Lesson 5: Women's Work

Big Idea: Why women do the work they do.

Guiding Question: How do cultural, political and family views about women affect the jobs they do and the wages they earn?

Our Challenge: To improve our understanding of the ways that gender intersects with government policies, court decisions, and business practices in China, and to explore how such policies and practices can – and are being – changed.

Guiding Activities: In this lesson, students explore the jobs that women of different ages, locations and educational backgrounds typically perform in China. In *Women's Work*, Chinese girls and women share their personal experiences with work in talking about their job preparation, how gender affects their employment prospects, and what their daily lives are like as they do these jobs. Through learning about their experiences, and with the help of additional resources, students engage in in-depth exploration of a range of work-related topics in class and small group discussions and through reflection-oriented activities.

5 - Setting the Scene

Read the opening scene of *Women's Work* stopping at Day Dawns. Watch the short video of one of the Chinese girls, Jin Shan, as she takes her new American friend Jennie to meet her grandmother. Look at the photo gallery showing Shan during her vocational construction internship. Suggest that the students write down questions this material raises for them in a questions and connections log, an informal journal to record ongoing learning, research notes, and their thoughts as the lesson progresses.

Have students read, "100 Women: The jobs Chinese girls just can't do," and watch the video toward the bottom of that story. In the video, students in Jiangsu province offer opinions about whether female students should be able to enroll in all university courses. (Note that the girls in *Touching Home in China* are from Jiangsu province.) High school and college students should read the article, "Being a Woman in China Today: A Demography of Gender," paying particular attention to its final section about the employment and education of women.

Ask students to share impressions of the opening section of *Women's Work*, describing what they learned from the text and videos. Explore with them generational shifts in work in rural China – the grandmother as a farmer, her adult child as a migrant worker, and her granddaughter as a construction intern. Compare this to what they know about American generational shifts in the jobs done by their grandparents and their parents, and ask them to look ahead to the kinds of jobs they think they might do. Talk with them about why so many young people decide to leave rural China to go to the cities to work.

After this discussion, split the class into pairs. Each pair will research two topics – the *hukuo*, China's household registration system, as a way to better understand what happens to migrant workers when they live in the city, and the role of gender in the types of jobs available to women in China. As they research, each student should write questions that surface and be prepared to share them with their partner and the class.

- *Hukuo:* For middle school: a CNN video about the *hukuo* system. For high school, a CCTV-America video about *hukuo* reform and a brief story in *The Diplomat*. For college students, the journal article "China, Internal Migration." Keyword searches will reveal additional sources of information on the Web.
- Gender: For middle school: *Los Angeles Times* story, "China's women begin to confront blatant workplace bias." For high school students, a *New York Times* op-ed, "China's Entrenched Gender Gap." For college students, a journal article, "Gender inequalities in employment and wage-earning among internal labor migrants in Chinese cities." All students can also read "In China's

Modern Economy, a Retro Push Against Women," a 2015 *New York Times* story offering a contemporary overview.

After each pair completes their research and discusses their findings, lead the class in a discussion of how these two factors – China's *hukuo* system and gender – intersect to influence the employment prospects of rural women. Chart as a class their collective findings and questions.

5 - Setting the Foundation

To prepare students for Engaging the Challenge, have them read the entire story, *Women's Work*. They should watch all of the video content, interact with the Gender Employment Ads graphic, and move through the captioned photo galleries.

As they read, ask students to focus on the two topics they've just examined: how a rural hokum can affect the kind of work that people do and how gender can shape employment choices. When they complete their reading, have students record in their questions and connections log on the factors that make women's work lives different than men's.

As a class, show three videos and discuss the questions, posed below, with all students.

- Liu Young, Migrant Worker – China Rises: Getting Rich
- China – Women Workers
- Pounding Work (from *Touching Home in China*)

Questions:

- What do you see in these videos that is either similar or different than what you know about the work that women customarily do in the United States?
- How are the lives of China's migrant workers the same or different than those of migrant workers in the United States?
- Why are so many women in China, especially older women, working as farmers?
- What other responsibilities do rural women take on as a result of China's field-to-factory migration?
- When Maya and Jennie's Chinese friends go to work, what will be different for them than it was for their parents and grandparents? Why?
- What do we know about the wages that women in rural areas of China earn?

