Women and Provincial Change: Gender Histories Across China

MixCache.com

Table of Contents

Introduction

This book begins with a simple proposition: to understand women’s lives in China, we must pay attention to place. Gender is not only shaped by national law or global markets; it is made and remade in provincial contexts where land, lineage, industry, and local governance intersect. By tracing women’s experiences in family, work, and politics across twenty-five provincial units, we reveal how regional histories generate distinctive gender norms—and how women, in turn, transform those norms through everyday strategies and collective action. The result is a mosaic rather than a monolith: a social history that foregrounds differences across space while keeping sight of shared constraints and aspirations.

Our approach is comparative, longitudinal, and empirically grounded. Each chapter is a case study of one province, pairing historical depth with contemporary observation. We draw on county and provincial archives, local gazetteers, factory and cooperative records, oral histories, ethnographic fieldwork, and statistical yearbooks. This mix allows us to follow long arcs—from late imperial kinship regimes and treaty-port commerce to socialist mobilizations, reform-era marketization, and the ongoing rise of service and platform economies. Across these periods, we track how women negotiated marriage, mobility, and labor, and how shifts in policy, industry, and ecology reconfigured the intimate economies of care.

Three analytical threads run through the book. First is household political economy: how families pool income, allocate care, and deploy kin networks to manage risk and opportunity. Second is labor regime change: from state-owned enterprises to township-and-village industries to export-oriented factories and digital entrepreneurship, each terrain organizes power and possibility differently for women. Third is governance and reform: local cadres, NGOs, and women’s federations mediate national agendas on the ground, producing provincial variations in access to justice, social insurance, and collective voice. Together, these threads show how gender orders are stabilized—and unsettled—by the interplay of markets, states, and communities.

The provincial lens also illuminates how migration binds places together. Sending regions like Anhui, Henan, and Sichuan have been remade by remittances, “left-behind” caregiving, and new aspirations, while receiving regions such as Guangdong and Zhejiang have built entire sectors around young women’s factory and service labor. Rustbelt provinces in the Northeast confront the legacies of state-sector contraction, with women leading household diversification into small trade and care work. In pastoral and arid regions—Inner Mongolia, Qinghai, Ningxia—ecological change and infrastructural development reconfigure women’s mobility, education, and claims on land and livelihood. These circulations of people, money, goods, and ideas

continually redraw the gendered map of opportunity.

Methodologically, the book balances narrative and comparison. Each chapter opens with a vignette—an entrepreneur in Wenzhou, a peri-urban home-based worker outside Shijiazhuang, a former SOE technician in Shenyang, a tea trader in Pu’er—that anchors broader patterns in lived experience. We then move through a province’s historical inheritance, its dominant industries and rural-urban linkages, and the institutions that regulate labor, reproduction, and property. A concluding note in each chapter revisits key indicators—employment, education, marriage age, migration intensity—while highlighting emergent forms of agency, from mutual-aid networks to digital organizing.

Our aim is neither celebration nor lament. It is to document complexity and change with clarity: to show how women navigate constraint, seize openings, and craft forms of power that are legible locally yet resonant nationally. By holding twenty-five provinces in view, we make visible the heterogeneity of China’s gender histories and the provincial engines of reform that shape them. We invite feminist historians and sociologists—and all readers interested in the entwined making of place, policy, and personhood—to read across chapters, compare patterns, and imagine how more just futures might be assembled from the practical experiments already unfolding on the ground.

CHAPTER ONE: Anhui—From Rice Fields to Assembly Lines, Migrant Daughters and Care Chains

In a narrow alley of Bengbu, a mid-sized city in Anhui's northern plains, Li Xiaohua sat cross-legged on a wooden stool, her calloused hands sorting through scraps of fabric. At thirty-two, she had spent nearly half her life working in factories in eastern China's coastal provinces, sewing buttons onto jeans for brands she would never wear. Her village, nestled among the rice paddies of Huainan, felt a world away. Each Lunar New Year, Xiaohua returned to her parents' home, where her mother, now in her seventies, asked if she had saved enough to marry. Xiaohua's reply was always the same: "Not yet. The city is expensive." This exchange, repeated countless times across Anhui's villages, encapsulates a silent revolution. Women like Xiaohua are neither the daughters of traditional agrarian patriarchy nor the emancipated workers of socialist propaganda. They are something new: migrant daughters whose labor fuels distant economies while their families navigate the delicate calculus of care left behind.

Anhui's story is one of contradictions. Known for its fertile plains and dense river networks, the province long epitomized the rhythms of rural life. Yet since the 1980s, it has become a launchpad for millions of workers, particularly women, seeking opportunities in the booming factory towns of Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Suzhou. Unlike neighboring Jiangsu or Zhejiang, Anhui never fully embraced the coastal-led export boom. Its interior geography placed it on the periphery of early reforms, leaving it to supply the labor that powered China's economic transformation. This liminality produced a unique gender dynamic: women as both enablers and casualties of progress, central to national growth yet peripheral to its promises.

In late imperial Anhui, women's lives were circumscribed by kinship hierarchies and agrarian cycles. Local gazetteers from the Ming and Qing dynasties describe women's contributions to rice cultivation—transplanting seedlings, managing irrigation ditches, processing grain—but also their subordination within extended households. Marriage was a contract between families, and daughters were expected to depart childhood upon reaching puberty to join their husbands' lineages. Anhui's patriarchy was neither the most severe nor the most lenient in China; it was simply taken for granted, like the Huang He's seasonal floods. Women's labor was indispensable but invisible, a pattern that would echo through the decades.

