

## CHAPTER 11

### THE HOUSEHOLD AS SECURITY: STRATEGIES OF RURAL-URBAN MIGRANTS IN CHINA

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#### **1. Introduction: The Household Approach**

The household as a unit of analysis has increasingly gained popularity in social sciences. Clare Wallace (2002) argues that household strategies are likely to become more important when a society is subject to rapid change that leaves households in a situation of risk and uncertainty, when more women enter into the labor force, and when large parts of the economy are informal. All three conditions describe circumstances facing rural Chinese today. First, economic liberalization since the 1980s removed communal protection, leaving those living in the countryside to deal with poverty, large labor surplus and lack of economic opportunities on their own. Agriculture faces an uncertain future, so do peasant households that depend on agriculture. Second, rural women are actively participating in migrant work, while those who stay in the countryside are taking up the bulk of agricultural work. In both cases, they constitute an increasingly important segment of the labor force. Third, as millions of peasant migrants seek work in urban industries and services, the sectors of the Chinese economy characterized by poorly paid, low-skilled and temporary jobs and rampant exploitation are rapidly expanding.

In migration studies, the conventional household strategies approach emphasizes the economic or utility gains households can make via migration (Boehm *et al.*, 1991). An influential view is that net family gain rather than net personal gain motivates migration. Thus, labor migration is often interpreted as a strategy to increase income and diversify income sources for the entire household (Adams and Page, 2003; De Jong, 2000; Ortiz, 1996). In some developing countries and poor areas, migration and remittances from migrant work are essential for the subsistence of rural households and households in poverty (Goldscheider, 1987; Itzigsohn, 1995; Radcliffe, 1991).

An approach that focuses on economic calculations alone, however, risks downplaying the social relations that underlie household decision-making. Increasingly, researchers are highlighting the non-economic factors of migration decisions (Clark and Huang, 2006; Hugo, 2005; Zhao, 1999). Odland and Ellis (1988), for example, find that potential migrants may forgo the economic benefits of migration in order to keep the household intact. Research by feminist scholars, in particular, draws attention to intra-household power relations, gender hierarchy and migrants' agency (Chant and Radcliffe, 1992; Eder, 2006; Fincher, 2007; Jarvis, 1999; Lawson, 1998; Silvey and Lawson, 1999; Willis and Yeoh, 2000). Marriage and gender roles within marriage are widely considered as the key to explaining differences in the migration process between men and women (Cerrutti and Massey, 2001; Radcliffe, 1991). Inasmuch as migration involves the collaboration of and division of labor among household members, the social and hierarchical power relations within the household are crucial for understanding decision-making and outcomes of migration (Lawson, 1998; Radcliffe, 1991).

Among studies on migration in China, those that examine household strategies tend to highlight economic reasoning rather than the social dynamics within households (Hare, 1999b). Yet, migration almost always involves considerations for, and collaboration of, other family/household members (Rowland, 1994). Split households, where one or more household members engage in migrant work while others stay in the village to farm and care for the young and elderly, are very common in rural China. The most popular arrangements include gender division of labor—the husband does migrant work and the wife stays behind—

and intergenerational division of labor—the husband and wife both do migrant work and their parents stay behind (Tan, 1996). In both cases, income from migrant work benefits the entire household while household members staying behind maintain the rural bases of livelihood that make possible the migrant’s eventual return. In this chapter we argue that the peasant household and the countryside constitute the bases of migrants’ economic and social security and that migrants’ strategies, in turn, make use of and support such security. In the next section, we examine the concept of security and its relations with migrants’ anticipation of an eventual return.

## **2. Permanent Settlement Paradigm and the Concept of Security**

In migration studies, the conventional approach for understanding temporary migrants assumes that they desire to stay. The experience of guest-workers in post-WWII Europe who eventually developed permanent communities, for example, supports the notion that temporary migration is a prelude to permanent settlement, as aptly summarized by the oft-repeated phrase “there is nothing so permanent as a temporary migrant.” This “permanent settlement paradigm,” however, is increasingly being challenged, especially in the context of international migration and transnational communities (Saxenian, 2005). Hugo (2003a, 2006) argues that while non-permanent and circular migration has increased rapidly, migrant workers do not always desire to settle in destination countries. Modern forms of transport and communication have reduced the friction of distance and allowed migrants to maintain closer and more intimate linkages with their home countries and communities than before. In addition, migrants can obtain the best of both worlds by earning in high-income destinations and spending in low-cost origins. By keeping the family at the place of origin, migrants can maintain valued traditions and family ties and make frequent visits. While in the past immigrants were expected to apply for citizenships and commit themselves to the host country, now dual citizenships are common and are recognized by more than half of the world’s nations (Clark, 2007). Concepts of international circulation of labor and international labor markets are, therefore, increasingly relevant.

Within countries, likewise, circular migration is on the rise. Temporary migration has always been common in Africa and Asia (Nelson, 1976). And, rural-urban circular migration is the fastest growing type of temporary migration in countries that are experiencing rapid urbanization and industrialization, such as Vietnam, Cambodia and China (Deshingkar, 2005). In China, however, the prevailing assumption about rural labor migrants is that they desire to stay in the city and bring their families there but are unable to do so because of the *hukou* system. Peasant migrants' inferior institutional status is indeed a formidable barrier to their access to urban services and the full range of urban jobs. Yet, some studies have found that migrants' desire to settle in cities is not as strong as expected and that the majority wish to return (Cai, 2000; Hare, 1999a; Solinger, 1995). Other studies show that many migrants choose not to obtain urban *hukou* even if given the opportunity to do so. Despite the aggressive *hukou* reform in Shijiazhuang since 2001, for example, only a small fraction of migrants took advantage of the opportunity to transfer their *hukou* to the city (Wang, 2003). Yu Zhu's (2003, 2007) surveys in Fujian conducted between 2000 and 2002 found that only small proportions of the floating population would move the whole family to the city even if they were given city *hukou* freely. While migrants' intention to stay or return likely varies depending on the specific city's labor market, the home village's resources and locations, and the household's economic and social situation, we argue that the concept of security provides a useful framework for understanding peasant migrants' considerations and their mobility behavior.

Security is related to protection, safety, continuity and reliability, and a sense of future and permanence. After more than 20 years of massive rural-urban labor migration, the countryside continues to be the basis of economic security for China's peasant migrants and their families. First, peasants have access to farmland contracted from village authorities. Despite the persistently low economic return from agriculture, it remains a major source of subsistence for rural Chinese. In addition, agriculture serves as an insurance against adversity—for example, when migrant work fails—and a security for migrants' future return. Access to farmland is, therefore, highly valued (Zhu, 2003, 2007). Protecting and taking care of the farmland during the migrants' absence continues to

be a high priority among rural Chinese. Popular arrangements include leaving behind family members to farm, asking relatives to farm the migrants' land, or leasing the land to other villagers. Such arrangements not only yield output but also guard the farmland's boundaries (against infringement by others) and prevent it from being fallow. In addition, Chinese peasants are not free to buy or sell farmland, and conversion of farmland into other purposes is strictly controlled by the state (Cai, 2000; Lin and Ho, 2005; Yusuf and Nabeshima, 2006). Roberts (2007) compares this situation to Mexico–US immigrants who have access to farmland in rural Mexico that cannot be sold and has become not only an economic asset but also a base for all household activities.

