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Course title: Gender, labour and migration in Asia
Degree programme: MSc. Contemporary Asian Studies

University of Amsterdam

Graduate School of Social Sciences

Subjects of the state or objects of pride?

Uyghurs in China's labour migration

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Student number 6156304
Assignment number Paper
Date of submission 1 April 2010
Page count 15
Word count 4,793

Introduction

Chinese labour migration, and the emergence of a new division of labour along rural-urban divides, are typically explained in literature with reference to structural components in China's policy of labour migration (Ngai, 2010; Fan, 2003). Authors bring to bear the collusion of the state and large industrialists on China's eastern seaboard, structural limitations placed on peasants by the situation in the countryside, and the continuation of policies that are often seen as outright discriminatory towards labourers from a rural background, such as the household registration (hukou) system (Ngai, 2010: 137). Others make note of the preference for women labourers in China's manufacturing industry, and explain such preference with reference to socio-cultural values of 'knowing ones place', a patrilocal tradition, and Confucian prescriptions on the social position of women (Fan, 2003: 28). However, structural components alone cannot sufficiently explain the migratory experience of all China's temporary labour migrants. This was shown most dramatically last year, when riots between Han and Uyghur communities erupted in Ürümqi. The riots were a direct result from ethnic tensions on the factory floor in China's manufacturing industry, and were explained with reference to cultural – ethnic and religious – values, especially as they pertain to the proper position of women in the household and their obligations to the religious community (Eunjung Cha, 2009). The Uyghur are one of China's 55 ethnic minorities. They are a people of Turkic descent, most of them are adherents of Islam. There are about 20 million Uyghurs in China and they are most numerous in China's far-western Xinjiang province.

The ethnic dimension of the migratory experience has received very little attention in the literature on China's labour migration. Even though minorities face similar structural limitations to the Han on migrating to industrialised urban areas on China's eastern seaboard, the literature on minority movement suggests that there are also key differences to the rise of a new division of labour in areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities. Specifically, Iredale and Fei (2003: 13) note that large scale labour migration began at a later date in minority regions compared to areas with Han Chinese peasants, that women are overrepresented in minority migration when compared to Han migration, and that not all 55 minorities have taken part in equal numbers in China's temporary labour migration. Media account of Uyghurs migration in particular show that targeted recruitment of Uyghur peasants for work in China's manufacturing industry didn't get underway until some time after the year 2000 (Eunjung Cha, 2009; Xinhua, 2009). Such 'labour export

programmes' as they target Han peasant in rural south China go back as far as 1986 (Iredale et al, 2001a: 9).

With this paper I aim to contribute to the literature on minority movement and migration, and to theorising about the experience of temporary Uyghur migrants on China's eastern seaboard. I begin by considering the literature on labour migration in China and Beijing's policies that perpetuate a rural-urban division of labour. I then turn my attention to the literature on minority migration in general, and to the Uyghur experience in China's labour migration in particular. Data on Uyghur migration is patchy at best, and anthropological research is restricted to one study among Uyghur migrants in Beijing. Reference to cultural values in the run-up to last year's riots suggests that the literature on Uyghur identity can bring something to bear on this discussion. I argue that Uyghurs – specifically Uyghur women – enter into complex negotiations between the demands of the state on the one hand and those of their ethnic and religious communities on the other. Whereas the government demands it's peasant labourers' cooperation as subjects of the modernising projects of the state, ethnic and religious communities demand appropriate behaviour of its members, and regard them instead as objects of pride. These demands require migrants to creatively submit to regulations for migrant labourers while at the same time maintaining their cultural identity. Taking a clue from such complex negotiations in other situations where Uyghurs also mix with non-Uyghur Chinese, I claim that it's with reference to ethnic values that Uyghur migrants most easily assert their Uyghur identity.

A new division for China's labour

The Chinese economy has been growing rapidly since the era of reform and opening commenced in 1979. In this year Deng Xiaoping announced that "getting rich is glorious" and China was firmly on the road to market-oriented reform. Economic development is concentrated in so-called Special Economic Zones (SEZ) on the Chinese east coast with easy access to foreign markets. Development has initially focussed on attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) and export-led manufacturing industries. Ngai et al (2010) argue that this process has been largely market-driven, but that it's also been encouraged by government incentives. To this aim Beijing has endorsed the growth of large industries at the cost of small family businesses (idem: 134). Industries have benefitted from China's cheap labour, which has remained cheap thanks to the government's promotion of labour migration and the creation of a new rural-urban division of labour.

