

Engendering rural women migrant returnees in contemporary China

Abstract

This paper focuses on the experience of women returnees in rural-urban migration in contemporary China. Based on in-depth interviews with women migrants, returnees, their family members, friends and fellow villagers in both sending and receiving areas, the research investigates the return and re-migration decision-making of rural women, their life as returnees, their identity shaping and the negotiation of the gender relations in the household. The author argues that the current government policies addressing ‘the problem of rural migrant returnees’ are inadequate in aiding women returnees in the villages to resettle as they fail to acknowledge the needs of rural women returnees. As a result, many women returnees will have to re-migrate again to the cities. As in their first migration, their seemingly free choice of remigration is a choice out of necessity. The government needs to devise policies and programmes that are more gender-sensitive to help women migrant returnees in their settlement and remigration.

Key words: *women, rural-urban migration, returnee, gender-sensitive, China,*

Introduction

Since the global economic down turn, China’s 140 million rural migrant workers have again become the centre of both national and international media’s attention – not for its contributions to China’s GDP, but for its potential ‘threat’ to China’s stability. It is reported that by February 2009, more than 20 million rural migrant workers have lost their jobs and been forced back to the countryside to fend for themselves. With limited social security provided by the state, they are the worst hit victims during the global economic crisis. Among them, 36 per cent were from manufacturing industries where the majority was women.

The development of China’s agriculture and countryside has long lagged behind and ‘the problems of agriculture, countryside and farmer’ have already put the government under strain¹. Having such a huge number of jobless ‘peasant workers’ staying idle in the villages only make the situation worse, causing concerns and worries to the government – government officials predicted that this *unexpected* return migration could increase social conflicts and inflict ‘mass incidences’ (Chang, 2009). In responding to the massive return of rural migrant labour to the countryside and its potential threats, both the central and local governments have introduced a series of initiatives and campaigns to ease the pressure off the situation², which include giving rural migrant workers who have

¹ ‘The problems of agriculture, countryside and farmer’ (Sannong wenti) were first introduced by Chinese economist Tiejun Wen in 1996 and was written into the central government report in 2003 (Wen, 2005).

² An example is ‘Notice from the State Council General Office on Successful Accomplishment of the Work Regarding Peasant Workers’, State Council General Office, 2008, No 130.

unemployment insurance a one-off living allowance, arranging free skill training and government sponsored job fairs. Yet, these seemingly gender neutral programmes are in fact gender blind. For example, most of the unemployed rural women migrants could not qualify for the one-off living allowance because the majority of rural women work in the informal sector where the employers refuse to provide them unemployment insurance. Despite the government's embracement of the rhetoric of 'gender mainstreaming' since the Beijing 1995 World Conference on Women (Jacka, 2006: 602) and growing evidence about the 'gender-specific aspects' of migration (IOM, 2005), the government demonstrates no gender awareness or sensitivity in its migration related policies, regulations and programmes. Examining the different needs and conditions of women and men in migration is fundamental for gender to be fully incorporated into the migration policies and practices. However, with a few notable exceptions (Murphy, 2002; Jacka, 2006), to date, little research has been done on rural migrant returnees and even less on rural women returnees.

Why do rural women return home and how their decision is made? How do women migrants adjust their life back in the countryside after their sojourns in the city and the exposure to urban life style? How their return influences the power relations in the household and further impact on the negotiation of their identities and their perceptions of their life as returnees? How does return influence women's social networks? Will their return be a 'sustainable return' (Black and Gent, 2006)? Based on in-depth interviews with rural migrant women as well as women returnees, their family members, friends, fellow villages and colleagues, this paper examines the decision-making of rural women in their return process, the reconstruction of their life back in the home villages and the negotiation of their identities as returnees. The rest of the paper is structured into four sections: section one gives a brief review of women in rural-urban migration in China and the government recent policies in dealing with rural migrant returnees followed by section two data description; section three engenders rural women migrant returnees and section four concludes the paper.

