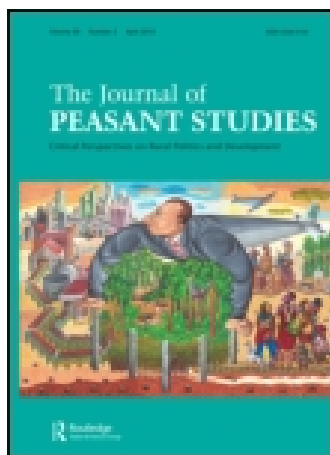


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## Rural women migrant returnees in contemporary China

Nana Zhang

This essay focuses on the experiences of female returnees in rural–urban migration in contemporary China. Based on in-depth interviews with women migrants, returnees, their family members, friends and fellow villagers in both sending and receiving areas, the research examines rural migrant women’s return migration process. It investigates rural migrant women’s decision-making in the process, the ways women returnees construct their lives in the countryside, their identity negotiation as returnees and the impact of patriarchy on women’s experiences of the return and resettlement process. The author argues that despite women’s active involvement in migration and the ‘empowerment and agency’ gained through migration, the patriarchal power relations within rural households remain intact and continue to shape rural female returnees’ life in their villages.

**Keywords:** rural–urban migration; returnee; China; women; gender; filial piety

### Introduction

Despite growing research on internal migration in China, return migration has attracted comparatively less attention. Indeed, it has never been a concern for the Chinese government, at least not until the recent global economic downturn, when more than 20 million of the 145 million rural migrant workers who lost their jobs have been forced back to the countryside to fend for themselves (Chang 2009). Yet the return migration of rural migrant workers does not happen only during an economic downturn. Various institutional barriers, such as the *hukou* system (household registration system) and its related welfare benefit system which favour urban *hukou* holders, still bar rural migrants from permanent settlement in the cities, whilst ensuring the unavoidable return for most rural migrants at some point in their migratory project. The lack of social and financial security in the city also dictates that rural migrants have to rely on their family in the home village for support when crises arise. Rural migrants in China are required to retain ‘a dual allegiance to land and industry, village and town’ – their split households left behind in the villages provide ‘subsistence reproduction’ to subsidize capital profits (Burawoy 1985, 105),

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while their ‘flexible citizenship’ also provides a ‘safety valve’ for China’s growing economy.<sup>1</sup>

Nationwide, more than 50 million rural women are working in the cities, accounting for around 40 per cent of the whole rural migrant population (NBSC 2008). They are commonly referred to as ‘women peasant workers’ in China, a name that connotes their marginal position in the city; their urban waged work cannot erase their rural origin and their status as peasants in the city. The majority of such ‘women peasant workers’ are channelled through *guanxi* networks to take up low-skilled, gender-specific jobs in textile and manufacturing industries and the service sector (Davin 1996, 1999, Solinger 1999, Fan 2003, Gaetano and Jacka 2004, Jacka 2006). This affords poor prospects for upward social mobility and minimal security (Zhang 2006).

Rural migrant women live a precarious life in the cities. Recent research conducted by the All China Women’s Federation shows that rural women migrant workers earn 20 percent less than their male counterparts. Meanwhile, 60 percent of rural women migrant workers do not have employment contracts, 76 percent of women do not have medical insurance, 85 percent do not have access to pension schemes, and 92 percent do not have unemployment insurance (Chinese Women Movement 2007). Rural migrant women experience the triple oppressions of ‘global capitalism, state socialism, and familial patriarchy ... along lines of class, gender and rural–urban disparity’ (Pun 2005, 4). Although working and living in the cities, rural migrant women are in fact segmented from the urbanites’ world, and have limited upward social mobility (Zhang 2006). Indeed, some researchers believe that rural migrant women are ‘the most oppressed’ and can be seen as existing under a ‘spatial and social apartheid’ (Au and Nan 2007).

In spite of myriad difficulties, hardships, inequalities and discriminations faced by migrant women in the city, their benefits from migration cannot be denied: income gained from urban employment, a sense of independence and freedom from direct parental control, improved confidence and self esteem, as well as the possibility of choosing their own marriage partner and their sense of ‘being modern’ and holding ‘widened world views’ are all stressed in recent studies (Murphy 2002, 2004, Lou *et al.* 2004, Davin 2005, Jacka 2006, Fan 2007, Yan 2008). Furthermore, these studies document the strong desire of rural migrant women, especially young women, to remain in the city, coupled with their reluctance to return to their home village (Lou *et al.* 2004, Beynon 2004, Jacka 2006, Yan 2008). Equally, however, studies show that a significant proportion of female rural migrants have returned to the countryside, despite their intention to remain in the city (Bai and Song 2002, Murphy 2002, Fan 2007).

Given its integral role in migration, the importance of return migration cannot be exaggerated – it not only leads to the ‘important phenomenon of repeat migration’ but also serves as a ‘vital link’ in the chain migration process (King 1978, 175). Yet except for a few notable studies (Murphy 2002, Bai and He 2003, Lou *et al.* 2004, Fan 2007), research that focuses on rural return migration in China remains limited.

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<sup>1</sup>Former US Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan made similar comments on unauthorized foreigners in the US: ‘unauthorized immigrants serve as a flexible component of our workforce, often a safety valve when demand is pressing and among the first to be discharged when the economy falters’ (*Rural Migration News* 2009).

