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# LIMINALITY AND TRANSFORMATIVE HABITUS：

## THE CASE OF RETURNED WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS IN QIANJIANG

**PENG JUAN**

Ph.D

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

2017

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Department of Applied Social Sciences

# Liminality and Transformative Habitus:

## The Case of Returned Women Migrant Workers in Qianjiang

**PENG JUAN**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2016

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(Signed)

PENG JUAN (Name of Student)

# Abstract

Guided by Bourdieu's concepts of "habitus" and "field", and Turner's notion of "liminality", the primary purpose of this thesis is to examine the lifeworld of returned women migrant workers and their experiences by bringing out these' women own voices. When this study began, the hypothesis was that after an extended period working in the city, many rural migrant workers would have to abandon their rural way of life and acquired an urban habitus as they entered different "fields" in their daily lives. Hence when they decided to return to their hometown, having carried with their urban habitus to resettle in a rural setting again, they would be experiencing a transitional stage of liminality which could wreak havoc on their personal and social lives. Findings from the research, however, have indicated that their lives in post-return period were far from being simple. For one thing, instead of abandoning one habitus and acquiring another, in reality they were developing a mixed habitus, combining traditional rural and Confucian values and practices such as filial piety and conformity with the modern urban aspirations of seeking independence, freedom and personal autonomy with determination and courage, resisting gender submission and passivity and confronting confusion and uncertainties of liminality in their process of resettlement and readjustment. Many of their daily personal and social practices were deliberately innovative albeit necessarily compromising. These findings have illustrated the limitations of the Boudieusian concepts of habitus as discrete domains. Instead, habitus should be seen as fluid, blurring and interacting, blending boundaries, temporal and spatial, just like the division of rurality and urbanity in China is beginning to break down as rural-urban mobility, collaboration and interchange increased and fueled speedily by government policies and digital connections. As well, the notion of liminality, especially viewed in these women's perspective, should be

considered not as a temporary, transitional period where there is a visible beginning or end; rather it could be regarded as a persistent, on-going, and may be permanent condition of life when contemporary lives in rural and urban settings are increasingly interfaced. These experiences shared by the returned migrant women have also highlighted that in navigating their own lives, their gendered perspective and wisdom should not only be overlooked but need to be investigated further in filling the gap of current literature on return migration.

# Acknowledgements

It is really a long way for me to arrive at this point. The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the assistance and cooperation of numerous individuals. First and foremost is my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Ip Fu-keung, for his intellectual guidance and support. He was always able to provide insightful advices on my work during different stages of the research process. His understanding and generous encouragement really got me through those difficult and frustrated moments along this long and tortuous journey. Most importantly, his great enthusiasm and diligence towards research and teaching show me a good example of how to be an academic.

Special thanks to all my informants in this research, especially those returned women migrant workers in Qianjiang, who spent time with me and allowed me to attempt to understand their world. Without their participation and contribution, this thesis would have never been completed. Their perseverance and struggles touched me a lot. I learned a lot from their stories, and the communication with them actually helps me reflect on my own life.

I would also like to thank my best friends Jiang Hongda and Luo Chia-ling who provided critical ideas and stimulating discussions on my research. I am also very grateful to Michael Stiegelmar at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Guo Huajing at the University of Washington, who read, edited and commented on my chapters, and most importantly, provided me with friendship.

Over the years I have received limitless encouragement and concern from many good friends in the course of writing this thesis. Many thanks to Ruan Jianqing, Qi Shanshan, Zhang Ludan, Du Ping, Guo Na, Lu Zengbing, Zhang Qian, Deng Yan and Zhang Chunyuan for their company and friendship. My memory always draws me back to those days when we lived and studied together at the campus of

the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

I am very lucky to study in a department of full of supportive and generous teachers and colleagues. I must thank Dr. Chen Juan, Dr. Ho Kwok-leung, Dr. Ku Hok-bun, Dr. Koo Ching-hua, Dr. Law Pui-lam, Prof. Lee Kin-ching, Prof. Pun Ngai, Dr. Yan Hairong, and all my teachers and colleagues at the Department of Applied Social Sciences who introduced me to gender, labor migration and social development studies and provided me with a warm intellectual learning environment

Finally, I owe my greatest thanks to my parents for their support and understanding while I complete this lengthy. It is unlikely this thesis would have been completed without their love, patience and belief in me.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

When in the summer of 2009 I went back to my hometown of Qianjiang, a semi-industrial city in Central Hubei Province, I spent many happy hours with Yanhua, the wife of my younger cousin. Yanhua and her husband had migrated to Shenzhen, where the couple worked for nearly two years, by which time the wife, on finding herself pregnant, returned home to Qianjiang for family help with her pregnancy, delivery, and early natal care. Yanhua would visit me at least twice a week, spending almost an hour by bus each way. We'd go shopping, sing at KTV (a karaoke chain), visit friends and relatives, and exchange experiences of urban life.

I could tell she missed her life in Shenzhen, even when she said how hard and frustrating it was. I discovered to my surprise that Yanhua is an excellent singer. She also knows how to divide the wheat from the chaff when searching for news on the Internet, and has good taste when it comes to matching clothes. "I want to have my own toggery," she told me, expressing a desire to open a clothing store. "It doesn't have to be big. Maybe I'll just start by joining a chain from a certain brand." Her words brought to mind how, by means of my laptop, she would always be searching for information on chain stores. "It's not easy to run a toggery by yourself," I replied. "I know. I've learned tailoring before, and worked in a clothes factory for a long time. The only thing I'm worried about is that my baby's too young. It might be impossible for me to go out again, but I'd prefer doing something to staying home every day. That kind of life is stifling." Yanhua felt the railway lines of her life converging, and wanted to jump the tracks. But was it already too late?

Although I like Yanhua very much, my relatives feel otherwise. This was made clear to me one day when my aunt, Yanhua's mother-in-law, came to my house

after having had a serious dispute with Yanhua. Stoked with the flames of ire, she complained to my mother about the wayward girl. "She is naïve, lazy, knows nothing about farming or taking care of a baby. How can she presume to tell *me* the right way to do things? Is she a qualified teacher? What does *she* know?" After commiserating with my aunt, and seeing the mollified woman off, my mother told me that the whole dispute had resulted from a disagreement over how best to feed the baby. Yanhua had advised her mother-in-law to wash her hands before the feeding, and this advice, on being deemed inconsequential, had been rejected. My mother, touched by my aunt's flames, warned me not to go out with Yanhua so often. "She's not a girl anymore. She needs to start acting like a mother." But as to what, precisely, constitutes acting like a mother, my mother could not say.

Notwithstanding the enigma of motherhood, I abided my mother's warning, and saw Yanhua only one last time before setting off for Hong Kong. She was taking her baby to the town hospital. The child was sick, the mother was gaunt, telling me she felt tired and confused. Her dream of a toggery is, as yet, unrealized.

In my hometown most rural girls, as was the case with Yanhua, have to drop out of school on account of unsustainable tuition fees, or find their academic lives foreclosed by "the dragon's gate," the college entrance exam which, for the lucky few, offers a reliable and expeditious ticket out of rural life. Failing this, the only way out is low-skilled work in the urban industrial sector; prolonged, onerous, and debilitating work that these "female migrant workers" (打工妹, dǎ gōng mèi) assume much earlier than their non-migrant urban counterparts. These toils are however for the most part temporary, the unsung laborers returning to their hometowns on attaining marriageable age. And motherhood presents an obstacle to subsequent migrations.

In their readopted rural milieux these uncommonly experienced young mothers stand apart. They talk frequently of the urban world they've left behind, and of the

old rural world they now see in a new light, as if through clouded glass. Their clothing, their eating habits, and their modes of interaction, all are imbued with the unassimilable remnants of their past lives, that jar with the present. Their townsfolk speak of them with the apparently bland and noncommittal term, "returned from working in cities" (打工回来的, dǎ gōng huí lái de).

Associating with Yanhua and some of her female friends who similarly have been challenged by reintegration into their communities of origin has given me first-hand experience of how these returned migrant workers perceive their current hometown lives and how their reencountered townsfolk perceive them. The tensions between the two sides could not fail to arouse my interest. These returned women are the objects of a mixture of perceptions, a jumbled and at times paradoxical aggregation of doubt, prying, sympathy, envy, and qualified or begrudged acceptance. These perceptions derive from images which rural communities and Chinese society as a whole have established in relation to women migrant workers and to labor migration in China, images constructed by mainstream media, social networks, popular literature, assorted state policies, academic scholarship, and women migrant workers themselves. The term "returned from working in cities" invokes a specific kind of image, one subtly differentiated from images of girls who never migrate out. The term is generally associated with having seen the world, with skills acquisition, selling labor for money, a livable income, the capacity to bear high-pressure and -intensity work, tolerance of long-separation from kith and kin, exposure to new values and ideas, and the possibility of corrupting one's hometown community with the insalubrious byproducts of these values and ideas.

As Roxana Waterson notes, "the worlds of meaning that cultures create grow out of time and space" (Waterson 2005:334). People construct their cognitive environments and through constant interaction with these environments begin to

read into them traces of ancestral and historical activity. Over time, as the meanings they discern become sedimented, people themselves become embedded or implicated in the environment, a process which enables them to understand and act upon meanings subsequently discerned (Waterson 2005). This process can be related to Bourdieu's conception of the germinal, which focuses on the role of practice in social life, and to his concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1990b), with its emphasis on embodied dispositions. I will address Bourdieu's concepts in more detail later in this chapter. For now, briefly, by "dispositions" is meant the values embodied by individual actors in processes of socialization which begin early in life, and which in large part are absorbed without needing to be consciously articulated. Habitus can thus be seen as an embodied sense of one's and others' place and role in the world of one's lived environment.

China's rural–urban asymmetries are in significant part socio-historically constructed, are subsequently inscribed in Chinese minds, and then, in conscious and unconscious ways, mind and construct work reciprocally to actuate behavior, from one circumstance to the next. The manifold conceptions that members of rural communities hold towards returned women migrant workers in particular, and to urban life in general, are thus the products of embodied constructs formed, transformed, and perpetuated through daily practice. This provides a good embarkation point for an analysis of the respective perceptions of returned women migrant workers and their non-migrant townsfolk in the social life of rural China.

Returned women migrant workers undergo a far more than geographical transition between urban and rural areas. Unlike their non-migrant counterparts, these returnees have immersed themselves in urban life, only to be reimmersed into the now unfamiliar wellspring of hometown life. While inhabiting cities their senses are bombarded with a range of new impressions which have to be absorbed and interpreted. This adaptive process requires them to learn, fitfully and at times

painfully amid toilsome obligations that they may face alone or with a married partner likewise burdened, a set of rules consonant with a new rhythm of life. Bourdieu regards habitus as an open concept, since actors' dispositions are constantly subjected to a multifarious and at times bewildering range of experience. These uprooted workers go through in their adoptive cities what in Bourdieu's terminology is a kind of "second birth" (Bourdieu 1990b:58). But this does not mean that the dispositions acquired in what might be called the "first birth" are entirely supplanted. The move to the city and back again can impart a multi-local dimension to women migrants' lives. The dispositions that comprise their original habitus may be reinforced or modified. This study seeks to explore how rural and city life jointly construct and reconstruct the habitus of these returned women, influencing their and their townsfolk's behavior in a reestablished rural life.

Reports in China's news media tend to propagandize the positive role of local government in providing employment opportunities for returned migrant workers and the workers' fruitful reembrace of hometown life[1]. To the undiscerning viewer it would appear that there is a seamless reintegration, with all the pain confined to the natural pangs of childbirth, which these women accept with fortitude after an equally welcome marriage to a suitable (if less travelled) hometown man. China is in the midst of a major push to promote urbanization and modernization, yet little attention has been paid to plight of these returned women workers, to their everyday conditions in the countryside. They have always been regarded as the passive recipients of change, with little control over their own destinies, and so their roles in rural development have suffered from a kind of aphasia. The confusions and struggles that Yanhua and her friends are experiencing after their

[1] Related reports can be easily found on the website. Here are some examples: "Zhushan, Hubei Province: attracting 'phoenix' back to home 'nest' by promoting employment of rural women" reported on Phoenix News, source: http://news.ifeng.com/a/20150621/44017985_0.shtml; "Returning to start a business: knitting family ties with love" reported by Liu Xinwen on NetEase News, source: http://news.163.com/14/1114/07/AB0DTK6500014Q4P.html

return show me the hidden side of the coin. This study, then, attempts to highlight these women's efforts to reestablish themselves into an old terrain made unfamiliar by their own transplantation. The study also aims to discover how, in the process of laying down new roots, these returned women migrant workers are reshaping China's rural grass-roots society.

### 1.1 Return Migration in China since the 1980s

Since the 1980s, when China began opening itself to global capital, to a market economy which demands labor power from China's rural areas to support the nation's urban establishment, millions of rural inhabitants have flocked to cities, rendering permeable the once rigid boundary between rural and urban, and making transience the defining characteristic of these newly urban workers. In time a considerable number of these migrant workers choose, either temporarily or permanently, to return to their rural hometowns. The post-return behavior of Yanhua and her female friends is not exceptional.

These returns have been particularly notable in the wake of the global financial crisis that erupted in 2008, quickly engulfing China's economic sector. Hard hit were the labor-intensive enterprises in China's southern and eastern coastal areas, where peasant workers are highly concentrated. Owing to the continual diminution of overseas orders, these export-oriented enterprises had to slash jobs or even claim bankruptcy. In consequence it is reported that 20 million migrant workers have lost their jobs and have returned home. The potential social and political ripple effects of these homebound waves of migrant workers have become a focus of concern for all levels of Chinese society. Western media have even predicted social unrest and spiraling political crises. Against all expectations, none of these events has occurred. It therefore seems necessary to understand the process of these migrant workers' return behavior in a bottom-up way, to comprehend how they reincorporate themselves into rural production and life.

Such a grassroots-level study may also help one to envisage future changes to rural communities and the future labor migration paths of these itinerant workers.

Since China's reform and opening there have been at least three waves of migrant workers returning from cities to rural areas. The first wave was from 1989 to 1991, when the state initiated a series of policies to curb inflation and regulate socio-economic order. Many urban construction projects were cancelled, and jobs were cut. At the same time, concrete measures were taken to clean up rural labor in cities. Subsequently a large number of rural migrant workers had little choice but to return home. The rural labor pool rose by more than 27 million during this three-year return wave, 9 million per year on average. The second wave fell between 1998 and 2000. The transformation of town and village enterprises had resulted in their loss of the ability to absorb rural surplus labor, pushing a growing number of peasants out of the countryside and into crowded cities in search of salaried work. But as China embraced a market economy and opened up, the state retreated gradually from direct engagement in productive activities, and initiated reform of state-owned enterprises (hereafter SOEs). With the deepening of reform, many workers holding urban status were laid off. In order to alleviate the reemployment pressure of urban workers, discriminatory employment policies were stipulated in order to block rural laborers from moving into cities and finding jobs. Those migrant workers who failed to find jobs and settle down in cities had to move back to their home villages. By 2004 it was evident to all levels of Chinese government and society that a third wave of return migration had formed. Unlike previous waves, these migrant workers had been mainly concentrated in the labor-intensive enterprises in southern and eastern coastal areas. We can see through this brief review of labor migration in China a recurrent pattern of outward flow and return flow, as employment opportunities, urban and rural, rise and fall.

In 2007, the Research Center of the State Council conducted an investigation that covered 301 villages, 99 counties, and 28 provinces (including municipalities and autonomous regions) in China, and found that 55% of migrant workers thought they would be able, in time, to settle down in cities. Yet it was estimated that in 2006 only 10% of the 130 million migrant workers (about 14 million persons) achieved the minimum economic capacity for urbanization. These capable few can be generally divided into two groups: one is mainly composed of skilled workers, management staff and CEOs of private enterprises, who enjoy relatively high annual income and better occupational prospects; the other group consists of self-employed migrant workers, such as street vendors, recyclers and nannies, who have lower annual income but have some control over their job prospects. It was also found that the number of migrant workers who had successfully settled down in cities since China's reform and opening was only 1.7% of the total number of current migrant workers. At least 80 million migrant workers faced a return home after a period of urban labor. In accordance with his "laws of migration," Ravenstein notes that migration produces its own counter stream (Ravenstein 1976). Return migration is thus an integral part of the migration process. And whether it results from structural unemployment or family life events (e.g. pregnancy, debility or advancing age), return migration never hits the individual migrant worker hard. [2]

It follows that labor migration is by no means a one-way process, but rather a bidirectional flow between rural and urban. There are migrant workers who return home once a year like clockwork, and migrant workers with multiple occupations who move to and fro between rural and urban areas in accordance with the agricultural production cycle. There are also migrant workers who return home to town or village after a period of work in cities, and those who migrate out again after returning home and engaging in agricultural sideline industries for a while.

[2] Source of all statistical figures of this paragraph: Han Jun (ed.). 2009. Strategic Research on China's Migrant Workers. Shanghai: Shanghai Fareast Press, pp.170.

The vast majority of China's migrant workers face eventual return. Indeed, China has witnessed an immense and unremitting backward flow of migrant workers over the past two decades. Why do they return? Has urbanization failed them? What is their future? All this remains unclear, for studies of China's migrant workers are largely confined to urbanization and proletarianization. Insufficient attention has been paid to returned migrant workers and the process of their return and reestablishment.

The general characteristic of Chinese migrant workers is that "they are peasants and workers, living in rural and urban areas" （亦城亦乡，亦工亦农, yì chéng yì xiāng, yì gōng yì nóng）. Clearly this characteristic was overlooked by the commentators who, after the most recent wave of return migration, which began in 2008 (the outbreak of the global financial crisis), prognosticated doom. They failed to understand the connection between these migrant workers and China's rural society. Furthermore, the anxiety expressed in response to this returning wave of migrant workers is symptomatic of the one-dimensional thinking that arises when talk of urbanization is dominated by rights discourse. Such discourse pre-supposes that it is only by transforming migrant workers into industrial workers and conferring them all due rights of urban citizenship that the problems of migrant workers can be solved. Thus the problems disappear when migrant workers disappear. The imperative of rights and the logic of developmentalism together drive to the ultimate goal of urbanization, all of which convinces the one-dimensional thinker that migrant workers uniformly envision a permanent life in cities, including retirement. But these theory-based presuppositions are at odds with reality. In fact, migrant workers maintain a regular flow between rural and urban areas, as circumstances (the economy, labor markets, family demographics) change.

Even if modernization requires that villages fade as cities flourish, this will be an inconstant and protracted fade, for city and country are not worlds apart. They

inter-develop, sharing resources human, material, and cultural. This resource sharing has been especially pronounced since the late 1970s, when China initiated reform and modernization. The institutional barriers between rural and urban, generally regarded as having been constructed by constraint policies like the Household Registration System[3], have been steadily diminishing, while peasants flock to cities. Taken en masse, these peasants are a carrier and bridge, or, as Murphy writes, "emissaries of modernity" (Murphy 2002:44), connecting rural with urban. Focusing on migrant workers in cities through the selective lens of urbanization and proletarianization provides a myopic understanding of labor migration in China. True, these migrants may become irreversibly urbanized, the field hand converted into a factory hand. But at present and in the foreseeable future, a return home is all but certain.

Furthermore, with rapid urbanization and the continuous (outward and return) migration of peasants, the social horizons of China's rural villages have broadened considerably. An exploration of these horizons, in particular the experiences of return migrants as they attempt to reintegrate into their sites of origin, is essential if we wish to understand labor migration and the changes it brings to China's rural communities.

### 1.2 Returned Female Migrant Workers as a Force for Rural Transformation

A changing trend of studies on women migrant workers in China can be seen in the current academic literature. At first, scholars tended to focus on the migratory behavior of women migrants, including their motivations, social networks, job

[3] For a detailed description of the household registration system and its associated constraints see Solinger, 1999. It should be noted that some discussions employ the term "migrant" (*qianyi renkou*) only when referring to those who have obtained official permission to cross an administrative border and to bring with them, by way of transference, their household registration (i.e. their Hukou). Unofficial migrants, i.e. those who cross borders without permission, are called the "floating population" (*liudong renkou*) (Hoy, 1996). Among the constituents of this floating population are rural labor migrants, who go by the name of *minggong* (laborers) or *dagongzi* and *dagongmei* (brother laborers and sister laborers). Thus named, these migrant workers are distinguished from the *gongren* (workers in the formal sector). In this study I refer to as migrants, all those who leave their villages of origin to search for work in cities without in the process transferring their Hukou.

and marriage choices, etc. (Deng 2004; Ding 2003; Jiang 2003; Tong 2001). Then focus shifted to the workers' living conditions in cities, particularly from a neo-Marxist perspective, documenting their exploitation and maladjustment under the capitalist production mode, state policy constraints, and a system of social patriarchy (Chan 2001; Lee 1998; Li 2002; Pun 2002). The most recent approach to the topic of women migrants begins to see these workers as resisting agents, and considers their acts of resistance and transgression in the workplace (Chan 2011; Chloé 2005; Lee 2007; Pun 2005; Zhu 2006). However, few studies have been concerned with women migrants' experiences of returning home, let alone with the changes they've wrought in their rural hometowns.

As is often the case with female migrant workers, their stay in cities is short term or seasonally circular. According to a 1999 survey of migrant workers' return migration to two provinces, Sichuan and Anhui,[4] female workers were more likely to return to their place of origin than were male workers (34.8%>25.4%) (see table 1), and married female workers had a much higher return rate than did unmarried female workers (54.7%>9.9%) (see figure 1). The most frequently cited reasons for return were: the difficulty of finding a job in the city, marriage and motherhood, and caring duties in rural hometowns (see figure 2).

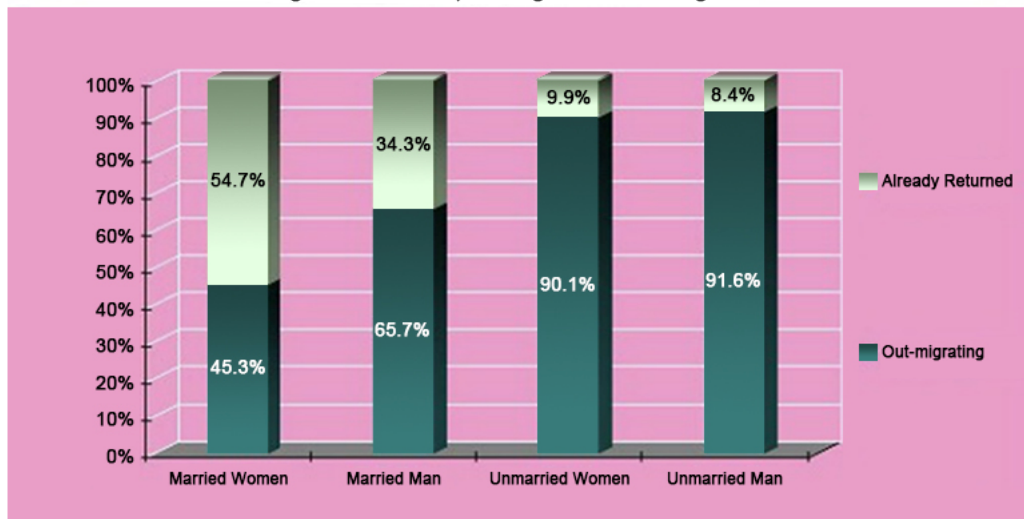
Table 1 Sex Distribution

| | Total Rural Labor Force | Never Migrate Out | Already Returned | Out-migrating | On-the-Spot Transfer | Out-migrating or Once Migrated | Among Out-migrating or Once Migrated | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | Out-migrating | Already Returned |
| Male | 52.2% | 44.7% | 59.2% | 69.5% | 78.4% | 66.5% | 74.6% | 25.4% |
| Female | 47.8% | 55.3% | 40.8% | 30.5% | 21.6% | 33.5% | 65.2% | 34.8% |

Data Source: sample survey data

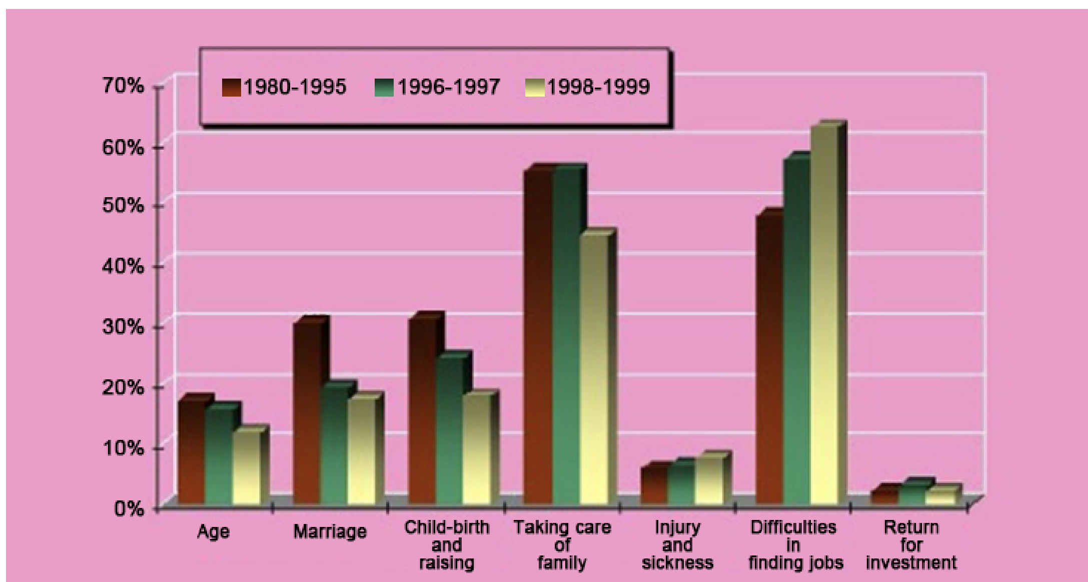
[4] For a detailed description of the characteristics of return migration in this sample survey, see http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/zhuanti/mingong/351580.html.

Figure 1 Gender, Marriage and Labor Migration




Data Source: sample survey data

Figure 2 Reasons for Return




Data Source: sample survey data

It is a misconception that women in rural China are subordinate to husband and paternal family and so are socialized into filial, wifely and maternal duties while being excluded from decision making, for the returned women migrant workers I spoke with in my hometown are more deciding than decided on. The choice to leave for the city, and to return in due time, is theirs. What causes them to give up everything once, and once again, and how do their peregrinations change them,

inward and outward, as they take on wage labor and all the trappings of modern life, then quit their urban remuneration and spheres of activity for their less developed hometowns, and their kinsfolk from whom they've grown apart? Did they get what they imagined, in the burgeoning cities, or did they encounter the unexpected, as life dissolved in work, and the times between?

I seek to link these women's migration experiences to their changing attitudes toward life and the choices they have to make in crafting a future for themselves and their loved ones, because migrant work presents to rural women in China more than just an opportunity for wage work. City life is faster, more technologically advanced, with formal institutions and regulations, modern perceptions and values, and greater lifestyle choices, money and inclination depending. Women migrants imbibe what they can of their altered circumstances, and on returning home, reflect those alterations in their newly fashionable attire, their outspokenness, skill sets, and their values and expectations regarding such things as marital roles, living standards (food, housing etc.), and the life trajectories of their children. By means of their changed and variegated outlooks, returned women migrants may become agents of rural transformation, social and economic.

While impelling socioeconomic change, returned women migrants may be undergoing rural–urban identity crises. The allure of a modern urban identity is offset by the socio-institutional obstacles to migrants' urban integration, on account of which migrants may feel they will never be "true" urbanites (Jacka 2006:213). And yet after a year or more of city life, these female migrants may feel they are no longer truly rural. Their reencountered rural townsfolk may reinforce their maladjustment, by treating them much as urban citizens do: as outsiders.

## 1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study

A great deal of attention, scholarly and otherwise, has focused on the impact of political, economic, and sociocultural determinants on women's positions in the labor market and on their roles in the village household. Relatively little attention has been given to the changes migrants may effect in multi-layered social levels. This shortfall is due in part to a lack of empirical field-based information, and also to researchers' general emphasis on broad trends rather than on migrants' direct experiences. By exploring rural women's subjective experiences of outward and return migration, this study aims to discern how they cope with reintegration into their places of origin while bearing the impress of urban life, and the extent to which they may function as agents of change.