Second, Chinese peasants are allocated non-farming land where they can build houses. Building a new house and renovating or expanding an existing house are priority projects for many rural Chinese. In the countryside, it is commonly expected that in order to get married a man must have a house or a partition of his parents' house. Only when a new house or an extension to an existing house is complete can a married son and his wife and children have their own space independent from the parents'. Indeed, housing-related expenses are a main reason for migrant work. Third, the cost of living in the countryside is low. Affordability to live in a place permanently is an important dimension of economic security.

By contrast, in cities, peasant migrants face high costs of living and do not have a permanent place to stay. For them, the city is merely a place to work. Cities offer income opportunities, but migrant jobs are insecure and most demand youth and manual labor. Once migrant workers become older, most are forced to return to the countryside. The *hukou* system continues to be a barrier for rural Chinese to live in cities on a permanent basis, as their access to health care, education, housing and other benefits is very limited. Even if a migrant has substantial savings, the city's high cost of living renders it a less desirable place to live than the countryside.

The countryside is also the basis of peasant migrants' social security, namely, a support system made up of the spouse, children, parents, siblings, relatives, and fellow villagers. In rural China, the age-old concept of *jia* (family or home)—which refers to not only the nuclear

family but also the extended family and the home village—remains strong. Members of a family are related to each other by blood or marriage and their budgets, properties and interests are interconnected (Woon, 1994). The institution of marriage is fundamental to the social structure and is one that rural Chinese keenly protect. Within marriage, traditional gender norms continue to govern men and women's opportunities and responsibilities. Children are still the main source of old-age support, and fulfilling obligations to parents is an important way to keep the traditional social support system intact. A parent's sickness, for example, often compels sons and unmarried daughters to seek migrant work in order to pay for medical expenses. A married daughter, on the other hand, is considered a member of the husband's family and is thus not expected to be financially responsible for the natal family. Siblings and relatives that live nearby constitute important sources of support when a need arises. Thus, household strategies often include family members not residing under the same roof. Research has found that increased migration does not appear to have undermined the concept of extended families in the countryside (Goldstein *et al.*, 1997).

By contrast, as the chapter in this volume by Gloria Davies and Scott Grant highlights, in cities, peasant migrants are seen and treated as outside labor rather than members of urban society (see also Chan, 1996; Fan, 2002; Solinger, 1995; Zhou, 1992). Their social interactions with urban locals are minimal, and they rely mainly on other migrants from the same native place (*tongxiang* or *laoxiang*) for support. Although there is some evidence of thriving migrant communities, such as the Zhejiang Village in Beijing (Ma and Xiang, 1998; Xiang, 2005), and of an increase in rural-urban family migration (Zhou, 2004), in general peasant migrants' social support system in the city is much weaker than that in the countryside.

In summary, the very consideration of security explains why peasant migrants are unable or reluctant to stay in the city permanently and their anticipation to eventually return to the countryside. The terms *dagong*—literally “being employed,” but more specifically peasants seeking work in industrial and service sectors—and *chuqu* (going out), for example, highlight migrants' crossing of the rural-urban border but also connote that the countryside is still their home. During their *dagong*

tenure—which for some has been over 20 years—migrant workers<sup>1</sup> straddle the urban and rural, seek to benefit from both, and “earn in the city and spend in the village” (Hugo, 2003b). The overall objective for most is not permanent settlement in the city but to prepare for a better living in the countryside. This objective has important implications for their migration strategies and behavior, to which we now turn.

### **3. Household Strategies**

We argue that division of labor and circularity are two key strategies for peasant migrants to straddle the city and the countryside, to obtain the best of both worlds, and to achieve both economic security and social security.

#### **3.1. *Division of labor***

Division of labor, involving some household members pursuing migrant work and others staying behind to assume village responsibilities, is very popular in rural China. The most common form of split households among the first generation of migrants—those who began migrant work in the 1980s or early 1990s—involves husband–wife division of labor. This is an extension of the age-old inside–outside dichotomy, which defines the woman’s place to be inside the family and the man’s sphere to be outside (*nan zhu wai nu zhu nei*) (Mann, 2000). Although young, single peasant women are highly represented among labor migrants, the pressure to return increases when they reach their mid-20s because of the prevailing tradition of early marriage and because their marriage market is still primarily in the countryside. Once married, and especially after having children, peasant women’s likelihood to pursue migrant work sharply declines, since traditional gender norms define their main responsibility to be looking after the home and the young and elderly. As husbands take up migrant work, the wife’s responsibility multiplies, including not only house chores, care-giving and supervision of children but also farming, animal husbandry and non-farm work (Stockman, 1994). Tamara Jacka

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, “migrant work” refers to *dagong* but not the more formal, permanent and high-paid jobs that are generally not accessible to peasant migrants.

(1997) argues that the boundary between the feminine inside and the masculine outside has shifted such that the inside now includes all village responsibilities.

Since the 1990s, intergenerational division of labor has become an increasingly common household arrangement. When parents are physically well and able to farm, their sons and daughters may be motivated to pursue migrant work in order to improve the family's economic well-being. To a married son or daughter, the availability of one or more parents to look after young children makes it possible for them and their spouses to pursue migrant work together. Increased popularity of this type of split households reveals in part the differences between earlier, pioneering migrants and younger, most recent migrants. Unlike in the 1980s and perhaps also the 1990s when migrant work was perceived as a temporary economic strategy, labor migration has now firmly established itself as a way of life, even a culture, throughout China's countryside (Lee, 2007; Zhao, 1998). To many peasant households, migrant work is a necessary, desirable source of income such that married women and women who have children are increasingly participating in it. This trend may signal that the inside–outside dichotomy is being challenged. Another reason is that a husband (urban) – wife (rural) division of labor demands long-time separation between spouses, while the wife joining the husband in migrant work is a strategy that preserves the marriage institution and accordingly the fundamental social structure.

The popularity of husband–wife and intergenerational division of labor explains why in many villages only married and older women, grandparents and children remain (Cao, 1995; Cook and Maurer-Fazio, 1999; Croll and Huang, 1997; Davin, 1998). Other, albeit less popular, forms of division of labor are also used. Siblings and relatives may negotiate strategies that allow them to both take advantage of migrant work opportunities and address family needs. For example, siblings can pool their farmland resources together; those who stay behind farm and care for the elderly thus permitting others to do migrant work. Often, this involves siblings who are married and live in the same village but in a different house, which illustrates that household strategies may include family members not residing under the same roof. If no family members and relatives are available, a migrant may ask another villager to take

care of the farmland, *i.e.*, guard the boundaries, keep the land fertilized, prevent weeds, etc. In exchange, the yield belongs to the stay-behind villager. When the migrant returns, the land returns to him/her. Thus, this type of division of labor is mutually beneficial to both the migrant and the stay-behind villager.