Ngai et al (2010: 136-137) identify three components in Beijing's policies of maintaining this division of labour. Firstly, at the direction of the central government rural authorities have been seeking inter-provincial labour cooperations. Through such 'labour export programs', a term borrowed from Iredale et al (2001a: 9), rural governments have sought to dispatch peasant labourers to the manufacturing industry in the east. Central coordination enabled the targeted recruitment of young, female labourers (Ngai et al, 2010: 136). Secondly, personal incentives for rural villagers commit these peasants to migrating to China's east coast for the purpose of labour. Limited opportunities in the village and low prices for agricultural produce mean that villagers have no choice but to migrate to the east in search of economic opportunities. Yet there is also an attraction that urban China has on young peasants: "[still] others want to widen their horizons and to experience modern life and cosmopolitan consumption styles in the cities" (idem: 137). Thirdly, the channeling of labour from rural areas to the coastal boomtowns has been aided by the relaxation of the household registration (hukou) system. This relaxation has allowed peasants with rural hukou status to migrate to urban areas for the purpose of temporary labour, while they remained tied to their countryside villages for social services such as healthcare and education (idem: 137). The persistence of the rural-urban divide through such 'non-hukou migration' prevents rural peasants from gaining full citizenship status in urban areas, and stops those migrants from identifying fully with the city. Hukou migration, in which the migrant receives urban hukou status for the city of destination, remains severely restricted and open only to those with specific skills and education.

The population of temporary migrant labourers, or 'floating population', is not the homogenous group that it's regularly made out to be. Gender and ethnic background also play a role in a person's experience with labour migration. Fan (2003) analyses the gender division of labour which has arisen as a result of socio-cultural factors. She brings to bear three such factors on the creation of this gender division: 'knowing one's place', a patrilocal tradition, and Confucian prescriptions of social positions (idem: 28-29). These traditions have not only created sectors of employment that urbanites typically snob, it has also resulted in a division of labour in which female migrants fill positions in industry that are regarded as typically female. Since a woman's position is in the household, life as a migrant labourer often ends when she gets wed back in the village. In the few years that women spend as migrants they are therefore restricted to menial tasks that require little formal education. Chinese women are further seen as submissive and docile, making them ill-suited for managerial positions (idem: 28). Whole sectors are thus filled with either men

or women. Female migrant labourers typically find work in the garment industry or as waiting staff, whereas construction work is popular among temporary male migrants (idem: 38).

Subjects of the state: China's minority movement

The labour export programmes, coordinated by local governments in rural areas at the encouragement of the central government, merit some attention. These programmes have allowed employers to specifically target young women for work on the assembly line. Local economies benefit from such mass migration by remittances sent back from the east coast. Rural economic development has played a major role in the initiation of these programmes. Ngai et al reference two such programmes through which peasant labour from rural townships in Hunan and Guangxi provinces has systematically been 'exported' to factories in Guangdong since the 1990s (Ngai et al, 2010: 136). Such programmes are also referred to in the literature on China's minority migration. Iredale et al (2001a: 9) mention a programme in rural Sichuan that been active since 1986 and Zhang (2003: 143) describes a programme in Guizhou. According to Zhang the programme in Guizhou disproportionately targets members of minority populations because they often live in poverty stricken areas with large levels of surplus labour: "[Ethnic minorities] have been gradually pushed into these regions or they retreated there to try to maintain their identity and culture" (idem).

