Report

Gender and Migration Networks: New Approaches to Research on Chinese Migration to France and Europe

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*Migrations-Sociétés*, a major French publication on migration, has devoted one of its latest volumes to women in migration in a special issue (Rigoni and Séhili 2005). The contributions draw attention to a new and important phenomenon — the growing presence of women in international population movements — and raise, once again, the delicate question of the lack of French research on this topic, including the scant amount of work done on one of the main migration movements to France and Europe in the last decades: that from the People’s Republic of China. This new flow of migrants has many interesting characteristics, including a growing involvement of women. Researches on this topic have tended to adopt an institutionalist approach, examining themes like the “migration system,” defined as two or more places connected to one another by flows and counter-flows of people. Lately some studies have defined migrant networks as sets of inter-personal ties that connect movers, former movers and on-movers between countries of origin and destinations. In addition to the existing approaches and methodologies, this Report proposes to look at the place and role of women migrants, in studying the phenomenon of Chinese migration.

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Women Migration and Chinese Migration

Women as Actors in the Migration Process

Since the end of the 1980s, works on migration history or women’s history have shed light on the quantitative and qualitative importance of women in migration flows since the 19th century. Michelle Perrot and Nancy Green (Green 2002: 105–120) point out that such findings have seriously challenged the commonly held notion that men migrate and women stay behind to look after the home. New studies have brought out the fact that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, women migrated from Europe to the “new” territories (America); Italian women in particular moved within Europe itself; and women arrived in Europe from North Africa, then Asia and other continents.

As Nancy Green explains, the early approaches paid much attention to the plight of the woman migrant who had to fend for herself living with the double stigma of being a woman and an immigrant. Then in Europe, under the influence of microstoria (analysis) and prosopography (methodology) (Revel 1996), a more individual approach — also a more optimistic one — depicts women not as an object but as a subject in migration. Such analysis and methodology have brought about a rethink on migration and its traditional concept (man being attached to immigration-production and woman to immigration-reproduction) that obscures the fact that even as a migrant “dependant,” women occupies a central economic position. These studies have also brought to light certain interesting issues such as the categorization of women migrants, the changing image of women from sedentary to mobile beings, the impact of globalization etc. All these seem to be particularly relevant to the research on Chinese women’s migration to France and Europe over the last two decades.

Renewal of the Chinese Migration Flow to France and Europe

Since the 1980s, mainland China has considerably relaxed the restrictions on the movement of its citizens abroad. In 2003, 220 million people crossed the frontiers and Chinese authorities said they issued 4,000,000 passports; the Chinese tradition dating from the 19th century of departing for overseas destinations has been revived (Guerassimoff-Pina 1997). If North America is still the first destination for these new migrants, Europe — and France in particular — is becoming once again a valued destination. Recent studies in France and in Europe (Guerassimoff-Pina et al. 2002; Guerassimoff-Pina 2003; Gao and Poisson 2005) have revealed some major characteristics of these new Chinese migrants.

(a) Places of origin

Zhejiang remains the principal sending area of Chinese immigrants in France and Europe but other regions are gaining importance. In 1995, Chinese official data