

Are They Forced Out? – The Migration Decision-Making of Rural Women Migrants in Contemporary China

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Abstract

This article is centred on the decision-making of rural women in their migration from rural areas to urban employment in contemporary China. Through the use of in-depth interviews with women migrants, their families and fellow villagers in both sending and receiving areas, the author investigate the factors and power behind rural women's migration decision-making and examines the influence of gender and patriarchal factors on their decision-making process. The author argues that although the migration of both married and unmarried rural women to the cities seems to break down the traditional patterns and morals set for women, women's subordinate status and the patriarchal control over them remain intact. On the whole, women and women's labour are in firm control of the Chinese patriarchal family and women's migration is directly and strongly influenced by their subordinate status. Their migration decision-making is still strongly controlled by their parents, in-laws and husbands.

Key words: women, rural-urban, migration, decision, China

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Poor families need money and have too many daughters. The daughters consume rice and need clothes; when they are grown up they leave the home and furnish additional service to the productivity of the economic family of the group into which the girl is married. The parents in poor families consider it better therefore to get rid of the girl at the first opportunity and thus free themselves of her expenses and at the same time get some cash (Kulp, 1925, p. 164 cited in Croll, 1978, p. 25).

Introduction

China has the world's largest internal migration – an estimated 140 million peasant workers migrated to the cities for urban employment by the end of 2008 (National Bureau of Statistics of China). Nationally, more than 50 million rural women are working in the cities as 'women peasant workers', accounting for 36-40 per cent of the whole rural migrant population. The majority of women are channelled through *guanxi* networks to take up low skilled gender specific jobs (Zhang, 2006a,b) and their employments are highly concentrated in textile and manufacturing industries and service sector (Davin, 1996; Solinger, 1999; Fan, 2003; Jacka & Gaetano, 2004).

Rural migrant women live a precarious life in the cities. A recent research done by All China Women's Federation shows that 60 per cent rural women migrant workers do not have employment contracts; more than 40 per cent work nine to ten hours a day (Ren, 2008). Their wages are not only incomparable to their urban counterparts, but

also 20 per cent less than that of their fellow male migrants (China Youth, 2006). Some researchers argue that rural migrant women are under triple oppressions of ‘global capitalism, state socialism, and familial patriarchy... along lines of class, gender and rural-urban disparity’ (Pun, 2005). They are segmented from the urbanites’ world and have limited upward social mobility (Zhang, 2006a). They are considered ‘the most oppressed’ and are under ‘spatial and social apartheid’ (Au & Nan, 2007). However, this does not stop women migrating. On the contrary, in the past decade, not only more rural women joined the migration army, but also more married women moved to urban areas for employment.

The migration of both married and unmarried rural women to the cities seems to break down the traditional patterns and morals set for women in China. Some researchers in China thus argue for the importance of women migrants’ autonomy in their migration process. Some researchers like Tan see the migration of peasant women from the countryside as ‘a breakthrough against the former system’ as well as a result of the improvement of women’s subordinate status in the peasant families (Tan, 2004a). She also argues that female migration decision-making is not a part of the ‘family strategy’ but a decision made by female migrants themselves for their own benefit (Tan, 2004b). In other words, they migrate ‘for themselves, but not for the needs of their families’ (Tan, 2004b). Other researchers like Wang divide rural migrants into two categories – the so-called ‘first generation’ and ‘the second generation’ (Wang, 2003). He also argues that the second generation – ‘those who migrate after 1990’ – ‘have different motivations’ from the first generation (those who migrated in the 1980s) in migration decision-making: unlike the first generation ‘who migrate purely to earn money’, the majority of the second generation migrate to ‘pursue a city life or

modern life style' and concludes that 'if we use "push and pull theory" to explain this, in the process of rural migration during the 1990s, the pull power is far greater than the push power...' (Wang, 2003).

Yet what are the 'push' and 'pull' factors which motivate rural women to migrate, as many peasant men? How gender and patriarchy influence women's migration decision-making? Do women have autonomy in their migration decision-making? Who are the real decision makers in the process? These questions pose serious challenge to current migration studies on internal migration in developing countries as many of the migration theories and theoretical frameworks and models have their limitations in capturing and explaining the dynamics of migration-decision making (De Jong, 2000; Fischer et al., 1997). There is even scarcer literature discussing the roles women actually play in the decision-making process that leads to migration (Bilsborrow & Zlotnik, 1992, p. 151). Based on the interviews with 33 women migrants as well as a large volume of data collected in the countryside, including interviews with women's parents, relatives and fellow villagers in their home villages, this research investigate migration decision-making from a micro-level of individual and household behaviour, exploring the 'push' and 'pull' factors and power behind rural women's migration decision-making process in a 'China context'.