The pervasiveness of labour export programmes in areas with large populations of ethnic minorities suggests that China's policies of labour migration have not targeted minority populations differently from rural Han communities. Indeed, in the context of minority migration Iredale and Fei (2003: 4-6) mention the same components responsible for the creation of a rural-urban division of labour that are also mentioned by Ngai et al. However, Iredale and Fei also describe key differences in the history of labour out-migration from minority areas. Firstly, they notice a difference in timing of minority movement. Labour migration from areas with large minority populations didn't take off at the same speed as it did for Han migrants (idem: 13). Secondly, the composition of minority migrant populations is different to that of Han migrants. Female migration, especially in lower age brackets, is more common among minority migrants than it is among Han migrants. What is more, minority migrants typically have a level of education on either end of the scale – either a relatively high, or a relatively low level of education. The latter may also explain the disproportionately high number of hukou migrants, minority national who migrate to urban areas after receiving the hukou status of the city of destination (idem: 14). A third

difference has been the redistribution of minority populations are a result of their economic migration. Ethnic minorities are now much more 'spread out' whereas before these populations used to live in well-defined areas. This redistribution has not affected all minorities equally. Minority migration first took off in south China, in areas that have been heavily targeted by labour export programmes from an early age. Minority regions in the west of China have so far not been affected to the same degree (idem: 15).

These differences are reflected in data on minority migration. The 1990 census, enumerating population flows between 1985 and 1990, indicates that only 5.4% of migrants had a minority background. This is compared the their share of 8.04% of the entire population (Iredale and Fei, 2003: 14). Some 40% of minority migrants were female, compared to only 20% among Han migrants (idem: 14; also compare Fan, 2003), and just over half of minority migrants were hukou migrants, 5 percentage points higher than their Han counterparts (idem: 15). The 1990 census report is one of few sources on the share of minorities in China's labour migration available to researchers. As Iredale and Fei (idem: 12) point out, this quantitative data has its shortcomings. The 1990 census report only classes people as migrants when they have moved away from their rural place of birth for over a year. These numbers therefore exclude large numbers of temporary migrants who return to their rural villages within a year. Such temporary migrants are classed as 'labour movement' by the census report, and its data on such 'labour movement' is patchy at best. The census report may therefore exacerbate the differences between Han and minority migrants identified by Iredale and Fei. What is more, this report is now two decades old; labour migration in general and labour export programmes in particular have likely smoothed out differences between Han and minority migrant flows, especially in the south of China where such programmes got underway in the 1980^s. The census report estimated the total number of migrants to be around 10 million back in 1990. Currently the size of the floating population is regularly estimated to be well over 100 million (Ngai et al, 2010: 135).

Labour export programmes in Xinjiang

I will now turn my attention to Xinjiang, which is one such area with a large minority population. Xinjiang is China's westernmost province, bordering on 7 Central Asian states to the south, west, and north. Numbers for the whole of Xinjiang usually estimate the population to be around 45% Uyghur, 40% Han, and 15% other ethnic minorities. Uyghurs are especially numerous in the oases towns on the fringes of the Taklamakan desert in south Xinjiang. Here they make up close to 90% of the rural population. The other 10% is made up of Han Chinese settlers and other, less numerous ethnic minorities. In urban

Xinjiang the Uyghur are not quite so well represented. In the capital, Ürümqi, ethnic minorities are outnumbered by Han Chinese migrants. Migration of Han Chinese to China's far western regions is not uncontroversial, it has raised questions about the central government's intentions in the region and concerns of cultural assimilation and ethnicide. (Dillon, 2004: 23-36). Due to its landlocked location far to the west of China's seaboard, Xinjiang has faced difficulties in economic development similar to those of other western regions. The province is commonly regarded as a 'mid-level performer' on the economic front, benefitting to some degree from its extensive international borders and its wealth in mineral resources (Dillon, 2004: 39).