Rural migrant women in China

Nationally, more than 50 million rural women are working in the cities, accounting for 36-40 per cent of the whole rural migrant population (People's Net, 2006). Due to their lack of urban household registration status (hukou), they cannot settle in the cities permanently even after years of migration. They are commonly called 'women peasant workers' in China. The majority of these 'women peasant workers' are channelled through *guanxi* networks to take up low skilled gender specific jobs (Zhang, 2006) and their employments are highly concentrated in textile and manufacturing industries and service sector (Davin, 1996, 1999; Solinger, 1999; Fan, 2003; Jacka and Gaetano, 2004; Jacka, 2006).

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, 76 per cent of the women do not have medical insurance, 85 per cent do not have access to pension scheme and 92 per cent of women do not have

unemployment insurance (People's Net, 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, 2006). They are 'the most oppressed' and can be seen as under 'spatial and social apartheid' (Au and Nan, 2007).

In spite of the difficulties and hardship in the city, migrant women still carry on with their migratory project – it is often not a freewill choice but rather a necessity. On the one hand, China's urbanization and modernization demands cheap and docile labour, on the other hand, increasing rural-urban disparity, the shortage of land, low return from agricultural work, and low status of peasants force rural people leave their villages to look for urban employments. Because women's labour is in firm control of the Chinese patriarchal family, they have limited power in their migration decision process and their migration is directly and strongly influenced by their subordinate status (Zhang, 2006) even though migration may coincide with their desire to 'see the world' and to 'develop' themselves.

Women and men experience migration differently and they have different needs in the process of migration. While migration opens up new opportunities for rural women, it also exposes women to violations of human rights and triple discrimination in the city because of their status as a migrant, peasant and woman. There is therefore an urgency in developing gender-sensitive policies and programmes in both sending and receiving areas that address the needs of both rural migrant men and women at all stages of the migration process, which will significantly improve the general well-being of rural migrants, especially that of rural women migrants (OSCE, 2009). In the past three decades, Chinese government has been making effort in reforming its internal migration policies and developing programmes to aid rural migrant workers. Nonetheless, the reforms and programmes are more often short-acting remedies addressing problems temporarily – for the government, its first and foremost concern is still the growth of the national economy at whatever costs. Integrating gender perspectives into its migration policies is naturally not on the government's top agenda.

Serving as a 'safety valve' during economic depression, rural migrant women are among the first to be discharged with very little costs to the business or the government³. As the majority of women do not have employment contract, unemployment insurance, medical insurance or access to pension scheme, neither the employer nor the government has to pay for anything when rural migrant women become jobless and return to the countryside. Although both the central and local governments have produced a series of initiatives on helping rural migrant returnees during the recession, rural women returnees can hardly benefit as these programmes do not recognize the specific needs of rural women. Few women returnees, for example, can find jobs through the government sponsored job fairs for rural migrant returnees due to the fact that most women did low skilled work in the

³ Former US Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan made similar comments on unauthorized foreigners in the US 'unauthorized immigrants serve as a flexible component of our workforce, often a safety valve when demand is pressing and among the first to be discharged when the economy falters.' "Obama: Immigration Reform," *Rural Migration News*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2009).

cities and they do not have adequate qualifications and training as required by the jobs advertised through these formal channels. For many reasons, the government sponsored skill training programmes for rural people such as the 'Sunshine Project' and the 'Rain Programme' also excludes the majority of women returnees. For example, the 'Rain Programme' specifically targets rural youth under 30 years of age who live below the national rural low income poverty line (958 RMB in 2006⁴), particularly those who newly graduated from middle school or senior high school. Most of the women returnees, on the other hand, do not have required educational level and many are over the specified age limit.

More nuanced research should be done on the gender impact on rural migrant women, especially women returnees, which is a less studied area, so that the current migration related policies and programmes could be modified to improve their quality and efficiency to address the specific needs of rural migrant women and returnees.

Description of data

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 Beijing⁵, and two sending provinces, Henan and Hebei. Thirty-three informants were women migrants and among them, 14 had return experience and four were still living in their home villages by the time of the interviews. 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 eight provinces.