The present paper draws on 60 in-depth interviews with rural migrant women and women returnees, their family members, friends, fellow villagers and colleagues. It examines the decision-making of rural migrant women in return migration, the reconstruction of their lives back in their home village and their aspirations and the negotiation of their identities as returnees. It further explores the resilience of patriarchy in the return migration process of rural women. By tracing the same cohort of rural women through their migration and return journeys from the receiving cities to their home village I have been able to look at a combination of factors that produce women's return migration at different points in the migration chain. The extended interviews conducted with members of the women returnees' support network, such as their parents, husbands and fellow villagers, also serves to shed light on the intertwined power relations that structure women's return migration.

The remaining part of the essay is divided into six sections: section one provides a brief review of women in rural–urban migration in China. Section 2 provides data description; sections 3, 4 and 5 meanwhile uncover the lived experience of rural women migrant returnees, while section 6 concludes the paper.

### **Women's return migration to rural area in China**

The secondary status of rural migrant women in China's dual-labour market preconditions the 'inherent precariousness and instability' of their urban employment – the preference for 'the nimble fingers' of young women in the 'world market factories' restricts women's working life; women's reproductive role deems their participation in wage employment can only be temporary (Elson and Pearson 1981, 101). Furthermore, the prevailing patriarchal social system in China, in which women are defined 'in relation to, and subordinate to, other males in the family' also limit women's ability to make independent decisions regarding their migration (Fan 2003, 28). Women's migration and decision-making are intrinsically related to the situation of women within their households. Although researchers do not have consensus as to how returnees are selected (Yue *et al.* 2010), they find that family needs and unemployment are prominent reasons for rural migrants' return (Wang and Fan 2006, Fan 2007). Marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and family demands are, equally, frequently quoted reasons by rural women to explain their return (Murphy 2002, 2004, Lou *et al.* 2004). These reasons are directly linked to women's gender roles in the household.

While most available literature shows that the re-adjustment to village life may present difficulties for women returnees (Murphy 2002, Lou 2004, Jacka 2006, Fan 2007), there is a less congruent view of the degree to which returnee women remain dissatisfied with their lives in the countryside, the likelihood of their re-migration and the impact of migration on their agency and status in the family. For example, based on her survey of both female and male returnees in Wanzai village in rural Jiangxi, Murphy suggests the possibility of a 'higher level of discontent and even suicide' among women, as compared to their male counterparts, which 'may be associated with women's limited opportunities to escape the drudgery of farming, domestic work and family duties' (Murphy 2002, 214). Other researchers, meanwhile, conclude that although some returned women may struggle 'to find a place for themselves' as they are changed by their experience in the city, for most women, 'the struggle is brief, with rural life the clear victor, especially the married women who return to a full set of responsibilities and expectations' (Lou *et al.* 2004, 240).

As to the likelihood of women returnees' remigration after marriage, using both survey and interview data with women in Sichuan and Anhui, Fan claims that 'Marriage . . . signals a termination of migrant and "outside world" experience for rural women' (Fan 2004, 204; 2007, 127). However, based on questionnaire surveys and interviews with women returnees from Anhui and Sichuan, Lou *et al.* find that marriage does not end migration for women, and two-thirds of their sampled migrant women were married (Lou *et al.* 2004). Recent research also suggests that although marriage and subsequent pregnancy and children care may temporarily end women's migration, some may re-emigrate again when their children can be looked after by other members of the family (Meng 2010, 87).

A third area in question relates to the empowerment and agency of women returnees and the impact of such agency and empowerment on women returnees' lives in villages, and family relations. Some researchers argue that migration brings 'fundamental changes' to female returnees, such as their imitation of 'urban fashion, speech, and behavior', their increased standards of hygiene and their opinions and attitudes toward issues such as marriage, divorce and sexual/fertility behavior' (Lou *et al.* 2004, 234–236), which give women 'control over resources . . . and the power to bargain for a change in their situation' (Murphy 2002, 222), empowers rural women and enables them to 'become potential agents of social change in rural areas' (Fan 2004, 178). Furthermore, migration experiences enable rural women to challenge the 'deep-rooted patriarchal ideology that determines gender differentials in opportunity in both economic and social spheres' and to 'challenge traditional gender roles and relations' (Fan 2007, 129). Women returnees are acclaimed to be the 'agents of transformation', 'advancers of civilization' and a 'rural version of Chinese immigrant returnees from abroad' (*xiangcunban de haigui*) (Meng 2010, 88).

Conversely, recent studies question assumptions relating to the extent of the empowerment and agency that women returnees are able to exercise. For example, Ge *et al.* (2011) argue that 'everyday practices associated with return migration and reincorporation into village life have the effect of re-citing gender and kinship norms and hierarchies' and women returnees 'remain firmly embedded within strong gender, class and kinship alliances' (Ge *et al.* 2011, 134). Jin (2011) also suggests that traditional rural patriarchal families have gone through a deconstruction–reconstruction process during migration, within which patriarchy remains intact (Jin 2011).