## 1.4 Research Questions and Key Concepts

The above research interest leads to four main research questions as follows:

1) How did living and working in urban cities change their life and identity, especially in terms of their values, lifestyles, appearance, income, lived experiences, expectations and identity when compared to what they were in a rural family and community? In other words, what are the meanings of their urban experience?

2) Upon their return, how have they been reintegrated into the rural reality?

- Specifically, how did they negotiate themselves in fitting into a rural existence, particularly in dealing with interpersonal relations within their family, with friends and relatives, community members and the institutional arrangements in general?

- In the process, what tensions, restlessness and challenges did they encounter in their urban-rural transition and what impacts did these have on their identity?

- What strategies did they employ to navigate themselves in the process of transition-especially as an active agent in asserting themselves as women and making and bringing changes in personal, family, community and institutional levels in their lives?

- What were the outcomes of their urban-rural transition?

To help process the answers to these questions the proposed research looks to the concepts of liminality (Turner 1967) and habitus (Bourdieu 1990b) for inspiration. There will be three major levels of investigation: individual, family, and community. The focus will be on the subjective experience of female migrant workers: their view of themselves and their lives rural and urban; their desire for, and actions toward, social change. A brief introduction to the fundamental concepts will constitute the rest of this chapter, and the conceptual/theoretical frameworks will be further explained in the following chapter.

• ***Liminality***

Originating in the field of psychology, the concept of liminality gained popularity in the anthropological writings of Victor Turner (Turner 1967). Here I use it to describe the psychological transition that returned women migrant workers face on returning to their hometowns. As Vitoria Lawson has noted, migrancy creates fluid forms of subjectivity, and includes a "state of in-between-ness" among migrants who must perceive their lives anew (Lawson 2000:174). This liminal state, characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy, disorients one's identity. But liminality also allows for the emergence of a social field, a space where transitional thoughts, feelings, self-understanding, and behaviors can be carefully examined, and then consolidated into new perspectives on the self and its role in society. The upshot may be social change, effected by a refashioned self.

• ***Habitus***

Bourdieu defines habitus as "a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structure, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing conscious aiming at end or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them" (Bourdieu 1990b:53). Individual agents develop cognitive and somatic dispositions that can be expressed as beliefs, values, conduct, dress, manners, etc., from their early socialization experiences in which external and objective structures are internalized. In this way Bourdieu expresses the incorporation of objective social structures into the subjective experience of agents. By providing individuals with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives "without consciously obeying rules explicitly posed as such" (Bourdieu 1990b:76), the habitus disposes agents to do certain things, orienting their actions and inclinations. Then, the subjective structures of action of the agent come to be commensurate with the objective structures and extant exigencies of the social field, a doxa relationship emerges.

Women migrate not only because of the opportunities that migration supplies but also due to embedded social factors—power imbalances and the interconnection of social roles and categories like gender, age, and class. The roles and power imbalances determine access to resources, and capacities for negotiation with other actors at the family and community level. Power and domination have been discussed extensively in Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu 1990b; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In his theory of practice, he asserts a dialectical relationship between social field and habitus, in which the social practice of the individual or a social group is produced through the interaction between habitus and social field. These two main concepts are supported by the ideas of struggle and various kinds of capital, which determine social practice.

Based on these two concepts, returned women migrant workers will be studied from two perspectives: their natal rural communities, and their integration into cities as workers. The dispositions inculcated throughout their everyday experience with families, peer groups and rural communities before migrating for work in cities will be termed **reproductive habitus**. However, the socialization of individuals is an ongoing process, and it is assumed that female migrant workers learn, change and adapt to their urban environments, in the process of which primary reproductive habitus occurs and engages them in the new characteristics of a **transformative habitus**. When these women reintegrate into their rural communities, a series of questions emerge: how is their reproductive habitus changed by city life? How does their transformative habitus, their internalization of their city experience, externalize their changing family relationship and society in the rural areas?

### 1.5 Outline of the Dissertation

In order to describe these women migrants' reintegration into an ever-changing rural context, this thesis will be organized into chapters as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature and develops a theoretical framework for the research. While highlighting the significant achievements of current scholarship in exploring the identity transformation of Chinese women migrant workers in an urban context, I address the under-representation of women in return migration studies. To make up the deficiency, I apply Bourdieu's concept of habitus and his theory of practice when studying these returned women migrants' identities and living strategies in the Chinese rural context. To put it simply here, the time-space perspective implied in habitus and its durable but transformative nature could weave together the spatial, historical and developmental aspects of actors' experiences and make it possible to understand these returned women's current rural living experiences in terms of continuity and change. Based on Bourdieu's theory, a detailed theoretical framework is developed to critically examine these returned women's multi-layered narratives, narratives that challenge prevailing

stereotypes.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodological choice of this study and describes the details of the research in practice. The epistemological perspective of this study, constructivism, informs a qualitative exploration of these returned women's lives, and ethnography is employed as the main research strategy with which to comprehend these women's perceptions and life strategies. The geographical and institutional setting of the fieldwork site, Qianjiang, a small county in Hubei province, is described, together with the changing attitudes of the local government toward labor migration as this migration occurs within the context of a nationwide transition. The discussion focuses particularly on the historical and structural environment in which the rural peasants choose migration and return as their strategies for pursuing the lives they want, the ways in which these strategies precipitate shifts in state programs for socioeconomic development at county, provincial, and national levels, as well as the responses of rural people to those shifts. Finally, a detailed exploration of the research in practice, and how I, as a researcher, dealt with unforeseen troubles while conducting fieldwork will be presented.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 move on to empirical data analysis and present the findings of the study. The focus in chapter 4 and 5 is on the returned women migrants' past experiences, including their pre-migration rural lives (chapter 4) and their city life before returning home (chapter 5). Abundant studies have shown that, even though they work and live in cities during their labor migration, Chinese migrant workers stay connected with their hometowns. But only a few studies have considered migrants' rural lives and family connections together with their identity transformations and choice of life strategies in cities. This two chapters, then, show how the pre-migration rural life influences the city life, and how, from the perspective of city life, migrants "rewrite" their rural past into conformity with a changed self, in order to assert continuity through time and space, as cultural

capital is exchanged into the hard currency of daily life, migratory life.

Chapter 6 considers women migrants' post-return life, their dispositions and perceptions as they seek stability in change, and work to project a refashioned self into an uncertain future.

Chapter 7 presents the main findings of the research, which would respond to the research questions listed in the introductory chapter. Then it further discusses the implications of the study while suggesting potential research avenues in this field of analysis.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Contribution to the Literature

Ever since China's incorporation into the global market by way of the economic reforms of the late 1970s, reforms initiated by the central government modernization project, China has seen large numbers of its rural inhabitants migrating into the urban industrial sector. Such labor migration has drawn considerable attention in a number of academic disciplines. While discussions of these migrant workers' urbanization have proliferated in the past two decades, little is known about reverse migration and the changes these returned workers effect in their places of rural origin, on account of their transformed personal identities and lifestyles.

This lack of knowledge regarding return migration is due in part to the difficulty of obtaining satisfactory data. National censuses and migration surveys always tended to overlook the reverse flow of internal labor migration, and many studies proceeded as if no returns ever took place (King 1986). The Chinese government did not consider return migration in earnest until 2008, when the global financial crisis erupted, and more than 20 million migrant workers lost their urban jobs and returned to their rural hometowns, sparking widespread concern over China's social structure and economic development.

But statistical elusiveness is only part of the problem, a problem rooted "in the nature of traditional framework for analysis used by migration researchers, and particularly in the strong and entrenched 'rural-urban' framework" (King 1986:2). Labor migration was always narrated as the inevitable outcome of China's industrialization and modernization. Although studies of internal labor migration have spanned diverse subjects and theoretical traditions, they share, to some extent, the same directionality and problem consciousness. Migration was a

one-way process that started in the traditional rural peripheries and ended in the modern urban sectors. The existing literature tends to ignore the return flows of labor migration and their impacts on China's rural areas. This dissertation attempts to remedy the imbalance. The theoretical concerns that frame its empirical inquiry are developed later in this chapter through a critical exploration of the existing migration literature.

Another motivation for the present research project is the under-representation of women in return migration studies. One of the few studies on internal return migration states that these returned women's role in decision making at the family and community level was "obscured behind abstract concepts such as reproduction and even, gender" (Wright 1995:771-792). By exploring these women's identity transformations during the outward and return migration process, and their daily living strategies in China's rural context, this study tries to highlight their agency in the reintegration process.

Specifically, this research addresses the relative absence of returned women migrant workers in current mainstream Chinese studies on gender and return labor migration. In order to contribute to this field of analysis, this chapter critically builds on: current studies on China's internal labor migration, feminist scholarship on women migrant workers and their identity transformation, international and internal studies on return migration. By exploring the meaning of their city life and the role these returned women play both in the migration process and in reinventing their lives in rural China, this dissertation tries to bring out the voices of women and let them speak of their own experiences. A review of the literature will help orient a theoretical framework that informs my empirical work.

## 2.2 Current Literature on Chinese Rural–Urban Labor Migration

Since the late 1990s, international and domestic researchers from different disciplines have employed a variety of methods to identify, explain and explore

how this massive population movement is shaped by and shapes China's rapidly evolving contemporary scene. It has been generally accepted that the large wave of rural–urban migration across different societies has been an inevitable component of modernization and industrialization, and the extensive studies of rural–urban migration in other countries have provided considerable guidance, theoretical and practical, for migration studies in a Chinese context. In this section I first examine how migration studies in China have been theoretically informed by western migration theories. Two different theoretical approaches of migration are used to examine the specific literature on rural–urban migration in China. The importance of China's unique historical, political and socioeconomic context in analyzing rural–urban labor migration in China is highlighted during the review of migration theories. There follows a brief review of how researchers have studied the impact of migration on women migrant workers themselves.

### 2.2.1 Migrant worker, Urbanization and Proletarianization

#### 2.2.1.1 Two Theoretical Approaches in Rural–Urban Migration Studies

The most influential theoretical approaches to labor migration studies in the Chinese sociological context are urbanization and proletarianization. Together they provide the intellectual basis for many policies pertaining to migration management and the balance of regional development between rural areas and receiving cities. The approaches are derived from different theoretical traditions of western migration studies, but both dichotomize China's socioeconomic space into modern urban cities and traditional rural peripheries, and presuppose migrant workers' future in cities. The concepts of "modern" and "traditional" describe a socioeconomic distinction between China's cities and their surrounding countryside. As I will explain in the following chapters, this distinction between rural and urban is an ideological construct formed and perpetuated by Chinese modernization discourse, a discourse that narrates rural life as being essentially inferior to urban life (Cohen 1993).

Urbanization scholars discuss internal labor migration within a knowledge framework built on the transference of under-employed labor from low-productivity sectors to more remunerative high-productivity sectors. Based on Lewis' model (Lewis 1954:139-191) and its extensions, early scholarship tended to see this rural–urban population movement as primarily an economic by-product of modernization, according to which rural and urban represent not only geographical differences in labor supply and demand but also represent maldistribution and the existence of different levels of productivity. The flow of cheap rural labor from agricultural to non-agricultural sectors provided needed manpower for industrial growth and augmented the national income through short-run efficiency gains. In turn, the higher accumulation rates in non-agricultural sectors would contribute to the transfer of investment capital from urban cities to the rural peripheries and the creation of a number of new employment opportunities, eventually eliminating the wage disparity between regions and economic sectors while effecting the country's industrial expansion and urbanization. In this surplus labor model, the labor market is the primary mechanism of labor flow, and a tendency toward labor productivity equilibrium is highlighted. Accordingly, in many micro-level studies, peasants' migration for work in cities is understood as the result of the rational individual's response to the disparities in labor productivity and labor returns between the core of the modern market economy and the rural periphery. These studies emphasize the economic incentives in propelling migration, and examine how rational individuals weigh the costs and benefits of working in different economic sectors and regions (Beals, Levy, and Leon 1967; Sjaastad 1962; Todaro 1969; Todaro 1996). The most sophisticated example in this regard is probably Todaro's explanation of rural–urban migration in the context of urban unemployment. He extended the wage differential model by emphasizing the role of "expected" earnings in determining rural–urban labor migration, a role that relates not only to the actual income paid to the urban workers but also the probability of securing a job at any given time during migration (Todaro 1996).

Such arguments were challenged by later studies, which argued that it is not simply isolated individual actors who decide to migrate: there is a collective decision made by larger units of related people, particularly families or households (Lauby and Stark 1988; Stark 1984; Stark and Bloom 1985; Stark and Lucas 1988). In order to reduce the risk of economic woes, families or households need to allocate their members into different economic sectors and activities so as to diversify family income sources. Then, even if agricultural earnings stagnate, and local economic conditions deteriorate, the earnings in nonagricultural sectors can guarantee a steady income. This "collective diversification" seems a reasonable practice, particularly among rural families in developing countries where the institutional mechanisms for reducing risk are absent or inaccessible to these families. Migration is thus interpreted as a family-based strategy and an effective way of mitigating risks in agricultural activities. Migrants fulfill their commitment to the implicit intrafamilial contract by remitting to their rural families in order to bolster their livelihoods, ensure inheritance rights, and enable an ultimately dignified return migration (Lucas and Stark 1985).

In identifying migration as a cause in exacerbating the widespread problem of urban unemployment in developing countries, many urbanization scholars have gradually recognized the impossibility of ever achieving labor productivity equilibrium between different regions and economic sectors through migration. But they all advocate the positive role of rural–urban migration in improving the efficiency of resource distribution across different regions and economic sectors (Hugo 1982). Peasants' circular mobility to the modern core cities was thought instrumental in spreading modern ideas and facilitating technical innovation in the underdeveloped rural peripheries (Brown 1991; Gould 1982; Gu and Jian 1994; Liu 2008b; Piore 1979). In dealing with the great pressure of urban unemployment due to increasing cityward migrants, rural development was the most frequently proposed countermeasure. The government of developing

countries is expected to devote more efforts to improving rural amenities, attracting investment to expand rural employment opportunities, as well as reducing the risks inherent in agriculture. From the urbanization perspective, backwardness and underdevelopment are represented as natural aspects of these labor-contributing rural peripheries, for which the remedy is their economic incorporation into the broader, modern market. Labor migrant workers are thus seen as the key impulsive force of lasting rural development and narrowed socio-economic disparity between regions and sectors.

Such an urbanization approach provides persuasive theoretical guidance for migration studies in China. Within the dominant discourse of modernization and development, current research on Chinese labor migration is actually an exploration of the modes of Chinese urbanization (Zhang and Huang 2008). It is generally accepted that, as an inevitable outcome of China's pursuit for modernization, labor migration enables these peasant workers a way of realizing urbanization through working in cities. Migrating for work in cities is regarded as an upward flow of these migrant workers by transforming them into urban citizens. Therefore, based on this urbanization perspective, Chinese scholars mainly focus on the obstacles to adjustment and integration faced by these migrant workers in terms of their social status in contemporary Chinese society. I describe these studies in detail in the following section.

Just as the urbanization approach can be linked to the neo-classical model of migration, the proletarianization approach is heavily influenced by the structural model of migration. The scope of the structural model is in fact too broad to make a concise summary. Developed by various (neo) Marxist theorists in the early 1970s, the structural model was primarily focused on the macrosocial changes that propel population movements rather than on the individual calculation process. In this section, before specifically addressing the proletarianization approach, I first review several key insights of the structural model which are closely connected

with or have enlightened the proletarianization approach.

According to the structural model, population movement should be discussed in the context of broader historical and structural transformations occurring in particular social formations, which necessarily requires reference to the broader theory of socioeconomic and political change (Wood 1982). Although there are various specific theories within this model, such as dependency theory, internal colonialism, the global accumulation perspective, etc., the theories all divide the world or a specific country into a capitalist core and non-capitalist peripheries, and problematize the never-balancing relationship between these two sectors. Such disequilibrium is thought to be inherent in capitalism and as such untransformable due to the uneven penetration of capitalism. Within this core-periphery framework, migration is then denounced as both the result from, and the impetus of, spatial and sectoral inequalities, because migration contributes to maintaining the unequal appropriation of various resources and values between the sending peripheries and receiving core areas, so that migrants are constantly lured from their places of origin (Connell, Dasgupta, Laishley, and Lipton 1976).

For structuralists, the continuous movement of rural–urban migrants between their rural origins and receiving cities is, to a large extent, due to capitalist employers not paying their migrant workers enough to live in cities. Migrants' regular wage remittance home, and physical return home, helps maintain their affiliation with their rural families while providing for their own spiritual support and material subsistence, in times of need. In contrast to the urbanization approach, which believes this circulation of migrant labor and resources would baptize the backward rural areas with modern ideas and diffuse advanced technologies, structuralists criticized the circulation of migrant labor from rural to urban for spatially separating migrant's production in urban areas and reproduction in the countryside (Pun and Lu 2010; Thadani 1985; Van Amersfoort 1978; Wolpe 1972). In this way, the rural peripheries must sustain the burden of labor reproduction

while generating wealth for cities, thus perpetuating the urban–rural chasm. Structuralists have also expressed pessimism overt the implications of remittances and modern ideas for rural development brought by these circular migrants. For structuralists, immersion in the vibrant world of urban consumption can only imbue these malleable migrants with egocentrism and the desire for conspicuous consumption. Studies have shown the inclination of migrants and their family members to use the cash earned from migrant work to build houses and purchase consumer goods rather than invest in agricultural production and rural community development (Connell 1981; Connell, Dasgupta, Laishley, and Lipton 1976; De Brauw and Rozelle 2008; Kearney 1986). The role of remittances is, therefore, denounced as a "stop-gap" (Hugo 1982:76) to block the fundamental transformation of the unequal resources distribution between city cores and rural peripheries by providing rural families a livelihood above the subsistence level. The expanded consumption desires of migrant workers, which may also affect their left-behind family members during this circulation process, would only give rise to the increasing dependence of local markets on core markets (Elson and Pearson 1984). The corruptive spread of individualism in rural villages would erode traditional pursued collectivism, and then negatively impact on the livelihood of rural family members whose basic subsistence needs and agricultural investments rely only on the remittances from migrant work (Connell 1981).

The proletarianization approach inherits the above-mentioned insights and carries them forward by shifting to a more class-based framework of labor migration. Under the context of global capitalism, rural migrant labors are seen as an important force in constituting and developing the working class in industrializing countries. The transformation of the agricultural population into the industrial labor force is regarded as the process of proletarianization, through which peasants lose their control over the means of production and have to sell their labor for survival. However, in contrast to the European and American experiences from which the proletarian model is derived, the extent of

proletarianization is thought to be incomplete in many industrializing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America[5]. Despite the specific historical context, the government policies and cultural customs in these countries, the peripheral location of these countries in the global capitalist economy is the generally recognized reason to interpret the incomplete proletarianization of workers within these countries. Using the concept "semi-proletarianization," the world system theorist Wallerstein has argued that the logic of capitalist expansion is to find the low-cost labor force "located in semi-proletarian rather than proletarian households" and that it is the workers rather than the capitalists who bear the pressure for proletarianization (Wallerstein 1983:27). For such theorists, semi-proletarianization weakens workers' bargaining power for wages above the minimal costs of survival and reproduction, while complete proletarianization would give them more wage bargaining power. Providing the domestic capitalist expansion with unremittingly cheap and flexible labor in core cities, the rural–urban labor migration within these developing countries is denounced as an exploitative system by which to transfer the costs of labor reproduction to the countries' rural peripheries and block laborers from full proletarianizaiton. The maintenance of the agricultural base of these rural–urban migrants is generally regarded as the indication of a blocked process of proletarianization. Therefore, studies adopting this approach either implicitly or explicitly suggest that an effective way to achieve the full proletarianization of rural–urban migrants is to cut off their economic link to the rural origins and fundamentally admit their status as urban workers (Lee 2007).

This approach has been applied to analyze China's rural–urban labor migration and the remarkable economic achievements such migration has produced. Drawing on the ethnographic and survey studies in the labor-intensive industries

[5] One exception in this regard is South Korea. Hagan Koo (1990) argues it is proletarianization, not semi-proletarianization, that dominates the trend of occupational structural change in South Korea. However, this proletarianization also deviates significantly from the European model in many ways due to the differences in historical timing, state policies and cultural context.

in China's southeast coasts, scholars argue a new working class of rural migrant workers is coming into being under the context of China's rapid incorporation of its socialist system into the global economy. Enlightened by Thompson's studies on the historical process of formation of English working class, scholars point out that, unlike its European counterparts, the urbanization of this new working class in contemporary China is highly disconnected from its industrialization (Pun and Lu 2010). Being deprived of the opportunity to live in cities by administrative measures (especially the Hukou system) and unable to cover all the consumption costs with meager wages, this new working class of migrant workers in China become incomplete working subjects, and undergo an unfinished process of proletarianization (Pun and Lu 2010; Pun, Lu, Yan, Chen, Xiao, and Cai 2009; Pun and Smith 2007). The dormitory labor regime, which reconfigures production and daily reproduction of labor to support the world factory by combining work and accommodation of these rural migrant workers in the urban space, represents not only a control mode of labor management for the sake of capital accumulation on the global scale, but also a platform for developing collective resources that can be mobilized by this new working class of migrant workers against the factory management (Pun 2007; Pun and Smith 2007; Ren and Pun 2006; Smith and Pun 2006). The state policies that continuously segregate migrant workers from the city, and the transnational capital that maximizes the productivity of these migrant workers, jointly contribute to the migrant workers' status as second-class citizens and their "deepened sense of becoming incomplete" (Pun and Lu 2010:498).

Viewing labor migration as an integral part of global capitalism, the proletarianization approach has far-reaching significance, and furthers our understanding of labor regimes and class formation in global capital accumulation. Through numerous studies, scholars call attention to what they see as the oppressive and exploitative existence of rural migrant workers in cities. The future of migrant workers, they assert, is to fulfill the proletarianization process and become industrial workers by severing their rural connections and thus reducing

their labor activism in cities (Lee 2007). The proletarianization scholars see an "emptying out of the rural communities" (Pun and Lu 2010:508) under global capitalist expansion and emphasize the inability of China's rural community to reincorporate these migrant workers on their return on account of their different cultural values, lifestyles, and economic expectations (Pun et al. 2009).

Falling within different clusters of western migration theory, the urbanization and proletarianization approaches provide insightful perspectives on the causes of labor migration and its return flows and their impact on sending communities. While learning from their achievements, we should also be aware of their deficiencies. The major weakness lies in their potentiality of simplifying the explanation of the impact of labor migration on the sending communities. Viewing the incessant back-and-forth movement of these peasant workers as forces that are external to those underdeveloped peripheries, both approaches tend to underestimate these sending communities' own potential to develop in its own way and influence its relationship with cities.

Emphasizing the role of rational decision-making at the individual and household level in facilitating rural–urban migration and its reverse flows, the urbanization approach is insensitive to the historical-structural parameters of particular countries within which individual decisions are made. Specifically, the neo-classical model of migration on which the urbanization approach is based applies to the capitalist mode of production in western countries, where free laborers move to sell their labor in response to wage disparities. However, when it comes to developing countries like China, such generalized applicability is highly questionable, on account of the coexistence of capitalist and noncapitalist modes of production in these countries. Also, the ahistorical attribute of this approach tends to explain the marginalization of and discrimination against migrant workers in a relatively static way, without considering its discursive construction process within particular historical conditions and different social and political contexts, in

which “meanings of represented objects are the product of power relations and are subject to change” (Lin 2010:96). Moreover, the persistence of a country’s cultural habitus across different historical periods and its impacts on individual migrants’ current practices are ignored by a reductionist urbanization approach that focuses mainly on economic stimuli. I do not intend to discredit economic stimuli in propelling migrant workers’ out-migration. However, we also need to consider the weight of various social and cultural factors in contributing to their social practices, particularly in terms of their decision to return and their ways of re-accommodating themselves into the changing rural context after return.

Within the structuralist-based proletarianization approach, although migrant workers’ accounts of their consumption and resistance have been used to illustrate their agency development, these workers are still passively regarded as a vulnerable group, or as second-class citizens subject to the authority of multiple and interconnecting hegemonic powers, namely global capitalism, the state, and the patriarchal system (Pun 1999). Focusing on these structural factors in forming this new working class of migrant workers leads to the insufficiency of this approach in capturing the complexity of how these Chinese migrant workers inhabit their different social positions and cultural representations across time and space, and how they display their new outlooks in their everyday practices. Therefore, by means of this approach, we could hardly see much difference among individual migrant workers’ experiences in receiving cities that are consistently associated with difficulties, discrimination, backwardness and subordination. The inevitability of migrant workers’ miserable lives and passive acceptance of the cities within various structural constraints paints an incomplete picture in which the constitution of migrant workers’ self-identity and its relation with social change are seemingly universalized as China’s modernizes. Moreover, this proletarianization approach, mainly employed to explore migrant workers’ working experiences in factories, may be insufficient on its own to give us a full understanding about these migrant workers’ choice of return and their creative

strategies in re-accommodating themselves into a changed rural formation. The argument that migrant workers' sense of "land enclosure" would contribute to their "self-driven" proletarianization and unwillingness of returning to the rural communities (Pun and Lu 2010; Pun et al. 2009), is somewhat contrary to the evidence that many of these migrant workers have returned home or intend to return home (Ma 2001; Murphy 2002; Wang 2005a) even though new policies have been launched to allow them to switch their rural Hukou to an urban one in some provinces[6]. Such contrast between theoretical explorations and social realities is partly due to the failure of this approach to acknowledge Chinese cultural specificity and its precipitation on disposition of these migrant workers themselves which are lived out in the process of social change. If we deploy western-originated concepts within a Chinese context without due reflexive analysis of the cultural constraints of these concepts, our exploration of the local construction of subjectivities and our understanding of Chinese migrant workers' lived experience may be limited. This unconsidered exportation of concepts to a radically different context is quite common among studies on Chinese women migrant workers. The concepts, such as patriarchy and sexual politics, with their cultural roots in the second-wave feminism in western countries, cannot escape the limitations of their original stand-point epistemological positions. Extending our vision beyond the urban factories to explore these women migrant's lives after their return to their hometowns would help us understand their social and cultural connections within the Chinese rural context.

#### 2.2.1.2 Rural–Urban Labor Migration Studies in China

The empirical studies of China's rural–urban labor migration are greatly influenced by the urbanization and proletarianization theoretical approaches. Embracing both aspects of these two approaches, scholars present various

[6] Examples in this regard are Guangdong and Jiangsu Provinces. In Jiangsu Province, among 20,000 migrant workers who are qualified to change their rural hukou according to the new policy launched in 2008, only 6 people have chosen to do it, revealing the low interests of migrant workers towards this new policy. Source: http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/20090809/21256591611.shtml

explanations of the causes, characteristics and outcomes of this large-scale population movement in China.

At first, peasants' cross-regional movement in search of work was regarded as part of China's modernization. Considering the long-term rural–urban segregation under the household registration system, scholars try to find out whether rural–urban labor migration is feasible during China's transition to a socialist market economy. Knowledge and the state's commitment are always interrelated. Within the dominant discourse of China's modernization and development, the state's commitment is more powerful and knowledge tends to justify its exercise (Wang 2009a). In order to justify the rationality and necessity of peasant workers' labor migration in China, urbanization theories often employ the Lewis model of equilibrium, Todaro's framework of discounted expected income, the new economics of migration and the push-pull theory. The low-productivity of the agricultural sector, unbalanced regional resource distribution, sharp urban–rural wage disparity, large surplus of rural labor, and rural households' strategy to diversify family income sources are therefore frequently proposed causes of Chinese peasants' outward migration from rural villages (Li 1996; Ma 2012; Seeborg, Jin, and Zhu 2000; Wang 1994; Woon 1993; Zhang and Song 2003; Zhao 1999a; Zhao 1999b; Zhu 2007). Of course there are also scholars who realize the particularity of China's labor migration and try to make amendments to western theories. For example, taking China's institutional policies into account, Li argues that push and pull factors can no longer explain Chinese peasants' labor migration, because the strict household registration system in China has changed peasants' way of thinking (Li 2003; Li 2004b). Other scholars see in the circular characteristics of China's labor migration the combined effects of institutional barriers, the intrinsic demand of the industrial society for temporary labor, and the household strategy of migrants to diversify and maximize economic opportunities (Hu, Xu, and Chen 2011; Woon 1993; Zhu 2007).