Research on migration to and from Xinjiang is almost exclusively limited to the impact of Han Chinese settlers on Uyghur culture and nationalism in the region. Literature on Uyghur migration is restricted to a study of Xinjiang's internal migration (Tsui, 2003), and an anthropological case study among Uyghur migrants in Beijing (Hoy, 2001; Hoy and Ren, 2003). A comparison of these studies indicate that Uyghur migration merits breaking down into two groups. Uyghur women form a significant part of Xinjiang's internal migration, but these women migrate almost exclusively to join their husband's family in wedlock (Tsui, 2003: 123). This migratory flow has been going on since well before the era of reform and opening. Contrary to male-to-female ratios among China's minority migrant population as a whole, Uyghur women traditionally don't take part in labour migration. From their sample taken among Uyghur migrants in Beijing, Hoy and Ren (2003: 162) estimate that Uyghur male migrants outnumber female migrants by almost 2-to-1. In an earlier study Hoy (2001: 183) finds the share of Uyghur men in labour migration to be as high as 85%. Contrary to migrants from other ethnic minorities, Uyghurs migrate on an almost exclusively non-hukou basis (Iredale and Fei, 2003: 27). Most Uyghur migrants reportedly come to Beijing in search of economic opportunities. They open shops and engage in commerce. Almost all Uyghur migrants report that they intend to move back to Xinjiang within a few years (Hoy and Ren, 2003: 155). Newspapers report that labour export programmes have only been active in rural Xinjiang since some time after 2000 (Eunjung Cha, 2009; Xinhua, 2009), suggesting that the high male-to-female ratio may have come down since then. As evidenced by the outbreak of ethnic violence in Ürümqi in 2009, labour export from Xinjiang, especially of Uyghur women, has caused some level of

resentment among the Uyghur population ¹. This raises questions about the ethnic dimension of Uyghur migration. How do Uyghurs, both migrants and their communities back home, experience temporary labour migration differently from other communities? I will turn to questions about Uyghur identity in the next part of this essay.

Objects of pride: Uyghur identity and labour migration

Prior to 1979 minority identity was a matter of the central government. Shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the communist party designated 55 communities as official minority populations. This designation was based on socialist ideology and Marxist classification of societies based on stages of development. Subsequently, areas with large minority populations were spared the worst excesses of revolutionary reform in times of ideological leniency, whereas minority status played little role in times of ideological fervour. The state's 'giving birth' to minority populations in this way has been termed 'ethnogenesis' by Dru Gladney. In the context of China's Muslim populations, Gladney writes that they "may well be made in the process of interaction between self-identity and state policy" (Gladney, quoted in MacKerras, 2005: 6). The process of ethnogenesis has gained momentum in the era of reform and opening for a variety of reasons. Events in other parts of the world, such as the collapse of Soviet Central Asia into the Central Asian 'stans' and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, have set precedents that allowed the reinvention of ethnic and religious aspects of the Uyghur identity (MacKerras, 2005: 8). The central government has attempted to counter this rise of cultural nationalism by way of modernisation ². The modernisation of the west, exemplified by state projects such as the western development programme, are meant to convince China's minorities that they are better off inside a unified China than in independent states (idem: 9-10). However, such modernising campaigns have been undermined by the popular turn that ethnogenesis has taken since 1979. China's minorities have been orientalised in popular culture; minority lifestyles and culture are commonly regarded by

¹ In a speech at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, on the 30th of March 2010, Rebiye Kadeer alleged that as many as 400.000 Uyghur women from south Xinjiang, aged 14-25, had forcefully taken part in such labour export programmes (Kadeer, personal communication). This is consistent with allegations of force in Eunjung's Cha account of events that led up to the 2009 Ürümqi riots (Eunjung Cha, 2009). Academic literature provides no clues to the nature of this coercion, nor has the use of force been documented in labour exchange programmes in different parts of China. Rebiye Kadeer is the exiled 'mother-of-the-Uyghur', leader of the World Uyghur Congress, who brings the 'Uyghur cause' to the attention of human rights activists in the west.

² I use 'culture' as an aggregate term for 'ethnicity' and 'religion', and 'cultural identity' for an identity that includes both ethnic and religious aspects. Reference to an 'ethnic minority' does not, however, exclude a reference to their religious identity.

the Han majority as both more authentic and backward. These developments are epitomised by a surging interest in such things as minority song and dance and the development of a flourishing tourism industry in areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities. Minorities, the Uyghur among them, have subsequently highlighted differences between minority cultures and the Han, resulting in further cultural nationalism (Smith, 2006).