Can returnee women 'transform the countryside', and challenge traditional gender roles and relations and the 'deep-rooted patriarchal ideology that determines gender differentials in opportunity in both economic and social spheres' (Fan 2007, 129)? Or do they simply 're-citing gender and kinship norms and hierarchies' (Ge *et al.* 2011, 134) after their return? How much agency could be ascribed to women returnees? Migrant women returnees are far from a homogeneous group. Indeed, their return experiences are structured and shaped by household hierarchies and power dynamics that spread across both sending and receiving areas, as well as multiple differences such as age, ethnicity and class. As argued by Silvey, 'rural-return migrants shape their self conceptions in relation to both their urban context, as well as the norms prevailing in their rural origins' (Silvey 2001, 43). Nonetheless, most of the literature to date has been heavily focused on the influence of the city on migrants. I argue that the influence of the family in the home village on rural migrants needs to be taken into account just as much as the influence of the city on rural migrants. Through close examination of rural migrant women's

decision-making process in their return migration, their lived experiences as returnees in the villages and their identity negotiation as returnees, this paper demonstrates the continuing power of the family, both in terms of return migration and in terms of the experiences of the female migrants after their return. While rural women's economic activities in the cities allow them to gain some power in the family, to some degree, migration does not in any way free rural women from patriarchal family relations. Hence, despite women's active involvement in migration and the 'empowerment and agency' gained through migration, the patriarchal power relations within rural households remain intact, and continue to shape the life of rural female returnees in their villages.

### **Description of data**

The data used for this paper is drawn from a qualitative study on women in rural–urban migration in China. While quantitative data is ideal for doing macro-level analysis, qualitative data 'enables researchers to gain insight into the lives of respondents and the meanings they give to their experiences' (Bhopal 2000, 68). Given the nature of the research questions that the present research attempts to answer, a qualitative approach, which combines interviews, direct observations and participatory observations, is considered the most suitable approach to data collection (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

As with their decision to migrate to the cities, rural migrant women's decision to return to the home village is under the influence of multiple factors that relate to both sending and receiving areas. However, to date, most of the existing migration studies on rural migrant women in China are based on data collected in either the sending areas or the destination cities, or research different stages of the migration process such as out migration and return migration as discrete movements that have no impact on one another. In this study, the data was collected at both ends of the migration chain. In the fieldwork, the researcher acted as a 'tracer', following the same cohort of migrants through their migration journey from their home village to the receiving city, and from the city back to their home village. This study interviewed not only women migrants, but also women migrants' family and fellow villagers in the countryside, as well as their friends and employers in the city. This approach enabled the author to map rural women in relation to others, whilst re-positioning women migrant informants into the migrant/rural/urban community. The method was also vital in aiding data triangulation.

Sixty in-depth interviews with rural women migrants, their family members, fellow villagers, and employers were conducted between 2003 and 2005 in four field sites: two popular destination cities with different social, economic and geographical characteristics – Beijing and Shantou, and two of the biggest rural migrant labour sending provinces – Henan and Hebei.

Shantou and Beijing offer very different employment opportunities to rural migrants. Established as one of the very first coastal cities in the SEZ, Shantou hosts a great number of labour-intensive factories and attracts a large volume of rural migrants, especially women migrants, from all over the country (Zhang 2000, 2), whereas in Beijing, the capital city, rural migrant women dominate the services sectors (Fafo 2000, 38). As for the selection of sending areas, Henan is the most populated province, and has been 'China's No 1 labor exporting province' for more than a decade, having 2.2 million of its agricultural labour force in migration by the



end of 2009 (Liang 2010). Hebei migrants, on the other hand, constitute a greater proportion of rural migrants in Beijing than those from any other province (Fafu 2000, 38). Both provinces are representative source areas in rural out-migration.

In the SEZ, informants were first located in several factories. Since migrants rely heavily on their *guanxi* to obtain employment in the city, women migrants from the same sending area via the same *guanxi* network tend to cluster in the same factory. This enabled the researcher to trace their journey back to their home village and carry out further interviews with their family members and fellow villagers.<sup>2</sup> Unlike in SEZ, most women migrants in Beijing hold jobs in the private service sectors which are difficult to locate. It is even more difficult to locate interviewees from the same village. The starting point in the fieldwork was therefore the sending area – a township in Hebei, reported to have a high volume of rural women migrating to work in Beijing. Interviews were first conducted in the villages with the families who had migrants working in Beijing. Using the information gathered from these families, the researcher then traced the migrants back to Beijing, and carried out further interviews with women migrants.

Among the 60 informants, 33 were rural women migrants. Twelve of the 33 informants came from the SEZ, and 21 informants worked in Beijing. They came from 30 villages in 24 townships/county seats from eight provinces. The remaining interviews were carried out with rural migrant women's parents, husbands, fellow villagers (from villages in Henan and Hebei) and employers (three from Shantou, two from Beijing). The youngest women migrant in the sample was 16-years-old, and the oldest 56 years at the time of the interview. The duration of their migration experience ranged from one month to 14 years. Among them, 15 had had the experience of returning. Most informants from the SEZ were factory workers, producing footwear, garment and hair ornaments, mainly for the domestic market. Three factories also accepted outsourcing orders from bigger companies that targeted the international market. The sizes of the factories ranged from 1000 workers to less than 10 workers. Most informants in Beijing were employed in private businesses, mainly in sales and service, and the sizes of the businesses ranged from two to 20 people.

Despite a small sample size, the study captures the different patterns and characteristics of the women migrant population through its method of locating the informants and the selection of its sending and receiving areas.

