Figure 1: The famous billboard in Shenzhen that reads: 'Time is money, efficiency is life.' PC: Lu.

Cheers and Tears

Life Stories of Highly Educated Women in Shenzhen

MENG Meiyun

This essay sheds light on the struggles that lie beneath the successes achieved by highly educated women through migration to Shenzhen. By exploring the life stories of three women, the article uncovers how these individuals navigated the obstacles imposed by patriarchal norms, which hindered their pursuit of neoliberal values such as self-improvement, competition, and individual responsibility. It also unveils the 'conditional' opportunities for women who pursued aspirations in Shenzhen, inviting readers to explore the hidden complexities beneath the city's rapid development from a small border town to the 'Chinese Silicon Valley'.

Shenzhen, the 'Silicon Valley of China', embodies rapid development and the profound challenges it brings. Harvey (2005: 1) describes China's market-oriented reforms as 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' and points out that China is the outcome of a 'particular kind of neoliberalism interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control' (Harvey 2006: 34). Shenzhen's extraordinary transformation from a small border town with a population of 300,000 in 1980 to today's vibrant centre of creativity and entrepreneurship is often held up as an economic miracle driven by neoliberal globalisation (Keane and Zhao 2012). Undoubtedly, the city's rapid growth has sown in its residents the seeds of neoliberal values, emphasising profit, competition,

self-improvement, and a strong work ethic (Gao 2021). However, behind the facade of this economic miracle, Shenzhen grapples with the dark side of the neoliberal principles it has embraced, where the pursuit of financial gain and social recognition is also known to manipulate collective emotions and shape individuals' aspirations and desires (Anderson 2012; Gao 2020). For instance, rural migrant workers are subject to extreme exploitation in the workplace to the point of being driven to self-harm and suicide (Pun and Chan 2013; Pun 2005).

The experiences of female workers in Shenzhen navigating migration and integration into the labour force present us with a nuanced picture of both the opportunities and the obstacles these women face. While some rural women who move to Shenzhen manage to find economic opportunities and empowerment as *dagongmei* (打工妹, 'factory girls'), challenges persist, and patriarchal constraints often linger, as some of these women did not choose to migrate in the first place and are compelled to remit earnings back home to male family members (Pun 2005; Han 2021). Unravelling the intricacies of these intersecting experiences is vital to understanding Shenzhen's development and the challenges of its neoliberal globalisation (Gao et al. 2021).

This essay delves into the experiences of highly educated women in Shenzhen, exploring the complex relationship between the promises of neoliberalism and the constraints it imposes on women's agency. While existing literature has primarily focused on rural women navigating patriarchal constraints through migration to Shenzhen (Pun and Chan 2013), this study shifts the spotlight to the life stories of three generations of highly educated women in the city, revealing the diverse realities they face in pursuit of their aspirations. By analysing the various factors contributing to their experiences, such as Shenzhen's evolving socioeconomic landscape (Gao et al. 2021), gender norms rooted in Chinese tradition (Pun 2005; Pun and Chan 2013), and migration dynamics (Qian and He 2012), we gain insights into the intergenerational differences of these women's life journeys in this southern metropolis. Moreover, by uncovering the complex interplay of individual agency, societal expectations, and the gendered forces shaping these three women's lives, this essay aims to shed light on a broader discourse about gender inequality within the context of internal migration in China.

A Trailblazer and an Outsider: Lu's Story

At the age of 17, Lu (who was 57 at the time of my interview in 2020) left Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi Province, to pursue higher education at a university in Nanjing. As one of only 10 female architecture students in a department of 64, Lu excelled in her studies. Under the state system of unified job allocation, which guaranteed lifelong employment and cradle-to-grave welfare, she received job offers in several places, including Beijing, Hangzhou, and Shenzhen. In 1980 Shenzhen was at the beginning of its trajectory of economic development and was just a small border town with a population of less than half a million (Ding and Warner 2001), so Lu made a bold choice when she accepted a position as an architect there. Both the attractive salary she was offered and the city's potential influenced Lu's decision. She knew that Shenzhen's political role as a test field for China's Reform and Opening Up policies would provide opportunities for highly educated individuals, promising high salaries and career growth. She also recognised the city's significance for economic development and urbanisation, which further motivated her to move there.

After three years in her assigned position, Lu's career took an unexpected turn. She decided to venture into entrepreneurship with her line manager, becoming one of many trailblazers 'jumping out' from a state-owned company. Her new endeavour was very successful—a success that was closely intertwined with the rapid urban development of Shenzhen. Through her architecture company and multiple projects, she contributed to the boom in residential construction for the growing influx of migrants.