The above division-of-labor arrangements are by no means static but may change frequently, as a result of shifts in life-cycle and household needs, changing economic opportunities, and negotiation among migrants and their family members and those who stay behind. While the specific changes vary considerably from household to household, the following are some common examples. Married women who used to stay behind may, after their children grow older, join their husbands in migrant work, especially if grandparents are available to help. At the same time, grandparents who used to take care of young children may be increasingly unable to do so because of age, and thus they may ask the migrant parents to return. A popular view in the countryside is that grandparents can look after pre-school age children but parents' direct supervision is needed after the children have started school. Finally, veteran migrants may decide to return when their children are old enough to pursue migrant work and assume the responsibility of primary wage earners.

While division-of-labor arrangements make it possible for migrants to earn in the city and simultaneously maintain their economic and social bases in the countryside, remittances from migrant work reinforce these bases and support the migrants' eventual return. Many studies have found that remittances constitute a significant source of household income in China's countryside (Cai, 2000, 2001; CASS 2003, 2004; Goodkind and West, 2002; Lian, 2002; Wang and Fan, 2006). Surveys conducted in the 1990s have consistently found that remittances were primarily used to fund household "projects" (such as building or renovating a house), maintain regular household activities (such as living expenses and agricultural input), support household members (such as wedding expenses and school fees), and lift the household out of financial difficulties (paying off debts), rather than for savings or investing in new economic activities (Fan, 2004; Murphy, 2002; Wang and Fan, 2006). While these usages continue to be important today, remittances are also being used by peasant households that have improved economically as savings for future use, such as to

fund children's education beyond the junior and senior secondary levels (see also "Stories and Narratives").

In addition to bringing obvious economic benefits to the household, remittances are also part of a social contract between the migrant and those who stay behind. The New Economics of Migration (NEM) theory, in particular, considers remittances as part of an implicit agreement between the migrant and the household that is grounded on attachment to the community of origin and a plan for eventual return (Lucas and Stark, 1985; Stark and Lucas, 1988). Focusing on late Imperial China, Skinner's (1976) work shows that it was precisely because sojourners who left to pursue their "occupational calling away from home" were expected to return that they could count on the support from the family and home community.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.2. *Circularity*

It is well documented that peasant migrants in China are highly circular in their movements between rural and urban areas (Hare, 1999a; Solinger, 1995). Many studies have described the routine whereby migrants return during the Spring Festival and during planting and harvesting seasons. Such seasonal migration enables migrants to participate in social traditions and to provide needed labor for agriculture, thus contributing to maintaining and reinforcing their social and economic bases in the countryside. Returning for the Spring Festival helps migrants maintain close ties with not only their family members but also the village community. The prevalence of this type of seasonal migration has led to the term "wild geese households" (*yan hu*), which compares migrants to wild geese that fly to the south in the fall, returning north in springtime.

To describe peasant migrants' mobility as seasonal, however, is to downplay the extent and fluidity of their circularity. In addition to the annual cycle described above, there is a range of circularity practices that are not "seasonal." For example, migrants may return to stay for an

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<sup>2</sup> Skinner (1976) draws a distinction between residence in one's native place and abode in one's place of work. He argues that residence is permanent and can be interpreted as an ascribed characteristic whereas abode is temporary and can vary.

extended period of time, up to several years, before pursuing migrant work again. This type of return may aim at enhancing economic security, social security, or both, of the migrant household. First, after accumulating some savings, some migrants may decide to return to full-time farming or to invest in other types of economic activities locally. In addition to finding migrant work too demanding, the opportunity to be with the family is an important motivation for such decision. Yet, existing evidence suggests that many returned migrants eventually seek migrant work again (see “Stories and Narratives” below). Second, migrants may return for months, even years, to build or renovate a house. They may be needed to oversee the construction work or they may be doing the construction on their own. After the house project is finished, typically the migrants’ savings are used up or they have accrued a debt, which thus calls for a new round of migrant work. Finally, when a new family need arises, such as the birth of a child, children needing supervision on schoolwork, or a spouse or elderly parent falling sick, migrants may return to meet these needs but they can pursue migrant work again when the needs are resolved.

Returning and going out again may occur more than once. Sometimes, a peasant migrant’s return makes it possible for another household member to pursue migrant work. In addition to traveling back and forth between the village and the place of migrant work, peasant migrants also circulate among places of migrant work looking for higher wages and better working conditions. Such circularity is an important explanation for the migrant labor shortage in recent years in some parts of Guangdong, where as discussed in David Kelly’s chapter in this volume, persistently low pay and poor working conditions have driven migrants to other parts of China, such as the Yangtze Delta (Jian and Zhang, 2005; Xinhua News Agency, 2005).

Peasant migrants’ straddling the city and countryside makes it possible for a high level of circularity and fluidity, which in turn gives rise to choices as well as opportunities to change plans. We argue that it is precisely migrants’ social and economic bases in the countryside that permit their high degree of circularity and the variety of associated practices: they can always return to the village if migrant work fails. Conversely, their willingness to leave other family members in the village enables them to seek migrant work if village activities are not successful.

Circularity also has implications for household division of labor: new mobility decisions often require new division of labor arrangements.

In rural China, circular movement of peasant migrants is no longer a temporary strategy but has become a long-term practice, which challenges conventional approaches in migration studies that assume a high degree of permanency (Fan, 2008). Defining migrants as those who lived in different places at two different points in time and defining others as non-migrants, for example, would completely overlook the very circularity and fluidity that characterize Chinese peasant migrants' mobility behavior. In the rest of the chapter, we examine the stories told by migrants and their family members in order to further illustrate the concept of security and the migration strategies peasant households use to achieve economic and social security.

#### **4. Stories and Narratives**

Qualitative material such as stories and narratives are usually from small samples and therefore not as representative as macro-level quantitative data, but the former is especially useful in revealing complexity and details. Personal stories and narratives are powerful means for identifying migrants' agency, negotiation and conflicts, and they enable a bottom-up research approach that brings to the foreground the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals in society (Jacka, 2006; Nagar *et al.*, 2002).

We draw from two related projects, conducted during the Spring Festival in 1995 and 2005. In 1995, the Research Center for Rural Economy of the Ministry of Agriculture conducted in-depth interviews with 300 households from 12 villages—three villages each from two counties in Sichuan and two counties in Anhui. Sichuan and Anhui are major sources of rural-urban labor migrants in China. The counties and villages for the 1995 project were selected on the following criteria, that: in terms of economic development they were representative of the respective provinces; they had been sending out migrant workers for quite some time; and migrant workers accounted for at least, respectively, 20% of the county's labor force and 30% of the village's labor force (Du, 2000; Du and Bai, 1997). In each of the villages, 15 migrant households (where one or more members had had migrant work experience) and 10

non-migrant households were randomly selected. Interviewees' responses are in the form of narratives and are transcribed *verbatim*.

