.

or private—contribute to the problems of labour segregation and discrimination and therefore should be reformed to be really useful for migrant women.

Main Findings

The main findings in this research work offer a better understanding of gender, urban labour markets and China's economic transition. In general terms, a more efficient utilisation of the BJJs, and by implication an improved labour allocation for migrant women, could be achieved if the following conditions were met:

1. *Administrative barriers should be reduced or even eliminated.* In order to avoid further economic insecurity for migrant women, it would be convenient to remove labour administrative and institutional barriers, increase the levels of employment information, and develop a genuine social security system for all women migrant workers (even if they have been hired through one of the private BJJs, which often ignore potential health problems), as well as an effective housing policy allowing married or engaged women to bring their families with them. Big cities like Beijing and Shanghai may want to follow the example of small cities such as Dongguan (Guangdong), which have specific areas where migrant workers are assigned their own apartment in exchange for work with local employers.
2. *More emphasis should be given to the level of human capital at the place of origin.* It is also necessary to improve the level of human capital at the place of origin, so that not all migrant women necessarily have to work in either domestic service or restaurants. The jobs open to them are so few that there is no scope for them to receive any additional professional training in other occupations.
3. *Legal and financial support should be offered to the BJJs and training should be provided to migrant workers.* If local governments could develop professional training programmes for newly arrived migrant women, this would help them more easily overcome the policy and administrative structure involved in the absence of job mobility, solving at the same time the low-skill disadvantage that most of them have in the labour market. In this case, even if the current SOE reforms negatively impact migrant women's labour distribution in the big cities (i.e. by decreasing their supply, due to increased job competition), the effect will surely be transitional until the unemployment threat

is eventually solved. Just as local laid-off women receive specific privileges for job allocation in the urban labour market through training programmes, so too local governments should offer financial and legal support to all BJs, so that the services provided to the newly arrived migrant women can further improve. Financial sources could include both the All Women's Federation and the local labour authorities. Despite their own internal problems, there have been active NGOs such as Beijing's Migrant Women's Club (*Dagongmei zijia*), established in April 1996 and sponsored by the *Nongjianü baishitong zazhi* (Rural Women Knowing All) magazine, aimed at improving the living conditions and protecting the legal rights of migrant women, providing them with a job orientation and a logistic support in administrative formalities (legalising their status in the city), or helping them to find housing. If this type of initiative could be further supported, the living and working conditions of women migrant workers could then potentially improve.

Concluding Remarks

While the housemaid agencies (BJs) initially emerged as an instrument guaranteeing job opportunities to migrant women, they have also restricted their access to alternative more highly skilled jobs. In short, BJs are part of a dual urban labour market system, wherein migrant women are treated as 'secondary' citizens in a highly competitive working environment, and where local women, laid off as a result of the SOE reforms, are now made the policy priority of most cities.

In addition, all BJs (state-owned and non state-owned) are part of a unified labour system where labour is allocated by the principle of origin and not according to the principle of human capital. This proves not only that BJs may be of little help to migrant women, but also that they may eventually be inefficient and stifling to economic growth.

The emergence of BJs shows that there is what could be identified as a 'migration industry', whereby migrant women workers are elements of an organised type of labour allocation system. Of course, this 'industry' is far from being the ultimate choice: the level of information remains incomplete and job choices are by implication too reduced.

China's urban labour market is still undergoing a maturity process, and external elements such as migration flows cannot be viewed as an obstacle to its growth. On the contrary, as migrant workers contribute to the urban labour supply, they therefore contribute to

further economic growth. Migrant women's contribution to economic growth in the urban areas is not as visible as migrant men's (domestic service vs construction). But this is not a reason why migrant women should be discriminated against.

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain
fleila@ceibs.edu

Copyright of European Journal of East Asian Studies is the property of Brill Academic Publishers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.