As their decision to migrate to the cities, rural migrant women's decision to return to the home villages is under the influence of multiple factors that relate to both sending and receiving areas. However, to date, most of the existing migration studies on rural migrant women in China are based on data collected in either the sending areas or the destination cities, researching different stages of the migration process such as out migration and return migration as discrete movements that has no impact on one another. 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. This study interviews not only women migrants, but also women migrants' family and fellow villagers in the countryside, as well as their friends and employers in the city. This approach enables the author to map rural women in relation to others and to position women migrant informants back into the migrant/rural/urban community.

⁴ See 'Notice on the implementation of the Rain Programme in poverty stricken area', 22/03/2007, The State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development.

⁵ Shantou (汕头) is located in the Special Economic Zone, where most informants were factory workers, and most informants in Beijing were mainly employed in private businesses.

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As few rural migrants can settle in the cities without urban household registration, returning home some day is an unavoidable part of their migratory life. Even without the economic down turn, they may still have to return home due to unemployment, hardship, illness or injury (Murphy, 2002). However, these factors can have very different impact on rural women's decision to return as compared to men. And rural women's life as returnees is also characterized by tensions and struggles originated from their gender role norms for women in China.

Returning Home – Making a 'Forced' Decision

Although unemployment is a common factor that leads to rural women migrants' retreat to the villages, it is not the sole reason for women to return. Many women are also compelled to return home because of the expectations, obligations and pressures prescribed by their gender roles regardless whether there is an economic recession. Women are more likely to be 'forced' home rather than acting on their own decisions as compared to their male counterparts and their 'forced' decision is often made under the influence of a combination of various gender specific factors in both sending and receiving areas.

For many filial daughters, returning home upon the call from their parents is their undeniable responsibility as their labor is still in firm control of the patriarchal family and these responsibilities are often prescribed by their gender role as woman. For example, some women migrants are expected to help with agricultural work at home, some to look after sick parents or relatives, and some simply to get married. 23 year old *Yan* came from Hebei. She had been working in a stamp factory in Beijing before quitting her job to answer the call from her mother, a 'double obligations' she had to fulfil – to help with the harvest at home village and to get married. Her mother told me proudly:

She quit the job this Mid-Autumn Festival. I planted a lot of cotton this year and I asked her to come back to help me with picking the cotton in the field. I kept her home and didn't allow her to go back to the job... She was very compliant and she followed my words obediently. She does whatever I ask her to do.
(age 45, mother of Yan from Hebei)

While marriage for a man is often a point of independence and may well be a 'push' power encouraging a migrant man to go back to the city and continue with his migration; whereas marriage for most migrant women means a temporary retreat from their life in the city because patrilocal, exogamous marriage forces them to move to and settle in their husbands' home and to perform the duty of a wife such as conceiving a son for the family and taking care of the in-laws. *Qin* quitted her work as a nanny upon her marriage and moved to her husband's home to perform her duty as a wife in a village in Hebei Province in 2000. While her husband continued with his migration in a nearby city after their marriage, she had to stay with her in-laws in the village to nurse her baby daughter. Holding the baby in her arms, she talked about her return helplessly:

I worked (as a nanny) for a year and later on went back home because of my wedding. It would be inconvenient if I continued to work in the family after marriage so I went back... I am now staying at home (not working), because I have to take care of my daughter and I have no other choices at all!
(returnee, age 26, migrated from Hebei in 1998)

For those women migrants whose husbands stay in the home village, constant return is their obligation since the centre of their world – the husband – is still in the village. *Xiu* migrated from Sichuan to work in Beijing in 1990 after her husband's migration failed to bring any money home. Despite the long distance and the expenses of travel and her job opportunities in Beijing, she retreated from migration and returned home several times until her husband joined her in migration Beijing in 1998. She told me:

Anyway, since I had my husband and child at home, it was impossible for me to stay here all the year round without going back home at all. So I came to Beijing and worked for a few months then returned home once more.
(hardware seller in Beijing, age 34, migrated from Sichuan in 1990)

But on the other hand, when the migrated husband decides to return to the village from migration, the migrated wife who accompanied him will be more likely to follow. This is especially true when the husband returns home to set up a business after some years' of migration. I met 46-year-old *Fang* in her rented home in Shantou, who had been selling fish balls with her husband in a local market. In the past 10 years, she had been in and out of her migration quite a few times – all because of her husband – to join her husband in migration when he was successful, to follow him back to their home village in Guangdong when he decided to start his own business in their village breeding bullfrogs, and to migrate with him again to Shantou when his 'business' failed and lost all their investments. While for *Fang*, migration or return was simply a part of life that was prescribed by her role as a wife – to follow her husband wherever he went.