The 2005 project, administered by the Renmin University of China, aimed at re-interviewing the same 300 households. The purpose is to document and explain changes that have taken place over the 10-year period, including, for example, whether peasant migrants are more attracted to and more able to settle permanently in cities than before, how household arrangements related to migration have changed, and how new and younger migrants compare to their predecessors. Each of the accounts is again transcribed *verbatim*.

In this chapter, we focus on interviews from one village—which we refer to as Village A—selected randomly from the original 12 villages. For the sake of simplicity, we use the present tense to describe the 2005 material. At the time of the 2005 interviews, Village A has about 310 households and a total population of approximately 1,200. In this chapter, stories and narratives are cited in such a way that ensures respondents' anonymity—their names are withheld or only pseudonyms are used, and the exact name and location of Village A are not revealed although it has features quite commonly found in many villages across China that have sent out a large number of migrant workers. First, agricultural activities center mainly on farming and animal husbandry, but labor surplus is persistently large because arable land is of short supply. Second, although some nonagricultural economic activities exist in and near the village, the employment and income they generate are limited. A recently built brick factory in Village A, for example, hires villagers mostly on a part-time basis. Third, by the mid-1990s labor out-migration had already become an important source of income for most households in Village A, and this trend has further intensified by 2005. Fourth, over time the number and range of labor migrants have increased. In the 1980s and early 1990s, significantly more men than women were engaged in migrant work, which was largely seen as a new, short-term, economic opportunity. By 2005, migrant work has become an established way of life, and participation in this activity is more extensive, involving more women and almost every household in the village. Finally, despite more than 20 years of migrant work history, very few households have moved out from the village altogether. Officials in Village A estimate that only 15 households, or 5% of the village and involving a

total of approximately 60 people, have done so. Among them, only four households have transferred their *hukou* elsewhere—thus giving up their contract land in the village. Eleven households—of which eight live in the same county as Village A—continue to keep their *hukou* in the village.

Of the 25 households in Village A originally interviewed in 1995, 16 were successfully interviewed in 2005. In our analysis, we do not distinguish households originally categorized as migrant from those originally categorized as non-migrant, because most of the latter have had some degree of participation in labor migration by 2005. A limitation of our study is that it does not include households where no members stay in the village or return during the 2005 Spring Festival. Since only 5% of the village's households have moved out, we are confident that our analysis can still reveal the most common household arrangements and strategies in the village.

Focusing on the economic and social relations between husbands and wives and between parents and children, we arrived at three models of division of labor (Tables 1 to 3). “Inside–outside” refers to households where at any one time only the husband or wife is engaged in migrant work but they have never done migrant work simultaneously. “Dual migrants” refers to households where in 2005 both the husband and wife are engaged in migrant work. “Second generation” refers to households where one or more children of earlier migrants or household heads are themselves migrants in 2005. The three models are not mutually exclusive, and we classify the households based on their most dominant or unique household arrangements. For the household composition outlined in Tables 1 to 3, we consider the husband and wife as the core of a household, and include also their unmarried children, married children if living together, and parents who live together or spend considerable time in the household. Siblings and married children, who do not live in the house, are not included in the tables.

#### **4.1. *The inside–outside model***

##### **4.1.1. *Type 1: Traditional***

While in 1995 the most common form of division of labor was one where the husband does migrant work and the wife stays behind to farm and

Table 1. The Inside–Outside Model.

Household Type	1995 Migrant Age	Stayer	Age	2005 Migrant Age	Stayer	Age			
#1	1. Traditional	Husband	28	Husband	38	Wife	37		
		Wife	27					Son	15
		Son	5					Daughter	13
		Daughter	3					Father	≈60s
		Father	≈50s						
#2	1. Traditional	Husband	29	Husband	39	Wife	37		
		Wife	27					Son	12
		Son	2					Father	≈60s
		Father	≈50s					Mother	≈60s
		Mother	≈50s						
#3	1. Traditional	Husband	30	Husband	40	Wife	38		
		Wife	28					Son	17
		Son	7					Daughter	14
		Daughter	4					Father	≈60s
		Father	≈50s					Mother	≈60s
		Mother	≈50s						
#4	2. Reverse	Husband	43	Husband	53	Wife	42		
		Wife	32					Daughter	11
		Daughter	11					Daughter	14
		Daughter	4						

raise children (Fan, 2004), in 2005 this traditional inside–outside model is mainly represented by three of the 16 households (Table 1).<sup>3</sup>

In Household #1, Wang Xinmin is a 38 year-old construction worker and has had more than 20 years of migrant work experience but his wife has never done migrant work. They have a 15 year-old son in junior secondary school and a 13 year-old daughter in elementary school.

<sup>3</sup> In several households categorized under the second generation model (#12, #13 and #14) (Table 3), the wife stayed behind when the husband did migrant work, but by 2005 the children in these households are grown and do not need care anymore.

While the husband's migrant work is the primary source of income for the entire household, farming and raising children remain the primary responsibility of the wife. Wang Xinmin's mother passed away in the early 1990s, and it appears his father is not an active helper for him and his wife. Wang Xinmin returns home at least once a year during the Spring Festival. His family was the first in Village A, in 1997, to install a telephone set. Wang Xinmin remarks that his calling home at least once a week helps him maintain close contact with his wife and children.

A major change during the 10-year period is the way Wang Xinmin thinks about migrant work. When interviewed in 1995, his plan was to return after several years:

Going out to *dagong* is not a long-term solution. After several years, I'll return to farm. I would like to find non-farm work in the countryside, but I am not sure what exactly I will do. I have no desire to move the whole family out from the village [to the city].

His comment on non-farm work is consistent with the common view in the village that agriculture is an inadequate source of income.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Wang Xinmin's initial plan to return, he has, in fact, continued to do migrant work year after year. His plan 10 years later, in 2005, is: "I'll continue migrant work until 50 years old and then I'll return. If I can't find non-farm work here then I'll just farm. Once the children go out to *dagong* I won't have to worry anymore." If this new plan materializes, by the time he is 50 years old—in the year 2017—he will have done migrant work for 32 years! He anticipates that his children will also rely on migrant work as their main source of income.

Despite the family's heavy reliance on migrant work, it chooses a long-term split-household arrangement rather than moving to the city altogether. Wang Xinmin explains:

My wife has to take care of the children at home and cannot join me in migrant work. I cannot take the children with me. School is too expensive in Zhangjiagang (Jiangsu); the fee is twice what we pay at home. Expenses for

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<sup>4</sup> By 2005, about two-thirds of the households in Village A are engaging in some form of non-farm activities.

the children at home are about 2,000 RMB a year but would be 5,000 RMB over there. ... I live at the construction site. If my wife and children go there, we will have to rent a place ... thus, they stay behind mainly because of financial consideration. ... Another reason why we don't settle down in the city is the unpredictability of migrant work. There are too many buildings in Zhangjiagang. Some of them are left vacant. ... When there is no more new construction work, everybody will have to return.