As for the consequences to rural areas of this massive labor mobility, most Chinese scholars endorse the urbanization view that rural–urban labor migration is an effective way to optimize resource allocation for rural development and increase overall labor productivity at the national level (Au and Henderson 2006; Lu, Yang, and Li 2008; Whalley and Zhang 2007; Yang, Ma, and Suo 2009). Studies on remittances of migrant workers have illustrated their ability to narrow regional income disparities (Li 1994; Li 2001) and reduce rural poverty (Huang and Zhan 2005). However, concurring with the proletarianization view, Chinese scholars also express pessimism towards the role of market forces in balancing the fundamental inequalities in the political economy, and therefore advocate government regulation of migration (Chen 2010; Liu and Qi 2011; Lu 2009; Xie, Yuan, and Xiong 2006; Zhang 2010c). In order to maximize the developmental outcomes of this large population movement in rural China, some scholars vigorously suggest that local governments should make greater effort in creating favorable institutional conditions to attract return flows of migrants so that returnees can play a positive role in revitalizing rural economies and alleviating poverty (Huang 2008; Shen and Zhang 2009; Tan, Li, and Wang 2012). Institutional constraints on rural–urban labor migration, including Hukou-related policies, labor market segmentation system on arrival in cities, and rural land tenure arrangements, are strongly criticized by Chinese urbanization scholars for having increased migrant workers' job searching costs, worsening the consequences of migrants losing their jobs in cities, hastening the pace of labor transfer to modern sectors, and increasing pressure on rural environments (Liu, Wang, Gao, and Deng 2005; Lu and Song 2006; Meng and Zhang 2001; Mullan, Grosjean, and Kontoleon 2011; Vendryes 2011; Whalley and Zhang 2007; Zhang 2010a).

In seeking to explain Chinese peasants' labor migration, the above studies of labor and institutional economics highlight the role of peasants' living strategies in shaping large-scale population flows and constituting the dynamics of China's

rural–urban interactions in the process. Taking the individual migrant worker as the abstract “economic man” who pursues maximum economic benefit, such a “subsistence-economy” narrative model (Wang 2009a) centers on migrant workers’ subsistence demands and living pressures when exploring the stimuli of their migration and meanings of their experiences. Within the “subsistence-economy” narratives, the cultural, political and social aspects of migrant workers’ behaviors are recognized as natural extensions of, and complements to, their subsistence needs and should also be submitted to rational calculation by individual migrants. The economically disadvantaged image of China’s migrant workers that is constantly constructed by the “subsistence-economy” narratives gives persuasive justification of the country’s development strategy, and, in turn, has a far-reaching impact on policies related to migrant workers. The evidence is that policies relating to migrant workers’ income protection, social insurance, health care, and their children’s education have visibly increased in recent years, and aim at guaranteeing migrant workers’ basic living demands in cities[7]. In doing so, the issue of migrant workers is reduced to migrant workers’ inability to meet basic subsistence needs, thus intentionally or unintentionally ignoring the root cause in China’s development strategies.

With the deepening of China’s economic reform, more and more migrant workers have been surging into urban manufacturing and service sectors for job opportunities. The number of Chinese migrant workers in urban cities once topped 200 million. Aware that this group of people has become an important force in promoting China’s urbanization and contributing to economic growth and restructuring (Bai and He 2003; Liu, Chen, Xu, and Cui 2010), scholars have

[7] Some examples of this increase are: “Provisional Regulations on Education of Floating Children and Juveniles” jointly issued by State Education Commission of China and China’s Ministry of Public Security in 1998, “Notice on Better Management and Services for Peasant Workers’ Employment in Cities ” issued by the General Office of the State Council in 2203, “Several Opinions on Furthering Compulsory Education of Migrant Workers’ Children in Cities” distributed by the General Office of the State Council from six ministries in 2003, “Several Opinions on Solving the Problems of Peasant Workers” released by the State Council in 2005, etc.

argued that it is necessary to transform these migrant workers into urban citizens and entitle them to a series of social and political benefits to which urban citizens have access. The successful urbanization of these migrant workers would have construction effects on national integration and further accelerate economic development. Various studies have been conducted in this regard, including urban adaptation and integration of migrant workers (Cui 2012; Guo and Chu 2004; Li 2010; Liu and Zhou 2004; Zhu 2002), social exclusion and discrimination against these migrant workers (Liu 2008a; Tan 2007; Wang 2010a; Zhou 2002), semi-urbanization of migrant workers (Wang 2006), as well as social stratification of migrant workers and China's ternary social structure (Gan 2001; Li 2004a; Li 2004b; Tang and Feng 2000). Although the focus of these studies varies, they all pinpoint the marginality or vulnerability of these migrant workers in terms of their social status in contemporary China. Within these studies, the household registration system (or hukou system) and its related institutional barriers, which prevent migrant workers from attaining permanent residence in cities and enjoying state-sponsored benefits to which urban citizens have access, have drawn much criticism for contributing to the low social status of migrant workers as second class citizens (Knight and Song 1999; Solinger 1999b). In order to institutionally integrate migrant workers into urban cities, scholars both at home and abroad argue for reforming the household registration system to grant Chinese migrant workers urban citizenship, or promote their citizenization (Chen and Yu 2010; Chen 2005; Knight and Song 1999; Knight and Song 2005; Liu and Xu 2007; Ma 2011; Solinger 1995; Solinger 1999a; Solinger 1999b; Solinger 2003). Rather than solve Chinese migrant workers' subsistence problems by means of higher wages, these scholars feel it is better to have comprehensive services and social welfare, the various rights and benefits of urban citizenship.

Such research raises the question of social stratification in terms of rural–urban divisions in contemporary China. However, hoping that government initiatives will integrate these migrant workers into a general citizenship system fails to

address the historical development of social stratification in terms of rural–urban division. Taking the campaign of ‘go up to the mountain and go down to the village’ as an example, initiated by the Chinese government in the 1960s when the division between peasantry and non-peasantry emerged under the household registration system, this movement sent numerous intellectual youths to be re-educated in rural villages by peasants. In looking back at the issue of rural households and the peasantry, we may become more aware of the significance of this social stratification of Chinese peasants. Moreover, seeing migrant workers’ institutional identity as the essence of eliminating their segregation with urban residents could possibly homogenize their life experiences and identity formation within the current socio-economic context, covering the differentiations and conflicts among themselves, as well as their commonalities with urban residents.

Differing from the above urbanization studies, Chinese proletarianization scholars develop a more critical way of analyzing migrant workers’ social existence and class formation by locating them in the global capitalist economy. For them, as I have mentioned in the last section, the commonly recognized exploitative and oppressive conditions of migrant workers in urban factories could only be challenged by the complete proletarianization of this group of people. Emphasizing the necessity of awakening class consciousness and empowerment of labor rights in forming this new working class, the political process of achieving finished proletarianization is more complicated than the citizenization of migrant workers. Nonetheless, as with urbanization studies, they also criticized the state’s institutional segregation for barring migrant workers from residing in urban cities. A necessary requirement for finishing the process of proletarianization, these scholars argue, is to transfer migrant workers into standard urban industrial workers and completely uproot them from their natal villages. In this sense proletarianization scholars, like urbanization scholars, suppose that the future of Chinese migrant workers is to legally settle down in urban cities.

In response to these academic studies, reports issued by the Development Research Center of the State Council in China have explicitly suggested facilitating the reform of the household registration system to change peasant workers into stable industrial workers and promote their citizenization[8]. However, despite official efforts for politically and ideologically integrating migrant workers into China's urban development system, many migrant workers have returned or intend to return to their rural hometowns instead of staying on in urban centers. Neither urbanization nor proletarianization studies in China can fully explain why migrants decline the government policy which appears to be in their best interests. This is possibly due to the failure in addressing the subjectivities and identity formation of these migrant workers during the process of migration and return. Emphasis on structural factors like institutional barriers and market exploitation can only show us a similar and fixed life experience of Chinese migrant workers, who are always regarded as disadvantaged and underprivileged within the discourse of China's modernization. Here I would argue it is important to empirically investigate how migrants position themselves in response to the state's institutional integration. Otherwise, we may find that the solution of migrant workers' collective identity as either "industrial workers" or "urban citizens" cannot necessarily correspond to their needs and bring them better living conditions. As Wang has noted, official admission of migrant workers' urban citizenship may only end the term "peasant workers" but not the problems originated by it (Wang 2009a). Alongside this, there are deeper and more complex interconnecting historical, social, and cultural issues involved in shaping the current representations of migrant workers and could therefore problematize the

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[8] Related reports can be found on the website of the Development Research Center of the State Council. For example, Cui Chuanyi's report on reform of the household registration system to transfer migrant workers into industrial workers, source: http://www.drc.gov.cn/dcyjbg/20041225/75-224-30910.html ; Han Jun's report on solving the issue of migrant workers' identity, source: http://www.drc.gov.cn/zjsd/20060323/4-4-2863150.html ; Lin Jiabin's report on breaking down the rights obstacles of migrant workers' citizenization, source: http://www.drc.gov.cn/xslw/20130506/182-473-2874832.html.

official policy. In this thesis, through the exploration of returned migrant workers' subjectivities and identity formation, we can get a fuller understanding of their responses and how they make sense of themselves during their transition from urban spaces to the constantly changing rural China. Both continuities and discontinuities in terms of the formation of this 'ethnically distinct' (Solinger 1999a:456) people from tradition to modernism should be identified in their daily practices, which have not been fully acknowledged in current academic studies.

### 2.2.2 Gender, Identity, and Labor Migration in China

#### 2.2.2.1 Four Distinctive Streams of Chinese Scholarship on Female Migration

In spite of the fact that women always constitute a high proportion of the migration population, early migration literature tended to obscure women's participation in migration. In response to the second-wave feminism of the 1970s, scholarly research in various disciplines focused more on women migrants. International scholarship on female migration has evolved from the sex-role paradigm, in which women were taken as either a variable to be measured with respect to, for example, fertility and education, and then compared with migrant men's pattern or "a segregated subfield separate from the major social dynamics of migration" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003:6), to the "gender and migration" research in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which recognizes gender as a set of social practices that both affect and are influenced by migration (Chant 1991; Chant and Radcliffe 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Tienda and Booth 1991; Wolf 1992; Zlotnik 1993). After almost two decades, this "gender and migration" research has gone beyond the original domestic arenas in family and household and explores gender-differentiated population movements in broader economic and institutional structures. Acknowledging the fluidity and mutability of gender relations and the constant interconnection of gender with other social institutions in constituting women migrant workers' subjectivities, the current "gender and migration" research mainly highlight how gender is incorporated into a variety of daily practices, identities and institutional and economic structures to reconfigure the

new system of gender inequalities during the migration process (Afsar 2011; Ganguly-Scrase and Vogl 2008; Joseph and Lundström 2013).

Although lagging behind international research in terms of time and volume, the development of Chinese scholarship on female labor migration has gone through stages similar to its overseas counterparts. But the periodization of each stage is not linear. Research momentum of distinct approaches and areas of concern is rapidly advancing in China, especially since the late 1990s when export-oriented and tertiary industries mushroomed in China's industrializing regions to heavily aggregate female migrant workers from rural areas[9]. Inspired by international migration research and feminist scholarship, scholars from mainland China and from overseas have devoted themselves to empirical and theoretical analyses of female labor migration in China.

Here I outline four distinct streams of Chinese scholarship on female migration. Firstly, the initial attempts to incorporate women into China's rural–urban migration studies also tend to take their sex role as a variable to quantitatively describe the characteristics of migration trends such as education, age, scale, and geographical distribution (Fan 1999; Li and Li 1995; Meng 1994; Song, Zheng, and Qian 2009; Tan 1997; Yang 2000; Yang and Guo 1999; Zhao 2007). In these studies, women's traditional role as caregiver and family follower are often employed to explain the patterns and determinants of female labor migration in China. The second stream is mainly concerned with specific problems that women migrant workers encounter in urban cities, for instance marriage choice, health status, job satisfaction, family planning and labor rights protection (Chen, Liu, and Xie 2010; Deng 2004; Liu, Lin, and Huang 2010; Tang 1996; Wang 2012; Xia 2004; Zhao 2007; Zhu, Wang, Fu, Zhou, Zhao, and Wang 2012). In this branch,

[9] Women are among the first to be picked up by these export-oriented industries, making up over 70 percent of the total work force (Pun, 2005) Besides, according to the data of the 2005 census based on a sample of the 1% of the population, which issued by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, female migrants in China have amounted to 49.5% of the total migration population in 2005.

women are the only subject of examination while their interactions with other actors during the migration process are always omitted. Nonetheless, neither taking women as a variable nor exclusively focusing on women is sufficient on its own to capture the vivid social dynamics of labor migration, during which women are actively and constantly contesting and negotiating with men, family members, other social actors, as well as outside economic and institutional structures.

Displacing the exclusive focus on women with gender analysis, the third stream of research began to focus on the gendered perceptions and experiences of women migrant workers. In this research field, different topics have been touched upon, including women' migrant workers' life experiences and self-reconstruction in cities (Ding 2011; Yang and Liu 2003), their occupational attainment and gender division of China's labor market (Fan 2003; Huang 2001; Liang and Chen 2004), their social capital and networks both in rural villages and urban cities (He 2007; Hu and Xiao 2003; Jiang 2003; Zhang 2011), social discrimination and exclusion against these migrant women (Schmidbauer, Tian, and Li 2007; Xiao 1994; Zhang 2007a), as well as their urbanization and social adaptation in urban cities (Zhang 2007a; Zhang 2007b; Zhu 2004; Zhu 2008a; Zhu 2008b). Recognizing these female migrant workers' dual role as peasants and as women in contributing to their "double-marginalized status" in urban cities (Schmidbauer, Tian, and Li 2007; Tang 1996; Xiao 1994), scholars of this type of research highly recommend the improvement of various legal systems to protect the rights and interests of women migrant workers. While praising the positive role of migration in modernizing these women's values and behaviors and fostering women's autonomy(Zhu 2004), some scholars explicitly argue for eliminating institutional obstacles in order to promote the citizenization of migrant women (Zhang 2007b). Clearly, scholars in this field of research embrace the urbanization perspectives that advocate the institutional integration of women migrant workers into their receiving cities. However, without addressing the various power relations implied in gender, this type of research cannot go further to explore how social relations

informed by gender organize and are affected by the migration process both in receiving urban cities and sending rural origins.

Promoted in part by the development of western feminist research, by heightened awareness of the fundamental power relations and individual identity implicated in gender, and by the recognition of the fluid and mutable characteristics of gender relationships, scholars locate women migrant workers within various social relationships and in different social contexts to examine the causes and consequences of female migration in China. The fourth stream of Chinese scholarship on female migration, therefore, has been more concerned with the implications of migration for gender and intra-family relationships, women migrant workers' identity formation, as well as their social status in contemporary China (Davin 1996; Davin 2005; Gaetano 2004; Goldstein, Liang, and Goldstein 2000; Jacka 2006; Pun 1999; Pun 2005; Tam 2006; Yan 2008; Zhang 2000; Zheng 2004). A general assumption implied in this research is that women are much more vulnerable than their male counterparts due to the traditional gender segregation in Chinese patriarchal culture. Through the exploration of women migrant workers' oppressive living and working conditions both in rural families and urban spaces, studies in this stream highlight the dynamics of multi-layered gender inequalities embedded in various institutional, economic and cultural structures. For example, in recent years, Chinese patriarchal culture and the capitalist market have increasingly become the most frequently-mentioned notions to understand these women migrants' subjectivities and social position in contemporary China. This is mainly informed by western feminism, especially the second-wave feminist viewpoints, which tend to associate women's subjugation with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, and gender segregation.

It is generally accepted that migration has the potential to reconfigure the gender relations and power inequalities. Thus, one of the most-frequently debated subjects in the fourth research stream is whether migration can improve women's

status in contemporary China. However, following different theoretical approaches in migration studies, two distinctive conclusions have been developed in this regard. Some scholars endorse the urbanization view that women's entrance into off-farm labor market with improved economic income would broaden their horizons, bringing them into contact with new ideas about gender roles and relations, emancipating them from the control of Confucian patriarchal culture, and finally empowering them to negotiate more choice in their lives (Connelly, Roberts, and Zhenzhen 2010; Davin 1996; Davin 2005; Fan 2003). In contrast, scholars who embrace the proletarianization perspectives are not so optimistic. For them, migration could expose these migrant women to new vulnerabilities as the result of the precarious legal status stipulated by state policies, exploitative working conditions under the capitalist market, and the ubiquitous patriarchal domination in rural villages and urban working factories. Although they also address women's struggle and resistance against structural constraints, the general image they draw of women migrant workers in China's market economy is the women are disadvantaged (Pun 1999; Pun 2005) or even extremely-exploited (Yan 2003; Yan 2008).

In my thesis, through an examination of women's decision to return and the way they reincorporate themselves into rural origins, I have to argue that both conclusions gloss over the reality of Chinese women migrants' day-to-day lived experiences. The urbanization perspectives, which analyze migration mainly as an economic phenomenon and discount the persistence of systematic hierarchical relations based on gender, could only give rise to a reductionist interpretation that the improved economic income of women migrant workers through migration would necessarily bring about their empowerment in current society. The proletarianization approach, although critically taking the coercively political and economic context into account, fails to address the diversity of women migrant workers' daily practices and the possibilities of their contributions to the migration process and rural development in various ways. Strictly constrained by external

structures, these women migrants in proletarianization studies seemingly have little chance to escape a fate described by unappealing terms like “subordination” and “backwardness”. Considering success and failure, resistance and compromise, and contingency together with certainty, within the context of women’s migration and return, this thesis aims to form a more comprehensive account of Chinese women migrant workers in reform China.

2.2.2.2 Chinese Women Migrants’ Identity: Modern? In-between? Disconnected?

As mentioned in the previous section, the question of subjectivity and identity also attracts academic attention in the fourth stream of research into women migrants. Although the volume of published research remains spare, there are some impressive studies by scholars at home and abroad that examine how women’s rural–urban migration constructs their identities, such as Pun’s insightful work on Chinese working girls (Pun 1999; Pun 2005), Yan’s ethnographic research on domestic workers in Beijing (Yan 2008) and Jacka’s studies on rural women in urban China (Jacka 1997; Jacka 2005; Jacka 2006). In this section, I review their research findings to help formulate my own thoughts.

Pun (1999; 2005) insightfully outlines the process of remaking the new worker subject, the working girls (*dagongmei*), at the trajectory of the incorporation of China’s socialist system into the global capitalism, from the perspective of gender. In her ethnographic analysis, the cumulative effects of state socialism, global capitalism and the Chinese patriarchal system on the formation of this new working class subject are examined in an electronics factory in southern China. She demonstrates, for example, that rural–urban disparities result mainly from the socialist Hukou system together with the gender expectations determined by China’s patriarchal culture. These working girls are defined as cheap and compliant labor, leading to their subordination in rural families and urban modern spaces. In this way, the state and the patriarchal culture skillfully cater to the interests of global capitalism in keeping cheap, flexible and obedient labor, and

eliminating the possibility of fierce resistance. Drawing heavily on Foucault's theoretical insights on sexuality and techniques of power, Pun critically reveals the specific means and practices the capitalist factory has employed to discipline these rural socialist migrant bodies on the factory floors. Rather than simply arguing for their passive acceptance of this multilayered exploitation, she identifies these working girls as tactical agents who actively engage into resistant acts and manipulate those exploitative forces for their own ends. Through the exploration of the various forms of agency these working girls exercise in negotiation with and resistance to the authority of the three oppressive powers, Pun argues these working girls' identities have become different from traditional rural identities. The strong desire of these working girls to claim their own independence and break with their rural past, which can be seen through their daily behaviors and choices such as consuming commodities with the wages they receive as industrial workers, is regarded as the illustration of their pursuit of modernity in the context of globalization. However, such desire does not necessarily transform these working girls into modern subjects, but rather contributes to their longstanding tolerance of the various means of capitalist production control. Being trapped by the hybrid conjugation of socialist state machine and capitalist market mechanism, these working girls can only become "half peasant and half proletariat" (Pun 2005:193). In her later published papers, she further defines this process of making the new Chinese working class as "unfinished proletarianization" (Pun and Lu 2010). Pun's work is much significant in raising the issue of identity formation of Chinese female migrants within China's particular historical juncture of opening to global capital and introducing market economy. Through her work, we can see that, in order to construct the new modern subjects for capitalist production, the traditional rural identities of these working girls are constantly devalued both inside and outside the work place.

Differing from Pun's conceptualization of this new working class subject as "half

peasant and half proletariat", some researchers opt for the term "in-between-ness" to describe these migrants' state of suspension between rural and urban, traditional and modern (Beynon 2004; Ma and Cheng 2005). The sense of in-between-ness, which results from the incompatibility between traditional rural ideologies and modern working experiences, might open space for new practices and discourses, and yet might also bring ambiguity and disorientation to the identities of these migrant workers. Being detached from traditional conventions yet influenced by modern discourses, these migrant workers would finally belong to neither the urban cities they work in nor the rural villages from which they've come. For example, in Beynon's work, women migrants' depiction of their lives as "living one day at a time" points to their uncertainty as to their future and lack of identification with their city lives (Beynon 2004). Drawing on their ethnographic study on migrant workers' experiments with sex, love, and marriage in South China, Ma and Cheng also highlight the in-between-ness of migrant workers in the rapidly globalizing Chinese society. Individualistic romance in urban cities is regarded as opposed to the traditional practices of early marriage in rural villages. The entrance into urban spaces, therefore, inevitably puts migrant workers in a ruptured discursive position "where new intimate experiences require new hybrid vocabularies to express themselves" (Ma and Cheng 2005:309). In the process of negotiating between traditional norms and modern lifestyles, the communicative bodies of migrant workers come into being to engage in creating themselves within the unstable pluralized context. Highlighting migrant workers' transitory situation of dangling between rurality and modernity, such research problematizes the rigid rural–urban dichotomy, in which rural spaces are equated with tradition and urban spaces with modernity, and migration is seen as a one-way journey to gradually but linearly transform the identity of migrant workers from traditional to modern (Ma and Cheng 2005). Some other scholars also notice the differences of migrant workers with both rural and urban people. In Li's work on labor migration and social stratification in contemporary China, Chinese migrant workers are identified as a "third group" of people with an emerging new identity (Li 2004a;

Li 2004b). All these studies put great effort into the analysis of migrant workers' identity transformation within the transitional Chinese society. However, their discussions around these terms focus more on the differences between rural and urban spaces and between migrant workers and other groups of people, while the continuities from old time to new time and interaction of migrant workers with other groups of people are relatively shadowed. In this regard, more empirical work is needed to enhance the explanatory value of these terms and enrich our understanding of Chinese migrant workers' real life.

Compared to the above literatures, Yan's study on the migration experiences of rural women serving as domestic workers (*baomu*) in Beijing shows a broader concern with the contentious issues of development, neoliberalism, modernity, and postsocialism underway in China today (Yan 2008). Situating rural domestic workers within the context of a reconfigured rural–urban relationship under the post-Mao discourse of development, Yan reveals the difficulties and impossibilities for these women to attain their modern personhood in urban spaces. In her research, the neoliberal logic of development within which Chinese countryside is considered as ideologically and materially emaciated in relation to the urban city, reorients these rural young women's imagination of city life and modernity, and therefore compels them to migrate out in hope of constructing for themselves a modern subjectivity in civilized urban cities. Meanwhile, Yan offers a critical examination of some key words produced by post-Mao modernization such as "suzhi" (素质, *human quality*), "self-development" and consumer citizenship, and their discursive functions in disguising and facilitating the extreme exploitation of these rural young women in urban spaces. In doing so, she argues that migrant women's imagination of achieving a modern identity and enhancing self-development through labor migration is vastly disconnected with their contradictory lived experiences in the city. To her, struggling with the impasse posed by the discursive violence of post-Mao modernity, these rural young women can only find themselves "trapped as modern subjects in a space in,

but not of, the culture of modernity" (Yan 2008:46). In this study, Yan provides a Marxist analysis of the link between the processes of women migrant workers' subjectivity formation and the political economy of development in contemporary China, highlighting women's inability to become subjects of modernity within the context of China's neoliberal development. As a whole, her study is much permeated with pessimism, overlooking the creative strategies and various resources these rural women can possibly employ in order to accommodate themselves in the city.

Failing to handle the complicated interrelationship between structure and agency, all the above research would leave us unable to capture the complexity of these women migrant workers' identity formation in contemporary China. Also, it is important to acknowledge the multiplication of different and conflicting subject positions that these women migrant workers would develop after moving across the rural–urban divide in a post-Mao society. Otherwise, all we can get is a one-dimensional impression of women migrant workers as helpless victims or losers in China's socialist market economy. The differentiations among these migrant women, the diversified ways in which they respond to the changing outside world, as well as the discrepancies between the dominant discourse of China's neoliberal modernization and women migrant workers' actual behavior and experiences, therefore, cannot obtain sufficient explanations. In Jacka's book, she specifically notes, personal "identities are not fixed attributes. Rather, they are a continuing shifting between different overlapping and conflicting subject positions" (Jacka 2006:13). Her in-depth ethnographic research on Chinese women migrant workers illuminates the dynamic interaction between social discourses and women migrant workers' identities, unfolding the considerable diversity in women migrant worker's urban lived experiences. She maintains that, like everyone else, this group of women carries multiple identities under the context of neoliberal modernization and globalization, within which a range of subject positions is available to or forced upon. According to the incisive analysis

of women migrant workers' narratives and meaning-making of their own experience and behaviors, Jacka finds that women migrant workers' response to the new positions and values in urban settings is "not a shift from rural to urban values, but a furthering of rural values" (Jacka 2006:249). The new values and lifestyles permeated in modern urban spaces are not always superior to these women. Obviously, Jacka disproves the stereotypical view that women migrants' traditional identities would be necessarily displaced by the modern ones through geographical relocation from rural to urban space.

More importantly, Jacka demonstrates the significance of women migrant workers' relationship with other people in the process of their identification. She points out, of all the forms that explicitly represent women migrant workers' identities, including gender, class, rural/urban, regional forms of identification, "it is the division between locals and outsiders, and that between urbanities and rural people, that dominate both urban and rural migrants' representations of what it means to be a rural migrant woman in the city" (Jacka 2006:241). Gender, however, appears much less significant in women migrant workers' representation of their identities. In addition, she specifically addresses these women's relationships with their close family members and with other migrants, especially those from same regions, arguing that these relationships are central component of these women's understandings of their lives and identities. Here, I would argue that all these relationships are shaped by powerful gender discourses in a Chinese context. The traditional gender roles as mothers, sisters, daughters, wives are continuously exerting influences on these women migrant workers' decisions and behaviors. As we can see in Jacka's book, although some migrant women resist the rural patriarchal discourses, almost all of them still maintain close connections with their rural families and send them remittances. In her discussion, rather than taking gender relations and the rural–urban relationship as a fixed dichotomous structure, Jacka observes that all these relationships are constantly reconfigured among different people, both individually and collectively, in the process of

post-Mao modernization and rural–urban labor migration.

In addressing women migrant workers' understandings of their experiences of life and identities, Jacka's study is of particular importance in highlighting their multiple social positions discursively constructed and performed in the material conditions of post-Mao modernization. Such discursive analysis of experience successfully reveals that various representations of these women migrant workers are relationally constructed. However, the way this analysis has been generalized in much poststructural work on subjectivity, was thought to easily result in a form of symbolic determinism, which often downplays the creative dimension present in the response of individuals to the changing social relations or a historically specific situation (McNay 2000; McNay 2003; McNay 2004). In Jacka's book, she writes:

"Human agency is thoroughly social and discursive, but is made possible by the fact that societies consist of numerous different, competing discourses, and within any one discourse a variety of subject positions are available. Discourses confer the ability to make choices between these various subject positions, but the intimate relation between discourse, knowledge, and power is such that some people will be able to image a greater range of subject positions than others, and will be better placed to choose which of those to enact." (Jacka 2006:15)

This conception of agency as abstract potential cannot adequately address the creative elements of agency such as intention and reflexivity. Nor, because of the abstract nature of discourse, does it adequately elucidate how agency is determined by access to symbolic and material resources. More strictly speaking, this argument still exhibits a tendency to subsume the social within the discursive, although she mentions the connections between discursive and other power relations. Agency, in this sense, is posited as a property of symbolic systems rather than a capacity of acting subjects, mainly arising from the disconnection between the individuals' psychic and the social structure, between the real and symbolic

order (McNay 2003).