Besides the 'pull' factors in their home villages that lead to women's return, there are also 'push' factors in the city that force women to go home. Illness, hardship, home sickness were mentioned by my informants as some of the reasons for their return; but more importantly, women's lack of social networks and legal status in the destination city makes returning home the only practical option for rural migrant women, especially for single women, since many may have to rely on their or their family members' social networks to find a husband. *Zheng* was among the very few informants who managed to enter the urbanites' world in her migration – she worked as an accountant in a trade union office in Beijing. Although she could work in the office, enjoy a stable salary and many holidays, she quitted her job and returned home.

It was (a nice job). But there were still a lot of problems... I couldn't get a Beijing local household registration and I didn't have any friends there. I couldn't settle in Beijing and did not have a family there either. Of course the only choice for me was to go back to where I came from. ... Even if I didn't quit and was still working in the Union, nobody could help me with my household registration. ... Besides it was also time for me to find a boyfriend... but it was almost impossible for me unless there

was somebody who could introduce me to him because I didn't know anybody there at all! ... The sphere of my contact with people was extremely limited and I couldn't meet the right person at all. So after consideration, I still felt that the best choice for me was to come back.

(returnee, age 28, migrated from Hebei in 1998)

Some women, though, tried to negotiate a compromise between migration and return – they re-migrate to the cities or townships that near their home villages where they could, on the one hand, find more home fellows and build their own *guanxi* networks, and on the other hand, fulfil their responsibilities as daughters, wives and mothers, meeting the needs of their families back in the villages. *Ping* migrated to Beijing to work in a stamp factory from a village in Hebei when she was 19 years old. Although she was happy with her work in Beijing, she returned home two years later to look after her aging parents. However, not for long, she re-migrated again, not to the capital, but to a small city near her home village where she could commute home easily and where she could build and extend her *guanxi* networks. She said:

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

(returnee, age 23, migrated from Hebei in 1999)

As migrants elsewhere, the home bound return of rural women migrants in China is seldom under the influence of one single factor only. It is always under a combination of various 'push' and 'pull' factors in both the receiving city and sending village that rural women make their decisions to go home. Women and men experience migration differently and this in turn has direct impact on their decision to return, which will also greatly influence their settlement in their home villages and their remigration intention to the city.

Reconstructing life in the home village – difficulties and struggles of rural women returnees

Forced back to the countryside, migrant women face many difficulties in adjusting their life as returnees after their sojourns in the city and the exposure to urban life style. Although both the factors external to the family such as the state policies and programmes and those within the family unit such as the structure and size of the family will have great impact on the resettlement of both male and female migrant returnees, they could create gender specific difficulties, tensions and struggles for women which have profound impact on women returnees' life therefore should be addressed with sufficient gender-sensitivity.

1. No longer a cash earner.

One of the biggest challenge that all returned women have to face is the fact that they are no longer 'visible' cash earners in the family and instead become 'dependents' and

'surplus labourers' in the household. This is more noticeable both to women returnees themselves and their family members who were left behind during women's migration because firstly, there is less cash income in the household as women returnees could no longer bring remittances home; and secondly, the contrast of women's absence makes their consumptions in the household more pronounced. The fact that women returnees are no longer cash earners also deprived of their 'fall back' position⁶ in the household that was earned through their migration, which could profoundly influence women's bargaining power within the family and their general well-being. *Qin* terminated her migration as a nanny in Beijing because she got married and then had a baby. Living in a village in Hebei with her parents-in-law, she experienced great frustration with her life as a returnee. Even though her husband, also a rural migrant, was still in migration and had been sending remittances home regularly, the economic tension in the family was high. *Qin* was desperate to re-migrate out of the village. She told me:

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

Aside from a big change in their financial status, returning home also put women back to direct and continuous monitoring from their parents, parents-in-law and fellow villagers, which makes them more aware of the presence of patriarchal control than before their migration. This control could become much tighter as compared to when they are in migration as now they are no longer considered as 'city people' (*chengli ren*) by their family members and fellow villagers and are expected to have 'proper behavior' like all other village women. Many women, especially young women, can feel very constrained at home. *Ping* had several breaks from her migration in Beijing as a stamp album factory worker. Talking about the lack of freedom she had to face back at home as a returnee, she said,

I had a pair of European style shoes with very long and pointy tips. She (my mum) said she would cut the tips of my shoes off if she saw me wearing them again...

Women's return and their transition from a cash earner in the outside sphere to the domestic sphere also reinforces the previous unequal gender relations in the household and it also leads both women returnees and their family members put more value on the waged work in the cities rather than unpaid domestic work in the household. Most women returnees resumed their household responsibilities without any complaint, let alone challenging the traditional gender role stereotypes. Furthermore, few returned women value the domestic work they did in the household – it was the cash generating work that was more valued by women returnees. When asked about the work they do at home in the villages, all returned women told me that they 'just stayed at home doing

⁶ See Murphy, 2002.

nothing', whereas in fact, they all took on household chores such washing, cooking and looking after younger ones in the family. The devaluation of women's domestic work in the villages and emphasis on cash generating work in the city by women returnees and their family members further put women returnees in a disadvantaged position in the family and this greatly reduces their bargaining power in the household.

2. A factual surplus labourer.

Upon returning home from migration, most women returnees are also pushed into factual 'surplus labourers' in their rural households because of their loss of land ownership. None of the returnees in this study had land in their home villages. In fact, among the 33 women migrants I interviewed, only nine women still had land back in the countryside. Land is the 'most valued form of property and productive resource' and 'the single most important source of security against poverty' (Agarwal, B. 2002: 2). Effective and independent land rights are important for the welfare, efficiency, equality, and empowerment of women (Agarwal, 2002: 4). Losing direct access to land will put women as well as children at more risk of poverty and make them more vulnerable especially when women's marriage break down (Agarwal, 2002: 5).

A research on rural women migrants conducted by All China Women's Federation also shows that the change of marriage status is the main cause of land loss among rural women (Mo, 2007). Although the policy of extension of the land contracting period to 30 years without readjustment since 1998⁷ intends to give peasants assured long-term land use rights, it at the same time results in the loss of land rights for married women. Because traditionally rural women leave their natal home and move to their husband's home upon marriage, they will not be able to get land through land readjustment in their husbands' villages under this policy⁸. As land is allocated to the household rather than to an individual, married women will not claim rights to the land from their natal home as the land is seen as a property of their natal family. This also endangers the land rights of divorced and widowed women in a peasant household as their land rights are not specified and are easily infringed by other members of the family. Since the economic tensions of the returnees' household could worsen dramatically during an economic recession as many migrant members of the household could lose their jobs in the city and return to the countryside, having access to arable land would greatly improve the livelihood of women returnees and enhance their sense of security. There is therefore urgency for the government to readjust its rural land allocation policies and practices, especially regarding the protection of the land rights of rural women.

3. Lack of *guanxi* networks.

⁷ '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.

⁸ Although the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Land Contract in Rural Areas (2002)* stressed the protection of women's land rights in **Article 6** 'In undertaking land contracts in rural areas, women shall enjoy equal rights with men. The legitimate rights and interests of women shall be protected in contract.', it undermines itself by specifying the peasant household as its contractor rather than an individual peasant.

Many returned women migrants, especially young women, find their life at home village unbearable because they do not have sufficient *guanxi* network in the villages. And this is one of the major forces that push many women returnees back on to one after another migration project. Xia migrated to Shantou from a village in Jiangxi at the age of 15. She gave up her work in a footwear factory in Shantou in 1998 and returned home because of poor income and hardship. However, she could not stay in her home village for long. She told me,

But most of the girls at my age either already got married and no longer lived in the village or they migrated to work in the city. I could not find many with whom I could have intimate conversation. I didn't stay home for long. Then I went out work in the city once more.