Data Description

The data used for this paper are drawn from a qualitative study on women in rural-urban migration in China. Sixty in-depth interviews with rural women migrants, their parents, husbands, relatives and fellow villagers, colleagues and supervisors were

conducted between 2003 and 2005 in two popular destination cities, Shantou (汕头) and Beijing, and two sending provinces, Henan and Hebei. Thirty-three informants were women migrants and among them, 14 had experience of temporary termination of their migration and among them, four returnees were still staying in their home villages by the time of the interview. 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 ranges from one month to 14 years. They came from 30 villages in 24 townships/county seats across eight provinces. Some follow-up telephone interviews were also conducted after the fieldwork to add missing information. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English and were analyzed with qualitative data analysis software Atlas/ti.

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, focusing on one aspect or one phase of the migration process rather than researching the whole migration circle. While in this study, the data were collected through both ends of the migration chain. By tracing women migrants through their migration journey from their home villages to the cities and from the cities back to their home villages, the dynamics of rural women's migrating process were captured and the links between the sending and receiving areas were established. Because the traditional data collection methods employed in most migration studies limit the scope of the data source to migrants' accounts only, some factors that influence migration decision-making are hard to be identified. This study focuses not only on women migrants, but also on women migrants' family and fellow villagers in the countryside as well as colleagues and friends in the city, mapping rural women migrants in relation to others,

which enables data triangulation. This greatly enhances the reliability of the data and helps to identify the hidden factors in the decision making process.

Patriarchy in the rural areas

The political and economic transformation following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 brought significant changes to women's status in the countryside, which, in a sense, 'laid the foundation for China's modernization and the fundamental transformations in rural women's lives' (Gao, 1994, p. 81). In this 'new society', men and women were supposed to be equal and women were said to 'hold up half of the sky'. Women were encouraged to take up the 'outside work' that formerly done by men. Yet the liberation of women was no more than liberation of the badly needed workforce. Expected to undertake all the domestic work as before while being involved in the outside work, the 'liberated Chinese women' had to shoulder a 'double burden' (Jacka, 1997, p. 5).

Although the Communist Party's early effort in improving gender relations did challenge the gender divisions of labour and the bi-polar dichotomies of men and women, the conceptual dichotomies of women's subordination remains intact and some new forms of subordination are created (Jacka, 1997, p. 5). The influence of certain Confucian doctrines around women's role and family structures in Chinese society remains strong, especially the notion that 'women are to serve and be subordinate to men and to the demands of the patrilineal family' (Jacka, 1997, p. 22). The Chinese Communist Party's attempts to promote women's rights and family reform have been continuously put off for more immediate priorities such as

economic development (Lindsey, 1997, p. 133). When talking about the gender relationship in China, Judith Stacey concludes that a ‘transformed patriarchy’ still prevails in China where ‘authority of men over women is closely tied to the rights and responsibilities of social fatherhood which include strong elements of control over female productive and reproductive activity within a patrilocally established family economy’ (Stacey, 1983, p. 263). Different forms and patterns of women’s subordination prevail in China and this is especially true in the rural area (Jacka, 1997, p. 190; Lindsey, 1997, p. 135).

The decollectivization after the initiation of the reform in 1978 makes the rural household an ‘independent economic unit’ again and ‘patriarchal domination still prevails therein’ (Hung, 1995), so does the conceptual dichotomies between men and women. ‘The lower value assigned to the “female” side of the dichotomies, still operate, and indeed in some ways have been strengthened in the process of reform. This has, in turn, contributed to the creation and maintenance of gender divisions of labour through which women’s subordination continues to be reproduced’ (Jacka, 1997, p. 5).

Moreover, rural women are more disadvantaged and have unequal life opportunities in contrast to urban women in China. Chinese urban women today enjoy a greater equality at least at home than women in previous generation (Hung, 1995). They have a better chance of being employed by state owned enterprises and they can enjoy all the social benefits which privilege urban residents due to their non-rural *hukou* status. Whereas rural women live in a different world – in addition to gender inequality in the countryside, they are also discriminated in the urban labour market because of

their rural *hukou* status. They have limited access to welfare benefits provided by the government and therefore have no guarantee of security in their old age. They still have to rely on sons for old-age security and are still blamed if they fail to give birth to a son (Hung, 1995). Overall, rural women are less independent and are more insecure both economically and socially.