5 - Engaging Our Challenge

As students engage in this lesson's challenge, remind them of the lesson's Guiding Question: **How do cultural, political and family views about women affect the jobs they do and the wages they earn?** To delve more deeply into topics raised in *Women's Work*, we've created four thematic discussion groups.

Each of the groups, with roughly five students to a group, will choose a facilitator to moderate the group discussion and a recorder to take notes. (Or the teacher can assign these roles and rotate then among the students.) The four topics in this lesson are "Migrant Work," "Family and Work," "City Dreams," and "Work and Gender." Each group's in-depth exploration of its assigned topic is enhanced through students' use of our curated resources on the Lesson Five tab, the hyperlinks in the story, and the online searches that the students undertake.

Encourage students to share insights and pose questions to their small group members based on what each one is reading, viewing and listening to. Remind students that they'll use what they discover in their research and small group interactions in their culminating Reflection and Action Project. Here are a few steps to share with students about this activity:

- Students should familiarize themselves with the resources assigned to each group.
- Revisit *Women's Work* to clarify information relating to this topic. This could mean exploring its hyperlinked content.
- When each student completes the research, the group should reassemble, talk about what they learned and add their new learning to their questions and connections log.
- They should each consider how what they are learning about work in China relates to their family's work experiences or to work, in general, in the United States.
- As they complete their research, students should note in their questions and connections log any unanswered questions and unresolved connections that arise in their discussions.

Group A: Migrant Work

The major reason that China's economy grew so rapidly during the past three decades is that millions upon millions of rural men and women left farming towns to work on factory assembly lines in faraway industrialized cities. China's rural to urban movement of people is the largest internal migration in human history, measuring three times the number of people who emigrated to America from Europe in a century. While migrant salary is still a major source of income for many rural families, the Chinese girls who guided Maya and Jennie on their journey of discovery are not following this farm-to-factory trajectory in their work lives.

Revisit two sections of *Women's Work* – its opening section up to "Day Dawns," and then read "Farm to Factory." Begin their research by looking at the captioned photos about the daily lives of migrant women construction workers in this *Washington Post* story. Students will then use this lesson's curated resources (Lesson Five tab) and the hyperlinks in *Women's Work*. This additional content, along with information they find via keyword searches online, will prepare them to discuss these questions:

- How do cultural traditions and values underpin the traditional Chinese work ethic?
- When an assembly line worker in his 30s says, "very few of them [younger fellow workers] can eat bitterness," to what aspects of work is he referring? What are some reasons why younger factory workers' attitudes toward work could be changing?
- Can you describe various ripple effects that young adults' labor migration has had on the children and elders left behind in rural China?
- What are the common living conditions of migrant workers in the cities? What is it like for migrant workers' families to come with them to live in the city?
- What legal rights do migrant workers have in the jobs they do?
- [For high school and college-level students.] Explain how global economic forces interacted with internal government decisions to launch China's internal migration. Are new economic circumstances in China and in other countries affecting changes in the lives of migrant workers?

Click here to explore the curated resources for Group A.

Group B: Family and Work

For centuries, Chinese women's lives were defined by their traditional roles in family life. As a daughter, she'd assist with household tasks while her brothers attended more years of school than she did. As a wife, she'd join her husband's family, raise children, and assume responsibility for her husband's parents. Work outside the home usually meant unpaid farming chores. Among elite women, some had their feet bound, which made physical labor impossible. By the mid-20th century, Mao Zedong's agricultural labor force was men and women working side-by-side. In subsequent decades, with the one-child policy and the external forces of a globalization, women had fewer children. They often followed men to work in the city. Meanwhile, their daughters became better educated than girls in previous generations; many go on to higher education, which enables them to pursue workplace opportunities previously out of reach for women. Still, China's patriarchal culture instills stubborn attitudes about women's capabilities and their roles as wives and mothers. At the intersection of gendered work and family expectations, China's women

confront their most difficult challenges. Today's only-child daughters are expected also to assume obligations within their families that until recently were considered to belong to the sons.

Revisit "Day Dawns" and "Farm to Factory" in *Women's Work* and "Becoming a Wife" in *Daughter. Wife. Mother*. There, they will also learn about China's changing family structure in the "4-2-1: China's New Family Form" box. Begin their research by using this lesson's curated resources (Lesson Five tab) and the hyperlinks in *Women's Work*. This additional content, along with information they find via keyword searches online, will prepare them to discuss these questions:

- In this story, how do parental expectations affect how the girls plan for and think about their work and family lives?
- What is filial piety in China and where does the concept come from? How does this family responsibility affect the decisions that sons and daughters make about the work they do?
- What, if any, affect has China's one-child policy had on the decisions that young women make about their work and family lives?
- How are the lives of older Chinese women (grandmothers) affected by the decisions their adult children make about work they pursue?
- With more women earning money for work they do, what factors are responsible for the wages women earn being less than what men earn? Is this wage gap between men and women's earnings also evident in the United States? If so, what similarities do you find in the reasons why.
- What family, societal and political factors affect women's choices and decisions about their work?