Actually, we can find that, nearly all the above-mentioned studies on rural women migrant workers share a similar concern, arguing this group of women is constructed through discourses which portray them as outsider "others" in a post-Mao modernization period. Deducing actions and interactions from external structure, women migrant workers in these studies exist more like a unified group with homogenous dispositions from the identity of their position in social space. In this way, we could hardly get a full understanding of the way in which individuals actively negotiate changes within various social relations. Such kind of one-sided account of agency is criticized as "not an agency per se but an account of the some of the discursive pre-conditions" and can contribute to "not theories of agency at all but theories of structural indeterminacy" (McNay 2004:178). I would argue that the essential problem with this negative account of agency lies in its failure of finding a workable concept of agency to differentiate discursive from other types of material power relations, and then, grasp the complex interactions between these two power relations. To complement and extend this discursive analysis on subjectivity, in this thesis, I would like to suggest rethinking the implications of Bourdieu's theory for bringing about a vivid account of agency.

In Bourdieu's analysis, social space presents itself as a symbolic system which is organized by the logic of difference, of differential distance. Or, to put it simply, social space tends to function as a symbolic space (Bourdieu 1990a:133). Actors within social fields occupy different positions in accordance with their possession of various resources and the structural relations between that field and the others. The lasting experience of occupying a social position would inscribe certain habitus or dispositions upon the actors, which is both a system of models for the production of practices and for the perception and appreciation of practices (Bourdieu 1990a:131). In turn, the operation of habitus in both cases expresses the

social position of the actors. Through the spatial feature of social position and the pre-reflexive concept "habitus" or dispositions, we could see that, actions are not only motivated by abstract structures and economic forces but also perception and representation of individual actors themselves. Furthermore, the complex interactions between symbolic and material power relations, between immediacy of experience and abstract structures can be elucidated. Bourdieu's arguments illustrate that agency is a lived social relation rather than a discursively constructed capacity. Undoubtedly, this relational style of experience analysis would open more possibilities for agency to creatively exert itself in the social space. In the following section of theoretical framework, I will elaborate more on how to use Boudieu's theory to get a deeper understanding of women migrant workers' living strategies after their return to their home towns and villages.

### 2.2.3 Return Migration: Causes, Consequences and Impacts

Although the above sections have involved some points related to the return decision of migrant workers, this section would give a more detailed review on the development of literature on international and internal return migration as the focus of this thesis is on Chinese returned migrant workers. Compared to the rather extensive literature on international and internal rural-urban labor migration, the backflows of migration are relatively unwritten in the history of migration. However, much as is the case with studies on rural–urban migration, a scattered literature on return migration has been steadily accumulating in the past decades, a literature that can trace migration to the two theoretical approaches, urbanization and proletarianization.

In exploring the causes of the backflow of these labor migrants, most scholars draw heavily on the urbanization approach to explain return migration as the outcome of the cost-benefit calculation of rational migrant workers in response to an environment filled with uncertainty and an incomplete market in the destinations (Christiansen and Kydd 1983; Massey and Espinosa 1997; Sjaastad

1962; Vanderkamp 1971). Following this assumption of rational "economic man" who always tries to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of migration, empirical studies in countries, regions and villages have been conducted to find specific reasons for return choices of migrants on both macro and micro levels. On the micro level, migrants' return decision is usually ascribed to their unqualified labor qualities which would not enable them to thrive in the urban destinations. It is generally argued that only negatively selective migrants, who are poorly educated, less skilled, and therefore unsuited for urban life, tend to return to their home places (Borjas 1989; Lee 1984; Newbold 2001; Simmons and Cardona 1972; Stark 1995). However, such argument has proved untenable in some social psychological studies, studies which provide evidence that migrants refuse to return due to their unwillingness to admit having failed in the destination (Gmelch 1980; Suzuki 1995). Other studies even draw a completely contrary conclusion, that successful migrants are more inclined to return than those negatively selective migrants because they are more capable of forecasting the labor market and more active in taking advantage of the favorable economic conditions (Saenz and Davila 1992). Obviously, such success-failure analysis is inadequate because it downplays migrants' agency in the return decision by replacing their explanation of return with researchers' definition of success and failure. Later on, after realizing that migrants are by no means isolated individuals who make the decision to return all by themselves, scholars gradually extend their perspectives from the individual level to migrants' kinship and social networks, exploring the role of these various networks in facilitating migrants' decision of return (Bailey and Cooke 1998; Ek-Iem 2001; Orrenius 1999; Traphagan 2000; von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun 2011). According to these studies, return migration is more likely to happen either when an effective network system is absent in the destination, or when there exists a requirement of fulfilling family obligations in origin communities. These studies identify the specific contexts under which migrants are motivated to return, for example, when they either fail to find an ideal job or achieve their goal in the destination, when their elderly

parents or children in rural origins need them, or when they advance from one life stage to another. It is pointed out that, the positive attractions of the home society like family ties and the desire to rejoin kin and old friends are dominant in migrants' return decision (King 2000; Toren 1978). Some other urbanization scholars tend to contextualize the phenomenon of return migration within macro-level processes of economic and societal changes. For them, return migration is regarded as either the result of the external economic ups and downs, or migrants' response to structural constraints in the destinations (Cassarino 2004; Fan 2003; Kirdar 2004; Vanderkamp 1971; Wang 2010b). On this macro level, reasons for return these studies have listed include the segmentation of the labor market, the change of wage differential between destinations and origin areas, and the institutional measurements to prevent migrants from permanent living in the destinations.

In reality, despite these conclusions drawn from analyses on micro and macro levels, the causes of return are diverse and overlapping. In order to integrate different levels of analysis to move their explanations of return reasons beyond this micro-macro dichotomy, some scholars try to take all the possible characteristics of origins and destinations into account by proposing a "push-pull" perspective (Christiansen and Kydd 1983; Hare 1999; Potter, Conway, and Phillips 2005; Xiao 2007; Zhao 2002). For return migration, push factors which cause migrants to leave the urban destinations would include lack of employment, low standard of living, lack of health care and educational opportunities, and an unfair legal system. "Pull" factors which attract migrants to return to home origins mainly refer to a desire to rejoin family and friends, the households' own production needs, increased job and development opportunities in the origins. However, it is often difficult to classify the factors as either push or pull, as the factors associated with origins may be just as important as factors in the destinations in many cases. Moreover, falling broadly within the neo-classical economic model, a push-pull perspective fails to note the structural constraints

which deprive people of equal access to resources.

Following the urbanization approach, most Chinese scholars highlight the role of economic stimuli and institutional constraints in propelling the return flows of China's internal labor migrants. In the analysis of pull and push factors in internal labor migration, scholars argue that economic incentives are the main motivation for the out-migration of rural workers, the Hukou system, however, prevents migrants from permanent urban residence and locks their life expectancy and future goals into China's countryside (Li 2003; Wang 2005a; Wang and Fan 2006). Contrary to this kind of institutional exclusion that hinders migrant workers' city integration, the campaign of building a new socialist countryside vigorously advocated by the Chinese government is thought to be effective in pulling migrant workers back to their rural origins (He 2009; Xiao 2007). Aside from institutional factors, the income that migrant workers' can possibly earn from migration work is regarded as an important factor that affects their final decision to stay or return. After estimating migrants' total income in their workable years and comparing it with the economic costs of urbanization, scholars conclude that the incapability of Chinese migrants' low wages to cover the costs of their households' urbanization in cities contributes to their decision to return on reaching middle age (Li and Zhang 2008). Nonetheless, enhancing wages in migration work does not necessarily increase the cities' appeal to all migrant workers. Instead, for those who intend to initiate entrepreneurial activities in home origins, wage increases can only allow them to go home earlier (Zhang 2006). In addition, migrant workers' personal characteristics such as education and limited expected working years, rural family demands, the ensuring desire to reunite, migrants networks, high house prices, and labor market conditions in urban cities are specific factors that scholars use to explain migrant workers' decision to return (Bai and He 2003; Chunyu, Liang, and Wu 2013; Jing and Ma 2012; Zhang 2006).

Chinese proletarianization scholars, on the contrary, maintain that internal labor migrants themselves are actually unwilling to trudge back to the spiritually and materially emptied countryside once they have embarked on their out-migration journey (Pun et al. 2009; Yan 2005). Rather, they endeavor to explain how the ongoing circulation of migrants between rural and urban areas is shaped by capitalist exploitation, state policies, and traditional production relations. Labor circulation is thought to be an effective way to externalize the costs of labor reproduction to rural peripherals, and therefore maximize the capitalists' profits from the productivity of migrants. However, in China, scholars found that the emaciation of Chinese countryside under the neoliberal logic of development made it impossible to successfully address the social cost of migrant workers' labor reproduction. Instead, incomes from migration work are the main sources for the cost of their labor reproduction. The lack of opportunities for individual development in the countryside and the inability of rural families in addressing the costs of labor reproduction contribute to migrant workers' sense of "land enclosure" and the process of "self-driven" proletarianization (Pun and Lu 2010:508). Focusing on migrant workers' working experiences on the factory floor in urban cities, proletarianization scholars highlight Chinese migrants' disadvantaged political status and unprotected labor rights in the reform period's rapid industrialization and globalization. Although they have temporarily escaped the emaciated countryside, thanks to China's institutional policies like Hukou system, these migrants are still denied the right of permanent residence after working for a certain period in cities. In these studies, the maintenance of migrant workers' connection to rural economy and their regular return seem more like reluctant choices they have to make in face of the intolerable hardship of factory life and the institutional impasse in cities. Given the sharp rural–urban chasm in reform China, it is maintained that most of those returnees would migrate out again as the countryside is no longer an ideal place for survival and self-development. As I have argued in the above sections, in order to comprehensively understand Chinese migrant workers' incomplete

proletarianization, we may need to extend our vision beyond the factories and cities, giving consideration to where they return, how they interact with rural families and communities, what kind of decisions and strategies they made in their daily life after return. In the following chapters, I show that there is a continuum between migrant workers' experiences in cities and their current situations in home origins. Focusing on either end of this continuum without considering the other would be impossible to get to know their real life world and daily practices.

As for the consequences of return migration to these returnees, urbanization and proletarianization approaches show different areas of concern. Urbanization studies discuss how these returned migrant workers economically and psychologically reintegrate into the disadvantaged countryside, whereas proletarianization research considers how migrant workers' incessant frustration of moving back and forth between rural and urban areas contributes to the emergence of their class consciousness and even collective action. As mentioned in the above sections, both approaches imply that urban and rural are at the two ends of a continuum, with urban representing modernity and rural standing for tradition and backwardness. For Chinese proletarianization scholars, the rural–urban disparities would induce migrant workers' sense of "land enclosure" and their unwillingness to return to the emaciated rural peripheries. In the meantime, the spatial separation of rural labors' production and reproduction imposed by institutional policies disconnects migrants' urbanization with industrialization and deprives them of the opportunity to become real urban citizens. The truncated life experiences of these incomplete labor migrants are thought to inevitably develop their feelings of anger, and their grievances then result in a politics of resentment. Focusing on the linkage of migrants' sense of enclosure to their incomplete process of proletarianization, these studies repeatedly stress that migrant workers no longer regard themselves as rural subjects, and that there is no place for returned migrants to survive and get ahead

in their rural homes.

Unlike the proletarianization approach, urbanization scholars take a relatively positive view toward the phenomenon of return migration, hoping the returned migrants will bring about some positive changes in rural areas. With respect to these returned migrant workers, the main concern of urbanization scholars is that the sharp distinctions between rural and urban areas would prevent these returned migrant workers from smoothly reintegrating into their backward rural origins. Because these scholars believe that migrants, after having stayed in urban cities for an extended period, must have been given a touch of modernity. The migration experiences, therefore, would turn these migrant workers into another person, as someone with modernized ideas, more potential, broader horizons, and bigger possibilities to induce social change (Chen 2004; Li and Yang 2007; Zhao and Wang 2006; Zhou 1998). Moreover, urbanization scholars recognize early that the degree of reintegration to home origins varies among returnees. International studies of return migration have proposed a dual hypothesis, that is, that the more urban and modern the value system of these returned workers, the greater the conflict in their readjustment to home origins, and vice versa (Cerase 1974; Del Campo and Garmendia 1974). Other studies note the process of reintegration can also be differentiated by life-cycle and gender. Especially, women returnees are regarded as more vulnerable as they have to face the risk of social isolation and the barriers to employment in traditional rural societies (King 2000; Ullah 2013). However, these studies fail to explain the matter in detail. There exists considerable literature on international returnees' reintegration difficulties upon their return to home countries (Adepoju 1979; Athukorala 1990; Bovenkerk 1974; Constable 1999; Gmelch and Gmelch 1995; Long and Oxfeld 2004; Ní Laoire 2007; Ní Laoire 2008; Sussman 2010; Traphagan 2000). Scholars have noted that the difficulties returnees may encounter in the process of re-accommodating themselves into home places are multifarious. In his study, Gmelch generally

classifies these readjustment difficulties into two categories: etic and emic. Etic mainly relates to the objective criteria of re-adaptation like jobs and housing, personal relationships, participation in community organizations, and so forth, while emic refers to returnees' feelings of satisfaction in regard to their homeland (Gmelch 1980). He then concluded that returnees' unhappiness and dissatisfaction toward home places would probably induce a desire of out-migration again.

Often accompanying this rugged process of reintegration is returnees' considerable ambivalence. While many scholars have hinted at this since the very beginning of their exploration of return migration, only in recent years are some scholars really starting to analyze migrants' ambivalence explicitly. This ambiguity is often exhibited in studies which focus on exploring the dynamics of interactions between returnees and non-migrants. On return to their places of origin, migrants are expected to demonstrate their success through behavior such as distributing gifts among families and friends, wearing fashionable clothes, building a house, etc. (Colton 1993; Dahya 1973). It is not until the last decade that scholars have begun to understand return migration in the context of hybrid identities, highlighting returnees' feelings of alienation and not-quite-belonging to home places (Ahmed, Castaneda, Fortier, and Sheller 2003; Christou 2006; Ní Laoire 2008; Olwig 2012; Ullah 2013).

Most Chinese scholars embrace the urbanization view that returned migrant workers would inevitably have troubles in readapting themselves into their rural communities. We could see that many studies which have been conducted to explore returned migrant workers' rural life emphasize their re-adaption problems (Fu 2007; Tian 2010; Tian 2009; Wu 2011; Zhou 2009b). Studies conducted at various levels show that Chinese migrant workers' degree of reintegration is influenced by several factors, such as the time of residence in urban cities, the comprehensiveness of social security, psychological and financial support from

rural communities, the frequency of social contacts with other migrants, the participation level into rural communities, etc. (Fu 2007; Tian 2010). Scholars assert that the new generation of migrant workers[10] is more likely to exhibit readjustment disorder than the older generation (Fu 2007; Tian 2009; Wang 2001; Yuan, Yu, and Yang 2009). In Fu's investigation paper, the maladjustment of these younger migrant returnees is mainly demonstrated in three aspects: their incapability of agricultural cultivation, the narrowing and defamilarization of social networks, and psychological imbalance resulting from the disparity between the village rules and lifestyles of urban reference group (Fu 2007). It is argued that such maladjustment, if not properly managed, would lead to the involution of these returnees' social identity, which means they would probably find themselves identified with a particular social group rather than the rural or urban communities (Wang 2001). Doubly excluded by the urban cities where they once worked and the rural communities that they regard as home, this group of migrant workers would live in an increasingly deteriorating situation and become rootless vagrants with nowhere to turn (Tian 2009; Wang 2001; Zhou 2009a). In order to effectively promote the returnees' smooth reintegration into their natal communities, scholars have made many policy suggestions, including reform of the Hukou system and social welfare, improvement of production conditions, skills and job training, financial support, etc. (Tian 2009; Yao 2010)

Similarly, urbanization and proletarianization approaches hold contrasting views toward the implications of return migration for rural development. The urbanization approach emphasizes the modernization potential of these returned migrant workers in propelling rural economic and social development, whereas the proletarianization approach repeatedly stresses the impossibility of returned

[10] The most frequently accepted definition of the new generation of migrant workers is from Wang Chunguang (Wang 2001). Wang emphasizes two major criteria. The first criterion relates to the migrants' birth year. It is argued that this group of young people who held the rural Hukou registration should have born after the 1980s; the second is referred to migrant workers' timing of labor migration. He maintains that the new generation of workers should have begun to migrate out for work since 1990s.

migrant workers to strongly devote themselves to rural development. According to proletarianization studies, the worsening situation in peasants' lives and the loss of the means of soil-dependent subsistence in reform China make rural areas lose their appeal to migrant workers. Growing up in relatively good living conditions, the younger generation of migrant workers lack experience and skill in farming and can do nothing to promote agricultural development (Pun and Lu 2010). Furthermore, it is argued although returned migrant workers may bring home certain skills and capital, they generally fail to innovate in the off-farm sectors. Because their urban work skills are largely inapplicable to the rural setting, and the material and financial capital they have accumulated from migration work is far from enough for the establishment of a successful enterprise in their natal communities. In short, highlighting the incapability of the emaciated rural peripheries to meet migrant worker's material and spiritual needs in reform China (Pun et al. 2009), Chinese proletarianization scholars hold a pessimistic view as to the potential of return migrants to develop their rural communities of origin.

In urbanization studies, return migration is viewed as beneficial for national modernization, particularly for rural development. The returned migrant workers are regarded as either messengers of modern civilization, who bear the responsibility of diffusing modern culture and values to the backward rural peripheries, or forces to accelerate rural economic development with the skills and capital they have accumulated from their migration work. Numerous studies in other countries have shown the positive role that returned migrant workers have played in their rural communities of origin. The studies usually depict these returnees as agents of change, introducing new crops and farming technologies, actively participating in credit associations, promoting industrial and tertiary development, bringing a good deal of fluidity into the original social structure, breaking down insularity and parochialism, etc.(Adegbola 1976; Adepoju 1979; Black 1993; King, Mortimer, and Strachan 1984; Pottinger 1987). The studies argue that the overall contributions of returnees to their natal communities depend

largely on the returnees' individual characteristics and the opportunities available for them to exercise their skills and abilities. Therefore, in order to effectively utilize the returnees' modernization potential, scholars argue for the creation of favorable economic and societal preconditions in the areas of origin (Adepoju 1979; Korner and Mehrlander 1986).

The implications of internal return migration for rural development are generally overlooked in research on China. This is partly due to the fact that scholars did not begin to explore the return flows of Chinese migrant workers until the early 2000s. Following the urbanization approach, and influenced by studies on return migration in other countries, most scholars have focused on the positive role these migrant workers are playing in economic development, rather than on social changes in the Chinese countryside. A common view is that return migration would bring home much needed human resources, which will contribute to the countryside either in the way of diversifying rural livelihoods and expanding non-farm employment, or ameliorating the sharp divide between city and village (Ma 2001; Ma 1999; Zhao 2009). Especially, scholars argue that the accumulation of human and social capital during migration would enhance migrant workers' entrepreneurship, which is essential for accelerating rural industrialization and the construction of a new socialist countryside (Démurger and Xu 2011; Ma 2001; Ma 2002; Ma 1999; Zhang 2012; Zhang and Sun 2013; Zhao and Wang 2006). Noting that not all the returnees can establish their own business upon their return, some scholars specifically explore the personal characteristics of returned entrepreneurs and the various difficulties they may encounter in the process of creating businesses in rural China (Chen, Weng, Zhu, and Kang 2010; Hu 2010; Ji 2012; Zhang and Zhao 2011; Zhao, Liu, and Gu 2008). Correspondingly, various policy recommendations for local rural governments have been put forward to encourage return migration and returnees' entrepreneurship, including the broadening of financing channels, fiscal support, rural infrastructure construction, the improvement of entrepreneurship training mechanisms, etc. (Guo and Jin 2009;

Liu and Liao 2010; Liu, Li, and Zhu 2011; Xie and Zhang 2013; Xiong 2009). Moreover, it is worth noting that there have been few studies with women returnees' entrepreneurship in Chinese countryside. In the few related studies, women returnees' subordinated role, underprivileged social status, limited access to resources and incapability of creative activities are the most often cited reasons for their failure to establish their own business (Cheng 2011; Li 2012). These female returnees are usually depicted as having limited employment choices except for selling their labor in the manufacturing and service industries in their rural neighborhoods (Wu and Xie 2009).

The most remarkable work on returnees' entrepreneurship is what Murphy has conducted in Jiangxi Province. In a series of papers and a book she has written extensively about how returnees employ various resources they obtained through migration work to achieve their goals, including education investment, house building, commodities purchase, and most importantly, becoming entrepreneurs (Murphy 1999; Murphy 2000; Murphy 2002). In her discussion of returnees' entrepreneurship she notes the importance of local government policies in attracting capable returnees, while also highlighting returnees' active negotiation with local government for changes in infrastructure and a more favorable policy environment. Arguing the necessity of moving beyond the core-periphery and micro-macro dichotomies in understanding the rural transformation brought about by Chinese returned migrant workers, Murphy tries to unfold the dynamics between returnees' living strategies and macro-level socioeconomic changes in China's urban and rural areas (Murphy 2002). Nonetheless, by maintaining the potential contributions these returned migrant workers make to economic diversification in rural China, her studies seemingly concur with the urbanization view that labor migration has become a positive mechanism to promote the integration of resources and accelerate China's rural development. Murphy's highlight of returnees' agency in realizing their objectives in the countryside appears inadequate to explain the diversified and even contradictory strategies

these returnees adopt in their newly started rural lives, and therefore, cannot present the overall picture of rural transformations brought about by Chinese migrant workers. As I have argued in the above sections, Chinese migrant workers are never a homogeneous group of people and their rural origins are by no means in a static situation over time. Although Murphy carried out a comparative study of three different counties to reduce the risk of universalizing the particular features of the observed process, she did not employ a holistic perspective of space and time which should locate different returnees in their specific ages and connect their past experience and current daily practices.

It is not until recent years that scholars have begun to consider the social changes that return migration might bring about in rural China. Scholars have believed that migrant workers, as the carriers of modern civilization, would breathe new life into the Chinese countryside and have far-reaching effects on the rural social structure and peasants' everyday life. Li maintains that the migrant work of rural women enhanced women's economic independence and broke men's dominance in the rural family (Li 2008). Cheng has concluded, based on an empirical study of a village in Henan Province, that the social interaction of returned migrant workers has broken the traditional "differential mode of association" (差序格局, chā xù gé jú) and extended beyond consanguinity and geography. In addition, compared to other villagers who never migrated out, these returnees exhibit more political enthusiasm and appear to play influential roles in their home villages (Cheng 2012). Moreover, some macro-level analyses have affirmed the positive interaction between returned migrant workers and Chinese rural society, so that not has the Chinese countryside been transformed by these returnees in terms of economy and culture, but the countryside has also provided an employment and business platform for these returnees (Wang, Xiang, Zhang, Jiang, and Ou 2011). The various mechanisms of Chinese rural society, such as a stable land system, family structure, traditional codes of conduct, face competition, interpersonal

relationships, rural governance, are thought to jointly provide institutional and material guarantees for these returned migrant workers while eliminating the potential negative effects of return migration under the context of financial crisis (Yang and Liu 2009).

In the literature on return migration to date, women returnees are rarely mentioned, let alone their roles in rural transformation. I will indicate the rare mentions. In her work on rural women's migration experiences, Fan (2004a) describes how empowered women migrant workers contribute to rural settings by incorporating new ideas and urban lifestyles acquired from cities into village life. However, according to her description, women migrant workers' exercise of such agency is more like dancing with shackles, largely undermined by ingrained Chinese sociocultural traditions and women's disadvantaged social position. A similar argument has also been presented in Murphy's study on the impact of labor migration on the well-being of rural women and Zhang's exploration on female returnees' resettlement process in Chinese countryside. Both agree that, although the migration experiences can broaden women migrant workers' perspective on life and empower them to a certain degree, the deep-rooted patriarchal system within the rural household remains intact and continues to undermine their claim on resources and restrain their scope for exercising agency in the villages they have returned to (Murphy 2004; Zhang 2013). Furthermore, Zhang critically points out that government policies addressing the problem of returned migrant workers fail to acknowledge the need of women returnees. An appeal for more gender-sensitive policies and programs has been made to assist this group of women in their process of resettlement (Zhang 2010b). In general, just like the studies on women migrant workers' plight in urban cities, the extant literatures on women returnees always downplay women's agency and perceive this group of women as "others" and "outsiders" in China's rural development, and therefore advocate the necessity of an inclusive strategy achieved through the institutional recognition and assistance. How do these women returnees themselves perceive

their newly started rural lives and the changing rural context? Does this understanding of otherness make sense in their daily practices? What kind of specific strategies do they employ to handle their daily difficulties and frustrations? Do earlier feminist explanations, with their roots in western culture, also apply to women migrant workers in the Chinese countryside? All these questions need to be addressed.

### 2.2.4 Short Conclusion of Literature Review

A close look at the existing literature on international and internal labor migration and its return flows can offer some insightful views. However, the literature also reveals deficiencies that need to be remedied in further studies. Although I have made some comments in the course of my review of the literature, I will summarize this review into several points so as to inform and direct my own work.

Firstly, the irreversible thought embedded in the urbanization and the proletarianization approach, which universalizes the default model of evolving from tradition to modern, as well as moving from rural countryside to urban cities, underplays the local cultural practices within particular historical conditions and different social and political contexts. That is why, for quite a long time, most studies on internal labor migration have tended to limit their research scope and analysis framework within the urban space no matter which theoretical approach they fall into. Migrant workers' urban plight and the impacts of internal labor migration on inflow cities attract much academic concern, while the perceptions and experiences of this group of people in their rural origins after return are rarely considered. Even in studies on return migration, the exploration of return reasons always cite unfavorable urban working conditions and problematic institutional arrangements, justifying the necessity of breaking down the policy obstacles to successfully integrate migrant workers into urban areas. Endeavoring to give theoretical explanations to the process and outcomes of migrant workers' urban

adaptation and struggles, scholars explicitly or implicitly presuppose a permanent stay in urban cities as the future destiny of these migrant workers as a whole. Based on this premise, these studies would ultimately direct themselves into a trap of predetermined goal, replacing the practical logic of migrant workers with the theoretical logic of the researchers themselves.

With reference to China, the take-for-granted continuum of urban cities at one end and underdeveloped rural peripheries at the other is simply a result of the strong development strategy within the discourse of China's new socialist modernization. China's transition from an old isolated socialist society to one characterized as a socialist market economy is accompanied by not only the success of its remarkable economic progress, but also the emergence of social and cultural change. These changes are differentially experienced by groups of people who, accordingly, have changed their perspectives about themselves and their society. Migrant workers and their rural origins, which were once privileged in pre-reform socialist China, are now discursively placed in a subordinated position within a post-Mao modernization discourse that prioritizes urban development. The changed relationship and the uneven regional development between urban and rural China resulted from state development policies facilitating the movement of peasants from rural areas to meet the demand for cheap labor in urban cities. All these jointly exert influence on migrant workers' ways of perceiving their new social positions, the changing rural context, and identifying and connecting themselves with the country's development strategy, particularly after their return to their rural hometowns where the sharp distinctions between rural and urban China are highlighted in their daily lives. This core–periphery dichotomy implies that tradition and modernity are opposed to each other, with the core finally being displaced by the periphery as development proceeds. In contrast, my fieldwork unveils a more complex picture. Rather than simply reading off from the abstract dichotomies of socialist/capitalist, modern/traditional (Wang 2003), dichotomies that are blurred and conditional, both continuities and discontinuities can be

witnessed in this transformation of China's migrant workers. As shown in chapter six, women migrant workers actively and creatively employ various strategies to deal with new contingencies after return. The changes of these returned women themselves and the changes to the Chinese countryside that are precipitated by the women's migration experience can hardly be classified into modern or traditional. It may be argued that these migrant workers and those still left in the countryside are undergoing their modernization process in their own particular ways in response to this transitional, globally-inflected Chinese society. To document their narratives, particularly the issue of identity formation, and explore their everyday practices in the changing rural context, will help us to understand the interconnections between local and the global.

