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### Migration, Women and Gender Issues in Contemporary China

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Artikel diskutiert die geschlechtsspezifische Migration in China unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Frauenproblemen. Er untersucht die Geschlechterverteilung bei einzelnen Migrationsgründen und speziell die Rolle von Frauen bei der Heiratsmigration. Weitere deskriptive Schwerpunkte der Studie stellen die Feminisierung der Landarbeit und neue Geschlechterrollen an den Ursprungsorten der Migration, die typischen Merkmale weiblicher Migranten sowie Verhaltensänderungen zurückgekehrter Migrantinnen in ihren Heimatorten dar.

**Schlagworte:** Migration, Migrationsgründe, Frauen, Heiratsmarkt, Frauenarbeit, Geschlechterrollen, Rückwanderung

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**Abstract:** This article discusses sex-specific migration in China, with special emphasis on women's problems. It analyses the distribution of various migration reasons by sex, in particular the role of women in marriage migration. The feminization of farm work, and new gender roles at places of out-migration, the typical traits of female migrants, as well as behavioral change among returned female migrants, are further descriptive highlights of the study.

**Key words:** Migration, migration reasons, women, marriage market, female work, gender roles, return migration

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## **Migration, Women and Gender Issues in Contemporary China<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the support of the Nuffield Foundation for a fieldtrip to Sichuan to do the research on which much of this paper is based. I would also like to acknowledge my debt to my colleague and co-researcher Dr. Mahmood Messkoub and to the many other colleagues in China and Europe with whom I have discussed my work.

## 1 Introduction

The development of large-scale population mobility has been one of the most striking knock-on effects of the economic reforms in China. It has already produced important economic and social consequences in both the sending and the destination areas and will continue to do so. Migration is of course a highly gendered phenomenon. In China marriage migration involves huge numbers of women but very few men. Studies of labour migration show that men and women have a different propensity to migrate, they may do so for different reasons and at different ages. It follows that we may expect other differences in their migratory behaviour. For example their destinations, the remittances they send back, the time they spend away and the effect their experiences have on them as individuals are also likely to differ. Migration affects not only the migrants themselves but also family members who are left behind. Again these effects are likely to be sex specific. Migration has an impact on gender relations in the sending and the destination societies. Gender issues are therefore an important area for study within migration studies, although a comparatively under-explored one.<sup>2</sup> This paper attempts an overview of gender issues in migration in China today focusing especially on women as migrants and on the impact of migration on women.<sup>3</sup> Given the present state of our knowledge much of my discussion will be speculative and tentative but I hope I will raise some pointers for further research.

## 2 Migrant Sex Ratios and Reasons for Migration

Migration generally involves a rather narrow range of economically active people in terms of age and sometimes in terms of gender. The push and pull factors that determine migration decisions are different for men and women. As Todaro puts it, migration is 'a selective process affecting individuals with certain economic, social, educational and demographic characteristics'.<sup>4</sup> It follows that migration alters the demographic balance of both the sending and the destination areas. It tends to deplete the sending areas of their younger, better educated and more dynamic members, and to increase the proportion of these groups in the destination areas. Effects on sex ratios are more variable because migration streams may be predominantly male or female, or may be quite evenly balanced. Any distortion caused to the sex ratio by migration will be concentrated in the main migrant age-group. Migration in many developing countries is dominated by one sex, often, but by no means universally, males. In China evidence from both migration surveys and from the census seems to indicate that males outnumber females among labour migrants, but that female migrants form a very

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<sup>2</sup> For a pioneering general collection on the subject see Chant, Sylvia, ed., *Gender and Migration in developing countries*, London 1992.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to my own fieldwork I have relied especially heavily on two works: Ma Z., K. L. Liaw, Y. Zeng, 'Migration in the Urban/Rural Hierarchy of China: Insights from the Micro Data of the 1987 Migration Survey', in: *Environment and Planning*, Vol.28, No.5, 1996 and Wan Shanping, *From Country to Capital: A Study of a Female Migrant Group in China*, 1992 (unpublished M. Phil. thesis, Oxford Brookes University). Specific citations will be found in the text, but here I would like to acknowledge a general debt to the authors of these two works.

<sup>4</sup> Todaro, M., *Internal Migration in Developing Countries: A Review of Theory, Evidence, Methodology and Research Priorities*, ILO, Geneva 1976, p.26.

considerable minority and are even a majority in certain migration streams. As the evidence is somewhat complicated it is perhaps worth a closer look.

The 1987 survey of migration in China indicated that of the 21 million people who migrated to another city, town or rural county during the period 1984-1987, females accounted for 55.7% and males for 44.3%.<sup>5</sup> Rather oddly, the figures from the 1990 census appear more or less to reverse these proportions.<sup>6</sup> Of the total population recorded as having moved in the 5 years prior to 1990, 57% were male and 43% female. The census also showed that while women made up 45% of intra-provincial migrants they numbered only 39% of inter-provincial migrants. The sex selective impact of marriage migration is undoubtedly an important influence on all these figures. Marriage in China is overwhelmingly virilocal, that is the wife moves to the husband's home. Moreover village exogamy is still the norm so that a woman moves into a different village.