As large volume of rural women leaves the traditional ‘inside sphere’ of work in their home villages and move to work in the cities, they seem to have challenged the traditional gender relations and transformed their subordinate status. Yet to assume therefore that many migrant women could thus obtain autonomy in their migration process is a too hasty conclusion, given China’s complex social diversity, uneven development between rural and urban areas and the prevailing patriarchal social system where women is defined ‘in relation to, and subordinate to, other males in the family’ (Fan, 2003, p. 28). The Chinese patriarchal family ‘has always been a symbolic and economic contract’ (Kristeva, 1991, p. 137). It is a contract which favours men over women. Women’s migration and decision-making is intrinsically related to how women and their migration is positioned in this contract. Therefore economic factors alone can not fully explain women’s migration decision-making.

The ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors in rural women’ migration decision-making

In the pursuit of its modernisation, China’s agriculture is facing increasing challenges due to its rapidly growing population and the constraints of resources and environment (Tian, 2002). This consequently leads to a widespread shortage of arable land, low return from agricultural activity and increasing expenses and cash demand

in rural households. In addition, sharp disparities between the countryside and cities, low status of peasants and the contempt for agricultural work also play an important role in pushing many peasants into migration. These are also some of the key factors that affecting women's migration decision-making.

Land loss

China's *Ministry of Land and Resources Survey 2006* showed that China had been losing its arable land in the past decade and this left only 0.27 hectares (1.4 *mu*) land per capita in 2006, less than 40 percent of the world per capita average (Xinhua Net, 2006) and the number is still decreasing. Land, as the 'most valued form of property and productive resource' is considered 'the single most important source of security against poverty' (Agarwal, 2002, p. 2). However, although rural women are entitled to have equal allocation of land as men, they do not have independent and direct land rights as land is allocated to the household rather than to an individual. Because traditionally rural women leave their natal home and move to their husband's home upon marriage, they will not claim land ownership from their natal home as the land is seen as a property of their natal family. Furthermore, many women are not able to get a new share of land when they marry and join the husband's family through land readjustment as the government issued a new policy in 1998¹ extending the land contracting period to 30 years that does not allow land allocation readjustment in order to give peasants assured long-term land use rights.

By the time of the interview, only three (out of 33) migrant women still had land after their marriage and still kept the land after their migration. Although nine women migrants reported their families had land at home and, for most of them, income from

the land was no longer a key income for the family. Among these nine women, two were single and four were engaged and they would eventually move to their husbands' home upon marriage and leave their shares of land to their natal home and it would be unlikely for them to get new allocation of land when they join their husbands' family under the current land allocation policy; the rest three women had given up land and farming before their migration due to regular natural disasters such as draught and flood.

Having no land not only pushes women into nominal surplus labour, but also reinforces their subordinate status in the family, which forms an important push factor in women's migration decision-making. Further more, becoming landless also erases women's sense of rootedness and belonging to the countryside, cutting off their attachment to the land.

Low monetary return from land vs. increasing cash demand

Not many peasants can profit from farming in China nowadays. The exploitation of land for short-term profit has exhausted the land and as a result, it significantly reduced agricultural productivity of the traditional farming. To make farming a profitable business again requires new advanced approaches to farming, modern technologies as well as intensive capital investments. Without effective and affordable credit provision and concrete support from the government, cultivating land is a lost battle for many peasants from the outset. Nevertheless, peasant families still have to face the expenses – tuition fees for their children's education form a great burden for many rural families, as compulsory education is far from free for people in the rural

area, as it is for city residents. Other 'big' costs include building a house for the son, the sons' wedding and family medical costs. A migrant's father from Hebei told me,

(Most of the peasants are afraid of three things) – building a house, the son's wedding, and serious illness. Mainly the son's wedding and illness. ... It will be terrible if these two things happen at the same time. ... It is very difficult to borrow money because no one wants to lend the money to you. ... Now the exchange of dowry needs at least 10,000 *yuan*². The output of the land is not predictable, the students need money to go to school, ... the *fenzi* (gift money) have to be paid and now it getting higher. ...