The Communist revolution of 1949 brought seismic shifts. Land redistribution upended traditional kinship structures, and women were mobilized into agricultural cooperatives and later state-owned enterprises. In Anhui's textile mills and fertilizer plants, women worked alongside men, earning wages and participating in political

campaigns. Yet the promises of the era came with strings. Women's empowerment was framed through maternalist rhetoric—"Half the Sky" slogans emphasized their role as both workers and reproducers of revolution. The household remained a unit of production, but its management increasingly fell to men as women entered waged labor. Archives from the 1950s reveal a paradox: state policies promoted gender equality while local officials often prioritized men's employment in strategic industries.

By the 1980s, economic reforms dismantled the state sector, leaving many rural women in limbo. Township enterprises initially absorbed some displaced workers, particularly in southern Anhui's tea-processing hubs and northern brickworks. But as state subsidies dried up, these ventures collapsed, creating a void. Women's work shifted to informal channels—subsistence farming, seasonal migration, or domestic service. For younger women, the allure of the cities grew irresistible. By 2000, Anhui had become the largest source of migrant labor in China, with women comprising over half of its outbound population. This mass exodus was not just an economic phenomenon but a gendered one, as families restructured themselves around the absent daughter or wife.

The "care chain" became Anhui's defining feature. When women migrated, they left behind aging parents, younger siblings, and children. These responsibilities fell disproportionately on elderly women, who maintained smallholder farms while caring for the sick and young. In 2010, a survey in Anhui's Suxian County found that 60% of left-behind elderly were women over sixty-five, their days filled with chores that once belonged to daughters. Meanwhile, male migrants often faced discrimination in urban job markets, relegated to construction or day labor, their masculinity questioned by employers. This gendered division of labor reinforced itself: women's wages funded male migration, which in turn justified their own continued subordination.

Yet within this system, women carved out agency. Xiaohua, the seamstress from Bengbu, had learned to negotiate factory discipline, switching jobs to secure better pay. Her earnings funded her brother's technical school tuition and her nephew's healthcare. In rural Anhui, older women formed informal networks to share childcare and crop work, their solidarity undocumented but vital. The province's women's federations, established in the 1950s, adapted to this new reality. County offices established legal aid clinics and vocational training programs, though their reach remained uneven. Urban migrants often found these services inaccessible; in Shenzhen, Anhui women's groups were largely self-organized, relying on WeChat groups and word-of-mouth.

Education emerged as a turning point. In the 1990s, rural Anhui's primary school enrollment rates improved, but girls still lagged behind boys in completing compulsory education. Economic necessity disproportionately pulled girls into early labor, either in township enterprises or as domestic helpers. However, a subset of women leveraged migration to fund their children's schooling. In Fuyang, a former migrant worker

named Zhang Meiling opened a small shop selling snacks and phone credit, using profits to hire tutors for her daughter. These micro-entrepreneurial ventures, often dismissed as insignificant, formed an ecosystem of women-led economic activity that defied easy categorization.

The state’s role in Anhui’s gender dynamics has been contradictory. On one hand, household registration (hukou) policies tied rural women to their ancestral villages, limiting access to urban healthcare and education. A migrant woman in Hefei might work in a factory for a decade yet still be denied subsidized housing. On the other, local governments promoted women’s rights through campaigns against domestic violence and maternal health programs. The Women’s Federation in Anqing, for instance, launched a 2015 initiative to provide childcare subsidies for migrant families, funded by provincial taxes on manufacturing firms. Such measures were piecemeal, however, and often conflated women’s empowerment with population control goals.

Climate and geography further shaped Anhui’s gender landscape. The province’s northern plains, plagued by soil erosion and water scarcity, pushed women into marginal livelihoods. In Fuyang’s drought-affected counties, female-headed households relied on reed weaving and seasonal migration to survive. Meanwhile, southern Anhui’s subtropical climate supported cash crops like tea and bamboo, offering women year-round income. These ecological differences produced divergent trajectories: in the south, women’s economic roles were more visible and varied; in the north, they were increasingly invisible, absorbed into the shadow economy of migration.

Anhui’s experience challenges the notion of a singular “Chinese gender order.” While national policies promoted women’s labor participation, the province’s internal diversity revealed the limits of top-down reform. In Huangshan, the UNESCO-listed mountain region, Zhu extended families retained more traditional structures, with women managing both tea farms and family-run guesthouses. In contrast, the canal towns around Wuhu resembled coastal provinces, with women dominating export-processing jobs. These discrepancies underscore the importance of provincial specificity in understanding gender change.

The chapter closes with a scene from 2023: a WeChat livestream hosted by a woman in Lu’an, demonstrating how to package dried mushrooms for online sales. Her face, backlit by a ring light, represents a new generation of rural entrepreneurs, her livelihood a hybrid of traditional knowledge and digital commerce. This transformation is ongoing, and Anhui’s women—whether in villages or factory dormitories—are its architects. Their stories, often untold, reveal the intricate ways place shapes gender, and how women shape place in return. As one provincial official noted in a 2021 report, “The future of Anhui lies not in its rice or its roads, but in the hands of its daughters.” For all their contradictions, their labor has already remade the province’s fate.

This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.

Visit MixCache.com to purchase the complete book.