Marriage migration will be further discussed in the next section, here, however, it is worth considering in relation to migration figures. The difference between the survey data which show female migrants as the majority (55.7%) and the census which showed males outnumbering them (56%), may be explained in part at least by the increase in labour migration (in which men are the majority) as a proportion of total migration by the later time period reflected in the census. The 1987 survey clearly indicates that once marriage migration is eliminated, males were in the great majority of young migrants in their late teens or early twenties. Of male migration reported by the 1987 survey only 2.6% of the total was for the purpose of marriage.<sup>7</sup> For female migration the figure was 45%. The migration of Chinese females peaked at over 30 per thousand in the 20-23 year old group, but if marriage migration is eliminated, this peak is reduced to only 7 per thousand compared to the male peak of under 15 per thousand, or nearer 14 per thousand if marriage migration is eliminated.

At ages other than young adulthood, male and female propensity to migrate seemed to show much less difference. The migration schedule was low and flat from early childhood through to the late teens when it began its sharp rise. It fell sharply again in the late twenties, although the male schedule here remained higher than the female. By the early thirties the difference between the sexes had become insignificant at just over and just under 5 per thousand. Migration for both sexes continued to decline through middle age to 3 per thousand in the early sixties. It showed a slight rise again after the age of 65 for women and 75 for men.

Table 1: **Distribution of Reasons of Migration (%)**

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<sup>5</sup> Ma Z. et al. op.cit., p.16.

<sup>6</sup> The source used here is Zhongguo Tongjiju (State Statistical Bureau), ed., *Zhongguo 1990 nian renkou pucha ziliao* (Tabulation of the 1990 Census of China), 1993. For a more detailed discussion see Davin, D. and Mahmood Messkoub, *Migration in China: Results from the 1990 Census*, Leeds East Asian Papers, Department of Asian Studies, University of Leeds 1994. Locally of course ratios between male and female migrants vary greatly. Lina Song's Hebei study found that men outnumbered women by 8:1: Song, Lina, *The Determinants of Female Labour Migration in China: A Case Study of Handan*, 1995 (paper prepared for the conference 'Socio-economic transformation and women in China', SOAS, London). My impression in Sichuan is that the proportion of females among migrants would be much higher but with variations from one village to another. Wan Shanping's Anhui study found numbers approximately equal.

<sup>7</sup> See Ma Z. et al., op.cit., figure 1.

	Job Transfer	Job Assignment	Work & Commerce	Education	Joining Relative	Retirement	Family Moving	Marriage	Others
<b>Total</b>	12.4	5.6	10.8	9.9	10.1	1.8	16.1	26.5	6.9
<b>Male</b>	19.5	8.8	16.1	14.6	9.7	3.5	15.3	3.3	9.3
<b>Female</b>	6.7	3.2	6.5	6.1	10.5	0.3	16.8	44.8	5.0

Adapted from Ma Z., K.L. Liaw, Zeng Y., 'Migration in the Urban/Rural Hierarchy of China: Insights from the Micro Data of the 1987 Migration Survey', in: *Environment and Planning*, Vol.28, No.5, p.877-890, May 1996, table 1.

The apparent similarity between the sexes in age-specific migration rates at ages other than young adulthood masks other differences. Men migrated chiefly for economic reasons: education in their teens; job seeking and commerce, job assignment and job transfer in their early twenties; job transfer in their thirties and forties and retirement after 55.<sup>8</sup> Only after the age of 75 was a family reason significant in their movement as they moved to join relatives. By contrast female migration was much more influenced by family-related factors. In all, 45% of female migration was marriage migration, 17% was to family moving and 11% to joining relatives. Reasons shown in the first four columns of table 1 which might be taken as relating approximately to the individual's employment, career or education were not negligible for women at nearly 23%, but were far more significant for men at 59%.

### 3 Marriage Migration

Marriage migration is often omitted from the study of migration that tends to focus strongly on economic migration.<sup>9</sup> However, in China the major sources of macro data on migration include information on marriage migration. There are other reasons why some discussion of the phenomenon is appropriate here. Firstly, it is the most clearly gendered of all types of migration. Secondly, although marriage migration has not undergone the dramatic increase seen in labour migration in the years since the economic reforms, the economic reforms have provided a context for changes in various aspects of marriage migration, perhaps most notably in the increasing frequency of marriage over very long distances.

Economic considerations have always been an important consideration in the arrangement of marriages in China.<sup>10</sup> Through bride price the girl's family expects to be recompensed for the expense of her upbringing and perhaps to finance the acquisition of a bride for their son. The bride's family supplies a dowry that, though normally smaller than the bride price, is necessary to their prestige and that of their daughter. Marriage is potentially a way to gain a link with a more powerful or prosperous family. For rural parents an urban bridegroom for their daughter would seem a good catch because urban incomes are both higher and more stable than rural ones. Similarly marriage to a rural man in a richer region could be seen as advantageous. A poor family may prefer a

<sup>8</sup> See Ma Z. et al., *op.cit.*, p.17.