Lu's migration to Shenzhen occurred at an opportune moment, aligning with the city's burgeoning economy and relatively affordable housing prices. As a highly educated individual, she capitalised on these favourable conditions and managed to acquire 10 properties in the city before the age of thirty. Such a feat has become nearly impossible for white-collar workers in Shenzhen, as they would need to save their entire salary for about 40 years to purchase a single property today (Tong 2021). Lu's story exemplifies how highly educated women born in the 1960s could attain unique opportunities for career advancement

and financial success through migration to Shenzhen, leveraging the city's transformation during that early period.

By embracing neoliberal ideals such as competition, self-improvement, and individual responsibility, Lu achieved remarkable success, surpassing her peers in state-owned companies, who were still saving for their first homes. Embracing the popular mantra in Shenzhen 'Time is money, efficiency is life' (时间就是金钱, 效率就是生命) (see Figure 1), Lu positioned herself as an agent of her own success, leveraging the dynamic environment of the city to make a significant impact. However, her journey was not without challenges, as it was then uncommon for women to assume leadership roles in her field (as it still is; see, for instance, Tsang et al. 2011).

For instance, despite being a founder of the company, Lu encountered difficulties having her opinions acknowledged and respected by her male co-founder. She said: 'I felt that, even as a co-founder of the company, the other, male, co-founder would often dismiss my opinions without much consideration. He believed accepting me as a woman and business partner was already a generous leadership gesture.'

Lu's experiences of discrimination by her co-founder exemplify the hidden struggles of highly educated women as they pursue neoliberal success by leaving state-owned companies and starting their own businesses. They also highlight the complex relationship between gender norms rooted in China's patriarchal traditions and Shenzhen's neoliberal ideals. While women represent a significant portion (about 25 per cent) of entrepreneurs in China, they often are stereotyped as lacking skills, capital, and networks, or are deemed too bold for leadership roles (China Daily 2015). Moreover, despite gaining access to the entrepreneurial field, women often encounter the glass ceiling and potentially unequal treatment that limit their ascent to more powerful positions. Lu's experience of being a company founder yet having her opinions dismissed exemplifies the systemic gender bias that persists in Shenzhen (Luo and Chan 2021; Han 2021). While market-oriented reforms may have offered surface-level opportunities for Lu's career advancement and enhanced her agency, it was not enough to eradicate deep-rooted gender biases.

Lu's story is representative of the challenges faced by professional women born in the 1960s in pursuing opportunities in Shenzhen. As the city rapidly developed under the Reform and Opening policy, it became an enticing destination for highly educated individuals, offering new policies and support for their career pursuits. In contrast, the next story showcases how highly educated women born in the 1970s leveraged internal migration as a powerful tool to escape patriarchal norms in their hometowns while striving for success in Shenzhen.

Following, Struggling, and Thriving: Chen's Story

Born and raised in a small town in Jiangxi Province, Chen (48 years old at the time of my interview in 2020) migrated to Shenzhen in 1999, following her husband. Her motivation for leaving her hometown was not only the promising future that Shenzhen seemed to offer but also her desire to shield her daughter from the pervasive influence of the traditional culture that prioritised male offspring (重男轻女) and dowries (彩礼文化) in her community (Murphy et al. 2011; Li and Li 2021).

Like Lu, Chen faced challenges and gender bias as a young female civil engineer in a male-dominated industry. During the initial phase of her career, when attending business dinners alongside her husband, she was often referred to as 'Mrs Li' (李太太). This title diminished her role and opinions in negotiations, as she was identified as subordinate to her husband. However, Chen took charge and actively facilitated collaborations between her company, real estate firms, and the local government. She gradually earned the title 'Boss Chen' (陈老板) by reinforcing her leadership and assertiveness in the industry.

Chen's transition from being identified as 'Mrs Li' to 'Boss Chen' symbolises the empowerment of women within the context of internal migration in China (see, for instance, Seeberg and Luo 2018; Sun 2016). Her journey created opportunities for professional growth and challenged the patriarchal norms that commodify women. Despite facing initial marginalisation, Chen's success highlights the potential for

women to assume leadership positions and make meaningful contributions in male-dominated industries. Like Lu, Chen's achievements were accompanied by 'invisible' battles and negotiations specific to women, demonstrating her resilience and ability to thrive in Shenzhen's business realm.