These cash demands are unavoidable for any rural household at some point, which could easily put any rural family into debts and poverty had it not had other means to generate cash income besides farming. Migration for urban employment, which is seemingly directly linked to immediate cash return, becomes an easy solution for many rural households. Women's surplus labour therefore could be better utilised in migration to generate cash income for the household, especially when their labour is in the firm control of their family. A villager from Hebei could not conceal his envy when he talked about his fellow villager's daughter who was then working in Beijing:

To migrate to work, you don't know, can help the family a lot. Baolai's child can bring back 800 *yuan* a month. She can give her parents 800 *yuan* every month. In our countryside, 800 *yuan* means a lot to a family. It can help (to solve) a lot of problems of the family.

Rural-urban disparity

Despite the government's efforts to reduce rural-urban disparity, the gap keeps widening over the last decade. Official statistics shows that the average annual per capita income of urban residents in 2007 was 13786 *yuan*, whereas it was only 4140 *yuan* for rural residents (National Statistic Bureau of China). This does not include other hidden welfare benefits for urban residents which peasants cannot enjoy due to their rural *hukou* status. Further more, basic infrastructure and social services in rural areas have continued to lag further behind urban areas. Many informants mentioned that the supply of electricity and piped water was restricted in the rural area and their costs are much higher than in the cities. Rural people are fully aware of this difference and this awareness often translates into despair in their narratives of their life in the countryside. A migrant's mother from Henan told me:

We peasants in the countryside have a real hard life. Unlike people in the cities who work in the units, we are left alone all by ourselves. If we are ill, nobody will care about us at all. We have to live purely on our labour. Even if we work hard, we may not get any money at all. But those people who work in the cities ... can get money even when they no longer work. Our condition is incomparable to theirs. ... We really have a hard life in the countryside. The young people cannot bear life in the countryside.

The despair of the older generation is passed to the younger generation and urges them to find a better life through migration. Stories of successful migrants from the neighbourhood and their account of experiences in the city consolidate the depictions

of migration and modern life in the city by mass media, making migration an indispensable part of rural life.

Discarding peasant identity

Chinese peasants have long been seen by the urban elites as a ‘culturally distinct and alien “other”, passive, helpless, unenlightened, in the grip of ugly and fundamentally useless customs, desperately in need of education and cultural reform...’ (Cohen, 1993). Conveying this view are a series of policies that discriminate peasants, among which, *hukou* is a well known example. These policies, together with public discourses, reinforce peasants ‘otherness’ as well as their lower status, forcing peasants to discard their peasant identity. On the other hand, peasants, especially the younger generation, have little attachment to the land and the countryside. These factors consequently cultivate a strong contempt for agricultural labour and peasant status among peasants themselves as well as urban dwellers, which is evident in the informants’ narratives. For them, peasant identity is an identity that should be discarded. Many young women I interviewed tried to do so through disassociation from land and agricultural work. They stressed proudly that they had no land at home or they seldom did agricultural work like ‘those peasants’ who worked in the fields. Their parents also took pride in the fact that their children had never done farming and did not know much about agricultural work. However, staying in the villages restricted them from constructing new forms of identities outside the peasant identity that was pinned on them. They had limited opportunities to change their status from rural to urban as they were restricted by *hukou* system and related policies. The most ‘immediate’ and ‘effective’ way to leave the peasant identity behind was bound to be migration.

Limited social mobility for women through education

Since household registration still separates rural areas from the cities and state policies, including education policies, still favour city residents over peasants, the scale of funding in education by the government differ greatly between rural and urban areas. The unbalanced policies and funding in education also lead to different rates of return to education and skills formation between the rural and urban. Schools in the countryside receive far less funding from the state – which currently accounts for only two per cent of the total rural educational funding (Xing, 2004) while schools in the city enjoy full state funding. The local government and rural residents have to cover the rest 98 per cent of the budget for education. This creates extra burden for peasant families as they have to pay miscellaneous fees to the schools for their children's compulsory education. Shortage of funding results in poor teaching facilities and teaching quality. Far fewer rural students can progress to further education beyond the nine year compulsory education, let alone going to the universities, which is one of the few possibilities to transfer rural *hukou* to urban *hukou* for peasants³.