<sup>9</sup> For studies of marriage migration in China see Goldstein, Sidney, and Alice Goldstein, in: Nam, Charles B., et al. (eds.), *International Handbook on Internal Migration*, New York 1990, p.63-83; Lavelly, W., 'Marriage and Mobility Under Rural Collectivisation', in: Watson, R. and P. Ebrey, ed., *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, Berkeley 1991 and Ji Ping, Zhang Kaidi and Liu Dawei, 'Beijing jiaoqu nongcun renkou hunyin qianyi qianxi' ('An Analysis of Marital Migration Among Residents of the Beijing Suburbs'), in: *Zhongguo shehui kexue*, 1985, p.201-13.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed and still very pertinent study see Croll, E., *The Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China*, Cambridge 1991.

groom from another village, even if its prosperity level is very similar to their own since it provides a form of risk-sharing. The two families are less likely to suffer crop failures in the same year than families in the same village would be. Marriage alliances with poor families or with families in poor areas are obviously undesirable. In China's marriage market, it has long been normal for the parents of women disadvantaged by poverty, handicap, age or looks to expect a smaller bride price or a groom with some disadvantage.

Men seeking a bride will similarly know that they hold a strong or a weak hand in the marriage market according to such factors as earning ability, wealth, health, connections and education. One interesting form of marriage migration which has emerged in recent years is that of men from impoverished rural areas who join the families of their brides in prosperous villages in the periphery of large cities. Here the man is accepting the traditionally humiliating position of a married-in-son-in-law in exchange for access to the economic opportunities of peri-urban residence, while the woman's family is glad to add a son-in-law to the family labour force rather than losing a daughter.<sup>11</sup> In recent times Chinese marriage markets appear to have expanded their geographical scope. The national trend is for the poor inland provinces to suffer a net loss of women to the rich coastal ones. According to data from the 1990 census shown in table 2, marriage accounted for 14% of inter-provincial migration nationally, but for fully half of total out-migration from the provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou and around a quarter of out-migration from Sichuan and Guangxi. By contrast, marriage as a cause for in-migration was only 8% for Guangxi, 10% for Guizhou, 11% for Yunnan and 15% for Sichuan.<sup>12</sup> The most popular destination provinces for marriage migrants were Hebei, Anhui, Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Between 25% and 34% of in-migrants to these provinces were marriage migrants compared with only between 3% and 10% of their out-migrants (see tables 2, 3).

While marriage across provincial boundaries is not necessarily long distance marriage, and intra-provincial marriage may sometimes be, it is reasonable to suppose that high rates of inter-provincial marriage indicate high rates of long distance marriage. There are many reasons to expect that this type of marriage would be increasing in post-reform China. There is increased marketisation and monetisation of the economy. Transport and communications have improved knowledge of conditions and the market elsewhere, including the demand for brides, and made it easier to move women around physically. The higher rate of population movement facilitated the contacts necessary for the arrangement of such marriages. Migrants who have settled in the destination areas may arrange marriages there for girls from their home areas. Like other forms of migration, marriage migration generates migration chains as successive cohorts of brides arrange matches in their husbands' village for younger women from their old homes. Movement may be highly commercialized: long-distance go-betweens recruit girls in poor villages in provinces such as Sichuan with promises of husbands in the rich coastal villages and take them down river to Jiangnan.

Table 2: **Distribution of Reported Causes of Inter-Provincial Out-Migration (%)**

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<sup>11</sup> Ji Ping et al. op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> The source used for calculations here is Guowuyuan renkou pucha bangongshi, *Zhongguo 1990 nian renkou pucha 10% chouyang ziliao* (10% Sampling Tabulation of the 1990 Population census of the People's Republic of China), Beijing 1991, because the full four volume tabulation of the census results used elsewhere in the article does not provide information on the causes of out-migration by province.

Place of Origin	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Total	15	5	29	8	11	2	11	14	6
Beijing	33	24	3	17	4	4	6	2	5
Tianjin	21	29	6	17	6	2	8	7	2
Hebei	16	6	32	7	14	1	9	10	4
Shanxi	32	4	9	16	8	2	15	7	6
Inner Mongolia	16	3	11	8	19	1	17	17	8
Liaoning	22	11	9	12	15	1	13	10	7
Jilin	14	7	10	6	23	1	16	12	11
Heilongjiang	14	3	6	6	28	1	21	10	11
Shanghai	15	18	11	5	8	9	4	2	26
Jiangsu	13	7	43	7	9	1	7	7	5
Zhejiang	7	2	63	5	5	0	9	3	6
Anhui	15	3	41	6	8	2	8	10	7
Fujian	19	4	44	10	4	1	10	3	6
Jiangxi	16	4	34	10	6	2	11	11	5
Shandong	12	3	27	9	21	1	11	9	7
Henan	11	4	36	8	14	1	11	10	6
Hubei	15	11	23	11	6	1	9	16	6
Hunan	10	5	44	8	6	1	8	12	7
Guangdong	24	4	27	14	7	2	10	6	6
Guangxi	8	1	47	4	3	0	5	27	4
Hainan	27	2	12	16	5	4	25	4	4
*Guangdong & Hainan	25	4	22	15	7	2	14	5	5
Sichuan	6	3	45	3	8	1	6	24	5
Guizhou	12	1	13	8	4	2	6	50	4
Yunnan	17	2	3	8	3	1	8	51	4
Tibet	50	1	2	6	2	4	25	2	6
Shaanxi	18	10	14	9	9	2	26	17	6
Gansu	21	4	19	10	10	3	13	14	6
Qinghai	26	2	2	11	7	10	24	7	9
Ningxia	20	2	5	23	11	2	16	11	7
Xinjiang	31	2	3	12	12	4	25	4	7

A: Work Transfer  
B: Work Allocation  
C: Work and Trade  
D: Study  
E: Live With Friends and Family  
F: Retire  
G: Dependant Migration  
H: Marriage  
I: Others

Source: Calculations based on Guowuyuan renkou pucha bangongshi, *Zhongguo 1990 nian renkou pucha 10% chouyang ziliao* (10% Sampling Tabulation of the 1990 Population Census of the PRC), Beijing 1991.