Thus, although the city has been a long-term source of household income, it does not offer the security that the countryside does, namely, affordability and a secure, albeit poor, livelihood.

In addition, like most other village respondents, Wang Xinmin identifies himself as *nongmin* (peasant), even though he has not actively engaged in agriculture for more than 20 years:

My *benfen* (role) is *nongmin*. ... *Chengliren* (city people) are different from us. What they eat and wear are different. You can tell right away. *Dagong* won't help you become a city person. City people are those who can buy an apartment, start a business, or open a shop. *Dagong* won't help you achieve all that ... But they [city people] are they and we [rural people] are we. I don't compare myself to them.

Among the 16 households, the most common self-description of migrant workers is *nongmin* or *nongcunren* (village people), sometimes qualified by *dagong*, *i.e.*, *dagong di nongmin* (peasants who do migrant work). These terms are contrasted with *chengliren* or *chengshiren*, both referring to city or urban people. Wang Xinmin's remarks suggest that the peasant identity and the notion of two distinct categories of urban and rural people are related to security. As a migrant worker, he does not live like and cannot afford to live like city people. The countryside is where his membership is, where his economic and social security lies, and also where he defines his identity and comparison group. In this light, despite long-term urban work, migrant workers' temporary, outsider identity with respect to the city remains intact.

Likewise, Wei Daming in Household #2 does not plan to move out from the village, despite having engaged in migrant work for more than

20 years. Like Wang Xinmin, Wei Daming plans to eventually return to the countryside:

I am still a *nongmin*. My family and my friends feel the same. City people have houses and jobs there. ... I won't move to the city. Life is much better in the countryside. Rural people are less complicated. Life is easier here. The city is merely a place to make money. ... I do not want to live there for a long period of time. After I've made some more money I want to return.

Wei Daming's wife has never done migrant work. She is the main person taking care of their 12 year-old son and she is a teacher at a local nursery school. Wei Daming explains why his wife stays in the village: "If my wife did migrant work she could probably earn quite a bit, but I do not want her to go out. Children in the countryside must study hard or else their future [livelihood] is bleak." His comment shows that he is heavily invested in his son's education, which is a main reason for the wife to stay behind. This is a rationale consistent with the common view that rural Chinese are inferior to urban people and that education is the only effective means for the former to possibly overcome such inferiority (see also "The Second Generation Model).

Household #3, likewise, is governed by a gender division of labor whereby the husband focuses on migrant work and the wife on village and home responsibilities. Wang Gen has had more than 20 years of migrant work experience. His wife stays home to farm and take care of two children, aged 17 and 14 in 2005. Her comment succinctly summarizes the traditional gender norms: "Men should make greater [economic] contribution to the family than women. Just like our family, the husband goes out to make money [and the wife stays home]."

#### 4.1.2. *Type 2: Reverse*

A reverse gender division of labor, whereby the wife is the migrant worker and the husband stays in the countryside, is extremely rare. Household #4 illustrates one such short-lived arrangement. During the early 1990s, the husband Wang Guohui did migrant work for several years but failed. His wife Zhao Xiaolan decided to go out in 1994 and worked in a sewing

machine factory in Wujiang, Jiangsu while Wang Guohui stayed home to farm and take care of the 11 year-old and four year-old daughters. But this arrangement was problematic for the husband, as described by Zhao Xiaolan in 1995:

Migrant work is the only means to pay back our debt [from building a house]. My husband had attempted to work in mining, construction, brick factory, etc. ... He is unskilled and can only do manual work—work that is dirty, tiring and dangerous. ... He is impatient and has a bad temper, and he cannot tolerate the tough life of migrant work. ... The past several years, the money he made from *dagong* wasn't even enough to pay for his food, cigarettes and drinking. Even he himself admits that he is *meiyong* (useless). For several years he did not bring back one cent. ... Fellow villagers all tease my husband. He feels embarrassed and doesn't want to go out anymore. ... Now that he has returned, he can work on the farm. I suggested that he take care of the home so that I could try my luck outside. He said 'Don't look down upon me. Migrant work is harder than you think. Try it out if you don't believe me.' So, I went out and he stayed home to farm and watch the kids. ... In one year, I brought home 3,000 RMB. This money helped us to pay back all our debts, buy fertilizer and pesticide, pay the children's school fees, and buy a TV set for them. ... After the Spring Festival, I still want to go out ... but my husband doesn't want me to go ... he wants me to help him raise some pigs ... we have been fighting about this matter.

This is a vivid example of how the reverse division of labor is seen as a deviation from the traditional gender division of labor arrangement and is hotly contested. Men who stay in the village while their wives do migrant work risk being perceived as “useless” and tend to put pressure on the wife to return (see also Lou *et al.*, 2004). Even though Zhao Xiaolan was proud of her economic achievements, her comment on the husband's failure in migrant work shows that she, too, was heavily invested in the traditional gender norms, even as she might simultaneously contest them and feel constrained by them.

Not surprisingly, the reverse inside–outside arrangement did not last. Zhao Xiaolan did migrant work for only two years, returned to the village in 1996, and has stayed there since then. The decision to return

appeared to have alleviated the tension between the husband and wife, which suggests that protecting the institution of marriage by assuming the expected gender roles within marriage, is prioritized over the economic benefits from migrant work. Personal considerations like the above, however, are often not directly commented on by respondents. Rather, Zhao Xiaolan describes, in 2005, her return as a result of a combination of reasons:

The main reason for my return was I was unable to go out [due to family responsibilities]. Both my daughters were school-age, and my younger daughter in particular needed to be taken care of [because of her young age]. ... In addition, a brick factory was built nearby... we began part-time work there. This way, we live at home and there are no additional living expenses [compared to *dagong*]. Beginning in 2001, we also leased land from relatives to farm.

Thus, the decision for both the husband and wife to stay in the village was made in order to balance economic and social considerations. Economically, the village has low cost-of-living, part-time non-farm work, and farmland including land leased from others. Socially, staying in the village allows them to keep the family intact, take care of the children, and safeguard the husband–wife relations. Like Household #2 described earlier, children’s education is given a high priority, as suggested by Zhao Xiaolan’s remark: “In terms of raising children, migrant households—especially those where both the husband and wife are outside—are usually unable to supervise the children in their education.”

#### **4.2. The dual migrants model**

The dual migrants model describes households where in 2005 both the husband and wife are engaged in migrant work. While this arrangement was not as common in 1995, ten years later it has become the most popular arrangement, accounting for seven of the 16 households in the sample (Table 2). In most cases, the wife stays behind when the children are young and later joins the husband in migrant work when the children are older. Type 1 refers to households where migrants’ parents replace the wives to take care of the children, thus changing the household arrangement

from gender division of labor to intergenerational division of labor. Type 2 refers to households where migrants' parents are not available to help. Household strategies are highly fluid, however, and most migrants in this group display a high degree of circularity and frequent changes in location and economic activity, reflecting a constant need to negotiate and renegotiate among household members and to balance economic and social considerations.