Secondly, a general lack of concern about the complex interactions between migrant workers and the outside world in current studies makes it impossible to fully appreciate the formation and transformation of these migrant workers' identity, and the changing outlook of the Chinese countryside brought about by them. Focusing on either the economic considerations of individual migrant workers or the social and political factors that affect their decisions and performance, all the existing literatures on return migration tend to divide the complex situations of these returned migrant workers into black and white boxes. Migrant workers are classified as either negatively or positively selected, and their contributions for rural development are regarded as either grim or tremendous. However, the reality is far more complicated than such an either-or thing. Neither the individual migrant workers nor Chinese countryside is homogenous. The roles of culture, contingency, customs, habits, which always entangled with economic and institutional factors in current literatures, are critically important in forming the ways how different migrant workers perceive themselves and transform their rural origins, and need to be further clarified. Migrant workers' dispositions and daily practices filtered through these interlocking factors. Meantime, they also act on these factors in their own particular ways. This is a never-ending process no

matter what kind of time and space these workers are located. Every kind of experience is engendered by the continuity of life and synchronously connected with the whole of the life itself. More importantly, this whole process can by no means be conducted by individual migrant workers alone but inevitably involves the participation of other social actors whoever these migrant workers would meet in their daily lives. Therefore, to obtain a full scale of explanation of reproduction and transformation of migrant workers' dispositions and the complexities of their roles in rural origins, we should try to take a more holistic perspective to explore how their present situations are mediated by the past experiences and future life expectations, and how returnees with different ages, family situations, occupational skills, and life vicissitudes handle their difficulties and achieve their goals by strategically employing various resources, to interact with other social actors in various ways.

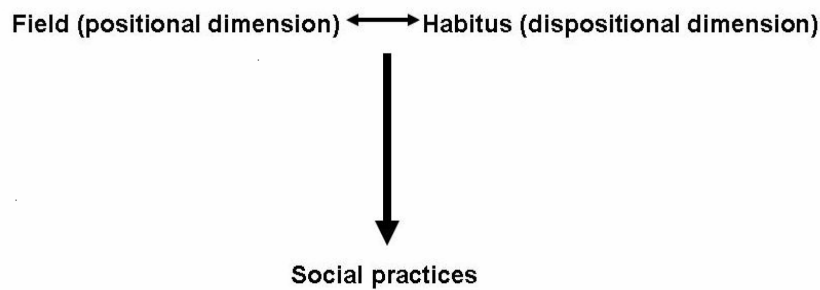
Thirdly, despite growing research on women migrant workers' plight in urban cities, women migrant workers who have returned to their rural origins have drawn comparatively less attention. With a few exceptions, women returnees are portrayed as the chattel of male family members within a rural patriarchal structure. It is believed, after returning back to the rural communities, the agency these women gained through migration would be finally defeated by the entrenched patriarchal power relations in rural life. Most of the women, especially those who have married would eventually resume the full set of responsibilities and expectations again imposed by the rural patriarchal codes. Not surprisingly, the returning life of these women returnees are always documented as being full of frustrations and difficulties, and their contributions to rural origins are shadowed or simply tucked into rural household reproduction. The creative aspects of women returnees' agency in flexibly contesting these difficulties, however, are rarely seen in current literature. As mentioned before, such limited agency of women migrant workers is largely resulted from the theoretical predicament, in which the complexities of interaction among various power

relations haven’t been full exhibited. Therefore, to bring about a more diversified reality of women returnees’ life in rural China, further theoretical reflections and empirical explorations are required to open a crack for revealing the potential creativity and reflexivity of these women actors.

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

With a focus on women migrant workers’ living experience of out-migration and return, this study highlights the impact of return migration on China’s rural areas, which has been largely overlooked in current literature. To understand what they obtain from their city experiences, what kind of particular challenges these women returnees face, as well as how they develop certain strategies to deal with these challenges after their return, I propose to use the concept of habitus and Bourdieu’s theory of practice as an analytical starting point.

Bourdieu’s theory of practice can be seen as an exploring reflection on the classic dualism problem between individual and society in the western intellectual tradition. For Bourdieu, individual and society are two dimensions of the same social reality rather than two separates sorts of being--one external to the other. The key concept of habitus plays a role in transcending this subject-object and agency-structure distinction. On the one hand, as the internalization of objective social structures, it entails objectivity; on the other hand, as the subject’s means of relating to others in a practical manner in specific social contexts, it entails subjectivity. According to his theory, Bourdieu sees social actions and practices as the outcome of the interaction between internalized structures of habitus and the objective structures, external to the subject which he names as *field*. A social field, constituted by a set of social positions of different actors and their interrelations, provides the social setting in which habitus operates. On schematic terms, Bourdieu’s theory of practice takes the following form:




According to this form, several aspects which illustrate the usefulness of the Bourdieu's social theory and make up deficiencies in current literature in terms of Chinese women migrant workers' identity transformation and living strategies need to be highlighted. Firstly, the emphasis of the dialectical relationship between habitus and field in Bourdieu's theory enables the possibilities for revealing the dynamic and complex interactions between existence of these returned women migrant workers and the external social structures. For Bourdieu, habitus is extremely close to field. On one side, field, the objective social structures, structure the habitus; on the other, habitus is constitutive of the field in that it endows the latter with 'sense and value' to make it worthy to invest one's energy (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:127). Considering the distinctive structures of urban and rural settings in contemporary China, we could say that, the characteristic structures of feeling, habitus, which is specific to these two fields, can be generated and inscribed on individual migrants. Ever since China's reform and opening-up, the differentiations between urban and rural fields have been extending not only in material features but also the social milieus especially in terms of lifestyles and consumption habits. Hence, whether it's from the countryside to the urban cities, or in the opposite direction, internal labor migration typically involves a constant readjustment of these rural migrant workers' habitus. For Chinese women migrant workers who have returned to the rural origins, they would take a sense of the rural–urban differences with them and probably bring home new gender habitus. However, this does not mean the original habitus inculcated from their early childhood in the countryside can be totally erased by the new habitus obtained in urban cities. According to

Bourdieu's definition, although profoundly dynamic, habitus, as a bodily product of history, is relatively a stable and conservative entity, "whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production" (Bourdieu 1990b:55). Actually, it incorporates the social positions of individual actors and the cultural and historical context in which these actors are located. Empirical studies have proved the persistence and continuity of the deeply ingrained cultural patterns via habitus in a state of pre-consciousness (Alayan and Yair 2009). It is recognized that the cultural aspects of habitus, which mostly expressed themselves in the form of beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and values, can be lived out as the basis for identities and continuously exerts influences on the existing social conditions through social practices. Such durable and pre-reflexive nature of habitus highlights the necessity of acknowledging traditional culture and localization in understanding Chinese women migrant workers' self-identity formation and living experiences of switching between urban and rural fields.

The traditional Chinese culture, which is typically characterized by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, are the roots of the development of these migrant workers' habitus (Wang 2005b). Growing up in Chinese countryside where the pace of social transformations is relatively slow, the habitus of all these women migrant workers has been imprinted on traditional Chinese culture. This cultural habitus is a collective phenomenon and implicitly shared by all these rural women. Since Chinese society has undergone profound changes and has witnessed the influx of new trends of thoughts, the cultural habitus inculcated by these women workers' early childhood experiences in their rural past would appear to be old-fashioned or even unacceptable. But the deeply ingrained cultural habitus is still partially precipitated over relatively long periods of time. It would continuously influence the social practices of Chinese women migrant workers even when steeping themselves in an atmosphere of modern culture in urban cities. While talking with these returned women about their new life in rural towns and villages, some key concepts originated from traditional Chinese culture, like

guanxi (关系, guān xì), mianzi (面子, miàn zǐ), li (礼, 理, lǐ) frequently came up in their narratives to explain their choices and strategies in the face of troubles and difficulties. The interpretation of China's reality only through western concepts and theoretical framework without giving enough attention to the specificity and persistence of Chinese culture could, in Márquez's words, "serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary."[11] This dilemma is quite common in today's Chinese studies conducted by both Chinese and overseas scholars.

Secondly, the time-space perspective implied in Bourdieu's conception of habitus enables us to view current social existence, living strategies and self-identity of these returned women migrant workers in terms of continuity and change rather than as a snapshot. Central to Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus is a temporary dimension by which objective structure are internalized over time "through the formative experiences of earliest infancy, of the whole collective history of family and class" (Bourdieu 1990b:91). This frames habitus as a dynamic and contingent phenomenon, dependent upon both structured subjective experiences and on the opportunities presented by any particular field. As Sayer noted, "later experiences can modify the habitus and produce new dispositions and skills, enabling people to react in new ways. To the extent that their habitus does become modified, they may feel comfortable in contexts where they might not have done earlier" (Sayer 2005:25). In this way, habitus links not only the internal disposition of individual actors with their embeddedness in the power relations inherent in social structure, but also its application in present social conditions with individual actors' prior experiences in the past. Moreover, habitus also has its spatial dimension, which is mainly derived from its interdependence with the field. Bourdieu describes field as a multi-dimensional space of positions and relations, within which individual actors are distributed in the light of the

[11] See Gabriel García Márquez's Nobel lecture, "The Solitude of Latin America" delivered 8 December, 1982, at: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-lecture.html

overall volume and the relative weight of the different kinds of capital they possess (Bourdieu 1985; Bourdieu 1989). Actors draw on various capitals they have and struggle in pursuit of desirable resources within the field. From a static point of view, a field is a relatively autonomous structured space. This social space has its geographic basis, and to some extent, spatial distances coincide with social distances (Bourdieu 1989). Individual actors who are situated within this space have more common properties if they are closer. Adaptive habitus to a particular field is developed as a result of individual actors' continuing occupancy of certain positions within the field. It guides the individual actors' daily activities and determines their perception of this field which in turn contributes to the production of this field. As mentioned before, this field-specific habitus, however, does not essentially static, especially when individual actors have to enter another field and incorporate the rules of this new field. Bourdieu endows his concept of habitus with generative capacity, which makes it possible to transform itself to fit new circumstances. In this way, habitus also connects the field-specific schemas of perceptions, relations and practices with the facts that bodies constantly move across different spaces or fields. Together with its temporal dimension, the notion of habitus is capable of weaving together the spatial, historical and developmental aspects of actors' experiences.

Therefore, when studying the returned lives and identity transformation of these returned women migrant workers in rural China, this time-space dimension of habitus could contextualize their current rural living experiences in a pre-return perspective which takes both their rural childhood and city migration experiences into consideration. In doing so, we could see how the embodiments of the past experiences influence their current choices and strategies in rural homes in terms of continuity and change. Furthermore, it also provides a mean to view the interaction between returned women migrant workers and the changing rural and urban structures. This would allow us to view China's rural and urban areas as an integral society rather than as separate isolated worlds as the material circulation

and cultural dissemination persist through embodied migrant workers across time and space. In summary, through the application of Bourdieu's notion of habitus and theory of practice, we could find that the perceptions, improvised actions and daily practices of these returned women in current China's rural context demonstrate not only the co-presence of their past and present experiences but also the imbrications of fields of both urban and rural places.

Thirdly, the transformative potential in the conception of habitus and theory of practice opens the possibility to bring the creative aspects of returned women migrant workers' agency to light. According to Bourdieu's definition, although objectively regulated by external structures, habitus can also serve as a "strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations" (Bourdieu 1977:72). As "a socialized subjectivity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:126), habitus can constantly adjust itself to fit specific fields across which individual actors move. In this sense, habitus is not strictly determining but rather flexible to orient individual actors' actions beneath the level of consciousness. With the generative capacities of habitus, action is no more "the mere carrying out of a rule or obedience to a rule" (Bourdieu 1990a:123) and actors have more spaces to make creative and improvised responses to the dynamic structure of social worlds. This is particular the case for migrant workers who have endowed with a pre-migration habitus from their early experiences in natal communities were suddenly uprooted and entered into a new field of destination countries or cities. Migrants' socially mounted dispositions would be transformed or even dismantled by incorporating new sets of rules and values and imperatives of new fields, which in Bourdieu's words can be regarded as "second birth" (Bourdieu 1990b:68).

In exploring migrants' identity transformation and their migration experiences, the employment of the notion of habitus is not rare in existing migration studies. Most of them have typically highlighted the dualistic habitus the migrants inculcate in

the fields of both origin and destination (Erel 2010; Guarnizo 1997; Kelly and Lusis 2006; Mckay 2001; Wang 2005b). Although Bourdieu did make some arguments related to migration in his work, he never explicitly put forwards the terms like “dualistic habitus” or “dualistic dispositions”. What he did emphasize is the sense of disorientation individual actors may suffer from in unfamiliar places due to the discordance between body and field (Bourdieu 2008). Inspired by this kind of argument, most migration studies that adopt Bourdieusian approach tend to conclude that the navigation of a new habitus does not necessarily bring about a good life for these migrants but rather their disorientation and marginalization in the place of resettlement (Bauder 2005; Friedmann 2002). Or, some other studies emphasize the durability of original habitus which reinscribes social position and influence migrant’s lifestyles and attitudes towards others in the new field of place (Oliver and O'Reilly 2010). In a word, the simultaneity of both old and new habitus within individual migrants was thought to give rise to migrants’ identity ambiguities and difficulties in negotiating the contradictory tensions between their natal and migrating places (Marshall and Foster 2002). Confined to their understandings of migrants’ identity and experiences within this binary framework (old and new), all these studies fail to shed light on a transformative habitus these migrants may develop to introspect and change the conflictual situations they encounter during the migration process. The disjuncture between migrants’ body and the field seems perpetual and can never be surmounted by migrants in these studies. Also, the complexity of social worlds these migrants are located seems impossible to be addressed in this way.

Many scholars ascribe such limitation of empirical studies to the unbalance of Bourdieu’s theoretical constructs which favor the determinism rather than voluntarism (Calhoun, LiPuma, and Postone 1993; Jenkins 2002; Nash 1990). They argue that, despite Bourdieu’s original intention to transcend the classic agency-structure division, his theoretical arguments give little credit to individual’s agency in initiating social transformations but rather focus on the

reproduction of societies through constraining the transformative actions of individual actors. Bourdieu's arguments acknowledge that habitus can constantly adjust itself to later experiences and in accordance with different fields. However, those adjustments themselves are still constrained by the prepossessions of individual actors in a state of unconsciousness (Bottomley 1992), as habitus tends to 'provide itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible, that is, a relatively constant universe of situations tending to reinforce its dispositions'(Bourdieu 1990b:61). To those critics, the emphasis of primary socialization in shaping the habitus enables Bourdieu's world become reproductive rather than transformative. In the meantime, these theoretical critics have driven the emergence of studies that aim to improve Bourdieu's theory by bringing the transformative habitus to light. Coincidently, these studies all come to a similar conclusion that transformative habitus is more likely to be produced in the time of either traumatic life changes or social unrest in which the power structures within fields are dramatically changed and actors' habitus modeled by the prior structure become old-fashioned (Crossley 2003).

According to Bourdieu's argument about the revolutionary potential in objective situations when the congruence between body and field is brutally broken(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), it is reasonable for these studies to address the transformative agency by locating the actors at particular socio-historical moments or time of crises. But this does not mean transformative habitus cannot be developed through actors' day-to-day practices within the micro-level contexts where multiple fields are overlapping with each other. As Bourdieu himself notes, "one cannot grasp the most profound logic of the social world unless one becomes immersed in the specificity of an empirical reality" (Bourdieu 1993:271). For him, given the "diversity of conditions, the corresponding diversity of habitus and the multiplicity of intra-and intergenerational movements of ascent or decline", habitus is not necessarily coherent and may "be confronted with conditions of actualization different from those in which it is produced" (Bourdieu

2000:160-161). All these arguments imply that the complicity between body and field can be challenged at both macro and micro level of analysis. Exemplary migration studies in this regard are Parker's examination of the diasporic habitus of British Chinese in a takeaway (Parker 2000) and Noble's exploration of migrant resettlement experiences through drawing on a bilingual speech at a community organization event (Noble 2013). Both of them acknowledge the potential of migrants' transformative agency by highlighting the dynamics of the specific situations and settings which allow for the imbrications of different fields.

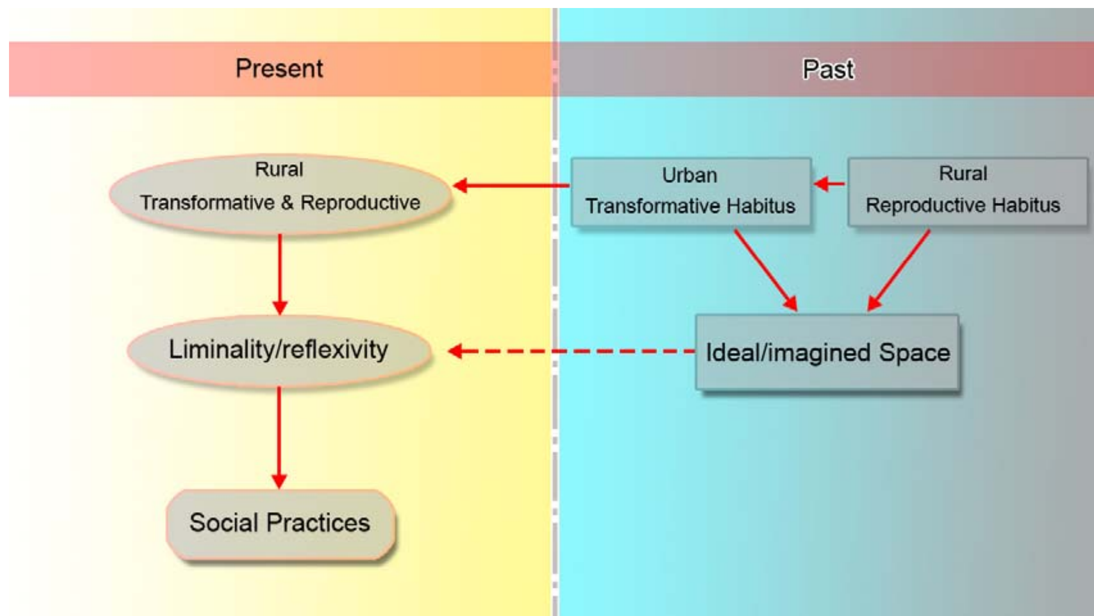
Frankly speaking, critics who label Bourdieu as reproduction theorists or structuralists have not really grasped the essence of his theory. What Bourdieu has devoted all his life to account for is not pure human agency but rather one in a constrained world (Dillabough 2004; Harker 1984; Harker and May 1993). This restrained agency is mainly attempted to demonstrate the ubiquitous contention or competition of all social life rather than the unyielding authority of compelling structures. "Struggle, not 'reproduction', is the master metaphor at the core of his thought" (Wacquant 2008:264). These criticisms have missed the point and can do no good to theoretical improvement and explorations of empirical studies. In her re-examinations of gender identities in current feminist studies, McLeod's arguments really provoke insightful and enlightening thoughts in employing Bourdieu's habitus and theory. After showing how gender stability and instability co-exist and intersect in current theoretical explorations, she argues the critical challenge today is not to choose either side of the binary (reproduction or transformation, freedom or resistance), but to "theorize both change and continuity, invention and repetition, and understanding the forms they take today"(McLeod 2005:24). This is a point that can also apply to migration studies. In current migration studies, although the dualistic dispositions migrants embodied by moving across different fields are repeatedly demonstrated, we could hardly see how migrants' habitus both changes and retains in the context of migration and return. For those returned women migrant workers, studies about

how their gender habitus have changed or reconfirmed during migration and return are even scantier.

Actually, as I mentioned in the second point, the time-space dimension implied in the concept of habitus and Bourdieu's theory does show potentials of conceptualizing both continuity and change in migrants' identity and practices. More importantly, Bourdieu acknowledges the uneven effects of different fields on the embodiment and the imbrications of different fields within specific conditions (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This means habitus would be inevitably embodied with distinctions and even conflicts as actors move across different fields. Actors will always find themselves in the situations which require reflexivity and creative strategies to negotiate the tensions inflicted by these distinctions. But Bourdieu himself just makes the point without fully exploring it in his own work. While emphasizing the unity of habitus "which retranslates the intrinsic and relational characteristics of a position into unitary lifestyles" (Bourdieu 1998:8), he seems unconcerned with the internal complexities of subjectivities embedded from the overlapping but distinct fields, and how actors externalize their ambiguities and uncertainties to improvised actions. Therefore, more empirical research is necessary to fully realize and improve his conceptual framework in social reality. It is exactly the reason for this thesis to employ Bourdieu's theory to examine the daily practices of returned women migrant workers in rural China. In doing so, it would enrich our understandings in terms of the dynamics of social worlds and the complexities of subjectivities.

Cognizant of the durable but generative capacities of habitus and in order to highlight its functional effects in social conditions, I generally classify the habitus of these returned women migrant workers into two categories: reproductive habitus that is mainly inculcated from their early childhood experiences before migrating for urban works; and transformative habitus which is acquired from their late migration experiences. Although, for analytical purposes, these two

kinds of dispositions will be considered separately, they are indeed dialectically related to each other and can simultaneously coexist within individual returned women migrants. Through the representations of these two dispositions in women's daily practices, I attempt to explore both the change and continuity relating to these rural women themselves and the ever-changing rural context in which they are now located. In the context of rural China, the reproductive and transformative traits of habitus leads us to expect that in some situations, those returned women migrant workers would tend to reproduce the constraints they feel in social conditions, while in others they would see the possibilities for improvisation and creatively engage themselves in rural development.




The above graph shows the process of how returned women migrant workers' habitus is formed and transformed along with their migration and return, and how their current social practices are continuously shaped by the imbrications of urban and rural fields within current rural context. The life history of these returned women migrant workers, by far, can be broadly divided into three phases according to the places they have moved across: rural childhood, labor migration in urban cities and present rural lives after return. Growing up in the relatively isolated countryside without much contact with the outside world, these women

would immerse themselves in the sets of local rules and customs and tend to generate reproductive habitus that is attuned to the rural field. The subsequent labor migration experiences in urban field undoubtedly endow them with more alternatives, which could possibly enable their habitus to bear certain transformative traits. Of course, certain reproductive characteristics of their habitus cannot be necessarily replaced by the transformative one. Considering the constancy and inertia of habitus, we could also expect to see these women migrant workers would continue to judge their social conditions in urban field according to the rules of their rural origins. When it is time for returning to the home villages/town, these female migrant workers go back with the hybrid identity of reproductive and transformative dispositions, which will lead to their sense of liminality, the identity confusion of belonging neither to the cities they once lived in nor villages/town they regarded as home. In this thesis, I use the concept of liminality mainly because it has both negative and positive effects. Turner likens the liminal status to the process of gestation and child rearing, during which "undoing, dissolution, decomposition are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation and the reformation of old elements in new patterns" (Turner 1967:99). For these returned women, staying liminal would possibly bring about reflexivity and creative strategies to transform situations in favor of their needs and expectations. This sense of liminality would either be permanent if these two systems of disposition can coexist within their habitus and then externalize for transformative actions, or transitional if, after staying a long time in home villages/town, the transformative habitus gradually fades with the embodiment of the present rural structures. For the latter, actors with newly-embodied reproductive habitus tend to take themselves and their current rural society for granted rather than recognizing there are ways that the situation could be transformed. Moreover, I would argue that there exists an imagined space which accommodates their memories of their past rural childhood and urban working experiences and their expectations towards their renewed rural lives after return. This imagined space can be somewhat regarded as a new field where the urban

and rural fields in the past imbricated with each other. Within this imagined field, the memories of the past and expectations towards future, although carried out at a conscious level, still reflect the underlying reproductive and transformative dispositions these women inculcated from their prior experiences of rural childhood and urban migration. When deciding on their strategies in reinventing their lives and identities upon their return, especially within specific contexts or situations, these women would constantly reflect on this imagined space. One crucial point is that rural and urban fields are never static but are ever changing under the constant struggles of all the actors within the two fields. It would be sure that they are now different from the imagined field of these returned women. Therefore, the disparity between the imagined space and the actual rural space at present would also contribute to the emergence of these women's reflexivity which will enable them to develop a certain critical distance from their situations and initiate transformative actions. However, what it is that makes the habitus predominantly reproductive or transformative, how it is that such simultaneity of dispositions become inscribed on the body, and whether or not they can externalize the hybrid dispositions for social actions, are matters requiring further consideration within specific situations.

A further issue is the reflexive capability of these returned women migrant workers, which is strategically important for their identity transformation and generation of their transformative agency. Bourdieu actually gives little insight into the agent's reflexive capability and the process of externalization of habitus for strategically actions. In his discussion, actors are oriented to behave in certain ways on a pre-reflexive level rather than through conscious calculation. The strategic choices and conscious calculations, if they exist, just tend to 'carry out at a conscious level the operations that habitus carries out its own way' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:131). Following this understanding of practice, Bourdieu relates reflexivity to "the systematic exploration of the 'unthought categories of thought that delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought'" (Bourdieu and

Wacquant 1992:40), which can only emerge from the dissonance between habitus and field when the power relations within the particular field are dramatically reconfigured. It seems that reflexivity itself is a form of habitus and operates in certain ways predisposed by the underlying dispositions. Then, the questions would be: how do these women come to reflect on the unconscious categories that shape their behaviors while switching between different social fields? How to explain the sense of liminality these returned women often feel in their daily practices after return? How can they develop certain strategies to transform their situations to meet their expectations? Or in other words, how and why do dispositional identity transform into conscious calculation, representation and even struggle?

Undoubtedly, such limited reflexivity has become an easy target of critics to accuse Bourdieu of holding a determinist stance. However, as Lawler argues, identity should be understood "not as belonging within the individual person, but as produced between persons and within social relations" (Lawler 2014:19). The autonomous self-development of reflexivity actually obscure and negate the cultural specificity of identity formation and the ubiquity of cultural contexts (Adams 2003). In this sense, I would agree with Adkin's explanation about Bourdieu's reflexivity as a situated one rather than being cognitive, since "knowledge of the world never concerns an external knowing consciousness" (Adkins 2004:24). Reflexivity, in Bourdieu's version, cannot be understood as a spontaneous capacity that actors develop to critically reflect on their habitus and deconstruct the prescribed rules without being manipulated by external structures. (Adams 2003). To answer the questions proposed in the last paragraph, I would argue the problem of Bourdieu's dispositional reflexivity mainly derives from its incapability to connect other aspects of identity and externalize itself for creative strategies. Studies have exhibited that, other than dispositional aspect, identity also have some more reflexive and self-consciously aspects which could open the possibilities for reflexive identification and collective behaviors (Billig 1995;

Brubaker 2004). Actors inevitably engage in the continuous interactions with other social actors in the social field, the process of which is of great significance to understand their identity and improvised actions but always downplayed by the Bourdieusian studies. Realizing 'the problematic role of reflexivity is perhaps better framed as a question of the intersubjective nature of practice'(Bottero 2010:12), Bottero futher suggests that the interactive-situational dimension should be taken into account to give a full explanation of actor's pre-reflexive and strategical actions within particular contexts. Therefore, in the particular case of these returned women, when analyzing the formation and transformation of these returned female migrants' habitus and its externalization for actions for change, we need to situate them in a specific context and explore their negotiation with other actors in their family and the rural communities as a whole. That is exactly why the proposed study put forward the three levels of analytical framework.

On the individual level, the proposed study will focus on the exploration of individual's dispositional identity, especially the construction and reconstruction of these returned women's gender-specific habitus during the process of out-migration and return. For Bourdieu, social practice is a practice ordered and structured according to systems of classification. Gender is one of the most powerful classifications "that differentiates according to both antagonistic and complementary principles, and operates as a high complex, differentiated, and vital symbolic order" (Krais 2006:129). The symbolic order of gender is embodied in the individual's habitus as a gendered view of the world which is a strongly normative vision of what men and women should look like, behave, and think. A gender-specific habitus thus means an identity that internalizes the division of labor between the genders in a pre-reflexive way. Through the gender habitus, which is deep-seated and constantly reinforced by the unconscious investments in conventional images of masculinity and femininity, Bourdieu argues that women participate in the reproduction of their own subordinate position. Is it still the case for these returned female migrant workers in Chinese

countryside? Are there any possibilities for reshaping their gender habitus while switching between the rural and urban fields? If there are, how and to what extent have their identity and values towards gender roles and relations been formed and transformed? What is the contestation between their reproductive habitus and transformative habitus?