It is especially difficult for rural women to 'upgrade' their status through education. Aside from the stratification between peasants and city residents, gender inequality is also an indispensable factor in considering the issue. 'In societies where patriarchally designated activities and relations between men and women prevail, the rewards that human capital investments yield may disproportionately privilege men, and as such discourage investment by women' (Kanaiaupuni, 2000, p. 1314). In China, especially in the countryside, where patrilocal, patrilineal and patriarchal family structure is still

solid and prevalent, peasant women are destined to be disadvantaged in many aspects of life, including education. Peasant women are triply discriminated in the urban labour market because of their rural *hukou* status, their gender and their low level of education. Therefore for many peasant families, investment in education for girls is a far more risky than for boys. ‘Human capital investment of women may be discouraged not only as an individual response to structural inequalities, but also as a reaction to socialized behavior and expectations taught in families and daily life’ (Kanaiaupuni, 2000, p. 1314). When money is limited and opportunities are rare, precious sons, seen as the pillar of the family in the future, will normally enjoy better chances to receive more education than daughters. Taught to be an obedient daughter and a dutiful wife to meet the expectations of the family, peasant women therefore also willingly give up their education. Xiu told me about her experience of being denied education by her father just because she was a girl.

I had only four years primary school education. My father prefers boys to girls. He thinks there is no need for a girl to have so much education. No matter how capable she is, she will definitely marry some guy and devote herself to her husband’s family. I wanted to study tailoring. The tuition was only several dozen *yuan* but he would not give it to me... He was a bit old fashioned and he valued sons more than daughters. He thought it would be a waste of money for me to learn sewing because I would marry away anyway.

(hardware seller in Beijing, age 34, migrated from Sichuan in 1990)

Although the average level of education of the 33 migrant informants is seven years, nearly 40 per cent of them (13 out of 33) had six years' or less education; among the rest (20) who had the chance to go to middle school, one quarter dropped their study later on. Overall, only less than 45 per cent informants had managed to finish the nine year compulsory education. For most of the other migrant girls, they had to quit school to migrate to work, as it was an obligation they had to fulfil.

Migration decision-making of the daughters

Most Chinese women's life course is still dominated by two stages: first 'temporary' members of their natal family as daughters and then 'outsiders' or 'strangers' in their husbands' families as wives (Croll, 1978, p. 22). Since every daughter, unlike the sons, is destined to move out of her natal family upon her marriage sooner or later, any investment in her would often be carefully assessed by her parents compared to their generous investments in the sons, especially when the family is under economic pressure. Facing the impoverished economic condition in the family and the pressure of being 'a commodity which will lose money', many peasant girls, willingly or not, have to quit their education to relieve the burden on their parents at an early age and few could bear to stay idle at home. They are 'in essence surplus labor waiting to be tapped' (Fan, 2003, p. 32). As women, especially most teenage girls are not conventionally considered profitable labourers for agricultural work, migration, which is directly linked to an immediate cash return, becomes an ideal way for them to fill the 'gap years' from the time they quit school to the time they get married. Fan (2003) also made similar conclusion in her research on rural migrant women in Sichuan province.

As temporary members in the family, daughters are well aware of their transient status as well as their obligations in the family. Their filial piety also urges them to take on the responsibilities to relieve the financial burden of their parents and meet their parents' expectations. Their remittances and savings from urban employments not only help to meet the cash demand of the households, but also cover the costs their parents will incur in preparing their dowry. Twenty-four year old Huan migrated from Fujian in 2000 and had been working in a model airplane factory in Shantou for more than three years by the time of the interview. She was the eldest daughter among the six children in her family. When talked about why she wanted to migrate to work, she said:

There were no other choices. I myself also wanted to migrate to work to help (my family). ... I was the unluckiest one who did not have any other choice at all! ... Because it was my family who wanted me to migrate to work in the city. Those girls of my age in my village, some of them were still studying.

Many parents I interviewed also expressed strong expectations for their daughters to migrate, not only because of the financial need of the family, but also because of the fact that they are *just daughters*. Bringing money back or not, their migration at least means a 'burden' relieved from their parents' shoulders – they will no longer be a 'consumer' in the family. A migrant's father from Hebei told me about the migration of his daughter, who went to work in a factory when she was only 16:

She wanted to migrate herself and I also want her to leave. She would be a burden for me if she stayed at home. ... Now she no longer lives on me since she has migrated and got a job in the city. Girls consume more than boys in daily life. They want to buy beautiful clothes... It was better for her to migrate; otherwise I had to buy everything for her.