#### 4.2.1. *Type 1: Parents available*

Six households belong to this type. As a whole, the couples in this group are younger than those described under the traditional inside–outside model (Table 1). Below, we select three households (#5, #6 and #7) to illustrate the intergenerational arrangement.

At the time of the 1995 interview, Wang Yonghua in Household #5 was 23 years old and had done migrant work for two years, had returned to open a grocery store and decided not to go out anymore. He and his wife had a one year-old son. He explained the decision to stay in the village:

The heavy manual work [during *dagong*] has adversely affected my health. And, migrant work has already given me the exposure needed to start a business in the village. ... The income from my current business is a little higher than that from migrant work. Plus, I can help take care of the family. ... I won't go out anymore.

Yet, his plan changed when the grocery business became unprofitable. In 1999, he began migrant work again, this time joined by his wife. They left their then five year-old son with the husband's parents, both in their 50s. In 2002, Wang Yonghua's wife returned, gave birth to a daughter and stayed home for more than a year. In 2004, she joined her husband again. Wang Yonghua's parents, both in their 60s now, are the primary persons farming and taking care of the 11 year-old and two year-old grandchildren. Wang Yonghua and his wife are not returning for the 2005 Spring Festival because of the cost of travel.

Wang Cheng in Household #6 was 23 years old and had already had six years of migrant work experience, mostly in construction, when he

Table 2. The Dual Migrants Model.

Household	Type	1995 Migrant Age	Stayer	Age	2005 Migrant Age	Stayer	Age	
#5	1. Parents available		Husband	23	Husband	33		
			Wife	23	Wife	33		
			Son	1			Son	11
							Daughter	2
			Father	52			Father	62
			Mother	50			Mother	60
#6	1. Parents available	Husband 23			Husband	33		
			Wife	21	Wife	31		
							Son	9
							Daughter	4
			Father	≈40s			Father	≈50s
			Mother	≈40s			Mother	≈50s
#7	1. Parents available	Husband ≈30s			Husband	≈40s		
			Wife	≈30s	Wife	≈40s		
			Son	8	Son	18		
			Daughter	4			Daughter	14
			Father	50s			Father	60s
			Mother	50s			Mother	60s
				Brother ≈30s			Brother	≈40s
							Brother's ≈40s wife	
					Brother's ≈13 child #1			
					Brother's ≈12 child #2			
#8	1. Parents available	Husband 24			Husband	34		
			Wife	22	Wife	32		
			Son	1			Son	11
			Father	≈40s			Father	≈50s
			Mother	≈40s			Mother	≈50s

Table 2. Continued.

Household Type	1995 Migrant Age	Stayer	Age	2005 Migrant Age	Stayer	Age	
#9 1. Parents available	Husband	28		Husband	38		
	Wife	≈20s		Wife	≈30s		
			Daughter	4		Daughter	14
			Son	2		Son	12
			Father	≈50s		Father	≈60s
			Mother	≈50s		Mother	≈60s
#10 1. Parents available	Husband	33		Husband	43		
	Wife	32		Wife	42		
			Son	9		Son	19
			Son	6		Son	16
			Father	58		Father	68
			Mother	57		Mother	67
#11 2. Parents unavailable	Husband	≈36		Husband	≈46		
			Wife	≈30s		Wife	≈40s
			Daughter	≈10		Daughter	≈20 (boarding school)
			Daughter	≈9		Daughter	≈19 (boarding school)

was first interviewed in 1995. His wife stayed in the village. In 1996, his wife gave birth to a son, and he returned to stay for a year. Both husband and wife then went to Guangzhou to work and returned the following year. Wang Cheng then tried different non-farm activities near home, including work at the local brick factory and doing transportation work in a nearby town, but none of these attempts were successful. In 2001, after having a baby girl, Wang Chen and his wife went to Guangzhou again to do construction work.

In 2005, both Wang Cheng, now 33, and his wife, now 31, continue working in Guangzhou. Their nine year-old son, four year-old daughter

and their contract land are taken care of by Wang Cheng's parents. Wang Cheng and his wife hope to renovate their house, and in order to maximize the savings from migrant work have not returned home for three years. But Wang Cheng's parents are increasingly finding this arrangement problematic, because of their deteriorating health and the difficulty in supervising the grandson's schoolwork. They asked the couple to return. After some negotiation, a compromise was reached: Wang Cheng's wife will return in the summer of 2005 to take care of the children while he will continue to do migrant work. In other words, intergenerational division of labor will soon be replaced by the traditional inside–outside arrangement.

Wang Cheng and his wife's commitment to renovating the house indicates that they fully intend to return to the countryside. This is also the sentiment expressed by Wang Cheng's father:

He is a *nongmin* after all. Rural people who live and work in the city can be considered half agricultural and half nonagricultural, but fundamentally they are *nongcunren*. Eventually they will have to return to the village. Wang Cheng doesn't have business skills; he can only rely on his physical strength to make a living. When he becomes older and lacks the strength [required for migrant work], he has to return. ... There is no question that his future is in the village.

The above two cases show that migrants' location and activity change frequently. They can return when a new family need arises, such as to care for an infant or to supervise school-age children, and pursue migrant work again later. They can return to do non-farm work or invest in non-farm activities; if these efforts fail, they can resort to migrant work again. While the city is a place to exchange labor for wage and is not a permanent place to live, migrant work provides a reliable, albeit temporary, source of income that is superior to non-farm activities in the countryside. Yet, it is precisely the countryside's economic and social security—respectively the house and farmland on one hand and the parents and the spouse on the other—that allows migrants to be flexible and to have choices. At the same time, protection of such security demands that migrants and their household members be prepared to negotiate, compromise, and make changes. A father who helps care for his 11 year-old grandchild,

for example, comments on how his availability makes it possible not only for dual migrant income from his son and daughter-in-law but also for the two to stay together (Household #8): “It’s better that the husband and wife stay in the same place.”

Household #7 differs from #5 and #6 in that two married brothers and their wives and children are living under one roof together with the brothers’ parents. The brothers and their wives are all migrant workers. Of their four children, one is doing migrant work and three are staying in the village with their grandparents. The traditional practice of *fenjia*, when adult sons establish their independent households—usually occurring after they get married—is postponed in order to facilitate the intergenerational division of labor arrangement. Of the 10 people in the extended family, five are migrant workers and five are staying in the village. The two brothers’ father comments: “We tried *fenjia* once but changed our minds the next day. The adults are all doing migrant work. My wife and I are taking care of the grandchildren. How can we *fenjia*?”