### Returning home – a forced decision for rural women?

Like other migrants, women migrants in China seldom return for one reason alone. Their decision of return is almost always born of a combination of both 'push' and 'pull' factors in both the receiving cities and sending villages. In this study, 45.5 percent (15/33) of women had the experience of return, and 73 percent of them (11/15) quoted two or more reasons for their return<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, 47 percent of women returnees in this study (7/15) commented that 'not making money' (*bu zheng qian*) was the primary reason that led them to return home, and their retreats were

<sup>2</sup>The home village of a Henan women cluster in SEZ was chosen as the sending area under investigation.

<sup>3</sup>This is close to Bai and He's finding which shows that 80 percent of their sampled returnees quoted two or more reasons for their return (Bai and He 2003).

often temporary – except for one woman, all the other six returnees remigrated when opportunities came up. Marriage, family needs and the lack of social networks in the city lead to more prolonged, and sometimes permanent return migration. Rural migrant women's return decision-making process often involves complex negotiations between migrant women, their employers and family members in the home village. This study shows that a central aspect of the negotiations is women's strong sense of filial piety to their family, parents and even employers in the city. This is reflected particularly in young women migrants' negotiation of return for marriage purposes.

Marriage, for rural men, is often a point of independence and may well be a 'push' power that encourages male migrants to continue with their migration; meanwhile, marriage for most rural migrant women means at least a temporary retreat from their life in the city, because patrilocal, exogamous marriage forces them to move to and settle in their husband's home and to perform the duties of a wife, such as conceiving a son for the family and taking care of one's in-laws. Fully aware of the possible consequences of marriage, however, none of the interviewed women expressed a single doubt that a woman should marry. The age-old notion that marriage is 'an inevitable and indispensable life event' (Fan 2007, 138) is well observed by migrant women, even when they are far away from their home village.

Zheng returned home after four years working in Beijing. She was among the very few informants who had managed to enter the urbanites' world in her migration – with the help of her parents' network, she secured a job as a bookkeeper in a local trade union office at the Beijing Railway Bureau at the age of 21, where she could sit in the office along with local Beijingers and enjoy a stable salary and fixed working hours. However, just before she turned 25-years-old, she resigned and returned home to Hebei province. Contemplating the reasons that led to her return, she said:

It was [a nice job]. But there were still a lot of problems . . . I couldn't get a Beijing local household registration and I didn't have any friends there. I couldn't settle in Beijing and did not have a family there either. Of course the only choice for me was to go back to where I came from. . . . Even if I didn't quit and was still working in the Union, nobody could help me with my household registration. . . . Besides it was also time for me to find a boyfriend . . . but it was almost impossible for me unless there was somebody who could introduce me to him because I didn't know anybody there at all! . . . My social network was extremely limited and I couldn't meet the right person at all. Therefore after consideration, I still felt that the best choice for me was to come back.

At the time of the interview, Zheng was working as an accountant for a private pharmacy in a county seat in Hebei. Turning 29 years, she had still not found a 'suitable match'. For Zheng, marrying was part of her responsibilities towards her parents that she had to fulfil. She was well aware of her mother's concern and mentioned quite a few times in the interview that 'Mum is worried to death about it'. Not being able to meet her mother's expectation certainly gave Zheng considerable pressure. She said:

'My mum is complaining all the time that I cannot find a partner. . . . I will certainly find somebody to fulfil my responsibilities. I will marry and have a baby. That's all. I don't want any emotions at all. It will be fine as long as he will not beat me or swear at me or treat me badly. That is exactly what I am thinking now.'



[...]

'Why do you want to marry?' [Asked the researcher.]

'I have no reasons. Every human being is supposed to marry.'

'Who said it?' [Asked the researcher.]

'It is impossible for me to be single all my life. A girl like me who grow up in my family, is impossible to not to marry in my life.'

Zheng's return did not lead to the fulfilment of finding a marriage partner immediately. However, for Zheng, she at least demonstrated that she was willing to make an effort to meet her parents' expectations, which in a way gave her some relief. From her interviews with rural migrant women in Chengdu, Beynon concludes that 'For many of the migrant women . . . marriage was a necessary step in securing a better future, however ambivalent they might feel about marrying' (Beynon 2004). This holds true for many women interviewed in this study, regardless of the time span of their migration. This study also reveals that equally important was women migrants' awareness that postponing marriage beyond a certain age might result in not being able to find a partner, as well as their awareness that this would bring worry and shame to their parents. For migrant women, marriage constitutes more than an insurance for the future. It is also widely conceived by rural women migrants as one of their filial responsibilities they have to fulfil.

It is evident that migration increases the opportunities and freedom for some young migrant women in finding their marriage partners. Twenty-seven percent (6/22) of the interviewed women migrants who were either married, cohabiting or engaged had found their partners during migration, by themselves. Interestingly, they all worked in retail. One possible explanation is that their working environment gave them the exposure to meeting strangers of the opposite sex, and their working hours were more flexible when compared to women workers in factories. However, for the majority of rural migrant women, finding a husband in the city, whilst desirable, is not easily achievable, due to their inferior status in the 'urban marriage market', the lack of social networks and their hukou status in the city. Many women therefore have to rely on their family members' social networks to find a marriage partner. This inevitably increases parental control over migrant women, which not only includes finding a match with a 'suitable marriage partner', but also the amount of the dowry, the timing of the wedding and their return arrangements.