Table 3: Distribution of Reported Causes of Inter-Provincial In-Migration (%)



Residence 1990	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
<b>Total</b>	15	5	29	8	11	2	11	14	6
<b>Beijing</b>	11	7	45	11	10	1	5	6	5
<b>Tianjin</b>	9	6	20	27	17	1	8	10	3
<b>Hebei</b>	14	6	9	9	8	2	14	34	3
<b>Shanxi</b>	9	4	43	2	10	1	10	15	8
<b>Inner Mongolia</b>	7	5	23	1	26	0	4	16	17
<b>Liaoning</b>	10	4	23	10	23	1	14	10	5
<b>Jilin</b>	8	4	16	22	20	0	16	9	4
<b>Heilongjiang</b>	6	3	31	2	30	0	10	11	8
<b>Shanghai</b>	19	4	36	12	11	3	7	3	5
<b>Jiangsu</b>	16	3	20	9	6	3	10	25	8
<b>Zhejiang</b>	19	5	19	9	4	3	10	24	7
<b>Anhui</b>	17	3	12	14	5	1	12	30	6
<b>Fujian</b>	14	5	34	7	4	1	7	23	5
<b>Jiangxi</b>	19	8	33	6	6	1	12	10	6
<b>Shandong</b>	19	6	10	1	13	2	19	20	10
<b>Henan</b>	26	5	16	6	5	3	18	15	7
<b>Hubei</b>	17	5	32	9	7	1	12	9	9
<b>Hunan</b>	21	6	21	6	6	2	14	17	7
<b>Guangdong</b>	10	3	59	2	2	1	7	11	5
<b>Guangxi</b>	23	8	29	11	6	6	8	13	6
<b>Hainan</b>	4	2	53	0	16	0	9	9	5
<b>Guangdong &amp; Hainan</b>	10	3	58	2	4	1	7	10	5
<b>Sichuan</b>	32	6	6	11	7	4	11	15	7
<b>Guizhou</b>	8	5	50	2	8	1	9	14	8
<b>Yunnan</b>	11	4	52	1	6	1	8	11	6
<b>Tibet</b>									
<b>Shaanxi</b>	19	6	24	20	10	1	11	6	3
<b>Gansu</b>	12	7	20	4	14	1	20	10	11
<b>Qinghai</b>	10	6	43	3	9	0	14	7	9
<b>Ningxia</b>	8	5	26	0	23	0	21	13	4
<b>Xinjiang</b>	3	2	39	0	29	0	10	9	9

A: Work Transfer  
 B: Work Allocation  
 C: Work and Trade  
 D: Study  
 E: Live With Friends and Family  
 F: Retire  
 G: Dependant Migration  
 H: Marriage  
 I: Others

Source: Calculations based on Guowuyuan renkou pucha bangongshi, *Zhongguo 1990 nian renkou pucha 10% chouyang ziliao* (10% Sampling Tabulation of the 1990 Population Census of the PRC), Beijing 1991.

Obviously naive young village women being taken hundreds or even thousands of miles are vulnerable to dishonest traders who are in fact procuring for the sex trade. There are many reports of young women being tricked or abducted and sold into prostitution.<sup>13</sup> But even when it is 'bona fide', long distance marriage migration seems likely to give rise to various social problems. Firstly, it causes shortages of brides in poor areas. The sex ratio is distorted in favour of men everywhere in China but the distortion tends to be more serious in poorer areas. Marriage migration can only exacerbate such shortages. Secondly, women involved in marriage migration are vulnerable. They may arrive in their husbands' villages without friends or even acquaintances and with little chances of appeal to their own far distant families if they are ill-treated, abused or merely given subservient status. They are unable to use the customary stay at their mother's home (*niangjia*) if they wish to negotiate problems with their in-laws.<sup>14</sup> This must be balanced against the fact that marriage migrants are often volunteers attracted by the prospect of greater prosperity and a higher standard of living. Some Women's Federation officials see marriage migration as offering women the same chances of self-improvement which labour migration offers men.<sup>15</sup> In material terms this may be realistic, but in terms of the status, autonomy and control they confer, the options are not comparable.

#### 4 The Women Left Behind

The majority of women affected by migration in China are not themselves migrants, they are the female relatives of the tens of millions of young male peasants who have left the agricultural areas to seek higher earnings elsewhere. In most developing countries young single people have the highest propensity to migrate. In China the authorities intervene actively to discourage rural migrants from settling permanently in the urban areas or from bringing their families to join them. This is achieved through restrictions on the migrants' right to settlement and on access to education and health-care for migrants and their dependants. Moreover rural migrants retain rights to land in their home villages and usually arrange for a close relative to cultivate it for them. All these factors encourage circulation rather than long term settlement. Most migrants therefore leave close family members in the villages to whom they expect to return.