Chen expanded her company in 2004, coinciding with Shenzhen's introduction of new preferential policies benefiting highly educated migrants (Wang 2022). In 2009, Wang Yang, then party secretary of Guangdong Province, introduced the policy known as 'vacating the cage to change the birds' (腾笼换鸟), which aimed to create space for higher-end industries by encouraging the departure of 'low-quality' (低素质) rural migrant workers—thereby raising average 'quality' (素质) as measured by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita—and making way for 'high-quality' talent (Xie and Hu 2009). Embracing this Shenzhen Talent Policy, Chen leveraged her connections and influence to offer employment opportunities and accommodation to 20 highly educated women from her hometown between 2006 and 2015, thus playing a crucial role in her company's transformation from a start-up to a medium-sized enterprise with 80 employees.

Chen's actions were driven not solely by charitable intentions. On the one hand, as an established female entrepreneur, she saw her facilitation of the relocation of highly educated women to Shenzhen as a transformative pathway for them to challenge themselves in the neoliberal labour market and break free from systemic constraints, including patriarchal norms and hierarchical systems in their hometowns. Her efforts became a collective route to empowerment (Sharma and Sudarshan 2010; Moyle et al. 2006). On the other hand, it is important to recognise that her company also benefited from developing its own strategy for talent development through targeted recruitment, which enhanced its reputation as a trustworthy employer and provided an advantage in overcoming intense competition in the local labour market. At the same time, by providing access to Shenzhen's labour market for these women, Chen also introduced them to the intense 'entrepreneurial spirit' of the city, potentially leading to 'new' forms of exploitation engendered by neoliberalism (Anderson 2012).

Chen's journey exemplifies the transformative potential and new challenges brought about by internal migration to Shenzhen compared with the time of Lu's arrival. Leveraging the benefits of Shenzhen's Talent Policy, Chen empowered herself to navigate societal narratives that confine women to subordinate roles and perpetuate patriarchal norms in her hometown (Shen 2016). However, the expansion of her business also foreshadowed the growing number of highly educated individuals in Shenzhen's labour market, which could potentially perpetuate the exploitation and impede the progress of newcomers like Wu—a returned overseas graduate born in the 1990s (90后海归)—as the following story illustrates.

Coming for Fantasy, Leaving for Reality: Wu's Story

Wu (30 years of age at the time of my interview in 2020) recently decided to leave Shenzhen and return to her hometown after struggling for seven years in the city. Her migration history began with her attending a college in Beijing and later pursuing a master's degree in Durham in the United Kingdom. After graduating in 2015, she moved back to China and opted for Shenzhen over her hometown and Beijing. Back then, Shenzhen was undergoing a significant economic transformation that built on the previous policy of 'vacating the cage to change the birds', shifting from a manufacturing-based to a knowledge-based economy with the aim of becoming China's Silicon Valley (Hu 2019; Chen and Ogan 2017).

Shenzhen seemed an optimal destination because Wu imagined that, as one of the four major cities in mainland China, it would offer her high-salary career opportunities and a metropolitan lifestyle (see Figure 2). In her words:

Shenzhen was an ideal place for me at that time. It was modern, energetic, and close to Hong Kong. I thought I could work with creative young people under the supervision of an open-minded superior. At the same time, I could also frequently visit and enjoy art exhibitions, concerts, and various cultural experiences in Hong Kong. Most importantly, I thought Shenzhen was less bureaucratic than many other Chinese cities.

Figure 2: An example of the metropolitan lifestyle sought by Wu. PC: Wu.

Wu's imagination of Shenzhen as an ideal city illustrates the appeal of the urban 'fantasy' (Tseng 2011) that encompasses a vision of self-improvement. Her aspirations to work with creative individuals in a competency-oriented setting, rather than one reliant on *guanxi* ('personal connections') in her hometown, align with Shenzhen's neoliberal values, such as the idea that effort produces gain. In her imagination, Shenzhen was characterised by a flattened power relationship between superiors and young workers like her, freeing the latter from the hierarchical norms that dominate some bureaucracies. Indeed, during her initial years in the city, Wu found happiness and fulfilment, realising her aspirations, and earning considerably more than her counterparts in her hometown. She also relished the freedom to explore Hong Kong during weekends.