Because travel is costly, none of the migrant workers in this household return regularly for the Spring Festival. Instead, a telephone set was installed recently and the migrants frequently call home. In the above and a number of other cases in the sample, migrants no longer return yearly for the Spring Festival, suggesting that the economic benefits of migrant work are increasingly being prioritized over social and cultural traditions. Nevertheless, the more widespread use of the telephone in the village and of the mobile phone by migrant workers since the late 1990s may have, to a significant degree, substituted for physical travel as the preferred means of maintaining ties with family members that stay behind.

#### 4.2.2. *Type 2: Parents unavailable*

It is uncommon that the husband and wife simultaneously do migrant work if none of their parents are available to help care for the children. Household #11 illustrates such a case in which the children are older and are in boarding school.

Li Wangping, who is in his late 40s in 2005, has done migrant work since the early 1980s. Parents on both sides had passed away years ago.

Until 2004, Li Wangping's wife was staying home to farm and raise the two daughters and had not had any migrant work experience. Every year, Li Wangping returned home before the Spring Festival and helped with planting before leaving again. In 2004, when their daughters were 20 and 19 years old, Li Wangping stayed home to farm and his wife did migrant work for the first time. She worked in a garment factory in Zhejiang. This experiment turned out to be successful, and thus the couple's plan for 2005 is that both will continue migrant work but in different places, the husband in Jiangsu and the wife in Zhejiang. Their daughters, in different senior secondary schools, will both be boarding at school. Li Wangping and his wife will lease their land to other villagers and leave the house locked and vacant.

The main objective of this new plan is to support the daughters' future education. The couple estimates that they would need a minimum of 200,000 RMB, which is now their target for migrant work, in order to send both daughters to the university:

We are *nongmin* our whole lives. Our *hukou* is here, and our land is here. But if our daughters enter good universities and obtain *hukou* in the city then they may be considered urban people. ...Our first priority is our daughters' education.

Li Wangping's comment reinforces an observation made earlier that education—more specifically, university education—is widely perceived as an effective, perhaps the only, way for rural people to “become” urban. This point will be further discussed in relation to second generation migrants.

#### **4.3. The second generation model**

Households with second generation migrants are primarily those where the children are in the late teens or early 20s. The model has three variations: first and second generations simultaneously doing migrant work; first generation migrants have returned and are replaced by second generation migrants; and non-*dagong* second generation migrants.

#### 4.3.1. *Type 1: Simultaneous*

Migrant work as a means of livelihood is being passed from one generation to the next. Veteran migrants who are physically capable may still be doing migrant work even after their children are old enough to begin migrant work and contribute financially to the family. Both Household #12 and Household #7, described earlier, belong to this type.

Jiang Zhengyi of Household #12, aged 53 in 2005, has done migrant work since 1991, while his wife stayed home to farm and raise their two sons. Every year, Jiang Zhengyi returns home in July for harvest and leaves in March or April after planting. He does migrant work for only four or five months a year so that he can help with farming, including farming the land leased from other villagers. In 2005, Jiang Zhengyi's oldest son is 24 years old, has graduated from university and is employed as a technician in Chongqing. He is skilled and has a formal job and can therefore be considered a non-*dagong* migrant. The younger son is 22 years old and has begun migrant work, first in factories and then as a painter, after finishing senior secondary school.

Jiang Zhengyi's financial burden was very heavy when the oldest son was in school, because of which he was in debt. Now that both sons are financially independent, he plans to return to the countryside in the near future:

I will continue migrant work for two or three more years. When my sons are older I will stop *dagong*. ... As a migrant worker you are, after all, always being controlled. Home [the village] is still a better place to live.

His comment illustrates the effect of the life cycle and the deep-rooted tradition that grown-up children are part of the social support system and are the main source of old-age security, especially in the countryside:

I hope that one son [the oldest son] will stay in the city and another son [the younger son] will eventually return home. We are getting old, and it is our hope that one of our sons will stay in the village and take care of us. The main reason for many years of hard work raising children is for old age security.

Table 3. The Second Generation Model.

Household Type	1995 Migrant Age	Stayer	Age	2005 Migrant Age	Age	Stayer	Age		
#12	1. Simultaneous	Husband	43			Husband	53		
				Wife	37			Wife	47
				Son	14	Son (non-dagong)	24		
				Son	12	Son	22		
#13	2. Replacement	Husband	43					Husband	53
				Wife	37			Wife	47
				Daughter	15			Daughter	25
				Son	≈12	Son (university)	≈22		
						Son-in-law	≈20s		
						Grandchild	1		
#14	2. Replacement (injured)	Husband	37					Husband	47
				Wife	31			Wife	41
				Son	11	Son	21		
				Son	9	Son	19		
						Daughter-in-law	≈20s		
						Grand-child	infant		
#15	3. Non-dagong			Husband	39			Husband	49
				Wife	38			Wife	48
				Daughter	12	Daughter (non-dagong)	22		
				Daughter	9			Daughter	19
				Father	63			Father	73

Table 3. Continued.

Household Type	1995		2005			
	Migrant Age	Stayer Age	Migrant Age	Stayer Age		
#16 3. Non-dagong		Husband 36		Husband 46		
		Wife 28	Wife 38			
		Daughter 12	Daughter (non-dagong) 22			

His expectation for the younger son to return is further explained in terms of rural versus urban identity:

I am still a *nongmin*, *nongcunren*, not *chengshiren*. Since my oldest son has finished university [and has skilled work in the city], it is difficult to say whether he is a rural or urban person. My younger son is, no doubt, a *nongcunren*. Migrant work is temporary; one year at a time. When migrant work is not available anymore you'll have to return to the countryside.

Like the comments by other villagers cited earlier, Jiang Zhengyi connects university education and a skilled job to urban identity. In this view, since the younger son is a *dagong* migrant worker, his identity remains rural and he should be the one who returns to take care of the elderly. Jiang Zhengyi's younger son, however, has a different perspective:

At home [in the village] I am a *nongmin*. Outside [in the city] I am a *gongren*.<sup>5</sup> Depending on the place and time, my identity is different. Since I am living and working mainly in the city, I am primarily a *gongren*. *Hukou* aside, I am an urban person, a *gongren*. ... In the future, I wish to *tiaochu nongcun* (leave the village), but the possibility of achieving that is slim. Painters may lose their jobs anytime. City people are not afraid of losing their jobs, because they have a permanent place to live. ... If my income increased to 3,000 RMB a month, I would consider buying an apartment in the city. If I won the lottery, I would buy an apartment in Chengdu. ... But these are all

5 The term *gongren* is primarily used to refer to urban people—those who have urban *hukou*—that have working-class type of jobs primarily in industrial or service sectors.

fantasies. At the moment, I can only work as a painter, earn as much as I can and hope to somehow live in the city permanently. People in my generation basically all have this hope.

This narrative reinforces the observation that the security of a reliable and comfortable livelihood and a permanent place to stay is perceived as the key to deciding where one belongs. The younger son's aspiration and desire to identify himself as an urban person, at the same time, hints at a new generation who may be questioning their rural identity and striving more aggressively than their parents to leave the countryside.