Wherever migration alters the sex balance in a sending area it has the potential to alter the sexual division of labour. Parnwell says that a common response to migration is for the old, the very young or women to be drawn into work they would not otherwise have done.<sup>16</sup> (Obviously also men may take on what is normally thought of as women's work where there is heavy migration of women although Parnwell omits to point this out.). Such developments will inevitably be mediated by culture. Whereas male migration from the rural areas in Africa has in many areas resulted in a greater feminisation of agriculture, in Pakistan, where the seclusion of women is favoured, a preferred solution is to bring in a male relative to farm in place of a male migrant.

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<sup>13</sup> 'On the Social Phenomenon of Trafficking in Women in China', *Sociology Research*, May 1991, translated in: *Chinese Education and Society*, Vol.26, no.3, Summer 1993.

<sup>14</sup> For an interesting discussion of the use of returns to the '*niangjia*' and for variations in the way that rural reforms have affected gender relations in the countryside see Judd, Ellen, *Gender and Power in Rural North China*, Stanford 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Discussion with Women's Federation officials in Kunming and Beijing, June 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Parnwell, M., *Population Movement and the Third World*, London 1993.

In China it has been widely reported that women are taking over more and more of the work of cultivating the land both as a result of greater non-agricultural employment for men within the countryside and as a result of male migration. In many areas men leave the villages to do construction work, transport work or trading, while women remain behind to farm. There has been little discussion of the impact of this development on women and on gender relations. Elsewhere in the world, however, the feminisation of agriculture is often seen as problematic for women. It isolates them in the poorest, least remunerative part of the economy. It forces them to do heavy manual work in order to survive and intensifies their work, leaving them with the dual responsibility of cultivating the land and bringing up their children on their own and it produces a high rate of marital breakdown.

There is reason to suppose that in China the picture is less negative. There has long been a considerable surplus of labour in the countryside. The labour of an absent man may simply leave other males in his family with a longer working day. Moreover, even for men, migration is concentrated in the first eight years of young adulthood before they have wives or children or their own households. It seems likely that most male migrants are not the only males in the households they leave, and that the feminisation of agriculture has gone less far than some reports would lead us to suppose. Where a woman does take on the major responsibility for agricultural work, she may receive help with the children from the older generation. This may result in a second change in the sexual division of labour. Although old women certainly do more childcare than their husbands, grandfathers are also drawn into childcare. It must also be remembered that those who are left behind may benefit substantially from the migrant's earning power through higher living standards. Most migrants keep close ties with their families. They pay visits home and for the moment, at least, most return permanently after a few years away. When they are working they send back remittances which contribute significantly to the prosperity of their families. Village families in receipt of migrant remittances can usually be often identified instantly, even by an outsider, from the superior quality of their housing.

When the absence of mature men who are working elsewhere as migrants does leave women in charge of the family, they are recognized as the heads of households. Such women are likely to suffer from a heavy work burden. On the other hand their confidence and authority will be boosted by the absence of their men.

## **5 Women as Migrants**

At least three constraints contribute to limiting the numbers of women migrants. Firstly, migration is recognized as a hard and risky business. The migrants may look for work for days and may have to spend nights on the street before finding a job. They may be tricked, robbed, exploited or assaulted. The uncertainty of the migrants' life makes some families regard migration as unsuitable for women. Secondly, as male wages are usually higher than female ones, a peasant household may prefer to send a son to work away while a daughter covers for him at home for economic reasons. Thirdly, women in China marry at an earlier age than men and once married are less likely to migrate than when single. Their migration is therefore concentrated in a narrower age range than that of men.

Why and how do women become migrants despite these constraints? The problem of risk may be minimised by going to seek work where a relative or a friend has already settled and is in a position to offer help, contacts and protection. Alternatively there are organized forms of migration in which either a private contractor or a local government organizes transport for the migrants and puts them in contact with a labour bureau or with private employers in the destination area. Such arrangements are reassuring for the migrant's family. The decision to migrate is not taken by the individual alone. At very least it is normally approved by the household head and may indeed have been initiated by him. The migration of individuals is therefore part of a larger household strategy. Whether a daughter or a son leaves the village to work elsewhere will depend both on the labour needs of the household and on the expected wage. A household which has a considerable surplus of labour, may send out both a young man and a young woman. In areas where women are perceived as capable of taking care of the land, or if the income to be derived from the land is low, they are more likely to be left to farm while their men seek high wages elsewhere. A different sort of case is the prosperous county of Wuwei in Anhui. There labour surplus is so great that women rarely do farm work and lack the skills to do so. A recent study has shown that this contributes to the high propensity of women from this county to migrate.<sup>17</sup> Their families can realize very little value from their labour in the village, but their remittances make a very useful contribution to the family economy. They are used for house building, saving for the marriages of male members of the family, building up dowries for the girls themselves and investing in small businesses locally.