However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 drastically altered her experience. The pandemic and the lockdown measures confined her to a small rented space and she was subjected to the gruelling '996' work schedule (that is, working from nine in the morning to nine at night, six days a week) due to her lack of seniority—all of which robbed her of the chance for diverse cultural experiences. Simultaneously, the influx of Chinese students returning from abroad undermined her advantage in the local labour market as a highly educated individual with overseas exposure. Shenzhen—one of the top destinations for such returnees who studied in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia—experienced a surge in its labour force for those with comparable educational backgrounds to Wu's (He 2020), which intensified competition within her company. Wu's long work hours and reduced competitiveness showcase the reality of exploitation that lay beneath her initial urban fantasy.

As well as coping with high-intensity work patterns, Wu faced multiple other challenges. She discovered that her anticipated competency-oriented setting was an illusion and her male superior viewed her as a tool rather than an individual worthy of respect. For instance, she was called late at night to accompany male clients for business, which showcased her workplace's gendered power dynamics. Moreover, on her thirtieth birthday, she was labelled a 'leftover

woman' (剩女) by her mother, who urged her to promptly find a husband to avoid missing the ideal time for marriage and pregnancy. However, Wu knew she would struggle to afford homeownership or children's education in Shenzhen, which added to her dilemma. Driven by the urgency to form a family and a sense of impotence amid increasing competition and manipulation, she decided to leave.

Wu's experiences epitomise the exploitation targeting highly educated women in the context of Shenzhen's neoliberal globalisation, which is aggravated by the persistent gender norms of China's patriarchal traditions. The intensified competition and exploitation Wu faced reveal a dark side of the prevailing neoliberal values in Shenzhen, raising questions about whether these women will be the next 'birds' to be 'vacated' to leave space for workers of higher 'quality' (Wang et al. 2009), such as PhD graduates or established researchers (Wang 2022). Moreover, the burden of social expectations and her biological clock (Te Velde and Pearson 2002) weighed heavily on Wu, demanding that she provide comprehensive wellbeing, including high-quality education and living conditions, for her future children. This additional pressure exacerbated the difficulties she encountered. In parallel with the experiences of rural workers in Shenzhen (Pun 2005), highly educated women of Wu's generation face common forms of exploitation, highlighting the entrenchment of gender inequalities and the constriction of women's agency within Shenzhen's neoliberal context.

Making Visible the Tears

By examining the narratives of three generations, this essay highlights the intergenerational differences among highly educated women in Shenzhen. Lu and Chen, representing the post-1960s and post-1970s generations, were drawn to Shenzhen by the promise of high salaries and career opportunities through the Shenzhen Talent Policy. They displayed resilience in navigating gender inequalities that once constrained their aspirations. In contrast, Wu, from the post-1990s generation, was enticed by the allure of a metropolitan lifestyle but faced the darker side of Shenzhen's evolving neoliberal globalisation, with reduced advantages in the labour market and limited agency to address gender inequality.

The analysis of these intergenerational differences reveals several factors perpetuating gender inequality in Shenzhen today. Although higher education was once a significant advantage, the city's rapid economic growth due to neoliberal globalisation (Gao et al. 2021) has led to an influx of highly educated individuals, eroding the previous advantages and intensifying competition in the local labour market. These changes have particularly affected highly educated women of the post-1990s era and beyond, reducing their competitiveness in the labour market and undermining their agency (Ramdas 2012). Additionally, the ingrained gender norms deriving from China's patriarchal traditions impose societal expectations on highly educated women regarding motherhood and childcare. These expectations not only naturally disadvantage them in labour market competition but also affect their ability to negotiate with male partners over the distribution of domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities. In particular, the increasing challenges of attaining homeownership limit internal migration for highly educated women in present-day Shenzhen as they find themselves having to navigate gender inequality and pursue successful careers while meeting social expectations. The interplay between entrenched gender norms and competition-driven neoliberal values in Shenzhen perpetuates 'new' forms of exploitation targeting highly educated women, treating them as replaceable agents in an increasingly saturated labour market.

Each generation of highly educated women in Shenzhen has experienced its share of challenges, enduring 'tears' that include exploitation, career bottlenecks, and discrimination, while also celebrating the 'cheers' of achievements such as economic independence, metropolitan lifestyles, and contributing to the wellbeing of their loved ones. Through a comprehensive examination of systemic biases and power dynamics perpetuating gender inequalities, we can develop a greater appreciation of the complexities of gender inequality within Shenzhen's ever-changing social fabric, which can help us create a more inclusive and equitable future for highly educated women in Shenzhen and beyond. ■

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