The awareness and pressure of being useless at home are never far from the daughters' minds. The pressure is often reinforced by the stories that passed through *guanxi* networks of those 'useful daughters' in the village who can remit money home through migration. It served as role models and incentives for many hesitant girls to make up their minds to migrate. Besides the role models, there are also incentives created for the daughters – finding a 'good' husband. Although rural women's marriage market is restricted to the countryside because of their low institutional and social status (Lee, 1995), this marriage market for rural women keeps shrinking. As more peasant men migrate and have migration experience, they also raise the standards in selecting a wife – many expect someone who also holds employment in the cities or at least has the experience of modern life in the cities through migration. For many parents, migration is also considered a means to increase the possibilities of marrying their daughters out to a family with better economic conditions (which usually means a family with migrant members) which can offer a good bride price. Such expectations from the parents and villagers were shown in my interviews in many villages. Qin's mother-in-law told me that the girls in her village wanted to migrate because 'It is hard for them to find a husband if they stay in the village.' One of my guides, who came from another village in Hebei province, also told me, 'The

most important thing for girls is to find a good husband. That's all girls want.'

Commenting on the marriage and migration of peasant girls, she said:

The main purpose for girls to migrate is to find a husband. The only purpose is to find a home, to build a family. Unlike the boys, boys have to find a wife and bring her back... Those good guys in the cities would not want a peasant girl if she stays in the countryside. Girls can only marry a peasant in the countryside if she continues to stay at home.

Under the pressure first from their natal family, then from their future husbands, peasant women have to fulfil their obligations and meet the expectations. They have to be willing to migrate. It is their choice – but it is a choice out of no choices at all, a step they have to undertake. Their parents are well aware of the daughters' pressure. When talking about her two daughter who were in migration, a mother from Hebei said,

You think my children wanted to migrate? Didn't they know it was more comfortable to stay at home? They had no choice.

Many filial daughters are therefore pushed out of their home villages to the cities 'willingly'. When facing my question 'Was it your own decision to migrate?', all migrant girls answered 'Yes'. This however should not be interpreted as these girls migrated autonomously or they migrated because of their 'self-awareness' and the sense of 'gender equality' as argued by Tan (Tan, 2004a). As a Chinese patriarchal family is based on the hierarchy of the sexes and generations (Croll, 1978, p. 22),

where a daughter is considered a transient in her natal family, she is socialised to believe that she has no other choice but to obey the authority of her family and to sacrifice herself for her natal family. The daughters in the families without a son experience even more pressure. They may naturally blame themselves for not being a son and feel obliged to take more responsibilities in the family. In the countryside, such a family is called ‘a family going to be extinguished’ (jue hu 绝户). Qin and Ping came from such a family. Both of them mentioned several times in their interviews the fact that ‘there is no boy in my family’ when they talked about their migration. Qin migrated to Beijing when she was 19. When we talked about her remittances, she told me:

It was not that I had to give all the money to my father. You know we don’t have a boy in our family.

As women’s labour is in firm control of the family, they do not have real autonomy in migration decision-making. This is especially true when their labour is useful and needed by the family in the countryside. I met 18-year-old Wang Li in a village in Hebei. Both of her elder brothers were in temporary migration in Beijing since they finished their middle school while she stayed at home. She told me she also wanted to work in the cities, but her father said to me:

My daughter is good at all sorts of work at home. She can do all the work here. ... She doesn’t consume much in food and clothes... It is not the best time for her to migrate now. The family and work here still need her. ... She can help with cooking, washing and all the other housework.

No matter how tired we are after work, we can have meals prepared by my daughter as soon as we get back home. ... She can carry 100 *jin*⁴ of wheat easily.

Hardworking but consuming little, the daughter was obviously still ‘very useful’ to her family. Since she was needed, there was certainly no point to ‘let’ her migrate. She was thus in the strong control of her parents and had no ‘autonomy’ to decide her life. Yet her ‘autonomy’ would come one day, according to the calculation of the father:

When the situation permits, we will let her migrate for a few years before she gets married and we will not ask for her earnings. She can on the one hand, reduce the expenditure at home, and on the other hand, save her dowry for herself.

Many parents do not only expect and encourage their daughters to migrate, they also spread the news of the availability of their daughters and find ways to ‘migrate their daughter out’ of the villages through *guanxi* networks. Many rural women’s migration was the result of the direct involvement of their parents. The power of the patriarchal family not only controls migration decision-making, but also decides the type of jobs the daughters will be doing. Because rural women rely heavily on their parents and relatives’ *guanxi* networks to migrate, they are more likely to do the jobs which are considered ‘suitable for women’ by their parents or relatives. Due to this patriarchal element of *guanxi* networks, women are consequently channeled to do low-paid gender specific jobs in the city (Zhang, 2006a, b).