The demand for women's labour in certain sectors of the Chinese economy is a major pull factor. Some types of work, especially occupations in the informal sector like trading or restaurant work, are available to both men or women. But the sexual division of labour in many of the occupations taken up by migrants appears rather rigid, ironically given that the migrants' departure from the villages challenges the traditional division of labour there. In textiles, clothing and assembly work, employers have a strong preference for women as ordinary workers although they may take men on as supervisors or accountants. The majority of factory workers in the special economic zones are female and migration flows from certain counties in Sichuan are dominated by young women seeking work in the new export industries of South-East China.<sup>18</sup> The growing demand for domestic help from prosperous but hard pressed dual career families in urban China is now largely met by female migrants.<sup>19</sup> By contrast the construction and transport industries offer employment predominantly to men. Although family groups may sometimes move to the city, especially if they are involved in trade like some of the Anhui and Zhejiang groups in Beijing, the usual practice is for the migrant to go alone or with a friend or relative. In many cases therefore male and female migrants go to different places and find different types of work.

In the destination areas women may live in factory dormitories or hostels, in the houses of the urban families which employ them as domestics, or, if they have migrated with relatives, in family groups. All these living experiences obviously serve to broaden their experience of life and give them new ideas and aspirations. But this is perhaps

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<sup>17</sup> Wan Shanping, *op.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to Tan Shen of the Sociology Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences for sharing her research findings about young female workers in the Special Economic Zones.

<sup>19</sup> Wan Shanping, *op.cit.*

particularly true of the first two. The factory dormitory was typical of the early Japanese textile industry at the turn of the century, of Shanghai factory industry between the wars and more recently of the export processing zones in places as diverse as Taiwan, Singapore and the Philippines.<sup>20</sup> This living arrangement gives the employer some control over the workforce and ensure its punctuality and stability. The parents of young female workers may feel that their daughters instead of being alone in a big city are under the protection of a group. Studies of workers in these diverse settings have shown that they develop their own sub-cultures around work and dormitory living, focusing on the struggle to improve wages and conditions and on seeking pleasure and amusement in their spare-time. In contrast to women in a family situation they have spare time in which to see films, go on outings and so on. They watch television, read magazines and in today's world at least are likely to develop a strong interest in the latest fashions and consumer goods. Young women who live with urban families during their time away from home similarly come under new influences and are likely to develop new ideas about how to live and what they want from life. All this has implications for the sending areas when they return to them which are discussed below.

## 6 Adjustments in the Sending Areas to the Absence of Female Migrants

Even where the migration flow consists of men and women in equal numbers and does not unbalance the overall sex ratio in the sending area, it is likely to disturb the balance in individual households. We have seen that women may take over their husbands' agricultural work but men may also take on new roles. In Anhui it has been reported that they cook, clean and even sew when the female members of their family have gone to work in the cities.<sup>21</sup>

All over rural China old people take care of children whose parents are busy elsewhere. Although young *unmarried* women form the majority among female migrants, there are some mothers. It is common practice in many developing countries for the children of migrants to be left in or sent back to the sending areas where childcare is cheaper. In China discouragement of long-term settlement by migrants reinforces this custom. Despite relaxations in the *hukou* (household registration) system since the introduction of the rural reforms, migrants to urban areas, even if they have obtained provisional residence permits, do not have the same rights as people with permanent urban household registration. Specifically they cannot send their children to school in the urban areas and do not have rights to free or low cost health-care there. These restrictions induce many migrants to send their children back to their home areas when they reach school-age even if they have not already done so earlier. Even migrant women who marry urban residents may face this problems as the children's *hukou* follows that of their mother.

I interviewed a young Sichuanese woman who had just given birth to her first child. Her husband was from Nanjing where they both worked.<sup>22</sup> She had hoped that her mother

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<sup>20</sup> Hunter, J., 'Textile Factories, Tuberculosis and the Quality of Life in Industrialising Japan', in: Hunter, J., ed., *Japanese Working Women*, London 1993; Honig, Emily, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills 1919-1949*, Stanford 1986; Kung, Lydia, *Factory Women in Taiwan*, New York 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Wan Shanping, *op.cit.*, p.96.

<sup>22</sup> Fieldwork notes, Sichuan, 1994.

would look after the child when he reached school-age but the mother had refused on the grounds that she would have to care for her son's baby, 'a child of her own family'. The new mother had already started saving to purchase permanent residence for her child in Nanjing so that the child could go to school there. She expected this to cost several tens of thousands of yuan. In other cases the mother may return to the sending area to care for her child or children. I also interviewed a grandmother who cared both for her son's child and for her daughter's child during the day. Her two sons and her daughter-in-law were working in Guangdong province, as was her daughter's husband. Her daughter had also worked there until the birth of her son. Afterwards, however, she had to stay in Sichuan because there were no childcare facilities at her Guangdong factory and her mother-in-law was dead. Her mother was prepared to care for the child during the day, freeing the young woman for work in her in-laws' fields, but had refused to enable her to return to Guangdong by taking total responsibility for him. She said, 'I can do that for my son and my daughter-in-law because we are all one family and they send money back home. My daughter is married, she belongs to another family.' Although the grandmother was clearly the chief provider of care to the grandchildren, they also kept the grandfather quite busy.