On the family level, the negotiation and reconstruction of gender and inter/intra-family relations among different family members will be highlighted. Family is not only a physical location but also a matrix of social relations, and can be perceived as one type of social network and of potential social capital. Migration affects both the family members who do not migrate and those who do, not only in the way of remittances, information, values, but also the social relations among these members. After they return to their home villages/town with new lifestyles, ideas, perspectives, etc, these returned female have to constantly engage in the renegotiation of their social relations and positions with other agents within the family. I will explore how such negotiation will either reinforce or weaken the original power relations among family members and to see whether these newly negotiated power relations create new opportunities or new restrictions. Also, by situating these women in the family arena, I will see whether and how they develop reflection on self-identification and strategies for meeting their expectations in interacting with others.

On the community level, the proposed study will focus on two aspects. On the one hand, it will explore how these returned female migrants interact with other actors in the rural communities, like their peers, local government officials, working colleagues, etc., to see whether and to what extent their city experience and changed gender habitus can empower them and enable them to have more access to social resources. Bourdieu tends to overstate the uniformity of group dispositions in generating joint practices, and to understate the adjustments, constraints, and all joint practices necessitates. Exploring other actors with various

dispositions will give us a full explanation on how different forces jointly contribute to women's identity transformation and their social practices. On the other hand, it will examine the shared habitus of these returned women inculcated from their similar experiences of out-migration and return. In Bourdieu's discussion, actors with shared habitus similarly located in social space are more likely to see, and be seen, as "the same". Through such shared habitus, we will see whether it might enable them to establish a certain kind of network and to mobilize collective activities.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I critically engage with existing literatures in order to address the primary concern of this research, which is the under-representation of Chinese rural women in return migration studies as a gendered category. I review two theoretical approaches of migration, seeing how they influence empirical studies on Chinese labor migration. I have given special attention to Chinese return migration studies and feminist scholarship on the identity formation of Chinese female migrant workers, and have summarized contributions and limitations in this regard. Then I proposed Bourdieu's concept of habitus and theory of practice as an analytical starting point to understand returned rural women's identity transformation and their living experiences in Chinese countryside. I acknowledge the potential of Bourdieu's theory to bring transformative agency to light and analyze the continuity and change relating to these returned women migrant workers' identities and practices. I have moreover pointed out the necessity of a contextual analysis to further a Bourdieusian understanding of complex subjectivities and the dynamics of social worlds. In the following chapters I develop a relevant theoretical framework to guide the empirical explorations.

# Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter has three main purposes. First, it briefly discusses the rationale for a qualitative approach in exploring the identity transformation and social practices of returned women migrants in rural China. Following this is an introduction to the fieldwork site of research: Qianjiang, a county-level city in Hubei Province. Then comes a detailed description of the research in practice, including data collection methods, sampling, instrument design and related ethical issues.

## 3.1 Rationale for the Qualitative Approach

The social sciences and humanities have witnessed a continuous debate over the relative merits of quantitative and qualitative approaches, a debate which, in Bryman's view, is not only over technical issues of choosing specific methods but also philosophical issues related to research paradigms (Bryman 1984). The paradigms, as sets of basic beliefs underpinning the research process, can be examined according to researchers' responses to three fundamental questions: "what is the nature of reality (ontology)", "what is the nature of the relationship between the knower and the known (epistemology)", and "how should the inquirer go about finding out the knowledge (methodology)" (Guba 1990:18; Guba and Lincoln 1994:108). Researchers' choices between these two approaches to their studies are determined by their implicitly ontological and epistemological position (Marsh and Furlong 2010). In general, a quantitative approach often commits to a realist ontology and adopts a positivist stance which exhibits a preoccupation with objectivity and causality and aims to generalize universal laws (Bryman 1984), while a qualitative approach is more often employed by theorists in other paradigms, who tend to explore the social world through the subjects' eyes and are concerned with the meanings attributed to the social world and the experiences of the subjects themselves (Berg and Lune 2012; Willig 2013).

As discussed in the previous chapter, in government policies and academic studies, Chinese migrant workers have been portrayed as a structurally disadvantaged group and their return behavior as either a source of social instability or a force for rural modernization. Alongside this, feminist scholarship has highlighted the role of structural constraints, such as state policies, a capitalist market, and a patriarchal culture, in forming Chinese women migrant workers' identity and contributing to their miserable living experiences both in urban cities and in their rural places of origin. At first I accepted the implicitly ontological position of these dominant assumptions that take these rural women as the passive recipients of various social constraints and as victims of China's modernization project, who have little say in their own destiny, and I therefore focused on their re-integration problems into rural communities and the social stratification within Chinese rural society. As my research progressed, the women migrants I interviewed unfolded a dramatic picture according to which they are actively engaged in the production of social conditions by employing traditional cultural norms and creative strategies learned from their rural past and urban working experiences. Informed by this fieldwork experience, I gradually switched to a constructivist ontological stance which argues that social reality exists rather as a set of holistic and meaning-bounded constructions through human practices, so that it is necessary to understand the complex world of subjects' lived experiences from their own point of view (Crotty 1998; Lincoln 1990; Walter 2010). This philosophical framework stems from the German intellectual tradition of hermeneutics and the Verstehen tradition in sociology, from phenomenology, and from critiques of positivism in the social sciences. The constructivist position is marked by an interest in exploring the ways that social beings interact in the social world and the situation-specific meanings they give to the world they live in. This position enables me to grasp these returned women's understandings of their urban migration experiences and current rural situations after their return, and more specifically, their creative strategies in response to the tensions between these two different fields of urban and rural spaces. Moreover, this constructivist position

makes it clear that the complexities of the social world cannot be fully captured by current political and academic accounts, which downplay the subjectivity, agency and meaning and simply project these rural women as marginalized others.

In consideration of this anti-foundationalist stance, the epistemological perspective of this study is constructivism, which informs a qualitative exploration of these returned women migrant workers' identity formation and living strategies in the current Chinese rural context (Bryman 2012; LeCompte, Preissle, and Tesch 1993; Miles and Huberman 1994). The qualitative approach requires the researcher to be more sensitive to the complexities of the phenomena under investigation and insists that the researcher closely examine the "real life" contexts. Thus, when studying the lived world of women migrant workers who have returned to their rural hometowns, the qualitative approach requires the researcher to capture the various social contexts and habitus confronted by the returned women in their full complexity. Moreover, given that the intent of this study is to document returned women migrant workers' interpretations of the events, processes, and structures of their lives, and to understand the frame of mind that shapes their perceptions, assumptions, judgments and dispositions in developing coping strategies for dealing with their liminality as they transition from an urban to a rural habitus, a qualitative approach will offer greater room for in-depth exploration and negotiation. A further advantage in using a qualitative approach for this study is that the qualitative data generated from the research will be richly detailed, allowing for broader and deeper theoretical reflection on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and agency.

Taking into consideration that this research inquiry is largely concerned with private domains and that the research subjects are not a socially privileged group, this study uses ethnography as its main research strategy to uncover possible and plausible explanations on the returned female migrant workers' decisions in

dealing with their transformative habitus in their rural communities. This approach is consistent with other early work on return migration in China conducted by sociologists using a qualitative approach.

Derived from the discipline of anthropology, ethnography is not only a method of data gathering, but also a tool of strong epistemological significance for studying a given society and/or culture from a holistic perspective, a tool that allows the multiplicity of complex conceptual structures to be understood fully. The hallmark of ethnography is fieldwork, working with people in their natural settings for an extended time to see how they meet their everyday demands. The voices of participants are an important source of data and should be allowed to be heard in the written end-product, which should be a coherent, fluent and readable narrative (Boyle 1994; Muecke 1994). Hammersley and Atkinson summarize five features of most ethnographic work (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007):

- People's actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher—such as in experimental setups or in highly structured interview situations.
- Data are gathered from a range of sources, including documentary evidence of various kinds, but participant observation and/or relatively informal conversations are usually the main sources.
- Data collection is relatively 'unstructured'.
- The focus is usually on a few cases, generally fairly small-scale, perhaps a single setting or group of people.
- The data analysis involves interpretation of the meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts.

Through fieldwork it is thought that the researcher should document people's

beliefs and practices from their own perspectives, interpreting the social meanings of their behaviors from the 'emic', or insider's view of reality. Yet, as cultural selves, seeing is inevitably filtered through the researchers' own ideas, which makes it impossible for researchers to see completely through others' eyes and write themselves out of the ethnography. Moreover, ethnography always begins with a problem or topic of interest which reflects certain conceptual and theoretical foundations. This usually requires the researchers to consider data as a field of interferences in which theoretical assumptions can be identified. The researchers' task, then, is not only to describe insider's meanings, but to interpret them into concepts comprehensible to individuals outside the given society. In that sense, an 'etic' perspective, which is to say the external, social scientific perspective on reality, is also necessary for ethnographic research. As Boyle points out, the emic perspective is at the heart of ethnography, while the etic perspective is the researchers' abstractions or scientific explanations of reality (Boyle 1994). Combining the 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives can produce a deeper explanation of how people in particular contexts experience their social and cultural worlds.

### 3.2 Locating the research: Qianjiang, Hubei Province

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Qianjiang, a county-level city in Hubei Province. There are several reasons for choosing Qianjiang as the fieldwork site:

- Hubei province, located in central China, is one of the major sending provinces of migrant workers; Under the state's policy of "vacating the nest and changing the bird"[12] (腾笼换鸟, téng lóng huàn niǎo), Hubei province has actively been undertaking the coastal industrial transfer in

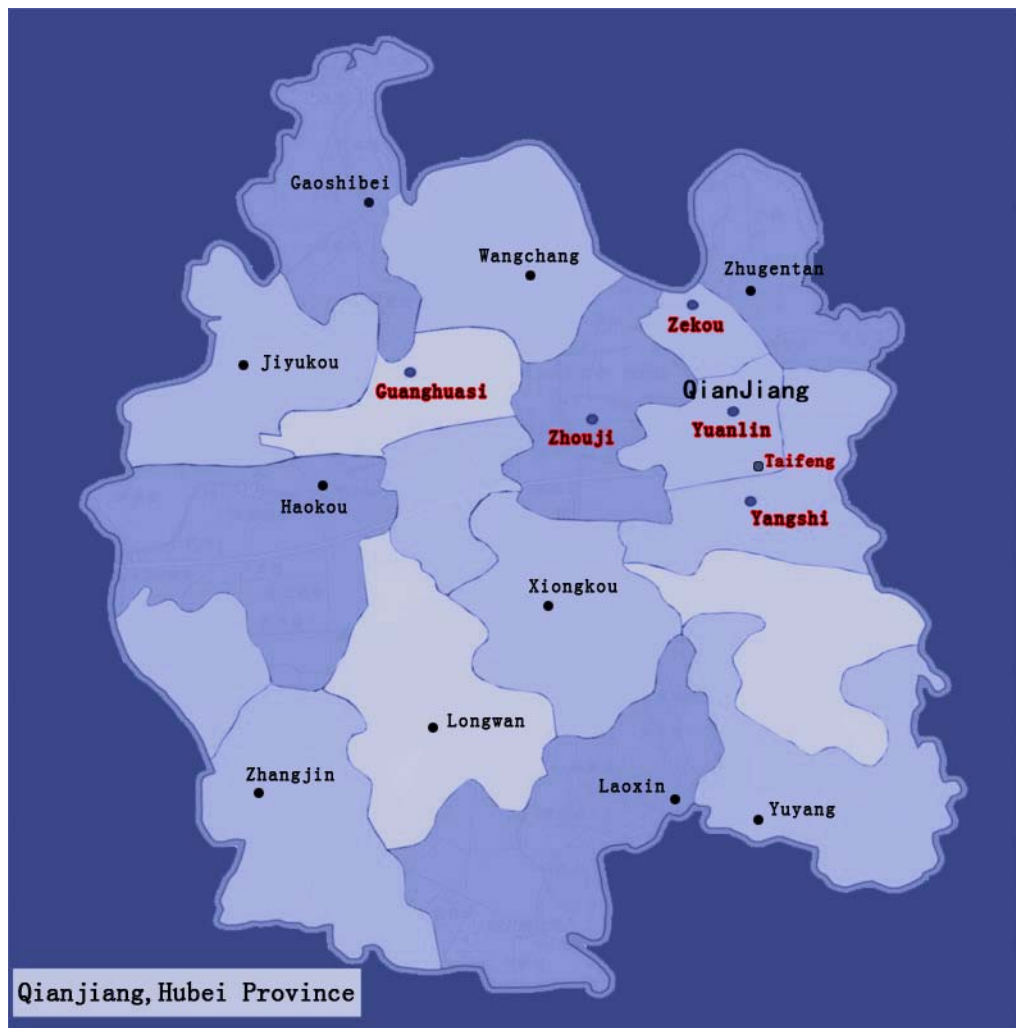
[12] "Vacating the nest and changing the bird" is regarded as a strategic measure to realize the optimization and upgrade of a country's industrial structure in the process of economic development. This policy is widely conducted by China's southeast cities in recent years which devoted themselves to transfer the labor-intensive industry out of their industrial bases in order to make room for the high-tech industry with advanced productivity.

recent years, contributing to its growing manufacturing industry. Thus, an increasing number of women migrant workers who used to concentrate in manufacturing industry in China's coastal cities choose to return home.

- Qianjiang, an established agricultural city, has witnessed an increase in the mobility of local peasants to work in big cities since the marketization of the countryside following economic reform in the late 1970s. Now, it is a common phenomenon for local peasants to move back and forth between Qianjiang and the big cities. For the past few years, Qianjiang has introduced a series of preferential policies such as tax reduction and exemption, sites and services providing, to attract the return of manufacturing enterprises from coastal cities. In the circumstances, more and more outgoing rural women returned home along with enterprises to enjoy the convenience of working in the doorway of their home.

- Return migration is not just a Hubei or Qianjiang phenomenon. Actually, previous studies have shown that all the major migrant labor output provinces such as Anhui, Sichuan, Hunan and so on have witnessed a considerable amount of return flow (Bai and He 2003). Theoretically, a comparative study of those provinces could provide a better understanding of the living situation of Chinese returned women migrant workers. However, due to the limited research time and grant, it is extremely difficult to conduct such a large scale of comparative study by myself alone. Moreover, a good ethnographic study requires a deep understanding of local cultural context. Qianjiang is my hometown, where I have lived for almost twenty years. My parents and many of my relatives still live there. It is easy for me to establish a rapport and trust with local residents and invite them to be part of my research.

Figure 3 Administrative Districts of Qianjiang




Located in central Hubei Province, the hinterland of Jianghan plain, Qianjiang covers an area of 2,004 square kilometers, including 6 sub-district offices, 10 rural townships, and 344 villages. As shown in the administrative zoning map above, areas labeled in red are the six sub-district offices, and those in black are the ten rural townships. This division of administrative regions in Qianjiang has been relatively stable ever since the abolition of the people's commune system and restoration of village government in 1985, when the household contract responsibility system was rapidly promoted throughout the country. What has changed is the titles of the different administrative levels as a result of the merger of *xiang* (乡, xiāng) with the dissolution of the districts in 1987, and the establishment of a county-level city with revocation of the county approved by the

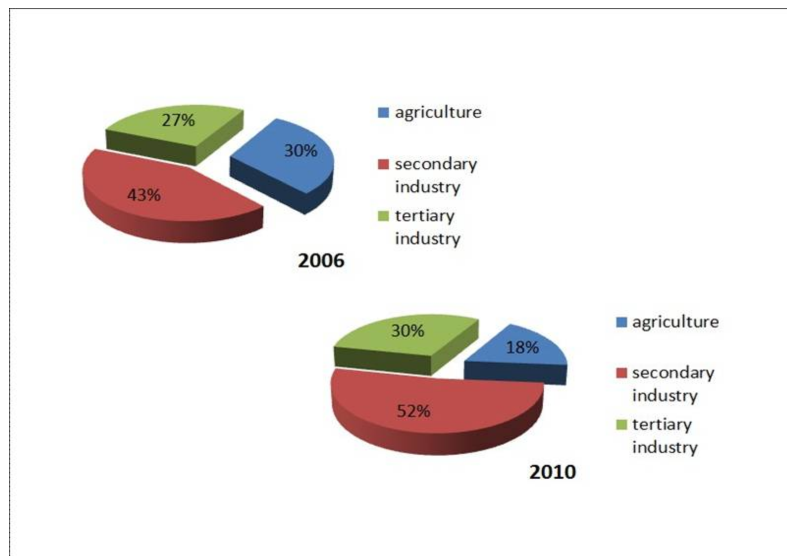
state council in 1988. For example, the original 10 districts in 1985 have been retitled as rural townships except for Yangshi district, which in 1995 was changed into a sub-district office. Wangchang, which used to be one of the three main towns, has since 1985 been one of the ten rural townships. At the very beginning, there were only three sub-district offices within the administrative region of Qianjiang city, namely, Yuanlin, Zekou, and Guanghuasi. To some extent, we could say that the administrative position of current sub-district offices is equivalent to that of the towns in 1985 and *xiang* (乡, xiāng) in 1987, although their administrative functions are different. Due to the need to accelerate urbanization, the sub-district offices have increased from the original 3 in 1988 to the current 6 as of 2011, adding Yangshi and Zhouji in 1995, and Taifeng in 2010. At present, the Yuanlin sub-district office is located at the downtown of this small city.

Qianjiang's economy used to be dominated by agriculture, as the flat topography and humid climate within this area provides favorable farming conditions. Ever since the establishment of New China in 1949, the local government has devoted considerable labor and financial resources to the reclamation of wasteland and establishment of various state farms. By 1985, the number of state farms within its administrative region had risen to 23, significantly boosting Qianjiang's economic development and supporting the socialist construction of the whole country. To date there remain six state farms within the administrative region of this small city, although some of the farms exist in name only. With the deepening of industrialization and urbanization promoted by government at all levels, some of the original farming land has in recent years been expropriated for real estate development and industrial enterprises. Employees in such farms now can no longer engage in farming, but rather have to find temporary work in the surrounding factories and enterprises. Nonetheless, the diverse and rich agricultural products in this area, such as paddy rice, wheat, grains, cole, cotton, etc, has already gained this county-level city a long-standing reputation as "the

land of fish and rice” (鱼米之乡, yú mǐ zhī xiāng).

Striving to turn Qianjiang into an industrialized city, the local government has in the past three decades launched a series of measures to accelerate economic development and upgrade industrial structures. To provide favorable economic environment, three provincial-level economic zones have been established in Zekou, Yuanlin, and Zhangjin since 2005. At the same time, preferential financial policies have been adopted to attract capital investment in local industries. The following pie chart shows that the proportion of agricultural industry in this city has been significantly narrowed during the eleventh five-year plan of economic development. At the last year of this eleventh five-year plan, agriculture represents a much smaller proportion, declining from 30% in 2006 to 18% in 2010. Now, Qianjiang claims itself as a semi-industrial city, being home to five pillar industries: oil and gas production, metallurgical machinery, pharmaceutical chemicals, textile and garments, agricultural and sideline products processing industry.

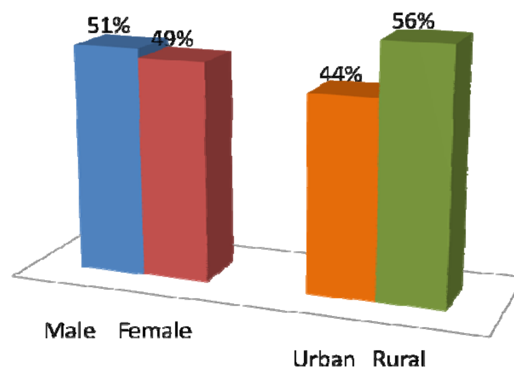
Figure 4 Composition of Gross Domestic Product in Qianjiang[13]




[13] Data source: Qianjiang Statistics Bureau (ed.) .2011. Qianjiang Statistic Yearbook 2010. Qianjiang: Qianjiang Baile Printing Co., Ltd, pp227.

After several years' pursuit of industrialization and urbanization following economic reform, Qianjiang retains a majority agricultural population. According to the data collected from the local statistical bureau, the total population of Qianjiang in 2010 was 1,021,411, 49% of which are female and 56% of which are Hukou holders[14]. Nonetheless, compared to the percentage of the rural population in 2000 census, which was 62.48%[15], the statistics in 2010 prove that, with the local government's efforts, the level of population urbanization in this city has been taking on an upward trend.

Figure 5 Population Proportions of Qianjiang in 2010




In almost every rural family in Qianjiang, there are always a few members, both men and women, who once worked or currently are working in the cities as migrant workers. Since 1985, when market forces were integrated into resource distribution in rural society, and the barriers between urban cities and the countryside were broken up[16], migrating out to find work in big cities has gradually become a universal phenomenon in rural Qianjiang. According to the available statistics on the local chronicles, the number of peasants in Qianjiang

[14] Data source: Qianjiang Statistics Bureau (ed.) .2011. Qianjiang Statistic Yearbook 2010. Qianjiang: Qianjiang Baile Printing Co., Ltd, pp97.

[15] Data source: Qianjiang Local Chronicles Compilation Committee .2009. Qianjiang County Annals (1986-2005).Beijing:Chinese Cultural and Historical Press, pp113.

[16] In January, 1985, the Communist Party and State Council issued ten policies on further energizing the rural economy, policies that reformed the state monopoly of purchasing and distributing agricultural products by opening up to market forces and permitting the peasants to run their own business, initiate tertiary industry, and provide various labor services in cities. For details, see http://finance.people.com.cn/GB/8215/135583/8145899.html

who migrated to work in big cities has risen dramatically from 2,132 in 1996 to 141,677 in 2005[17]. Even so, officials from the local statistics bureau told me that the official statistics are much lower than the actual numbers due to the difficulties in collecting data in villages.

It is worth noting that most of these migrant peasants from Qianjiang, especially women migrants, tend to concentrate in the garment industry of the big cities. Scholars usually ascribe the concentration of women migrants in factory work to institutional and socio-cultural constraints, such as patriarchal ideology, limited social networks for searching jobs, and gender segregation of urban labor market (Fan 2003). Such explanations are to some extent reasonable. But as I mentioned in the last chapter, these explanations replace migrant workers' practical logic with the theoretical logic of the researchers themselves by disconnecting migrant worker's living strategies in urban spaces from their past experiences in rural contexts. For women migrant workers from Qianjiang, working in garment factories should not just be a choice of last resort, but rather an accustomed one based on their living skills inculcated in the past rural context. According to the historical records, tailoring shops started to appear in almost every market town in Qianjiang in the late Qing Dynasty. In revolutionary times, several garment factories were established in Qianjiang to make and provide military supplies for the New Forth Army. In Mao's era, professional sewing households in Qianjiang were organized into 33 communes in 1958 and then merged into 8 garment factories after the abolition of the people's commune system. In the post-Mao period of reform and opening-up, the garment industry in Qianjiang was one of the first to introduce advanced equipment from Germany and Japan to expand its production capability. With more than a hundred year of tailoring history, Qianjiang is famous as a "tailors' hometown" (裁缝之乡, cái féng zhī xiāng), and continuously provides skillful tailors to garment factories inside and outside

[17] Data source: Qianjiang Local Chronicles Compilation Committee .2009. Qianjiang County Annals (1986-2005).Beijing:Chinese Cultural and Historical Press, pp240.

the city. As a child I saw family workshops of tailoring and self-employed tailor shops everywhere, in villages and in towns. This prosperity is partly owing to the fact that Qianjiang is rich in cotton, ramie, and silk, the basic materials for making clothes. Growing up in such an environment, women in Qianjiang liked wearing hand-made clothes, and would acquire tailoring skills of basic or advanced degree. Therefore, if the income of a rural household is not enough to pay the tuition fee of their children, or if the children fail the college entrance examination, rural parents tend to seek a crafts apprenticeship for their children, which, in most cases, is the tailoring apprenticeship. When they migrate to the big cities after completing their apprenticeship, these young people are more likely to find jobs in garment factories.

Migration is never a linear movement. Once they began to migrate, these women migrant workers kept moving back and forth between Qianjiang and the outer cities. Many of them eventually chose to stay at home without going out again. According to statistics issued by the local labor and social security bureau, in 2009, 30,519 migrant women workers returned to Qianjiang, and the number has been increasing [18]. Indeed, this homebound rush of women migrant workers can somewhat alleviate the growing demand for labor in local industrial factories, especially the manufacturing industry. After their return, these women migrant workers either find jobs in factories or run their own small retail businesses in townships. Government at all levels has worked hard to prevent the potential problems brought about by this returning boom of migrant workers, launching a series of measures to maximize the positive impacts to rural development. One of the important measures is the Spring Action (春风行动, chūn fēng xíng dòng), initiated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security in 2008. It was designed to provide employment services to migrant workers, secure these workers' rights and interests, and promote their integration into the receiving cities. Given that

[18] Data source: Qianjiang Statistics Bureau (ed.) .2011. Qianjiang Statistic Yearbook 2010. Qianjiang: Qianjiang Baile Printing Co., Ltd, pp152.

Qianjiang is mainly a sending place of migrant workers, the local government focused this action on returned migrant workers who are now staying at home villages and towns in Qianjiang. Every year, the local government holds numerous job fairs and provides free training in various vocational skills for returned migrant workers. In addition, the local government actively constructs favorable infrastructure and stipulates preferential financial policies to enhance Qianjiang's appeal to returned migrant workers' entrepreneurship. In 2009, 103 enterprises were established by returned migrant workers, with a total amount of 65 million *yuan*[19]. Most businesses are in the field of garments and aquacultural processing.

### 3.3 Research Process: Methods, Instrument, and Sampling

My hometown of Qianjiang, where a relatively a large and rapidly increasing number of returned migrant women live and work, seemed an ideal setting for researching returned migrant women's identity transformation and living practices. I thought I would establish an immediate rapport with my interviewees. But things did not go well at first. In this section, I focus on the technical issues and share my experiences of dealing with the challenges that emerged during my fieldwork.

#### 3.3.1 Four Stages of the Fieldwork

The fieldwork, which was mainly carried out in Qianjiang between 2011 and 2012, can be generally divided into four stages. At the very beginning, from the February to April, 2011, I tried to pinpoint my interviewees and conducted a pilot study. The purpose of the pilot study was to give me some general ideas of the total context of these returned women's current lives (personal, family, work, economy and community), and develop more sources for finding interview subjects. With the help of my mother and relatives, I made preliminary contacts with several potential interviewees. After conducting some simple interviews with them, I found that while these returned migrant women all have houses in their

[19] Data source: Qianjiang Statistics Bureau (ed.) .2011. Qianjiang Statistic Yearbook 2010. Qianjiang: Qianjiang Baile Printing Co., Ltd, pp147, 150.

original home villages, many have bought or rented apartments in local townships, or even in the city center. Those who were self-employed or doing odd jobs were all living and working in the central area of the local townships and the seat of six sub-district offices. Those who were working in the garment factories on the periphery of the town chose to live in the dormitories provided by the factories on weekdays, and went back to their apartments or village houses on their rest days. To my surprise, most of my interviewees told me that they prefer to live in their original village houses, where they can enjoy the fresh air of nature and peaceful times with their family members. Based on the total context of their lives and their residential choices, I selected three major sites for finding interview subjects: the central area of the local township, villages in the rural area, and garment factories on the town periphery.

In the second stage, from May to September, 2011, I interviewed 11 returned migrant women living in the central area of local townships while actively participating in their daily activities. Apart from one returned woman who was working in a garment factory on the periphery of the town, the others were either self-employed or working for self-employed shops during that time. After building a rapport with them, I accompanied them when they visited their family members and relatives in the rural areas, to learn more about their social relations.

Since returned migrant women often work in garment factories, from October 2011 to January 2012 I worked on the assembly lines in two garment factories, one in Haokou township and the other in Laoxin township. The experience of working in garment factories provided a more diverse range of potential interviewees, thus enriching the data together with my own life experience. In the time of my factory labor I observed these returned women's daily interactions within the workplaces and conducted life-story interviews with 6 returned migrant women.

Since completing my fieldwork I have maintained close ties with the women I interviewed. Whenever I go back to my hometown, I visit them, share life experiences with them, and update my work. The follow-up interviews are conducted in person, and also through written QQ messages, emails and personal diaries.

### 3.3.2 Methods for Data Collection

Informed by my epistemological position, this study used multiple methods of data collection, including document analysis and life-story interviews. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison, "triangular techniques in social science attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint" (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007:112). Multiple methods aim to increase the reliability and validity of data collected from diverse sources (Maxwell 2002), while providing a more comprehensive understanding of these returned women migrant's experiences in the rural context. In the following paragraphs, I briefly introduce how I employed these methods in the process of my empirical data collection.