Twenty-three-year-old Yan had been working in a stamp album factory in Beijing since she was 18-years-old. She went back home at the request of her mother to help with work in the family cotton field. However, she could not return to Beijing as she originally planned – her mother had already set up a date for her wedding and did not allow her to go back to work. A couple of months later, she became the wife of a young man in her neighbouring village. Knowing Yan's reluctance to terminate her migration and to marry, Yan's mother appealed to her filial piety, which proved to be very effective. For example, Yan was asked to visit home because her mother had fallen ill, only to find that a blind date had already been arranged for her during her visit. In the interview, Yan's mother talked about Yan's filial piety proudly:

She came back and told me that she was not willing to come back, [she said], 'I would not have come back if you didn't say I must come back' . . . She quit the job this Mid-Autumn Festival. I planted a lot of cotton this year and I asked her to come back to help me with picking the cotton in the field. I kept her home and didn't allow her to go back to the job. . . . She was very compliant and she followed my words obediently. She does whatever I ask her to do.

Like Yan, for many filial daughters, returning home at the behest of their parents is their undeniable responsibility, because their labor is still in the firm control of the patriarchal family, and these responsibilities are often prescribed by traditional gender stereotypes. Daughters are expected to help with agricultural work at home, to look after sick parents or relatives, or simply to get married and raise children. Some women, though, try to negotiate a compromise between migration and return – they re-migrate to the cities or townships near their home village where they may, on the one hand, find more home fellows and build their own *guanxi* networks, and on the other hand, fulfil their responsibilities as daughters, wives and mothers, so as to meet the needs of their families back in the villages. Twenty-three-year-old Ping migrated to Beijing to work in a stamp album factory from a village in Hebei when she was 19-years-old. Although she was happy with her work in Beijing, she returned home two years later to look after her aging parents. However, shortly afterwards, she re-migrated to a town nearby where she could commute home easily and where she could build and extend her *guanxi* networks. Working as a shop assistant selling clothes, she was content that she had found a compromise. She stated:

I came back because I didn't have any friends in Beijing. All my friends were working here [in this town]. The boys and girls in my village and neighbourhood, all of them found jobs here and migrated here by and by, so I had more friends here.

As for married women, although they may have greater bargaining power in the household after years' of marriage, they, too, have to observe carefully the patriarchal hierarchy within the family and fulfil their obligations as a wife and mother in their migration decision-making. Thirty-four-year-old Xiu migrated from Sichuan to work in Beijing in 1990 after her husband failed to bring any money home from his migratory work and returned home. Despite the long distance and expenses of travel and her employment opportunities in Beijing, she retreated from migration and returned home several times at her husband's requests. Only after her husband joined her in migration in 1998 was she able to stay in Beijing for longer periods of time.

It is worth noting that rural migrant women's sense of filial responsibilities can also be utilised by urban employers, which may set up a conflict with the responsibilities which migrant women are expected to fulfil towards their family in the countryside. This complicates women's return process. Qin migrated to Beijing in 1998 at the age of 21 from a village in Hebei. She had been working as a nanny for a retired army officer's family for two years until two days before her wedding day. She did not have any doubt about terminating her work in the city. However, she found it difficult to get out of her work because her employer could not find a suitable substitute and had not wanted her to quit. She said:

They [the employer] said that I was a very reliable person and they trusted me and asked me to find a nanny for them. . . . They also met several others to replace me after I told them that I would go back home to get married, but they were not satisfied with any of them until I introduced the girl to them. She came to the family and I began to teach her everything. I did not return until she became familiar with everything. Then I went back home to get married. My wedding day was just two or three days away. I didn't have any time to rest at all.

The indebtedness built up over the years in the employment relation could greatly influence migrant women's return decision. Like Qin's employer, many employers

request their workers recommend substitutes or offer hands on training to the new comers before the workers leave their job. Some women may risk losing their wage payment if they do not follow the requirements, as their wages are often withheld by employers, sometimes for months.

### **Reconstructing life in the village**

Returning to the countryside, migrant women face many difficulties in adjusting to their life as returnees after their sojourns in the city and their exposure to urban life style. Both factors external to the family, such as the state policies and programmes, and those within the family unit, such as the structure and size of the family, could create gender specific difficulties, tensions and struggles for women which have a profound impact on women returnees' lives. While some of the difficulties that rural women returnees face are well documented in recent studies (Murphy 2002, Lou *et al.* 2004, Fan 2007), it has not been well explained how rural women contest these difficulties and how these difficulties can influence women returnees' lives. This section will uncover the lived experiences of women returnees through examining the factors that have direct impact on women returnees such as their lack of land entitlement, the devaluation of women's domestic work as well as the constraints women returnees face in developing *guanxi* networks. It demonstrates that the power of family continue to impact and shape women's experiences in the villages after their return.