Click here to explore the curated resources for Group B.

Group C: City Dreams

More girls are more highly educated now than they've been at any time in China's centuries long history. For women who attain a college degree, the predictable hardscrabble life of a wife, mother and grandmother in rural China holds little appeal. Nor do the assembly-line jobs and cramped bedrooms that typified the grueling routine of migrant workers' lives in their parents' generation. For today's college graduate, her destiny is likely to be different. Yet, as Mengping Yuan's story illuminates in *Women's Work*, college-educated women from rural towns confront numerous challenges as they try to fulfill their city dreams.

Review "City Dreams" in *Women's Work*, watching its video, "Hard Landing." Document why Mengping, a college graduate, set out to work in Shanghai and what it's like doing the job she does. Read the first two paragraphs of the next section "Work and Gender." To more fully appreciate Mengping's life as a girl growing up in rural China in the 1990s, go to *Abandoned Baby* and read the box "She Can't Be Our Baby." Begin their research by using this lesson's curated resources (Lesson Five tab) as well as the hyperlinks in the story Women's Work. This additional content, along with information they find via keyword searches online, will prepare them to discuss these questions:

- Why do girls/young women from rural China want to leave their towns for jobs in the city?
- What special challenges do rural residents confront when they go to a city to work?
- How do the societal and family expectations about marriage make it difficult for young women to live independently at a time when they might be pursuing graduate studies and/or settling into a career path?
- After a few months in Shanghai Mengping said, "I don't know how to describe my mind now. It has changed a lot from when I was in school. The world is not as very beautiful as I used to think it was." What factors do you think are contributing to her feeling this way?
- For rural young women who don't attend high school, what kind of work is she likely to do in the city? What are some dangers for poorly educated women who move to the city on their own?

Click here to explore the curated resources for Group C.

Group D: Work And Gender

Article 48 of China's Constitution reads, "Equal rights for women." China's Employment Promotion Law (2007) states: "No employment unit, when recruiting a female employee, shall include a clause in the employment contract imposing marriage or childbirth restrictions on the employee." In surveys, however, vast majorities of women in China say that they experience discriminatory treatment by employers. Such practices begin with gender-specific job ads. If a woman hasn't completed childbearing, some ads tell her not to apply. Such messages are not legal, but the law is seldom tested. In the past two decades, according to a 2013 Save the Children study, the gender wage gap has been widening, too; the ratio of female-to-male earnings in urban areas has fallen from 77.5 percent (1990) to 70.1 percent (1999) to 67.3 percent (2010). Similarly, in rural areas the ratio of female-to-male earnings has fallen from 78.9 percent (1990) to 59.6 percent (1999) to 56 (2010).

A few pioneering young women have gone to court to fight for their employment rights. Until recently, women activists publicly protested against gender inequality, but such demonstrations ended in March 2015. To learn about these protests, scroll to the end of Daughter. Wife. Mother, view the captioned gallery "Taking to the Streets" and read "Voicing Discontent."

Revisit the final two sections of *Women's Work* – "City Dreams" and "Work and Gender"– and look at the captioned display of Gender Employment Ads. Begin their research by using this lesson's curated resources (Lesson Five tab) and the hyperlinks in the story. Refer to the National Women's History Project timeline for a legal history of American women's rights and read this essay for a comparative exploration of the progress of women's rights issues in America and China. This added content, along with information they find via keyword searches online, prepares them to discuss these questions:

- Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China, once said, "Women hold up half the sky." He said this when women worked alongside men as farm laborers and agriculture drove the nation's economy. Nearly half a century later, identify the forces inside and outside of China that have led to the rise of unequal treatment of women in China's workforce.
- What recourse, if any, have women had in China when they believe they aren't being treated equally?
- Two-thirds of the world's self-made billionaires live in China, according to this story. Yet, we know that the wages of employed women have fallen in recent decades and that China now leads the world with its income inequality, with women among its poorest citizens. Why do you think these very different circumstances exist for women in China today?
- Do you know or have you heard about women in America whose experiences in the workplace are similar to those you've learned about in China? Or, if you feel gender discrimination still exists in American workplaces, can you describe how and why it differs from what women experience in China?