(returnee, age 22, garment factory worker in Shantou, migrated in 1996 from Jiangxi)

'*Guanxi* network needs to be cultivated and maintained' (Zhang, 2006: 121). Their sojourns in the city prevent women to cultivate, maintain and further develop *guanxi* networks in their home villages. As many women migrate at a very young age with the help of others' *guanxi* networks before they build up sufficient networks at home, many do not have mature networks at all in their home villages. Their return also makes the maintenance of their *guanxi* networks in the city more difficult. Women returnees therefore risk losing *guanxi* networks at both destination and sending places. It may be hard for them to find immediate social support when they are in difficulties (Zhang, 2006: 121). Helping women to build up and extend their *guanxi* networks in both the cities and the countryside could provide women returnees with extra social protection and security and therefore could greatly enhance women's general well-being.

4. Living with rural urban disparity

Despite the government's effort to reduce rural-urban disparity, the gap keeps widening over the last decade. Latest figures from the National Bureau of Statistics show that the average urban per capita net income was 17,175 yuan (\$2,252) in 2009, compared to only 5,153 yuan in the countryside, a ration of 3.33:1 (Fu, 02/03/2010). This does not include other hidden welfare benefits for urban residents which peasants cannot enjoy due to their rural hukou status. On the other hand, basic infrastructure and social services in rural areas have continued to lag further behind urban areas. These disparities are rather more pronounced and more noticeable for women returnees. Xia had quite a few episodes of returned experience before she found work in a garment factory in Shantou. Talking about her life as a returnee in her home village in Jiangxi, she said:

'... But there are some aspects which I cannot get used to. ... It is hard to say. I cannot find words to describe. ... For example, the roads in my village are not like the roads here. They are unpaved roads and are very muddy after the rain. And it rains often in my hometown. So my shoes and my pants all become dirty with mud if I go outside. It is very clean in the city.'

Fen, who sold eggs in a local market in Beijing told me:

‘Life is very convenient here (in Beijing⁹). The first inconveniency at home is water. ... And the water supply is very good (here). I can use water whenever I want no matter it is day or night. In my home town, you know, the water supply is restricted. We can only have water during a certain time every other day.’

Experience of return only makes women returnees as well as their family members more aware of the sharp rural-urban disparities and the necessity for them to migrate again. Without addressing and changing the negative push factors that created their first migration, it would be difficult for women returnees to settle in the villages. Most women will have to migrate again. Villagers from Hebei told me, ‘People all want to migrate. Nobody wants to stay in the village... There is no hope in the countryside...’

Negotiating identities and belongings as a woman returnee

Rural women experience a series of changes through migration, regardless of their migration span. Many villagers told me that migrant girls had ‘big changes’ after their migration: ‘The way they talk is different from people in the village. They speak in a civilized way. They also eat and dress differently.’ Through adopting an ‘urbanized’ life style, migrant women send out a clear message of their departure from peasantry and they generally identify themselves different from their fellow villagers. However, returning home forces women to accept their rural origin and their identity as a peasant and links them back to the life that they once dissociated from. Many women returnees therefore encounter great distress and restrictions in their identity construction process. They often feel alienated from village life and identify themselves different from their fellow villagers. The feeling of alienation could be so great for some women migrants that even to stay with family members in the home village is unbearable for them.

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

To me, their life was aimless and meaningless. They didn’t want to improve themselves or to achieve anything at all (*meiyou jingzheng yishi* 没有竞争意识). The only place they visited was the mah-jong house... So we didn’t have much to talk about to each other because we didn’t share anything in common at all. I cared more about how to earn money (*zhuangqian* 赚钱) while they cared more about how much they won from one round (in a mah-jong game) (*shuaqian* 耍钱)... I could no longer bear to stay at home in the end so I migrated once more to Beijing in 1998.

⁹ Words in brackets are added by the author.