The question remains whether Uyghur cultural identity has been formed largely with reference to ethnicity or religion since 1979. Opinions vary in this regard. On the one hand there are those who read the rise of Uyghur cultural nationalism as contemporaneous with the world-wide assertion of a pan-Islamic ideology. This point of view is exemplified by the writings of Rafael Israeli (MacKerras, 2005: 6). Academics such as Israeli argue that the 1979 reforms have allowed the articulation of an identity based on Islam, and the reinvention of Uyghur culture based on religious traditions. This religious aspect of the Uyghur identity was reinforced after 9/11, when the Chinese government came down hard on expressions of religious zeal in the name of the world-wide war on terror (idem: 11). On the other hand, academics such as Gladney stress the ethnic component of Uyghur identity and accord more relevance to developments on China's periphery. The establishment of a number of independent states on Xinjiang's western border, based on cultures closely related to the Uyghur, have created a precedent for Uyghur calls for greater autonomy from China and the reinvention of Uyghur identity based on its Turkic heritage and traditions (idem: 6). Nicholas Becquelin puts forward the view that both ethnicity and religion are involved in the articulation of an Uyghur identity in complex ways. In his reading of events since 1979, ethnicity has been the source of unrest whereas religion is the vehicle for its expression (idem: 14). In the context of Uyghur labour migration Hoy claims that "the growing pan-Islamic movement has spurred a range of changes in Xinjiang including attempts to keep women out of the workforce" (Hoy, 2001: 195), but I'm of a view similar to that of Becquelin. In Uyghur experiences with labour migration, religion and ethnicity both play a role in complex ways, but it is religion that has most often been used to express resentment against China's policies of labour migration. I will consider the religious and ethnic aspects of Uyghur migration separately in the following sections.

Uyghur identity and religion

Since the Chinese government has come down hard on expressions of religious zeal, so disparate views on the proper behaviour for Muslims have been appropriated as a vehicle

for expressing resentment against China's modernising projects such as its labour export programmes. China's uncompromising attitude towards religion is evident in many aspects of daily life in Xinjiang. These include prohibitions on the observance of the sabbath, performing 5 daily prayers, wearing the full veil, and observing religious festivals such as the Ramadan. Further checks on expressions of religiosity include strict government monitoring of Muslim places of worship and of its religious leaders. Institutions for the training of religious personnel have been placed under government supervision. Such prohibitions on religion have been pushed by the state since the beginning of the 'strike hard campaign' (Dillon 2004: 84) and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Fulfilling one's obligations as a Muslim are made especially difficult in places where Uyghurs and non-Uyghurs interact closely such as in government organisations. Schools and other educational institution have similarly been identified as hotbeds for Islamic fervour (idem: 88).

When Uyghurs migrate to China's east coast for work in the manufacturing industry, negotiations between their religious obligations on the one hand, and demands placed on them by the manufacturing environment on the other, become particularly problematic. These difficulties are especially acute for women, as their religious communities demand them to behave demurely, cover up their faces, and shy away from close contact with male colleagues and supervisors. The most Uyghurs in the manufacturing industry can expect to gain are compromises in the way of separate dormitories and separate cooking and dining facilities for the preparation of halal food. This contrasts sharply with the experiences of Indonesian women in the Middle East described by Silvey (2006). Their migration for labour purposes is explained and becomes more acceptable both to themselves and to their family by the host country's tolerance of Islamic practices (idem: 24). China's manufacturing industry doesn't make such concessions to the Muslims who are caught up in it, making negotiations between one's identity as an Uyghur Muslim and one's identity as a temporary migrant particularly troublesome.

Uyghur identity and ethnicity

If the religious context places government demands on temporary migrant labourers in a diametrically opposed position to demands by the migrant's community back home, then ethnicity plays a much more ambiguous role in the Uyghur experience with labour migration. On the one hand Uyghur socio-cultural tradition makes similar demands on Uyghur women as do Chinese traditions (compare Fan, 2003). On the other hand, expressing one's difference from the Han majority with reference to one's ethnic identity has always been much more acceptable to the Chinese government; expressions of ethnic

identity are not seen as challenges to the state in the same way that expression of religiosity are. Bellér-Hann (2002) enumerates such expressions of ethnic pride in the face of a Han majority. These includes dress code and fashion, hygienic practices and diet (idem: 68-78). Highlighting ethnic differences in this way allows Uyghurs to foster a feeling of cultural superiority and to resist dominant stereotypes of minority backwardness (Smith, 2006: 15).