### ***The fragile 'fall-back position' of women returnees in the family***

Murphy suggests that compared to non-migrants, women returnees may benefit:

... from the opportunity to earn independent income for their own use; from the increased visibility of their labor contributions to their households; and from the fact that they are able to demonstrate to other household members that they have a 'fall-back position' in the form of *knowledge* of urban labor markets. (Murphy 2004, 255)

However, such benefits can easily disappear after women's return, and the 'fall-back position' is particularly fragile for women returnees. First, remittances sent home by women during migration are seen to be part of the family income, and are rarely kept by women individually for their own use. Second, what is noticeable for most, if not all, women returnees and their family members is the fact that they are no longer 'visible' cash earners in the family, and instead, become 'dependents' and 'surplus labourers' again, doing household chores or agricultural work which are often 'invisible' in counting their contributions towards the household income. Interviews with female returnees often revealed their agony over the fact that they were no longer able to contribute to the family income, but not that they had been able to contribute through their waged work. Thirdly, as has been argued elsewhere in this paper, rural women rely more heavily on *guanxi* networks in gaining urban employment rather than '*knowledge* of urban labor markets'. Unless they maintain the *guanxi* links in the city after their return, their '*knowledge* of urban labor markets' is likely to be of little use in securing a 'fall-back position' in the family.

Twenty-six-year-old Qin terminated her migration as a nanny in Beijing because she got married and then had a baby. Living in a village in Hebei with her parents-in-law, she experienced great frustration with her life as a returnee. Even though her

husband, also a rural migrant, was still in migration and had been sending remittances home regularly, the economic tension in the family was high. As a daughter-in-law, and an 'outsider' in the family, she did not have much say in the allocation of the remittances because it was not 'proper'. Qin was desperate to re-migrate out of the village. She told me:

Working in the city is much better than staying at home. And I had more freedom there. I could spend the money I earned at my own will. Nobody could interfere with me. But I cannot buy whatever I want to buy when I return home [from migration], because it is not very proper for me to spend money which is expected to be saved for the family. . . . It is very difficult for me to stay at home after my experience of migration.

Women's return and their transition from being cash earners in the outside sphere to the domestic sphere also reinforce the previous unequal gender relations in the household. It leads both women returnees and their family members to put more value on waged work in the cities rather than unpaid domestic work in the household. Most women returnees resumed their household responsibilities without any complaints, let alone challenging the traditional gender role stereotypes. Few returned women value the domestic work they did in the household – it was the cash generating work that was more valued by women returnees. When asked about the work they undertook at home in the village, all the returned women stated that they 'just stayed at home doing nothing', whereas in fact, they all took on household chores such washing, cooking and looking after younger ones in the family. The devaluation of women's domestic work in the villages and emphasis on cash generating work in the city by women returnees and their family members further placed women returnees at a disadvantage within the family. The fact that women returnees were no longer cash earners could well deprive them of their 'fall back' position in the household, earned through their migration, which could profoundly influence women's bargaining power within the family and their general well-being.

#### *Women returnees and land entitlement*

Even though non-agricultural income has become an increasingly important form of income for rural people (Bai and He 2003), land is still valued as a source of security by many, because of their lack of access to social security and welfare system. It is also 'the basis for pursuing livelihood diversification strategies' (Liu and Murphy 2009, 617). However, rural women in China can only obtain their entitlement to land through their family, as land is allocated to the household rather than to an individual. A rural woman will naturally lose her land allocation in her natal home upon marriage, because under village exogamous marriage practice, a woman will move to her husband's family and is therefore expected to have her land reallocated in her husband's village. However, in reality, many villages do not readjust their land allocation for years. The policy of extending the land contracting period to 30 years without readjustment since 1998,<sup>4</sup> which intends to give peasants assured long-term land use rights, also results in the loss of land rights for married women. Research into rural women migrants conducted by the All China Women's Federation also

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<sup>4</sup>'Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on Several Major Issues Concerning Agriculture and Rural Work', issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in its Third Plenary Session in October 1998.

shows that the change of marriage status is the main cause of land loss among rural women (Mo 2007). Without land, married women can be very vulnerable in their husbands' households.

Most married women in this study were factual 'surplus labourers' in their rural households, because of their loss of land ownership. None of the returnees had land in their home village. Among the 33 women migrants interviewed, only nine still had land back in the countryside. Land is the 'most valued form of property and productive resource' and 'the single most important source of security against poverty' (Agarwal 2002, 2). Effective and independent land rights are important for the welfare, efficiency, equality, and empowerment of women (Agarwal 2002, 4). Losing direct access to land will put women at greater risk of poverty, and make them more vulnerable, especially when women's marriages break down (Agarwal 2002, 5).

### *Women returnees' guanxi networks*

Returned women migrants, especially young women, often find their life in home villages unbearably lonely because they do not have a sufficient *guanxi* network in the villages. This has also been documented by other researchers (Murphy 2002, Lou *et al.* 2004, Fan 2007, Jacka 2006), and is often one of the major forces that push many women returnees back to one migration project after another. Twenty-two-year-old Nan migrated to Beijing in 1998 from a village in Hebei at the age of 17. She gave up her work in a small shop in Beijing in 2000 after two years migration and returned home because of unfair treatment by her boss. However, she could not stay in her home village for long. A couple of months later, she found herself again working in Beijing. As she stated:

I didn't have anything to do when I was home. I was very bored and lonely. Those who were around my age had all migrated to work in the cities. Even when some of them happened to visit home, they didn't have much to talk to me about.