Although many women migrants share the feeling of being a stranger in the city, rootless, isolated and inferior and their sense of rootlessness in the city strengthened their ties with home during migration, few women feel settled in their returned life at home in their villages. They are home but they no longer feel 'belonged'. Their geographical departure from the city does not remove their attachment to the city. On the contrary, it engenders and reinforces their sense of belonging to the city and identity as a migrant worker. For them, the return to the home villages is seen as a temporary interruption to their migration project rather than a long term settlement. The discourses of their memories about their life in the city are always connected to their plans of remigration to the city. Talking about her life as a returnee in her husband's village, Qin told me,

I can meet all kind of people when I work in the city and I can get a lot of knowledge there. But here in the countryside we don't read anything at all. And we don't know anything about the outside world at all. We are like an idiots. Especially when we go to a strange place, in a new environment, we are like the blind. The feeling is awful. We will not feel like this if we see new things often and get used to them. I prefer working in the cities. My mother-in-law mentioned today that next year, when my daughter is getting older, it would be time for me to find a job.

(The reason why) I am now home is because I have to take care of my daughter and I have no other choices at all. I will definitely migrate to the city next year when my daughter gets older. I can have chance to know all the modern things in the city. There is nothing at home but a few fellow villagers.

Women returnees' former migration experience may grant them some bargaining power in the family, nonetheless, as in their first migration, whether they can re-migrate again is often not up to them to decide. However, by differentiating themselves from their 'fellow peasants', reiterating memories about their life in the city and planning migration for the future, women returnees reconstruct an imagined identity as 'a migrant in the city'. Both their experience of temporary sojourn in the city and their return to home village work together in urging them to renegotiate a passage back to the cities. According to the fieldwork data, one third of the women migrants interviewed had the experience of returning home. Most of the returnees expressed a strong determination to migrate again and the majority did return to the city and were still in migration by the time of the interview.

Concluding remarks

Return migration has never been a one-off, one-time event. As floaters in the city, peasant workers would have to return to their home villages at some point of their life. However, until recently, neither the government nor the academics had paid much attention to it. Using ethnographic data, this research engenders how rural migrant women returnees experience, articulate and shape return migration and shows that the government needs to readjust its policies and programmes and made them more gender sensitive so that they could meet the needs of rural women returnees.

Rural women have limited choice in both their migration and return process. Both their migration and return are choices out of necessities rather than acts of free will. As in their migration, many women migrants return home to meet the expectations and demands of family members in the village and rural women's return is directly and strongly influenced by their subordinate status. As returnees, rural women encounter many difficulties. The fact that they are no longer a cash earner but a 'dependent' in the family reinforces the unequal gender relations in the family. This also leads both women returnees and their family members put more value on the waged work in the cities rather than unpaid domestic work in the household, which further devalues women's unpaid labour in the domestic sphere. Many women returnees do not have any land, which makes women expose to poverty and impoverishment. Lack of *guanxi* networks in both the cities and home villages also disadvantages women from getting social support and protection.

Many women returnees encounter distress and restrictions in their identity construction process. Their return not only makes women more aware of the rural-urban disparities, but also further alienates women from peasantry and village life. Many women identify themselves different from their fellow villagers. Living away from the city reinforces their sense of belonging to the city. Through disassociation from their fellow villagers, memories of their life in the city and planning migration for the future, women returnees reconstruct an imagined identity as 'a migrant in the city'. Both their experience of temporary sojourn in the city and their return to home village work together in urging them to renegotiate a passage back to the cities.

In addressing 'the problem of rural returnees', the government needs to design long term, systematic policies and programmes that are gender sensitive to meet the needs of both men and women returnees and to ensure that gender concerns are incorporated in these policies at both national and local levels (OSCE, 2009). Readjustment of land allocation policies and practices that protect rural women's land rights, programmes that help women to build up and extend their *guanxi* networks, financial support to landless women returnees and free counselling services that are accessible to women returnees in the villages would greatly aid rural women returnees' resettlement in the villages and enhance their well-being.

To make rural women's return a 'sustainable return' (Black and Gent, 2006), the government also needs to readdress the negative push factors in the countryside that create women's first migration, without which, women returnees will not settle in the villages and they will have to migrate to the cities again.

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