## 7 Circulation and the Influence of Returning Migrants

Chinese migrants keep close ties with their home villages. In Sichuan reportedly between 70% and 90% of them return home at least once a year, usually at Spring Festival. When they leave, most envisage that they will come back permanently after a few years. Large-scale migration is still rather new in China and it is difficult to know to what extent these expectations will be realized. Elsewhere in the developing world many rural migrants do in the end settle permanently in the urban areas whatever their original expectations. However, again the Chinese experience may be shaped by particular factors which encourage circulation rather than long-term settlement.

We have already seen how even legally registered migrants lack certain rights in the urban areas. One of the justifications offered for denying them access to the urban system of social security is that their security is supplied by their right to responsibility land. And indeed rural migrants do retain a link with their villages through their right to that land that is usually cultivated for them by other family members in their absence. Migrants also lack other types of security in the urban areas. They are usually on short-term contracts and can be fired if their enterprise runs into problems. They can be cleared out of town when urban authorities feel they pose too many problems. A provisional residence permit affords some protection, but costs money and must be frequently renewed at the police station. Only the most successful migrants could consider purchasing a permanent residence permit which can cost 20-100 thousand yuan in Beijing and 4-20 thousand in Shanghai.<sup>23</sup> Migrants must put up with open hostility from urban people that is encouraged by the negative coverage of their lives and activities in the press.<sup>24</sup> Many live in poor shanty type accommodation which they must hesitate to consider improving given that it could be razed in some anti-migrant

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<sup>23</sup> 'Beijing to Charge 20-100 Thousand Yuan for Urban and Suburban Residency', in: *Jingji Wanbao*, 22.6.94 and 'Farmers Buy Residence Permits, at Cost of 4-20 Thousand Yuan, Popular Again Since 1992', in: *Wenhuibao*, 19.8.94.

<sup>24</sup> Davin, Delia, *Migrants and the Media: Concerns About Rural Migration in the Chinese Press*, unpublished paper given at the International Conference on the Flow of Rural Labour in China, Beijing, June 1996.

drive.<sup>25</sup> Migrants are not made to feel at home in the city and most see their sojourn there as temporary. This is particularly the case for young women because of the difficulty for migrants of bringing up children in the destination areas. Most young women migrants from the rural areas return to their own village to marry and bring up their children. Migration for them is an 'episode' in their late teens or early twenties.

In the circulation type of migration which prevails in China, each year a number of young migrants depart for the city, while others who have already spent some time there return. Obviously the effects of circulation are likely to differ in important ways from migration which is very long-term or permanent. Notably 'circulation' produces greater and more continuous flows of information, skills, capital, innovation and lifestyle influences back to the villages with all sorts of implications for development there. Let us consider what the gender implications of this might be.

Young women who leave the villages and come back after a few years of experience working in the towns are likely to influence gender relations and assumptions in their home areas. Their departure challenges the traditional concept of woman as the 'inside person' responsible for the home. The cash remittances sent home by some female migrants make them the biggest contributors to the shared family income. Even when they are less significant, remittances always make a considerable difference. Few families appear to rely on them for subsistence, rather they are able to set them aside for house construction, wedding finance and investment in small sideline production. We know from the work of Salaff in Hong Kong, Kung in Taiwan and Bell on Wuxi silk workers that the mere fact that daughters become important wage-earners in the Chinese family does not mean that they are necessarily equally valued with their brothers.<sup>26</sup> The basic problem remains that under the system of patrilocal marriage, boys are permanent members of the family while girls join the family into which they marry. This knowledge informs both the attitudes and the behaviour of the parents. But girls do gain something from their contributions. They apparently enjoy self-esteem when they are able to 'repay' their families for their upbringing, they may be able to negotiate greater personal autonomy, they are likely to marry rather later than non-migrants and they acquire savings, clothes and other personal property during their sojourn in the urban area.<sup>27</sup>

In exceptional cases female migrants may even use their earnings to purchase greater personal freedom. I interviewed one Sichuan migrant to Guangdong who had made a marriage arranged by her father that turned out unhappy. She said that during her father's life she could do nothing about it. When he died she applied for a divorce that her husband was willing to agree to, provided that she left her son with him and paid a lump sum of 7,000 yuan for child support. She had found a factory job in Guangdong at 600 yuan a month specifically in order to save this sum. Once it was paid she was looking forward to 'being able to save for her own future and help her mother'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See for example 'Putuo (Shanghai) Sends Hundreds of Migrants Home, Dismantles 5,000 Squaremeters of Shacks', in: *Wenhuibao*, 19.8.94.

<sup>26</sup> Salaff, J., *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial Pity or Power in the Family?*, Hongkong 1981; Kung, Lydia, *Factory Women in Taiwan*, New York 1994; Bell, Lynda, 'For better for Worse: Women and the World Market in Rural China', in: *Modern China*, Vol.20, No.2, 1994.

<sup>27</sup> Wan Shanping, op.cit., p.98. Field Notes from Sichuan, Sept.1994.

<sup>28</sup> Field Notes from Sichuan, Sept.1994.