#### 4.3.2. *Type 2: Replacement*

Replacement refers to households where first generation migrant workers have returned and their children are now engaged in migrant work. Three years after Chen Guowei of Household #14 began migrant work, in 1990, he was injured and became paralyzed. His wife's farming activity then became the only source of livelihood. She, at the same time, had to support the two sons' education, pay off a debt, and take care of the disabled husband. According to the couple, the family did not have enough to eat, until the two sons were old enough to do migrant work, the oldest son beginning at the age of 14 and the younger son at the age of 17.

In 2005, Chen Guowei's two sons are, respectively, 21 and 19 years old. The second son is married and his wife is also doing migrant work. Chen Guowei's wife is now taking care of an eight month-old grandchild. The two sons and the daughter-in-law are not planning to return for the Spring Festival. The family does not have a telephone but they can use one that belongs to a relative in the same village. Chen Guowei and his wife's dream is that both sons will make enough money to build their own houses in the village. Just like Households #5 to #10 in Table 2, in this household intergenerational division of labor is mutually-beneficial: migrants send back remittances that benefit the entire household, and grandparents that stay behind take care of the grandchildren so that the migrant workers can earn as much as possible to build up their economic security.

#### 4.3.3. *Type 3: Non-dagong*

While in 1995 almost all young people who left Village A to work took up *dagong* work, by 2005 a minority of second generation migrants have managed to find formal, non-*dagong*, jobs in urban areas. The oldest son in Household #12, described earlier, is one such example. Like him, both the non-*dagong* migrants in Households #15 and #16 have received university or post-secondary education, reinforcing once again the notion that higher education is the key for young, rural people to secure skilled, urban jobs, as opposed to the physically demanding and low-paid *dagong* jobs taken up by migrants with lower educational attainment.

Wang Jiankun of Household #15 and his wife have never had any migrant work experience. He has been a village cadre since 1992, and the family's main source of income is farming and animal husbandry. During the 1995 interview, he explained why he did not do migrant work:

Our income is comparable to those who do migrant work. In addition, staying home is less hard work, and I can take care of the family, which is more important than anything else. ... No matter how good it is outside, home is still the best. Nothing is better than the whole family living together peacefully. What's the use of making so much money? ... Only the children are the most precious.

And his comment during the 2005 interview vividly summarizes migrant work's negative impacts on the family and the trade-off between economic return and the social support system:

The biggest difference between staying home and migrant work is how much one makes. The annual income of two migrant workers can be more than 20,000 RMB; that kind of income is impossible at home. ... But *dagong* has big impacts on the children. Parents' not staying home affects children's education. It also affects the elderly. If sons and daughters-in-law are not around, no one takes care of the elderly; as a result, 70 and 80 year-olds are still carrying 30 *jin* of chemical fertilizer!

Wang Jiankun has indeed committed fully to his two daughters' education. In 2005, his oldest daughter has graduated from Chongqing University,

and his younger daughter is in senior secondary school. Because of the school fee, Wang Jiankun has been in debt.

The oldest daughter is now a store manager in Chongqing. Ideally, she would like to work for a big enterprise or to find a government job. Her friends are mostly from the university, and her plan is to stay in the city:

The key to becoming a *chengliren* is to own an apartment there. I wish to have an apartment in Qingdao. To own an apartment with an ocean view is a dream that would probably take 10 years to realize.

Her father's dream is much more modest: a color television, a telephone and a refrigerator. He installed a telephone set five years ago, mainly to contact his oldest daughter, and he has recently bought a color television. He still does not have a refrigerator.

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

Migrant work, or *dagong*, has become a way of life in the Chinese countryside. Many peasants have been engaged in migrant work for more than two decades, and more and more of their children are following their footsteps. Yet, the city is still seen as a temporary place to stay; migrants' home village is still considered their permanent base and a place to return to; and migrants' identity as peasants (*nongmin*) remains strong. In this chapter, we have used the concept of security to explain peasant migrants' decisions and strategies. We have argued that the countryside (peasants' household and home village), rather than the city (migrant work), is the basis of peasants' economic and social security and that their migration strategies utilize as well as support such security. This argument places the focus on where one feels economically and socially secure rather than where one actually lives.

Our analysis has drawn on interviews conducted in 1995 and 2005 in a Sichuan village. Although the sample is from only one village, our observations appear consistent with surveys done in other parts of the country (*e.g.*, Zhu, 2003, 2007) that have found peasant migrants' desire to live permanently in the city is not as strong as once expected. Villagers'

stories and narratives show that economically, the countryside provides security because of access to farmland, housing, and low cost of living. Socially, the peasant household and the extended family constitute a reliable and effective support system. To peasant migrants, the city is primarily a place to work but does not offer the type of economic and social security that can give them a sense of permanence, protection and belonging.

The concept of security is also useful for understanding peasant migrants' strategies, in particular, division of labor and circularity. Gender and intergenerational divisions of labor enable migrants to straddle the city and the countryside, obtain the best of both worlds, and preserve the valued economic and social infrastructure in the countryside. Circularity refers not only to seasonal migration but also to the fluidity of migrants' movements between the home village and various destinations of migrant work. Peasant migrants' bases in the countryside permit and require them to be highly flexible in their strategies, which are almost always collectively decided, often negotiated, sometimes contested, and constantly changing.

The approach we have taken seeks to foreground peasants' agency, and our analysis supports the notion that peasant migrants are actively strategizing rather than passively succumbing to inferiority. Their persistent reliance on and steadfast protection of a rural livelihood, enables them to have choices (between the city and the countryside) and to be flexible. There is also evidence that the rural youth's educational attainment has improved, and some members of this generation, as a result, have managed to secure formal, non-*dagong*, jobs in the city.

Our analysis of household strategies and security, however, does not connote a rosy picture for China's peasant migrants. Far from it, *hukou* continues to be a formidable gatekeeper, millions of migrants remain in poverty, and they continue to be exploited and marginalized in the city. And, it is questionable if the countryside's economic security is sustainable: if agriculture and rural non-farm work cannot guarantee a satisfactory livelihood, as the stories we have examined suggest, then will migrants really return for good? In addition, although division of labor facilitates migrant work, splitting a family into two places over an extended period of time is taxing on the family and especially on

those who stay in the village. Left-behind children, for example, are fast becoming a social problem in the countryside (Xiang, 2007). Finally, the new generation of migrants has had little farming experience and may be more determined than their parents to put down roots in the city (Lee, 2007: 206; Qiu *et al.*, 2004; Wang, 2003), thus potentially undermining the rural social support system. At the present, however, it is circularity, not moving for the purpose of staying, that defines rural-urban labor migration in China. This challenges conventional approaches in migration studies that assume a high degree of permanency and shifts the focus to frequent movements, flexibility in timing and location, and the collectivity and negotiation that underlie mobility decisions.

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