The general absence of young people and friends in the village is something that young rural returnees of both genders might note. However, women returnees are particularly constrained in building new *guanxi* networks both within and outside the village because of their gender. Rural women do not have the same freedom as men in carrying out *guanxi*-enhancing activities such as attending banquets and drinking alcohol (Yang 1994). Social norms regulating women's proper behaviour also restrict women from developing *guanxi* effectively with others, especially with men, who tend to hold positions that are more influential. Socializing with men may give women a bad reputation. Returning home also means that women are again directly and continuously monitored by their parents, parents-in-law and fellow villagers, and women returnees can thus feel very constrained at home. New brides are extremely vulnerable in this respect, as they have to move to their husbands' village upon marriage. It could be worse if their husbands are still away in migration. On the other hand, maintaining their *guanxi* networks in the city can be challenging because of the geographical distance from their networks. Women returnees therefore risk losing their *guanxi* networks at both destination and sending locations. Indeed, it may be hard for them to find immediate social support when they are in difficulty.

### Strangers at home – contesting identities and negotiating belonging

The exposure to the urban world has profound impact on rural women. Women migrant returnees are more aware of the growing rural–urban disparity<sup>5</sup> and poor basic infrastructure and social services in rural areas after their sojourn in the city. Muddy roads, unstable water and electricity supply and poor irrigation in the villages are frequently quoted reasons by women returnees for their discontent with village life. Poor infrastructure and social services tend to influence women more profoundly due to the nature of women’s everyday work in the household and beyond such as washing, cooking, cleaning, as well as farming. It may be argued that the gender division of labour in the household, as well as their migration experience in the city, make rural–urban disparities rather more pronounced and more noticeable for women migrant returnees.

Furthermore, rural women experience a series of changes through migration, regardless of their migration span (Murphy 2002, Lou *et al.* 2004, Fan 2007). Many villagers in this study mentioned that migrant girls went through ‘big changes’ after their migration: ‘The way they talk is different from people in the village. They speak in a civilized way. They also eat and dress differently’. Through adopting an ‘urbanized’ life style, migrant women send out a clear message regarding their departure from peasantry, and they generally identify themselves different from their fellow villagers. However, returning home forces women to accept their rural origin and their identity as a peasant, whose very name denotes ‘ignorance, backwardness and a dire lack of civility’ (Yan 2008, 42; 2003b, 495). Women returnees therefore experience ‘a double alienation’ (Yan 2008, 232) – on the one hand, they are no longer accepted by the urban world; on the other hand, they often feel alienated from village life and identify themselves differently from their fellow villagers. The feeling of alienation could be so great for some women migrants that even to stay with family members in the home village is unbearable for them. As Yan argues, ‘post-Mao development has robbed the countryside of its ability to serve as a locus for rural youth to construct a meaningful identity’ (Yan 2003a, 579).

Xiu migrated from a village in Sichuan where mah-jong was an extremely popular pastime. She felt she was so different from her mah-jong addicted family members as well as her fellow villagers during her return home that she had to migrate once more. She said:

To me, their life is aimless and meaningless. They don’t have competitive spirit at all [*meiyou jingzheng yishi*]. The only place they visited was the mah-jong house . . . So we didn’t have much to talk about to each other because we didn’t share anything in common at all. I cared more about how to earn money [*zhuangqian*] while they cared more about how much they won from one round [in a mah-jong game] [*shuaqian*] . . . I could no longer bear to stay at home in the end so I migrated once more to Beijing in 1998.

Although many women migrants share the feeling of being a stranger in the city, rootless, isolated and inferior and their sense of rootlessness in the city strengthened

<sup>5</sup>Latest figures from the National Bureau of Statistics show that the average urban per capita net income was 17,175 yuan (\$2252) in 2009, compared to only 5153 yuan in the countryside, a ration of 3.33:1 (Fu 2010). This does not include other hidden welfare benefits for urban residents which peasants cannot enjoy due to their rural *hukou* status.



their ties with home during migration, few women feel settled in their returned life at home in their villages. They are home, but they no longer feel that they 'belong'. Their geographical departure from the city does not remove their attachment to the city. On the contrary, it engenders and reinforces their sense of belonging to the city and their identity as a migrant worker, despite their 'troubled process of subject formation' during their migration in the city (Yan 2008, 37). For them, the return to the home village is seen as a temporary interruption to their migration project, rather than a long-term settlement. However, by differentiating themselves from their 'fellow peasants', reiterating memories about their life in the city and planning migration for the future, women returnees reconstruct an imagined identity as 'a migrant in the city'. The discourses of their memories about their life in the city are always connected to their plans for remigration to the city. Talking about her life as a returnee in her husband's village, Qin told me:

I can meet all kinds of people when I work in the city and I can get a lot of knowledge there. But here in the countryside we don't read anything at all. And we don't know anything about the outside world at all. We are like idiots. . . . I prefer working in the cities. . . . I can have the chance to know all the modern things in the city. There is nothing at home but a few fellow villagers.

For rural women returnees, returning home is only a 'temporary project'. Both their experiences of temporary sojourn in the city and their return to home village urge them to renegotiate a passage back to the cities. However, this is not always easy because of the familial responsibilities women returnees have to fulfil, which have resulted their return on the first place. Women returnees' former migration experience may grant them some bargaining power in the family, nonetheless, as in their first migration, whether they can re-migrate again is often not up to them to decide. Studies have shown that returnee women are more likely to be confined to village and family and gender division of labour in the household still nail women in the inside sphere, whereas returnee men are more likely to engage in off-farm activities (Murphy 2002, 207).