There is evidence that a sojourn in the city can influence both the roles and attitudes of village women. Most female migrants earn a wage that they receive into their own hands. Such is the gap between the poor counties and the booming coastal area that their monthly wage may be double or even treble the average per capita annual income in their home villages. The knowledge that they are able to earn such money must increase their sense of self-esteem. Even when they save and send most of their earnings back home the experience must give them a sense of power and autonomy which working as part of the labour force of a peasant household could not give them. Later they are likely to carry into their marriages an expectation at least of some control over their new family budget.

Migrants to the towns are influenced by urban lifestyles and customs. The strongest influence is perhaps on the young rural women who work as maids because living within an urban family they become most intimately aware of a different way of life. However, even factory workers who live in dormitories observe from real life, from magazines and from the television and films. They take back with them to the villages notions of love, more companionate marriage, home comforts and luxuries, smaller families and so on. In all probability for many individuals this will result in conflict and difficulty. Control over the arrangement of marriages has long been an area of struggle in the Chinese rural family and urban influences on whole cohorts of young women is likely to exacerbate this. Peasants of the older generation will still see marriage as an important affair for the whole family in which they should make decisions for their children. They are likely to shake their heads at the extravagance of the young when returnees seek to furnish and equip their houses or dress themselves and their children according to their new tastes. The returnees may experience considerable difficulty in resettling in the countryside and feel deep frustration at the things they cannot change. Wan Shanping noted the dislike felt by young women who had lived in the cities for rural latrines.<sup>29</sup> They found it hard to re-acustom themselves to these and to other hardships which for most of their lives they had taken for granted.

At a superficial level young women who have worked in the city are easily identifiable on their return to the villages. They wear bright coloured, more fashionable clothes, more expensive (and impractical) shoes and sport modern hairstyles. But the way in which they have changed may be far from superficial. The distinctive appearance of the returnees makes them attractive as models for other young women. In Anhui the desire to buy clothes was found to be an important motive for female migration.<sup>30</sup> The return of one cohort to the village reinforces the desire of the next to experience urban life and the movement of population is thus self-perpetuating.

## **8 The Fertility of Migrants**

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<sup>29</sup> Wan Shanping, *op.cit.*, p.101.

<sup>30</sup> Wan Shanping, *op.cit.*, p.58.



Much concern has been expressed in China by officials and in the media about the fertility of migrants.<sup>31</sup> Migrants in the urban areas are perceived as having too many children because they are 'difficult to control' and 'no-one is responsible for them'. Such concerns are perhaps understandable for they are voiced by harassed urban officials anxious to keep within their low birth quotas. There are other ways of looking at the problem however. Many migrants come from poor remote areas of China where fertility is still comparatively high. If they move as families to the urban areas their fertility may indeed be higher than that of local people, but it is likely to be lower than it would have been had they remained in the villages. The difficulties associated with giving birth to and bringing up children in these areas where they do not have rights to health-care and education, and the opportunity costs for the mother whose earning power will almost certainly be reduced will be powerful inducements to migrants to restrict the size of their families. Some migrant couples in urban areas may even have fewer children than the locals.<sup>32</sup> In the more common situation where married migrants leave their spouses in the villages their fertility will be reduced by separation, while single people who migrate tend to postpone marriage at least by a year or two.<sup>33</sup> Finally migrants to the urban areas will be influenced by the different family size aspirations of the urban population and are likely to be more receptive to and more knowledgeable about birth control.

There are many reports of young women who have brought back capital to their villages with which they set up shops and even small manufacturing enterprises.<sup>34</sup> If such developments are general and sustained they will contribute substantially towards changing gender relations. As managers in such enterprises individual women will attain greater autonomy and respect and they also offer a new role model to other village women.

## 9 Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the impact of the increased migration triggered by the economic reforms on some aspects of gender relations and the lives in China. I argue that women involved in marriage migration are very much at risk and may have difficulty negotiating the conditions of their lives in their new families. I speculate that labour migration has a more favourable implication for women. When their men migrate they benefit from remittances and may sometimes gain in independence and authority. When young women themselves are migrants they expand their horizons and their self-confidence. The demands and expectations of young women who return to their villages after a period spent living in the urban areas will be affected by urban norms. This may lead to initial conflict but will also bring about greater personal autonomy for young women and higher standards of material consumption in the rural areas. Although women will remain disadvantaged by the patrilocal marriage system and other customs, their earning power as migrants and the money that they send and bring back to the villages will help them to realize at least some of their demands. The economic, social,

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<sup>31</sup> See for example 'Changning District in Shanghai Opens School for Migrant Labourers to Teach Law, Hygiene and Birth Control', in: *Beijing Wanbao*, 23.5.94.

<sup>32</sup> 'Guangdong Finds Migrant Population Makes Fewer Babies than Natives Contrary to Previous Theory', in: *Yangcheng Wanbao*, 25.6.94.

<sup>33</sup> Wan Shanping, *op.cit.*, p.98.

<sup>34</sup> Wan Shanping, *op.cit.*, p.93-5 and fieldnotes from Sept. 1994.

cultural and educational gap between the poor countryside and the prosperous urban areas of China will remain for the foreseeable future, but migration in the form it takes at present in China has the potential to return human and financial resources to the villages and thus helps prevent the gap becoming even greater.