Click here to explore the curated resources for Group D.

5 - Reflection and Action Project

This critical element of *Touching Home in China's* curriculum asks students to complete a culminating project to assess and demonstrate their learning. In doing this, students have an opportunity to try out new approaches as they share with others a finished project that reflects on knowledge gained in their Engaging the Challenge group explorations. Students should not expect to "solve" problems – in the sense of finding a definitive answer – though they are likely to draw broader public awareness to the situation and/or its consequences by the activities they pursue. It's possible their project(s) will shift attitudes and inspire action. By reflecting and acting on what they have learned, we want students to gain deeper appreciation of the kind of challenges that individuals confront when they set out to solve a problem and/or inspire others to take action on an issue.

In this Reflection and Action Project, students learn about the playwriting techniques of Anna Deavere Smith. Her work is described as "a blend of theatrical art, social commentary, journalism, and intimate reverie." In a radio interview she described how she goes about writing a play: "I interview people, and then I make these one-person shows where I perform all the parts of the people I interviewed. When I was a girl growing up in Baltimore, my grandfather – who had an 8th-grade education – said that if you say a word often enough, it becomes you. ... I think, in a way, trying to heal the crisis of having to grow up in a de facto segregated city, I decided to try to become America, word for word. I've been going around for a long time now, since the late '70s, working on an oeuvre called "On the Road: A Search for American Character," where I've just interviewed lots and lots of people usually about subjects where there's more than one point of view."

She has also talked about the space for community dialogue she created as part of her 2016 play, "Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education," in which audience members come together (with a facilitator) to talk about the issues dealt with in the plan and explore how they can act to make a difference: "In the [play's] second act, theatergoers are divided into groups that are led by a facilitator in the lobby and courtyard areas. Questions are raised to get the audience to link the material to their own lives. Pads and pens are distributed, along with snacks, and audience members are invited (though not compelled) to share their thoughts on what change might look like."

Students use a collaborative approach that is similar to Smith's to examine from various perspectives the work that women do, challenges they confront, and the kinds of gender discrimination they experience and how they cope with it. This project has two acts; the first act is the play they write and perform together; the second act is discussion about the play as performers and audience members come together to talk about what they heard, saw and learned. Students will facilitate these discussions. Students collaborate on all aspects of this effort.

The words in the play come out of interviews that middle-school students do with family members and high school and college students do with community members. It might be a good idea to have the students practice interviewing each other in the classroom before they try doing this with family and community members.

A few guidelines:

- Students choose two people to interview about work and challenges they face. One person who is interviewed must be a woman; the other can be a man as long as he works with women or a second woman. Students can interview a family member; in fact middle school students are encouraged to do so.
- High school and college students should reach out to community members and make the effort to include a recent immigrant to the United States among those whom they talk with. They can get in touch with a local community center or agency where immigrants seek help in looking for work. (To find this in your community, Google "Immigrant employment program.") The teacher can make an initial call to explain why students want to do these interviews.
- Students will prepare some questions in advance based on what they've learned in this lesson. Yet, they should be reminded to be open to asking different questions, if the person's experience takes their conversation in an unexpected direction.
- It is best if the students digitally record their interviews. (Phone apps work well.) Then, they can listen to their interviews a few times and share them with others in the class. The students work collaboratively in selecting sections of interviews that they think would work well in the play. Students should be aware of the likelihood that not every person interviewed will appear in the play.
- Once students decide on the words they think will work well in the play, they turn those words into text, which is put in a central location, such as a shared Google Document.
- After these initial selections are made, students decide on the number and length of the ones that work well together in the play, and then determine the order in which the characters and their words appear.

- Students take on the roles of the various characters – be sure every student has a speaking role. (More than one student can play some of the characters since some of them will likely say things at different times in the play.)
- Invite those who were interviewed to see the play performed.
- Record the play's performance and, if the students want it to be put online, the video can be shown on YouTube.
- If your school or college has a student newspaper, ask if the editors have a reporter to attend the play and write a review/story about the play.

As a concluding exercise, ask students to write a brief essay (250 words) to describe their experiences in producing this play. Bring the students' essays together online, perhaps in a Google folder.