Smith's (2006) account of Uyghur women's empowerment through dance in the context of the multi-ethnic workplace is particularly revealing in this regard. Smith recalls the accounts of women who create spaces for themselves through the embodied practice of dance. In one such account an Uyghur woman remarks:

"I danced, because the whole group was pushing me very hard and then my boss, [his] ...face... [was] very angry. So you have to dance and then I don't have [a] choice... I, I dance, but just little it was very shame... you know... but then I get angry and I dance. You know, ... not for him, but for me." (Smith, 2006: 13).

This example shows both the orientalisation of ethnic culture and dominant stereotypes about minority song and dance – through the (Han) boss and the crowd pushing this women to dance – as well the creative appropriation of one's own ethnic identity. "I dance; not for him, but for me," this woman remarks. Practices such as dance allow Uyghur migrants in general, and Uyghur women in particular, to fulfil expectations placed upon them as objects of pride for the home community. Since ethnic expressions of identity are quite acceptable to the Chinese authorities as well, such practices allow Uyghur migrants to negotiate demands placed upon them by the state on one hand, and by the community back home on the other, much more easily than do religious traditions.

Conclusions

In this essay I've considered two bodies of literature. I reviewed research on labour migration in China and policies aimed at maintaining a rural-urban division of labour on the one hand, and literature on Uyghur identity on the other. These separate bodies of literature come together at the point where labour migration and Uyghur identity intersect; where Uyghur labourers take part in China's large-scale labour migration. Uyghur experiences with temporary labour migration are complicated by their minority background, and the participation of Uyghurs in temporary labour migration has engendered resistance among the Uyghur population of Xinjiang. This resistance was shown most dramatically by

last year's riots in Ürümqi. It's the complex involvement of ethnic and religious values in the Uyghur experience with labour migration, as well as the resistance against China's policies of labour migration, that I've been trying to explain by means of Uyghur cultural – ethnic and religious – identity.

With reference to the literature on minority migration in China it was shown that structural components of China's policy on rural-urban labour migration affect ethnic minorities in similar ways. These components are the state's collaboration with large export-led manufacturing industries, the promotion of rural to urban migration through labour export programmes, and the perpetuation of the rural-urban division of labour by means of the household registration (hukou) system. A gender division of labour is engendered with reference to socio-cultural values. Yet differences in the migration of Han peasant labourers and minority migrants were also found. These differences included an imbalance in the volume of migration – minority migration got under way at a later date – differences in the composition of the minority migrant body when compared to the Han migrant population, and the uneven distribution of minority out-migration by region – south China was affected by labour policies at a much earlier date than was west China.

The violent resistance against labour export policies in Xinjiang has shown that the Uyghur experience with labour migration is in some way affected by their cultural background. With reference to the literature on Uyghur identity it was shown that both ethnic and religious values are involved in complex ways in the creation of the Uyghur identity. I agree with Nicholas Becquelin that Uyghur identity draws from their ethnic heritage and traditions, but that resistance against the Chinese state is voiced most easily with reference to their Islamic identity. I've attempted to show that this is also the case in China's manufacturing industry. Uyghurs caught up in the development projects of the state have difficulty negotiating the demands placed upon them by both the government and their religious community. Objections against labour export programmes are therefore most easily voiced with reference to religious values. For migrants on the eastern seaboard it is often much easier to assert their minority identity with reference to their ethnic identity instead. The fostering of ethnic pride and empowerment in the face of hegemonic stereotypes about minority backwardness are countered by means of ethnic practices such as song and dance.

However, no anthropological research currently exists that bridges the gap between these two different sets of literature. This essay is only a first attempt at bringing the insights of both these academic communities together. Anthropological field research among Uyghur

communities in the sending-areas of Xinjiang, will allow us to gain better insights into the reasons for the sending communities to object to China's policies of labour migration. Similarly, research among Uyghurs in receiving-communities on the east coast will help us understand the implications of one ethnic and religious identity on the experiences of Uyghur migrants in China's manufacturing industry. The sensitivity of this issue to the Chinese government makes such research very unlikely at the present moment in time.

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