However, to stress the decisive power of the parents in women's migration decision-making process is not to deny the possibility of some 'free will' of the daughters in the process of migration decision-making. Xia was the third daughter of a family with four children. Having both of her elder sisters working in a clothing factory in Shantou, there was less economic tension in her family than in other families in her village. She told me that her migration was her own decision and her parents opposed it at the very beginning because she was only 15. Her interview revealed that she had experienced great peer pressure from both of her two sisters who had been working in the cities and her friends who were also in migration – she wanted to be a good daughter like her sisters who could bring in money and she also wanted to be like her friends who could buy beautiful clothes with their own earnings. She migrated at the age of 15 when her father located a job through his networks. Her migration was still under her father's control because she had to rely on her father's networks to locate a job in the city.

Migration decision-making of the wives

As Jacka commented in her book *Women's Work in Rural China*, 'women's power within the family continues to be seriously undermined by certain structures and practices. In particular, the continuance of patrilocal marriage casts women as temporary members of their family before marriage and as "outsiders" to the family after marriage' (Jacka, 1997: 72). One of the many 'serious consequences' exemplified by Jacka is 'patrilocal marriage combined with the practice of bride-price payment' which leads to the vulnerability of the newly-married peasant women under the control of their husband and in-laws (Jacka, 1997,

p. 72). Since the expectation of having a ‘grandson’ is always high from her parents-in-law as well as her husband, the new daughter-in-law is naturally expected to stay at home to fulfil her responsibilities as a wife and daughter-in-law and to meet the expectations of her husband’s family.

According to the national survey on family planning 2001, the average time between the marriage and the birth of the first child is 1.3 - 1.6 years (National Population and Family Planning Commission of China , 2002), which means that giving birth to a child is at the top of the agenda for most women after their marriage. Because women in China are still stereotyped as nurturer and care-givers, and also because of the increasing costs of living and raising children in the cities, many women will have to bring up their child in their home villages. As a result, many married women will have to stay in the villages to look after their children until their children can be farmed out to grandparents or other relatives.

Yan terminated her migration to Beijing in 2003 and got married in a village in Hebei which was arranged by her mother. Although she herself wanted to migrate once more after her wedding, the pressure of being a proper wife and conceiving a son for the family forced her to bury the wish. Her mother told her:

You want to (migrate) but your parents-in-law and your husband will not let you migrate. They will not let you earn those few bucks.

Her husband also stressed that:

Our countryside is different from your city, where both of the couple work and they live apart from their parents and they can have a very good life.

But in our countryside, it is not convenient for us if she migrates and we also need hands for the work (in the household)... We will have more work in the future and we need her at home.

It will be a too hasty conclusion that marriage means the termination of a woman's migration. Although in the domestic sphere of a patriarchal family, men are still 'the institutionalised source of all authority' (Croll, 1978, p. 32), the migration of a wife after marriage is not simply terminated, contrary to what is argued by Fan and Jacka (Fan, 2003, pp. 28-29; 2004, p. 204; Jacka, 1997, p. 72). There are, in fact, an increasing number of married women who take on the project of migration and work in the cities. Like the migration of the daughters, whether a wife can migrate or not is often decided out of the needs of the family. As the husband is the pivotal point of the family, the wife's migrations is therefore strongly controlled by the husband as well as her in-laws. Rural wives may have to migrate when their husbands have migrated.

Because the economic tension in the family, which often worsens after the birth of a child, many rural women have to migrate along with their husbands to shoulder the burden. It is also an expectation of many parents-in-law, not only for the purposes of improving the family income, but also an obligation their daughters-in-law have to fulfil – to take care and serve the husbands who work in the city. I met Aunty Liu in a village in Henan. Both her son and daughter-in-law were in migration. Talking about their decision to migrate, she said,

They have to migrate. They have to migrate. ... They have four mouths in the family to feed and they have to find a way to earn enough money for their living. They have to migrate to make money. I am old and I don't have any strength to do the hard work. ... She (daughter-in-law) has to migrate with my son. He needs to eat. She has to cook for him. It will not do if he migrates alone or I migrate with him.

The traditional roles and obligations of women as mothers and nurturers as well as the expensive costs to maintain a family in the urban area for many rural migrants force women to retreat at least temporarily from migration, regardless of their own migration wishes. Finding a reliable alternative childcare for their children in their home villages is therefore of critical importance in their migration decision-making. Their parents-in-law, usually their first and sometimes their only possible alternative carers for the children, play an important part in their migration.