- **Document analysis** is necessary to familiarize public policy and contextual background. From the beginning of this research, I collected newspapers, magazines, academic journal articles, as well as government reports at all levels related to returned migrant workers, and discursively analyzed the dominant public portrayal of "migrant girl" (dǎ gōng mèi, 打工妹), "migrant women" (dǎ gōng sǎo, 打工嫂) and returned women migrant workers within the context of Chinese modernization. After initiating fieldwork, I dipped into the local chronicles, annals of ten rural townships, statistics yearbooks as well as official policy documents related to the returned migrant workers in Qianjiang. The official documents and reports provided some basic information about return migrants' occupation,

education, and year of marriage. In addition, I constantly logged on Qianjiang People's internet forum and read the online articles and discussions written by or related to returned migrant workers. All these formal and informal materials mapped out a general picture of the social and cultural conditions of villages and towns in Qianjiang where these returned women are living. More importantly, document analysis provided an important source for my later critical discussions of the returned women's own narrative accounts to see how they identify themselves in response to the public representations. Information from these documents also helps my participant observation and on-going process of understanding of the experience of female returnees.

- **Life-story interviews** were conducted with individual returned women migrant workers in order to understand their different perceptions of their urban and rural lives. It looked at how women workers decide to leave for work in cities and later to return, what kind of problems and opportunities they face, and how they negotiate changes and recreate social, gender, intra/inter-family relations after their return. In other words, these women's narratives and understanding of their past migration experiences and current rural lives were placed at the center of the study through the life history approach. Particularly, Bourdieu's theory of social practice made me more sensitive to how the past experiences of these women had influenced their interpretations and responses to my questions during the interviews. I also conducted many in-depth interviews with various people in the community who have close contacts with these returned female migrant workers, such as their family members, working colleagues, peers, village heads, and local civil servants. All these interviews helped me comprehend more fully the complexity involved in the different levels of habitus that returned women migrant workers faced within themselves, in the relations to their family and community.

Several of my reflections on interviews need to be highlighted. Firstly, as a researcher, it is necessary to be prepared for surprises and changing situations. Nothing is impossible in the real world. Reality is much more complex than the literature. What I learned from the literature and the theoretical framework I originally proposed seemed almost useless and inappropriate as soon as my fieldwork commenced. Ultimately how these women perceive their own lifeworlds and lived their lives made me reflect critically on whether Bourdieu's theory is appropriate for studying these women in a non-Western social context.

Secondly, my pre-set interview questions and interview guide I prepared before entering the fieldwork turned out to be irrelevant and meaningless to my informants in practice and had to be continuously adjusted according to the specific contexts and different informants. Some of the pre-set questions evoked only silence or responses like "oh, I never thought about it before", or "I don't have anything particular to say", which disappointed me a lot at the early stage of my fieldwork. Faced with this kind of situation, I decided to put aside my pre-set questions and allowed my informants to talk freely on whatever they wanted to share with me. I came up with new questions based on their stories later and added them to my interview guide.

Thirdly, it is impossible to get all information in one single interview and researchers should develop a good rapport and maintain closer relationship with informants. As the fieldwork moved on, previous interviews and daily observations enabled me to be familiarized with their social contexts and can generate more appropriate questions. Even after the fieldwork was completed, there were still many questions that required further investigation.

The fourth reflection is related to the methods of interview. I had intended to have one-on-one interviews only, but sometimes felt I had to allow other individuals to join in, which made the interview into a group discussion. Also, follow-up interviews are not only limited by verbal expressions, but were also conducted through written QQ message, emails and personal diaries.

Fifthly, despite the assistance I had from my mother and uncle in contacting potential interview subjects, there was suspicion as to my motives. In the garment factories where I briefly worked in hopes of making contacts with returned migrant women, for example, I found myself initially regarded by the women who worked there as an intrusive observer. It was only when I successfully established a trusting rapport with them that I was able to conduct fruitful interviews with them. Last but not least, as a female researcher, it was hard to get access to the family members of these returned migrant women workers, especially their male spouses and parents. I had to take every chance to talk to people around them, like their friends or relatives, before eventually approaching them.

### 3.3.3 Sampling

Snowball sampling, which locates the potential interviewees through personal contacts and acquaintances, proved useful in my fieldwork. My background as a native resident allowed me access to valuable assistance and advice from other local residents who know the local community inside out. Many of my relatives were working in, or had once worked in, big cities. Some of my relatives, like Yanhua, returned to their home villages and found temporary work in town. With the help of their introductions it was easier to get to know the returned women migrants I needed to learn from. This method is similar to the "theoretical sampling" of Glaser and Strauss, which does not restrict itself to statistically-representative cases (Glaser and Strauss 1968). The method is also

useful in addressing sampling biases resulting from interviewees being selected by others. As Mishler notes, rather than attempting to guarantee representativeness, this sampling method aims for diversity, difference and constant comparison (Mishler 1999).

The term “migrant workers” or “peasant workers” in China is historically constructed and has undergone constant changes from the initial term of “blind” (盲流, mɑ́ng liú). To date, there is still no unified and consistent definition for this group of people. Some Chinese scholars define peasant workers as those people who hold rural Hukou and are employed in non-agricultural activities (Chen and Liu 2006). The term “returned migrant workers” or “migrant returnees” in China refers to those people who have worked or run a business outside their home county for at least half a year, and then returned to engage in various professions in their home county, including county town, rural townships and villages (Council 1999). Based on these definitions and combined with my research practice, this study broadly defines returned women migrant workers as those women who once moved out for work and then returned to live in their home county. It focuses on those returned women who have returned and settled down in Qianjiang during my fieldwork period no matter whether they were intending to move out again after my work. There were three basic criteria for recruitment of interview subjects: first, the interviewees had to be aged 18 and over; second, they had to have worked in major cities like Dongguan, Wuhan and Shenzhen for at least two years; finally, they had to have lived in villages/town for at least a year. Through snowball sampling, the collected informants in this study have the following characteristics when being interviewed: first, the proportion of the married and unmarried is 9:8; second, the number of informants above 30 years old is 9 and below 30 is 8. In other words, the number of my informants is evenly split on their marital and age status. During the data analysis, I found that both the marital and age status have distinct impact on their reasons of outgoing and return, and their urban and rural living strategies.

No matter how much researchers involve themselves in their interview subjects' daily activities, as instruments of ethnographic research, researchers unavoidably have an effect on the people they are studying. In getting to know potential interview subjects, how I represented myself to them was, therefore, of paramount importance to the success of the interviews. Despite the fact that I shared their birthplace, these returned women tended to place me in an advantageous position due to my high education background. The unequal relationship between researcher and the people researched will lead to either a cover-up or embellishment of certain facts. In order to minimize any negative effects, I initially took a less aggressive approach by just chatting to the women, casually sounding them out and letting them get to know me. Thanks to the snowball sampling, the diverse experiences of female returnees with different backgrounds, such as age, years of working in cities, period of stay in villages or town, and migrant cities can be explored in this study.

Although well-prepared, the process of sampling was still filled with challenges. There were potential biases in recruiting interview subjects through personal contacts. A particular example in this regard is the recruitment of returned women introduced by my mother. I found that these women all appeared to enjoy happy marriage and sound family relations after their return. Then I realized that it was because my mother tried to show her over-age unwed daughter a positive picture of marriage by purposely omitting those women who were living in bad conditions. And so I had to diversify my sampling pool by recruiting informants through the introductions of others. In some situations, I found that personal contacts can be a double-edged sword, which makes it easier to approach some potential informants while at the same time becomes an obstacle to get to know other particular informants. In garment factories where I was allowed to meet and gain approval from high-level managers of the factories who are also returned migrant workers to recruit samples, for instance, my close relationship with the

managers made it difficult for me to approach those returned women on the assembly line because they regarded me as an intrusive observer. In order to dispel their misgivings and accept me as a colleague and friend rather than someone who knows their manager, I lived and worked as other returned migrant women in the factories for several months. I then came to realize that snowball sampling only worked when researchers gradually became part of the informants' daily routine and developed rapport with them. Sometimes, of course, interview subjects would migrate out again or relocate during my fieldwork, but I still tried to follow up with their daily lives, and in the process I learned more about the tensions and contradictions they experienced.

### 3.3.4 Data Analysis

Compared to quantitative analysis, there is as yet no standard approach or list of procedures for analyzing qualitative data (Elliott 2005; Miles and Huberman 1994). Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that the power relationship between the researcher and the researched inevitably affects data analysis in ethnographic study, especially in data selection and the development of theoretical framework (Bravo-Moreno 2003; Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994; Reay 1996). I kept reminding myself of this, but still was constantly bound up in the interplay of theory and practice. As Bourdieu notes, "there is no more real or more realistic way of exploring communication in general than by focusing on the simultaneously practical and theoretical problems that emerge from particular interaction between the investigator and the person being questioned" (Bourdieu 1999:607). As my fieldwork progressed, I began to realize that the relationship between the empirical data and theory is reciprocal and dialectical.

Through the analysis of current academic literatures and government policies with a gender lens, I found that the public representations of these returned women are either highly marginalized or completely voiceless under the dominant discourse of Chinese modernization. The constructivist position enabled me to critically

examine these accounts which credit these women with limited agency. A major goal of this fieldwork, as indicated above, was to get these returned women's inside view of their migration experiences and after-return lives, and make sense of their understandings of their social positioning and their responses to the Chinese modernization project in the current rural context. The epistemological privileging of returned women's narratives is methodologically important because these returned women as gendered beings have been suffering aphasia in both government policies of rural development and academic literatures on migration and gender. The data I collected from the fieldwork rendered, therefore, a richly detailed picture of social life that describes the people on their own terms, graphically capturing their language and letting them speak for themselves.

All the interviews were conducted in Qianjiang dialect, a local Chinese language that is widely spoken by Qianjiang people. I transcribed them into written Chinese for further analysis as soon as I finished the interviews. The emotional expressions of these returned women burst in upon our interviews, and their laughter, contemplations, and weeping are expressed in the texts. I also made note of the non-verbal communications, such as the improvised situation of the interviews, temporarily interrupted by other matters or persons, to what extent these people intervene or participate in the interviews, the general outlooks of my informants, etc. As a native resident, it is easier for me to communicate with my informants using Qianjiang dialect and slang. But I have to say, it is difficult to find exact Chinese equivalents without leveling, and losing, the cultural implications, particularly when there is further translation into English. In order to minimize the gap between the oral accounts and written translations, I transcribed their words as closely as I could according to my experiences and detailed field notes, and then asked my foreign friends to check on my translations.

The various interviews were transcribed into a format that is readily accessible and understandable for later analysis. Owing to privacy concerns, all informants

in this thesis were given a pseudonym. As Bourdieu states, “true submission to the data requires an act of construction based on practical mastery of the social logic by which these data are constructed” (Bourdieu 1999:617). It is only the uncovering of the inherent structure implied in informants’ contingent narratives that can enable us to fully understand their self-recognition and creative responses to various specific situations. Through several careful readings of my interview transcript, I found these returned women constantly reflect on and navigate their current lives according to their memories of their past experiences, including their rural childhood from the start and urban labor migration period. I then generally categorize their narratives according to the contents of their life experiences in relation to rural and urban spaces they were located. Within these categories, several general themes can be drawn out. For example, their self conceptions and sense of belonging, the gender relations within their families and social interactions in workplaces are frequently mentioned in their narratives. The next step involved the constant comparison within and across cases to search for the similarities and differences in these women’s accounts. During the process of data analysis, I realized that there are tensions and contradictions between their past experiences and current living situations, within which meanings are actively produced. The conflicting thoughts and strategies of these returned women that appeared in their current rural lives may have been informed by their past city working experiences, through which their reproductive habitus has been changed to bear some transformative traits. In this regard, I found that Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and theory of practice was an effective way to look at these returned women’s current lives. Because it enables the possibilities to conceptualize their current rural life in terms of the influences of their past experiences before their return and open the chance to look into the differences among this group of people without ruling out the impact of the urban and rural contexts.

According to the analysis of the ethnographic data, the rigid dichotomies of rurality/urbanity, tradition/modernity, seems inapplicable to capture the

complexities of these returned women's identity transformation and living strategies within the current rural context. In navigating their new rural hometown life, these seemingly opposing sides are actually not either-or choices for these returned women. Rather, both sides have been actively employed by these women to reconstruct their social and gender identities during the process of labor migration and return. Hence, by searching for a collective pattern within individual cases, I tried to demonstrate the ways these women reconstruct their self-identities within the contexts of discontinuities and continuities of social relations while moving across different social fields (Jacka 2005). Themes related to their memories of the past experiences before return are discussed in Chapter 4 and chapter 5, and those associated with their current rural lives after return are discussed in Chapter 6.

### 3.3.5 Reflexivity

Against the illusion of seeking neutrality by eliminating the researcher, Bourdieu argues that personal knowledge and experiences of researchers can become irreplaceable analytic resources and produce epistemic and existential benefits to research work (Bourdieu 2003:281; Bourdieu 1999:618). However, he particularly stresses that this requires a constant reflexivity of researchers during the whole process of the research project. For Bourdieu, on the one hand, researchers should adopt what he termed as 'participant objectivation' to grasp the effects of their relationship with research subjects and avoid unconsciously projecting their pre-reflexive social and cultural experiences onto their subjects (Bourdieu 2003; Bourdieu 1999). This implies that researchers should objectivize and take continuous account of their own personal elements from the very beginning of each research project, such as social background, cultural experiences, social position, etc. All these would inevitably influence the selection of specific research topic, data collection method and the picture of the social world finally produced. On the other hand, researchers should cultivate a sociological craft, which disposes researchers to flexibly respond to changing circumstances, grasp

opportunities to propose appropriate questions in the interviews, and help the interview subjects to express their true thoughts (Bourdieu 1999).

I noted in the introductory chapter that it was Yanhua's confusion and struggle that made me pursue this study, but now I must add that her life choice resembles my own, for I too left my hometown in my youth, the same hometown, albeit for different ends. Yanhua worked in a Guangzhou factory for a time, while I went to Nanjing, and later to Hong Kong for study. Similar directions, different flows. But the same essential stuff. Like Yanhua, every time I go back home I stumble to belong. Many of my childhood friends flunked their college entrance exams and, scorched by the "dragon's gate," left for temporary work in cities, and returned for temporary stays at home, shuttling back and forth till home and destination intertwined, and caught between, a suspended self. They told me stories of their migrant life, stories of their labor to sustain themselves while discovering themselves, to find persistence in transformation, labors that ring with a truth not found in books. I resolved to chart those transformations, by learning from women who migrate and return. And perhaps in understanding their self-development and the rural changes they effect, I will learn something of my own life's journey, and even of China's rural future, as it too seeks persistence in change.

When I introduced myself to potential interviewees I always emphasized my rural background and migrant status in cities where I have studied. These similarities provided us with many shared topics and made discussion easier. But I worried that our similar experiences and friendliness might lead me to take things for granted, and steer the conversation in a direction I anticipated, but in which my interviewees might not otherwise have gone. When they talked about certain things and asked how I felt, saying things like "I have to do that, right?" or "You know that, don't you?" I tried not to assert my own opinion, but just let them talk about themselves. I did, however, offer an opinion when they seemed depressed or insisted on hearing what I thought.

Most importantly, it is common to see researchers unconsciously universalize their scholastic disposition when exploring the experiences and practices of people who do not share their formal education. In addressing such potential bias, researchers should employ a stance of epistemic reflexivity and help their interview subjects to achieve self-understanding and self-knowledge (Bourdieu 2000:60). As a PhD student in sociology, my academic training did at first hinder my understanding of these returned rural women's life experiences. Based on my academic readings before entering into the field, I generally divided my observation and interviews into several parts as soon as I started my fieldwork, like the motivations for the migrants' return, their formative self-recognition after their return, their negotiations of inter- and intra- family relations. However, all the categories and plans did not work at all in research practice. My pre-set questions always sounded meaningless to my informants and the whole process of first several interviews was full of frustration and could not even be continued. It seemed for example that they were more willing to talk about their lives and work in cities, especially what they regarded as their achievements (e.g. good work performance) rather than discuss their return to a rural context. Realizing that the imposition of my academic intentions upon them would do no good, I finally got rid of my seemingly organized and structured pre-set questions and let the women I spoke with decide for themselves whatever they wanted to tell me. In the process I dropped in a few questions from my interview guide. Ultimately I was able to make sense of their enthusiasm in talking more about their lives in cities, which reflected the transitional stage of their current lives and the liminality of their identity.

It is unrealistic to completely eliminate the effects of researchers in research. Rather, as Bourdieu states, we must admit, "paradoxically, the only 'spontaneous' process is a constructed one, but a realist construction…It is only when it rests on prior knowledge of the realities concerned that research can bring out the realities

it intends to record" (Bourdieu 1999:618). Rather than taking my academic and social experiences and my role as both a local resident and a student researcher as hindrances that may bias my research, I regarded them as important resources in facilitating my understanding of these returned rural women's accounts of their life experiences.

**3.4 Ethical Considerations**

Due to its extended participatory nature, ethnography has attracted various criticisms on ethical grounds. The following questions always require to be explicitly answered by ethnographers: Do the researchers understand their roles, and their responsibility to the people they are studying? How well should the researchers let their subjects know about the research? To what extent should the researchers get involved into their participants' private lives? For me, all these questions boil down to two ethical issues: informed consent and confidentiality.

Although these two issues are not unique to ethnography, the unavoidably interdependent relationship between the researcher and the researched bring these issues to the fore in ethnographic work. Unlike those research methods which ask for only limited personal contact, as for instance surveys and telephone interviews, ethnography requires researchers to actively involve themselves in the daily activities of their informants for an extended time. As Edward Bruner asserts, "when you live for long periods intertwined with others, immersed in their life ways, it is hard to separate yourself from them. Research is no longer something out there, separate from self, apart from life"(Bruner 2005:1). Therefore, researchers in ethnographic study should be under greater obligaton to protect their subjects, particularly in terms of ensuring that informants' private information and identities are not publicly known and that the data collected from them can be used only for research purposes and only with their consent.

It is generally agreed that informed consent must be obtained before any attempt

to collect information from informants begins, especially when doing interviews and tape-recording. Individual informants must be fully briefed about the purposes of the research and their rights to withdraw with no penalty whenever they feel uncomfortable with their participation. A key issue that has been easily overlooked is that observation in public places also requires informed consent. This is particularly the case in ethnographic research, which takes observation as one of its primary techniques in collecting data. Many researchers have misinterpreted the notion of privacy and have seen individual's privacy as something involving only their own private life. However, according to De George, it is up to the individual to decide what can be revealed to others and what should remain concealed (De George 2003:48). The underlying ethical principle is that researchers should respect their informants by treating each of them as a free individual with dignity. Hence, it should be regarded as offensive to observe and study people's behavior and emotions without their knowledge or consent in public places. Publicizing the information obtained in this way is clearly a further violation of privacy. On top of that, researchers should do everything possible to guarantee the confidentiality of everyone they talk to, protecting them from being harmed or exploited on account of their participation, during and after the research. This is particularly the case in ethnographic work, because ethnographers have to establish close relationships with their informants and cannot ignore the trust their informants have of them. Distinguishing between information that can be used as research data and that can only be shared as close friends is one of the most important issues ethnographers should take into consideration in research practice.

It was only after I entered into the field that I truly realized how important ethical issues are to the research. In the context of my fieldwork, although the locale is my hometown, still I should not get myself involved in the informants' daily activities and observe their behavior without their consent. I was very honest with my informants from the start of the fieldwork. To respect their privacy and rights,

I have been keeping them well-informed as to the nature, objectives and scope of my research, how I intended to conduct my research, as well as the findings after data analysis. Actually, in practice, I found obtaining informed consent made it more difficult to gain approval for the interviews. But as a researcher I insisted that informants be regarded as an end rather than a means. Moreover, while adhering to the ethical principles of confidentiality, I tried to be more flexible in dealing with sensitive information especially in terms of specific topics, the vulnerability of individual informants, and the role of the researcher. For example, as some informants' friends or relatives, I always faced greater challenge not to abuse these close relationships and ensure the confidentiality of the intimate thoughts and feelings these informants shared with me.

An interesting case scenario of ethical issues I encountered in the fieldwork was the illegal gambling of some returned women. After getting to know that several informants have lost a lot of money on illegal gambling, I decided to enter into the gambling places and see how and why this once male-dominated activity become popular among these women. With the consent of one of my neighbors who was a junior banker in this gambling game, I successfully entered into a secluded room behind her grocery where she was secretly conducting the illegal lottery. Then, I found myself in an ethical dilemma of whether I should tell all the gamblers there about my role as a researcher and the purpose of being there. If my identity is covert, I would suffer with the disturbing feelings of infringing on others' privacy as many women gamblers didn't want others to know they were doing things illegal. If overt, my presence would definitely disturb these women's behavior and silence their voices. And even worse, the banker who allowed me to be there may lose money as no one would gamble at her place anymore. So I finally chose to moderate my level of involvement and tried to keep a lower profile by intentionally limiting my personal contacts in that field. The main work I conducted there was to record specific gambling activities and spontaneous conversations overheard, which was mainly used to know the background of the gambling and develop questions for my interviews.

### 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter critically justifies the choice of methodological approach and the employment of ethnography as the research strategy within the field. I began by explaining the rationale for a qualitative approach while acknowledging the constructivist stance of my research. After addressing the usefulness of ethnography in conducting this research, I provided a detailed introduction of the fieldwork site, Qianjiang, Hubei Province. Then I specifically demonstrated how specific data collection methods were carried out and what kind of problems I encountered during the fieldwork process. This was followed by an explanation of how I have reflected on my experiences and the position of my research while working to understand my informants' narratives. According to the data analysis and correspondingly theoretical framework explored in last chapter, the following two chapters respectively address themes related to the woman returnee's memories of their experiences before return and those associated with their current post-return lives.

# Chapter 4 Memories of the Rural Past

In chapters 2 and chapter 3 I have repeatedly presented that the existing literature on return migration is mostly gender insensitive to the situation of women returnees in their home origins. The images of these rural returnees portrayed by contemporary academic research and public narratives are sharply polarized, regarding returnees as either “messengers of modern civilization”, “agents of rural transformation”, “modernization losers”, or a “source of social instability”. Some of these limited studies on returned women migrants in China have made positive comments on women’s role in challenging the deep-rooted Chinese patriarchal ideology and traditional gender relations, while other studies negatively regard these women as more likely to resume traditional gender norms and hierarchies in their home villages. Whatever sides they stand for, all these arguments heavily highlight the role of returnees’ urban city experiences in navigating their after-return experiences. Through the exploration of the self-representations of returned women migrant workers in Qianjiang, I found that the reality is much more complicated than this black-or-white conclusion. One important factor that existing literature leaves out is the impact of women migrants’ rural childhood on their after-return living strategies is just as significant as it is on their urban experiences. Both the norms prevailing in their rural origins and their working experiences in urban cities are creatively deployed by these women as important resources to reshape their perceptions, appreciations, and actions at every moment in their reintegrated rural lives. Chapter 4 and chapter 5, therefore, explores the self-representations of these returned women themselves in terms of their past experiences both in rural childhood and urban residence. Specifically, according to the three levels of analytical framework proposed in chapter 2, I address how returnees construct and transform their gender-specific habitus and family relationships, and how they alter their social interactions in both rural and urban fields.

It is worth noting that, other than being influenced by social and historical forces, these returned women's memories of their past lives are constantly mediated by their current rural contexts. As I mentioned in the last chapter, the imagined space of returned women migrant workers, although carried out at a conscious level in their current daily practices, still reflect the underlying dispositions they acquired during the migration process. Through an exploration of their imagined space where urban and rural fields combine, we may learn what kind of underlying reproductive and transformative habitus they have obtained. Moreover, these women's narratives could give us a chance to see whether different fields can exert uneven effects on individual embodiment, which may theoretically enhance the Bourdieusian understanding of identity transformation. Practically, their reflexive review of the past would necessarily deepen our understandings about their current confusions and life strategies in the rural context after return, which will be presented in chapter 6.

Furthermore, as Bourdieu argues, "personal is social" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:202). The most personal aspect of oneself stands the least individualism in a society. One's individual habitus embodies not only one's past and current experiences, but also one's collective history of family and society. Returned woman migrants, like Chinese rural society itself, are never homogeneous, but change over time. The complicated and unpublicized experience of returned women is not only a representation of sociohistorical change on a macro level, but also shows their active and creative responses to these structural changes through their daily life. It's a continuous process of actions and responses between the women and the society, and there is no ending in the social perspective. When we speak of "traditional" or "modern" institutional structures, we speak of them within the context of women returnees' daily practices even though these structures are not always enforced in a full and effective way. This study aims to explore returned women's identity transformations through time and space, and

aims to show their rich and colorful lives from multiple perspectives and in so doing remedy the one-sided impression of returned women in mainstream accounts.

**4.1 Life Rooted in the Soil**

> "The song of hometown is a beautiful but distant flute,
> Always sounds on those moon lights.
> The face of hometown is actually a kind of fuzzy listlessness,
> In the fog waves the hands as if leaves apart.
> After leaving,
> The nostalgia is one does not have the annual ring tree,
> Never dies of old age."
> --- Hsi Muren, "Nostalgia"

I found this poem in one of Cai Hong's diaries. She would, as she said, write down anything that popped into her mind during her work life in Guangzhou. In this case, what popped into her mind is a famous piece of verse by the noted Mongolian-Taiwanese poet Hsi Muren. Perhaps the most widely read woman poet in Taiwan, Hsi Muren has attracted readers for her themes of undying love and a melancholic sense of the lost past. Cai Hong told me that Hsi Muren is one of her favorite poets and that she can recite most of her poems. She also mentioned other poets such as Gu Chen, Hai Zi, and Shu Ting, discussing their work with enthusiasm. I notice that sorrow is the typical theme in the work of these poets. Cai Hong explained that she enjoys these poems because they assuage her regret over not having finished school. Because her family was very poor, Cai Hong could not attend high school even though she was really good at literature. She experienced a longing for her family and hometown, and expressed this feeling throughout her diaries. Cai Hong's homesickness is not unique; all my other informants said they missed their hometown and family while they were working in cities.

Ever since China's reform and opening-up, the rural hometown has changed in almost every way, but in women migrants' memories it remains authentic, untouched by the global economy and consumption culture that has swept through China's cities. The home constructed in their imaginations and memories "is not only a space, it also has some structure in time; and because it is for people who are living in that time and space, it has aesthetic and moral dimensions" (Douglas 1991:289). This inveterate nostalgia, which represents a relatively static past, is however not in and of itself a persuasive reason for these women's choice of return. But it at least illustrates how their early livelihood and original habitus could continuously influence their city lives and reencountered rural lives. In the following chapters, we will notice that returned women always employ cultural values or moral standards that they learned from their childhood to explain their coping strategies in cities and rural hometown. Some of the strategies derive from the Confucian hierarchical system in terms of gender and age, and some are from the Mao period and reform period which, as such, possibly contradict the Confucian strategies. We should not overlook the fact that individual differences play a role in returned women's understanding and response to their personal experiences. A fortiori, these cultural values and moral standards are affected by the rapidly changing socioeconomic environment, as the women achieve their personal growth. To better understand these women's identity formation, their confusion, struggles and strategies, it is necessary to explore these cultural and moral dimensions amid the backdrop of migrants' memories of their rural home. Specifically, the reproductive habitus, not easily erased by subsequent life experience, will be highlighted in this process.

Hubei is one of the major crops production areas in China. Qianjiang, "the land of fish and rice", was a typical agricultural region prior to economic reform. Most people relied on land for their basic production materials and living needs, except for limited numbers of urban residents and workers on state-owned farms who

received a salary. In 1956, 96% of the people in Qianjiang worked in agriculture related fields. With the establishment of the Household Responsibility System and the development of commodity economy, the makeup of employment structure changed in rural areas. However, still about 75% of the people were engaged in agriculture related work[20]. Because of the rich land resources in Qianjiang, people were able to maintain a self-sufficient living style. According to a 1992 land usage report, Qianjiang's cultivated area was about 18,372,000 acres, about 63% of the total area, and the average cultivated land per person was higher than the all-time national average[21]. With the great force of urbanization, a large amount of cultivated land became roads, minting companies and town constructs, the percentage of cultivated area decreasing year by year.