New brides are especially constrained as they are naturally expected to 'settle' in her husband's home and conceive a baby for the family. Subsequent childcare may mean years of retreat from paid work in the city. Before they could find alternative childcare, migration is unlikely to happen. As mentioned earlier, Qin terminated her work as a nanny in Beijing and returned to her husband village for marriage. Although she had been contemplating to remigrate again since her return, her 'plan' had been delayed because of the birth of her daughter. She said:

My mother-in-law mentioned today that next year, when my daughter is getting older, it would be time for me to find a job. . . . [The reason why] I am now home is because I have to take care of my daughter and I have no other choices at all. I will definitely migrate to the city next year when my daughter gets older.

It is worth noting that married women may gain more bargaining power over the years after their marriage, especially after giving birth to a son. They may also be able to extend their *guanxi* networks in the village so that they could negotiate childcare arrangements and find a way back to the city. Some women returnees also manage to remigrate by persuading their husbands to migrate with them. Thirty-four-year-old Xiu was one of them.

Xiu migrated to Beijing alone from Sichuan as early as 1990, after her husband had failed to make money in his two attempts of migration. Leaving her husband and young son in the village, Xiu found herself torn between Sichuan and Beijing. She gave up her work and eventually returned home. However, life as a returnee was unbearable for her. In 1998, she was offered a job as a hardware store manager by her previous boss in Beijing and her husband was also invited to work in the store with her. After careful consideration, she turned down the offer and persuaded her husband to start their own hardware selling business in Beijing instead. As she noted:

We could have worked for him [the boss] and both have a fixed income ... but he [husband] knew nothing about the hardware business and he could only work in the storage room [checking stock]. What if he made a mistake? On the other hand, if I was the manager there and I was in charge of my husband, he would lose face as a man. It was not better than working for ourselves and being our own bosses. Even if we failed, we could still go back home and have a peaceful life.

Through her strategic plan, Xiu successfully managed to migrate. Instead of transgressing the traditional gender relation by being the boss of her husband, Xiu chose to protect her husband's superior position within the household and beyond and keep his face intact. Xiu's actions could be seen as 're-citing gender and kinship norms and hierarchies' (Ge *et al.* 2011, 134). It could also be argued that Xiu consciously put her husband in a superior position in the household and maintain the gender division of labour is often the only effective strategy for women to bargain against patriarchy and the traditional gender ideology, although this may well in turn reinforce and further legitimize gender inequality.

## Conclusion

Return migration has never been a one-off, one-time event. As floaters in the city, peasant workers would have to return to their home village at some point of their life. However, until recently, neither the government nor academics have paid much attention to this phenomenon. By using qualitative data, this research has investigated how rural migrant women returnees experience, articulate and shape return migration, and shows that patriarchy still works hand in hand with capitalism and state socialism in shaping the life of rural returnee women in China. Meanwhile, women's strong sense of filial piety to their family, parents and even employers in the city still greatly influence their negotiations of life back in their home village.

Women returnees' migration experience and their waged work in the city, indeed, have a great impact on them to various degrees, which has been well documented by recent studies (Murphy 2002, Lou *et al.* 2004, Jacka 2006, Fan 2007, Yan 2008). However, rural migrant women returnees are far from a homogeneous group. Any attempt to generalize their agency will be deemed to offer only a partial representation. The author argues that in accessing rural returnees' agency and empowerment, sufficient attention should be paid to the following three elements: the meaning of family for rural women, their filial piety and gender relations in the household.

Family is more than an economic unit for women. Their current and future life security and prosperity are realized through their position in the family and they do not participate in waged work as independent individuals. Many young women migrate simply because migration is 'a rite of passage', although this may coincide with their wish to 'see the world'. Whether in the city or the village, rural women

consciously observe their filial piety to their family members, and maintain their 'proper' position in the household. They return home to meet family needs, answer the call of marriage and fulfill responsibility of conceiving a son for the family, etc., which is expected as their filial responsibility. Even though they may be able to gain any bargaining power during migration, upon return, women again become redundant non-waged labour in the household. Waged work in the city is more noticeable and valued by both returnee women and their family members. Torn between migration and a harsh rural life, many women seek to negotiate a passage back to the city. Over the years, married women may be able to bargain their way back to the city. However, they consciously observe their 'proper position' in the households and remain filial to their husband and other family members. Through migration, women may gain some power in the decision-making of family issues and this might be seen as a form of agency. Nonetheless, this agency is earned by women through 'eating the bitterness' – observing her 'proper' position in the household and fulfilling their filial responsibilities. Indeed, as argued by Tiano, 'women's increasing immersion in capitalist relations of production does not in itself create the conditions necessary for transforming the patriarchal relations with which capitalism is so closely intertwined' (Tiano 1994, 223). Like Mexican women working on the production line, Chinese rural women migrants enter the dual-labour market from a disadvantaged position. Although rural women's paid economic activities may modify the 'ideology of reproduction' to a certain degree, neither their participation in an 'inegalitarian system' nor their return to 'patriarchal family institution' could in itself 'alter the terms of that disadvantage or make the systems more egalitarian' (Tiano 1994, 224).

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