Qin returned to the countryside from her migration to get married. As many other wives, she gave birth to her child less than one year after the marriage, while her husband had been working in a factory in a nearby city in Hebei. Although she wanted to join her husband in the city, because her baby still needed her care and her parents-in-law were busy with work in the field, all she could do was to stay at home looking after her daughter and doing household chores.

Among the 14 married informants, four migrated independently to the cities while their husbands stayed in the villages, falling into the category of 'reversed division of labor' (Fan, 2004, p. 201). There were great differences in their age, first migration

year, and occupations in the cities. They also shared many similarities: their families were in extremely difficult economic conditions; they all had children; their husbands either had to take up the agricultural work which the wives themselves could not handle alone or had failed in their migration attempts. Although they managed to earn money in their migration, their obligations as a wife and mother often forced them to either engage in temporary migration because they had to return home often or to give up migration totally, unless their husbands could migrate with them one day. Women involved in this ‘reversed’ pattern of migration do not necessarily have independence and autonomy in migration decision-making.

‘The presence of a gendered power difference within the family does not mean that the women are entirely powerless, nor that they play no role in household decision-making’ (Cerrutti and Massey, 2001, p. 188). It is worth noticing that some women did use their improved status and bargaining power which they earned through years’ of marriage in the husbands’ family to influence the migration of the family. Fen, an egg seller from Hebei, told me that it was she who persuaded her ‘idle’ husband to migrate to Beijing. She knew she could not migrate with her husband because she had to look after their two young sons at home in the village, she encouraged her husband to migrate first and she joined him later when she could leave her sons with her parents-in-law.

Concluding remarks

Based on the fieldwork data from both sending and receiving areas, this article examines the factors and power behind rural women's migration decision-making and the influence of gender inequality on the process.

On the one hand, the shortage of arable land, low return from agricultural activities and increasing living costs and cash demand force many rural households to find alternative means to generate cash income; on the other hand, sharp disparities between the countryside and cities, low status of peasants and the contempt for agricultural work and peasant identity also urges peasants to disassociate with their rural origin and find new niches in the process of China's modernization. Migrating for work in the cities therefore becomes the only choice for many peasant families. Furthermore, women's labour is in firm control of the Chinese patriarchal family, a symbolic and economic contract which favours men over women. Patriarchy is deeply embedded not only in local traditions and culture but also in the structure and functioning of the family. The patriarchal ideas are not simply maintained by men; they are internalized and upheld by women themselves.

Rural women have limited opportunities in any upward migration through education. Because of the economic tension of many rural families and the lesser status of the daughters, many parents do not want to risk investment in their daughter's education. As filial daughters, rural women willingly take the migration course to relieve the burden from the family. Their 'choices' often bear strong influence from their parents – whether they could migrate, what type of job they do, etc. After years' of marriage, especially after giving birth to a son, women may gain some 'bargaining power' over family matters which could include migration. However, their migration is often

conditioned under other obligations which they are expected to fulfil and the decision is often strongly controlled by their husbands, their in-laws and the needs of their sons.

Rural women's 'free choice' of migration bears the stamp of patriarchy which reminds them constantly their inferior status as a peasant woman. They keep contesting the identities as a peasant, a woman, a surplus labourer and a 'mere consumer' in the family, which pushes them into migration. Rural women do not migrate as independent individuals and their seemingly autonomous decision is often made to meet the demands of the family. Because rural women rely heavily on their parents and relatives' *guanxi* networks to migrate, they are more likely to be arranged to do jobs which are considered 'suitable for women' by their parents or relatives. Due to this patriarchal element of *guanxi* networks, women are consequently channeled to do low-paid gender specific jobs in the city. Although migration is always linked to choices, migration for rural Chinese women is a necessity. They are forced out of the villages simply because they are both a peasant and a woman.

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¹ '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.

² 1 Chinese *yuan* = 0.146 U.S. dollars.

³ Chan and Zhang had a detailed discussion on the conversion from an agricultural *hukou* to non-agricultural *hukou* (*nong zhuan fei*) (Chan and Zhang, 1999: 823-827). There are also new policies in the cities setting out new criteria for rural-to-urban *hukou* transfer. However, stringent rules make the transfer beyond the reach of most peasants.

⁴ Chinese measurement of unit for weight, 1 kilo = 2 *jin*.