The self-efficient agricultural model requires peasants to arrange crop planting according to crop growing cycles and changes of seasons, so they can maximize the usage of their land and crops production for to support themselves. Rice is the major crop in the area, and wheat ranks second. Among all the crops production, 50% of the land is used to grow rice year round, and over 75% of the total crops production is rice. Besides rice, cotton and cole are top cash crops, and aquaculture production is very active in the area as well. As early as 1986, Qianjiang was not only the best area for producing commodity crops and cotton, but it was also the top city for cole production within Hubei province. In 1990, it was ranked as the national advanced area of grain production. In 1995, it was one of the top hundred counties (cities) for agriculture production and cotton production. All of the data showed the importance of agriculture production in Qianjiang's peasant households. It is therefore not hard to understand how returned women, who were born in this rural field around the reform period, had

[20] Qianjiang Local Chronicles Compilation Committee. 1990. Qianjiang County Annals (1906-1985). Beijing: Chinese Cultural and Historical Press, pp97, 224.

[21] Qianjiang Local Chronicles Compilation Committee. 2009. Qianjiang County Annals (1986-2005). Beijing: Chinese Cultural and Historical Press, pp280, 305.

memories of farming life in their hometown.

> *My family has relied on farming from generation to generation. As far back as I can recall, my parents would get up early to work in the field and get home late every day. When the harvest season came, we (children) were asked to help out after school as well. I am not master in any sophisticated farming techniques, but I helped transplant rice seedlings since it's easy to learn, just repetitive work. Most of the time, I just needed to get dinner ready for my parents, so they could eat right after they came back from the field. But I liked going to the field to help out because many of my friends were there as well. The adults were working hard in the field, but we (children) were working and playing at the same time. I can never forget the scene where everyone was lined up in order and worked hard in the field. (Cai Hong, 33 years old）*

Seventeen of my informants have similar memories of rural life. Most of them admitted they have very limited knowledge of farming, and that this is one reason why they did not choose farming after they returned home from cities. Another reason is the traditional Confucian view that "men rule outside, women rule inside" or "men are breadwinners, women are homemakers" (男主外，女主内). Therefore, girls tend to receive more training and practice in housework. But we must keep in mind that a society's values and an individual's values change over time. From a macro level, the ending of the Rural Cooperative Movement led to the beginning of the Family Responsibly System, sparking a change in the evaluation standards for history and society. The historical view of focusing on class struggle and socialist revolution became a historical view of modernization and development (Guo 2011). The Cooperative Movement was blamed for the resulting poverty, and the Family Responsibility System was claimed to be the most reasonable strategy to end poverty. However, the Family Responsibility System did not change the fundamental issue of low efficiency of agricultural production even though peasant households gained management right of farmland. Therefore, their joy of managing the farmland did not last for very long. Returned

women have no interest in farming, and in their minds, peasantry is equivalent to poverty.

> *My father has farmed all his life, and he thinks 'if you don't focus on farming, you're a trifler.'*(不好好种地就是不务正业) [laughing] *At that time [when I was little], some smart people started to look for jobs in towns or the city of Wuhan. My dad would ask them to rent their land to him, so he could grow more crops. The tax rate was pretty high at that time. The more you farm, the more you pay. We barely had enough food for the family after we paid taxes. I was very young back then and didn't know anything about numbers. I only remember when the truck came for collecting taxes after every autumn harvest, the huge pile of produce in the courtyard was gone by more than half. My family usually didn't have enough food for the first half of the year, so we went to relatives who had leftovers and we barely made it to the next harvest. In order to save food, we ate congee for dinner and added whole grains like sweet potato to it. We had chickens at home, and my father sold chicken eggs for me and my brothers' tuition. The money we got from selling chicken eggs was the only cash we got. I didn't know what money looked like because I'd never seen any [Laughing]. Me and my little brother's elementary school tuition was only 7 RMB each semester when we started, but it rose to 21 RMB at the end. My older brother was in middle school, and his tuition was more expensive, around 30 RMB. The tuition for us three cost nearly 100 RMB, and selling chickens and chicken eggs couldn't get us that much money. So my father went to others' homes to get chickens and eggs for reselling. It was still hard and we worried about not being able to pay our tuition all the time. (Li Hua, 33 years old)*

In Li Hua's mind, those who went to cities for work were the smart ones; but they were the minority. Most people were just like her father, holding onto their farmland as best they could. James Scott used the concept of "subsistence ethic" to explain peasants' particular arrangements during the process of survival and rebellion in Southeast Asia, finally converting his research from economic fields to fields of culture and religion. This "subsistence ethic" can also help explain Chinese peasants' preference of staying on their impoverished lands rather than

move out. For peasants, the primary goal is to survive, and they hold onto their land to avoid any economic loss rather than taking on risk in order to increase their income (Scott 1976). For most Chinese peasants, like Li Hua's father, the "subsistence ethic" makes them reluctant to take on challenges in an unfamiliar environment. In traditional Chinese agricultural society, the formation of the subsistence ethic is related to limited production resources, and is also related to the idea of "stressing farming and restraining commerce" (重农抑商), which is based on state policy and the government ideology in ancient China. Fei used two Chinese words, *xiang* (乡, countryside) and *tu* (土, earth, soil), to sum up traditional Chinese peasants' attitudes toward their land. The first word *xiang* (countryside) represents the ties to the land and the blood ties, the ties they rely on for security. *Tu* (earth) represents the way of making a living. As a peasant, your life can never be separated from your land. You rely on your land for living when you are alive, and you are buried in your land when you die (Fei 1992). Peasants' dedication to their land is evident in their ritual practices. Shrines to the land god are seen across Qiangjian. February 2 of the lunar calendar year is a day of worship. Peasants pray for a year of good weather and seasons full of harvest, as they offer incense and gifts to the land god. These ritual practices persist in rural areas. "A house full of gold or silver is no better than one's home, even if the home is in its worst condition" (金窝银窝，不如自己的穷窝). The soul of the peasants is rooted in the land. "*Xiang*" and "*tu*" are essential to peasants, giving them psychological comfort and security. This cultural background is what led Li Hua's father to say, "if one doesn't focus on farming, one is trifler."

From as early as the mid-twentieth century there has been western capital investment in businesses in China. The peasant household economy, which relied on farming and weaving, could not compete with cheap western merchandise. At the same time, cities had growing demand for labor. But still, not many peasants went to cities. The reasons might be the negative influence of socioeconomic change, and restrictions caused by traditional culture. With the establishment of

New China, the nationwide land reforms reinforced peasants' already strong attachment their land. The ultimate dream for peasants was "thirty acres of land, a cow, a wife, children and heated brick bed". In the thirty years between the early 1950s and economic reform, many peasants were called upon to foster the economic development of New China by working in cities, and after the failure of Great Leap Forward, many were asked, through the arrangements of state agencies, to return to their rural areas and resume farming. The establishment in the 1960s of the people's commune system and the precise division of a city and a rural Hukou system made it all but impossible for peasants to move to cities. Besides going to urban schools, joining the military or attending limited recruitment events, peasants had no way to leave rural areas. The mobility of peasants depended solely on state policies and the political environment in this era. Whether it was recruitment in cities or return to rural areas for farming, these were government actions and peasants did not have any freedom to make decisions. The state level arrangements did not change peasants' traditional attitudes toward their land, it only suppressed peasants' free will to move between cities and rural areas.

When the Family Responsibility System was established in rural areas in 1979, the state encouraged peasants to have side jobs in order for them to accumulate additional income. However, because of the limited cash flows and limited sources for earning cash income, peasants found it difficult to sustain their living, the more so as taxes rose. By 1990, peasants in Qiangjiang bore a total of 37.15 million RMB taxes and dues, and the burden increased with every year. By 1999, they bore 145.93 million RMB in taxes and dues, when their average per capita income was only 2501.4 RMB[22]. The mid to late 1990s, then, is when the cash-starved peasants of Qianjiang began migrating to cities for work. The local government abolished agricultural taxes in 2005, but the outward migration has

[22] Qianjiang Local Chronicles Compilation Committee. 2009. Qianjiang County Annals (1986-2005). Beijing: Chinese Cultural and Historical Press, p. 318.

not stopped. Due to economic reasons, women have had a greater desire to seek jobs in cities. But it is worth mentioning that the attitudes of the younger generation of women toward their land have changed in comparison to their parents' generation. These changed attitudes have been related to changes in material living style, the political environment, and the media-generated sociocultural significance of outward migration. In next chapter, the returned women's reasons for moving to cities will be discussed through their memories of their lives in cities.

In the returned women's recollections of their rural childhood we see constrained material circumstances (e.g. food shortages), sudden deaths of family members, and other life challenges. But the most common feature of their lives was school dropouts on account of unsustainable tuition. I conducted the interviews in a casual way. The informants talked about whatever came to mind and were only asked additional questions when necessary. There was not only bitterness in their recollections; there was happiness and warmth as well. These more positive emotions appeared as they recalled details of rural life, and the images they described were quite romantic.

> *I do not think life was so hard at that time when I think about it. I actually feel warm and I miss the feeling of being home. It has been a long time, and I can't recall many details now, but what I can recall are all happy memories. In summer, I would sit in the courtyard and do homework after school. I could gaze at roosters eating for a long time. I would play with my friends in the fields; we liked to swim and catch fish in the river. We'd go into the forest to catch fireflies and put them in a bag, so we could use them as lights to guide our way home. Usually they would die soon after we got home* [laughing].... *in summer nights, families would bring out their bamboo mats and lay them on the ground, so we could sleep as a group. Adults would tell stories of gods and ghosts. We children were thrilled and scared to hear them, but all fell asleep eventually. My biggest happiness was to see my mom cooking in the kitchen when I opened my eyes in the morning. I could smell the delicious*

*breakfast and see circles of steam by the light from the roof top. I can remember this really well, and I feel happy whenever I think about it. (Li Hua, 33 years old)*

Could time have erased the bitterness of these women's lives? Or was it on account of the hardship they faced in cities that they rewrote their early years into an escape shelter of sorts, an oasis of calm, penned by a selective hand? Or did they learn to cope with their urban trials by means of strategies devised in childhood and nurtured by tradition, their formative years a crucible from which they emerged tempered, resilient, and with a bittersweet optimism handed down to them by their elders and inculcated with a shared experience of love and pain? When I asked the returned women, "Why don't you think life was difficult when you had to struggle so hard to survive?", they often answered that everyone was in the same predicament, and that their shared pain as a group alleviated their individual sufferings. As a common group they expressed, as Scott (1976) would say, the logic of moral economy.

*I walked two kilometers to school every day when I was in elementary school. The middle school was in the rural township, so I walked four kilometers to my middle school. It took only half an hour if I biked. I went home only on Wednesdays and Saturdays, so I could bring rice and homemade pickles to school. When it was time for lunch or dinner, we'd all wash our rice and give it to the on duty person to take to the big kitchen and put in a giant steamer. When the rice was ready, everyone ate with their own homemade pickles. It might seem like we didn't have much to eat, but I didn't think of it as suffering, and actually found the rice tasty at the time. Nowadays, our living has improved. We have lots of food options, but I feel I can't taste my food anymore. Everybody was in a similar situation, and we didn't compare with each other. These were normal living standards for all of us. Everyone was doing the same thing and you couldn't find much difference among people. (Qin, 29 years old)*

*At that time, everybody's living situation was really similar, and we didn't*

> *think of it as good or bad. You couldn't afford to wear or eat what you want, only a very few people could. Some people were in a better situation, like one of my good friends. Her father was working in a factory in town. She could buy new clothes sometimes, and that's the only thing I was envious of. In general, I didn't feel I suffered more than others, and there was really not much difference. I had clothes to wear, maybe a little bit less than others. The designs were standard and we had no particular beauty standards. The only judgment for clothes back then was "new" or "old." Nowadays, there are so many designs and styles. I didn't feel there was much difference between me and her. We were the same, equal, and we appeared to be similar in others' eyes.（Li Hua, 33 years old）*

We see from Qin and Li Hua's recollections that "equal" and "no difference" were their mental supports in those straitened times. These compensatory thoughts bore similarity with the communist ideals propounded in the times of collectivization. Although the migrant women I spoke with were born in the reform period and so did not experience collectivism firsthand, some norms and values from that time remained in rural areas and so have vestigial effects in their minds, influencing their perceptions, judgments and behavior. Their past perceptions of "no difference" may fuel a sense of injustice when confronted with the more obvious social differentiation of their present times. In the next chapters, we will see that all informants tended to compare, consciously or not, their past rural lives with their present rural–urban lives. Although they can all, with reasonable objectivity, point out the pros and cons of their living standards rural and urban, past and present, still they feel defeated by circumstance: they feel inferior, and discriminated against. Their early lives were not always good, but they were understandable, and, within their group, perceived as fair. Their material needs are now better met, but they cannot always taste their food, perhaps because their souls, once rooted in the land, now hang suspended between worlds apart, and the newer world obstructs them, while the old world sees them as souls apart.

### 4.2 Living with Parents: Intra-family Relationships before Migration

Family is a primary and indispensable locale for cultural and social production and reproduction, within which the reproductive habitus of each actor is originally inculcated. Interacting with family members in the early stage of one's life plays an essential role in awakening children's consciousness of sexual identity and thus giving them a role in accordance with their gender (Bourdieu 2001). When talking with these returned women, I found that their confusions and difficulties are somewhat different from what men have encountered both in urban cities and in their rural homes after return. More importantly, in their narratives about their working experiences in cities and after-return lives, the women constantly referred to their connections with their past rural family, which they claimed helped them to form and transform their identities in their post-return life. The values and norms they obtained from their original family continuously affect their life decisions and future expectations. As shown in the Literature Review chapter, many studies have placed their focus on the gendered exploitation experiences of women migrant workers in their city workplaces. Chinese patriarchal culture, which is thought to permeate into capitalist factories and workplaces, was always one of the major targets of criticism for suppressing migrant women workers and contributing to their subordinated status. In this dissertation, I do not intend to negate the existence of patriarchal norms and values in Chinese culture, but rather to explore how these women's gendered habitus was embodied and transformed in such cultural contexts during their process of migration and return. Although China is certainly a multi-faceted society, especially in the context of rapid social-economic change, this "traditional" or "backward" patriarchal culture always seems to be the characteristic of Chinese rural society. In fact, I am wary of the word "tradition", because it risks simplifying a complex reality. The word "tradition" is here mainly used to refer to those gender-related thoughts that are characterized as natural and imperative in Chinese culture. I use the term "reproductive habitus" to refer to these women's dispositions embodied from taken-for-granted rules and customs in the pre-migration rural context. In order to

understand these returned women's struggles for a new identity in this ever-changing society and their transformative strategies in their post-return life, it is necessary to look back to their rural family of origin to see what kind of reproductive habitus, especially as relates to gender, was inculcated during their interaction with their family members at the very early stage of their life.

Family, in Chinese translation, *jia* or *jiating* (家，家庭), is the basic unit in rural China. Fei once called this unit an "expanded family" (Fei 2008). In his words, "A Chia (same as *jia*) is essentially a family but it sometimes includes children even when they have grown and married. Sometimes it also includes some relatively remote patrilineal kinsmen" (Fei 2008:27). He later changed his viewpoint, arguing that the term "small lineage" (小家族, xiǎo jiā zú) is more appropriate for identifying the Chinese rural family, as it highlights the structural characteristics of the family and not just the size of it (Fei 1992). Based on structural principles, even the nuclear family household, which is triangle formed by father, mother and child, should not be regarded as an independent unit, but rather as one ring in a structure of concentric social circles which can expand out along the patrilineal lineage (Fei 1992:83).

As noted above, Fei used the term "the differential mode of association" (差序格局, chā xù gé jú) to describe the characteristic of social networks in China. In Chinese society, being embedded in various social relationships, a person's sense of self emerges through living up to the personal obligations defined by these relationships. Within China's *jia*, the parent–child and husband–wife relations are two fundamental axes, the former axis seemingly more important than the latter (Fei 2008). All these relationships are constructed and operated based on Confucianism, according to which the male elders have the absolute paternalistic power within the family and the children should always show their filial responsibility to their parent. For women, other than the filial responsibility and

patrimonialism, there are "three followings and the four virtues" [23](三从四德) they need to obey. The relationship between Confucian culture and rural women is always described as suppress and being suppressed, restrict and being restricted; and this kind of relationship conclusion is based on researchers' objective criteria and facts (Jacka 1997; Leng 1999; Matthews and Nee 2000). Even though women who are in a relationship are the study subjects, their subjective opinions regarding their actual experience were excluded.

As we need to point out, there are always gaps between ethical standards and its practices even though women are suppressed and restricted under the Confucian code of ethics. As a matter of fact, the gaps are objective realities. The core idea of the Confucian code of ethics is: family and country are construed in similar ways. In order to achieve harmony and bring peace to society, the country needs to have classes such as a ruler and followers, and followers need to obey the ruler. The classical books of Confucianism say, "cultivate oneself, unite one's family, rule a country and bring peace to the world" (修身,齐家,治国,平天下). In other words, individual, family, country and the world are tied together for good or bad. The power structure of a family is the same as a country. Therefore, men are always leaders and women are followers in families. The real aims of having hierarchical ethics within families are to protect the power structure of the feudal country and maintain social class balance in the context of Confucianism. In classical texts such as Zhou Li (《周礼》) and Li Ji (《礼记》), all code of ethics for social policies and individual behaviors were written to differentiate men from women. The follower role of women was clearly defined, and behavioral restrictions for women were cruel. However, how these hierarchical ethics were explained, enforced and to what extent are unknown. One would doubt if it was even possible to put them into practice. If these codes of ethics are moral

[23] "The three followings and the four virtues" are maxims in the Book Nǚjiè written by Ban Zhao, a female scholar of the Eastern Han period. The three followings mean that a woman should follow her father before marriage, her husband during marriage and her son in widowhood. The four virtues refer to four aspects that women should cultivate, namely morality, speech, appearance, and work.

standards, we all know there are differences between moral standards and moral practices. If we define them as behavioral standards, there are still differences between behavioral standards and actual behaviors. As a matter of fact, women did not live under patriarchal oppression by their father or husband entirely throughout the Chinese history as we once regarded. In ancient myths, having only mother figures (no father figures) in stories is quite usual. This phenomenon shows the idea in which woman is the origin of human beings, and it proved that women had freedom in their relationship with men in ancient time. In addition, historical researches showed that many social ethics were not widely enforced in practice even though restrictions for such ethics were tougher in the Qin and Han dynasties (Xu 2010) . By the end of the Wei and Ji dynasties, the popularity of Confucianism had decreased to the extent that the ethical restrictions on women had been considerably lessened. After the Song and Ming dynasties, restrictions for women became cruel again under the influence of *Li Xue* (理学, Chen Zhu Li Xue, Chen Zhu School), one proof of which was the increased number of chaste women. One reason for this phenomenon was its economic reinforcement. For example, chaste women's families were excluded from certain taxes and state duties. However, some women still chose to get divorced or remarry in these periods. In conclusion, there are two specific points we need to keep in mind when discussing how the Confucian code of ethics influenced women in Chinese history. First, the restriction level of ethics on women changed from time to time, so we cannot apply one simple conclusion to historical millennia. Secondly, we need to clearly identify the fact that gaps always exist between ethical standards and practice.

In this sense, I cannot agree more with Morgan's notion of "family practice", through which he emphasizes the fluidity and flexibility of intra-family relationships (Morgan 1996). According to Bourdieu, although internally structured, habitus needs to be externally developed in social practice. For these returned women migrant workers, their before-migration family practices play an

indispensable role in developing their reproductive gendered habitus. Through their parents' modeling and their own participation, gender norms and values prescribed by Confucianism are embodied in these women in their daily practices. It needs to be stressed that this gendered habitus is also a relational system of disposition, which cannot take male family members' role out of the construction process. In their narratives, they recalled their parents' image and role in specific family practice, and expressed their own perspectives towards the Confucian ethics and norms they learned in their family of origin. More importantly, we could see that these women actively played their gender roles as daughter, sister, mother, and daughter-in-law in their daily practices. A focus on these women's past family practices and the construction process of their reproductive gendered habitus may present a more vivid gendering process of family dynamics in the changing rural household.

### 4.2.1 Gender Roles as Daughter, Sisters within Qianjiang Rural Family

In rural families, there are three typical gender roles of women: being a daughter before she gets married, being a wife after she gets married, and being a mother after she gives birth. Before these returned women went to cities for work, most of them played the role of daughter in their family and developed their reproductive gendered habitus through daily practices. It is worthwhile to point out that among all the 17 informants, Lei Juan is the only child in her family and all other informants have at least one sibling. Like Cai Hong, Yue E, Yan Hua, Cai Feng, who were born before 1978, when the One Child policy came into effect, they have two or three brothers or sisters in their family. That means they also need to play roles of elder sister or younger sister in their family. Lei Juan is the only exception among this group of informants, and she attributed her being the only child in her family to the bad marital relationship of her parents. Her parents barely talk to each other even though they live under the same roof. They are just husband and wife on paper. I tried to set up a face-to-face interview with Lei Juan's father but failed. Actually, I did not even meet her father once when I went

to their home for interviews, and he also refused to talk to me when I called to set up a meeting. In Lei Juan's narratives, her father is mean, selfish, cruel and irresponsible. In chapter 6, we will see how her parents' relationship influenced her perspectives towards marriage and enabled her to have extreme standards for finding her future partner. From the interviews with the informants and their parents, I learned that Confucian sayings like "The more sons/children, the more blessings/great happiness" (多子多福), "Raising sons to support one in one's old age" (养儿防老), and the absolute paternalistic power of elders in a household, continue to exert a direct influence on peasants' childrearing. As I talked more with Lei Juan's mother, I learned that Lei Juan's father is not a Qianjiang local, and that they do not have any relatives from her husband's side in Qianjiang. Thanks to this physical distance, her mother did not get much pressure from her husband's side of the family to have more children or sons. In her own words, "the heaven is high and the emperor is far away" (天高皇帝远), so nobody could do anything about their decision to have only one child. Another informant's mother, aunt Rong (Bing's mother), explained her decision to have another two sons even though the family faced huge fines after they had two daughters, Cui Ping and Bing.

> *When I gave birth to Cui Ping and Bing, the One Child Policy was not enforced strictly. So I just went ahead and gave birth. In my generation, each family has four or five children and I have four siblings in my own family. My neighbor sister, Ping An, even have nine children, five daughters and four sons. Children did not require a lot of attention and they were easy to raise at that time. We just fed them congee and they survived. All sister Ping An's nine children grew up to be good people and live a good life. Sister Ping An is living in the city now and her children take turns to take care of her. She does not have to work in the farmland anymore. During holidays, her children and her grandchildren all gather together and celebrate with her. They need a couple of tables to accommodate everyone and it's a full house. It was difficult to raise so many children at that time, but she is having the best time of her life now. My in-laws did not ask me to have sons directly, but I know the Tang's*

*(Bing's family name) wanted me to give birth to a son. They did not have to say it because I could tell how happy they were when I gave birth to my first son. Later, I gave birth to my second son, and they were really happy about it as well. Nobody was happy when the fines were due (laughing). We sold stuff and borrowed money from others. We had a huge debt and it took us a couple years to pay it off. Actually, having one son is enough. The most ideal situation is to have daughters and sons because villagers will call you "lonely elderly"*(孤老) *if you do not have a son.(Aunt Rong, 68 years old）*

The returned women who were born between the late 80's and the early 90's rarely have more than three siblings in their family, and most of them have only a sister or brother. We can't simply conclude that the traditional view of childbearing changed at that time period based on this single phenomenon. One possible reason could be that the Single Child policy was clearly promoted and strictly enforced in the villages of Qianjiang. According to an official at the local Family Planning Commission, the fine for having more than one child was about 5000 RMB in the early 80's. It once rose to 20,000 RMB in the 90's, and it's an unbearable economic burden for peasants. As mentioned above, policy enforcements only suppressed one's free will; they could not change one's fundamental cultural values. As a matter of fact, peasants still found different strategies to put their Confucian familial gender ideology into practice creatively even though the government tried to interfere with administrative policies. One fine example is the marital model "bu jia bu qu" (不嫁不娶), which emerged in the early 21st century. This kind of marital model exists only when the wife does not have a brother and the husband is the only son in his family[24].This unique model only requires verbal agreements between families and no betrothal gifts or dowry are offered or received. Both families are responsible for helping the new couple to get a new house and the couple is asked to have two children. One child will carry the mother's family name and the other will carry the father's family

[24] According to the Family-planning Law in China, families in rural china are allowed to have a second child only when the first child is a girl or suffering from a non-hereditary disease.

name, and the couple is responsible for both sides' parents when they get older[25]. Under this kind of marital model, both families are guaranteed to have a child to carry their family name and the elders' dream of being looked after properly is fulfilled. I was curious how verbal agreements without any legal protection could fulfill the elders' expectations in every way possible. In fact, many disagreements and conflicts exist in practice, but the women's parents responded to my confusion with vague statements like "we have a say in things in this way". Such a marital model is not unique among the returned women who were born in the 80's and 90's; Wang Man and Yu Hua are two examples. Wang Man described her marriage as:

> *A woman who wants to look after her parents will do so even after she gets married. A man who does not want to take good care of his parents will stay home and rely on his parents for support even after he gets married. 'Bu jia bu qu' is just a term and it does not mean much. The reason I did it is because I wanted my parents to feel better, and I would have a legitimate reason to stay home and take care of my family. After all, living with my parents is quite different from living with my in-laws. (Wang Man, 25 years old)*

For Wang Man and Yu Hua, it may appear as if they simply obeyed their parents' wills, but they actually gained more freedom in this marital model based on their realization of the differences between living with parents and with in-laws. Even though their acceptance and recognition for such a marital model reflected, to a degree, their internalization of Confucian gender ideology, the modification of the traditional marital model itself proved the actors' creative agency, by which they changed traditional marriage to ensure the perpetuation of traditional ideology.

The father-son relationship is the major focus in descriptions of filiality in

[25] Here is how it works: the prospective husband is asked to be a son for the woman's family by marriage, so his Hukou can be put under the woman's family Hukou registration. Only by doing so, they would be allowed to have a second child no matter what the sex of their first child is.

Confucianism; however, compared to the parent-daughter relationship, the father-son relationship appears in practice to be one of distance. Daughters play important roles in their family from an early age. Confucianism does not consider their roles as rights or responsibilities but as emotional bonds. The women returnees I interviewed recalled spending most of their time with their mother when they were little because Confucian ideology requires women to assume more responsibilities in taking care of their children. Especially at a time when they had dropped out of school but had not yet gone to cities for work, they often were left with their mother at home while their brothers were in school or playing around with male peers. The young women shared many life experiences with their mother, such as doing chores around the house, maintaining good relationships with relatives and neighbors (they became their mother's messenger: sending words or gifts to relatives and neighbors) and engaging in small talk about other villagers. From these experiences, daughters and mothers developed a close relationship, and the women's understanding and sensitivity toward human relations developed as well. These communication skills, cultivated in rural areas, made them unique in their later, post-migration social practices. For example, when Cai Hong recalls her mother, who died when Cai Hong was in her teens, what stands out are her mother's impeccable housework and social perspicacity, for which she was famed in her rural community. Her mother has become a model for her, and in the next chapter we will speak more of Cai Hong's admirable skills. For now, suffice it so say that Cai Hong is the heart of her big family and enjoys a high reputation among all her relatives. Furthermore, even though there are people like Lei Juan who have a bad relationship with her father, I found it surprising that most of the returned women have an easy relationship with their father. In their eyes, their father was strict, but reasonable in many situations. Compared to their mother, who always took their brother's side, they found their father even loved them more. One reason could be that the powerful hierarchical relationship between father and daughter was less restricted compared to father and son. The easy and close relationship between parents and their daughter made daughters

become conflict mediators between mother and father or father and brother. For example, Bing's first younger brother wanted to quit learning auto mechanics and go out with his friends to look for work in the cities. He talked to Bing and got her support first, and then Bing persuaded their father to agree with the decision. Many similar incidents happened, and the women used their own way to bring influences on family matters.

In addition, women play the roles of wife and mother for the longest period of time within their lives, and these roles influence their family greatly. The Confucian ideal is that women will cultivate qualities like meekness and thoughtfulness: "Being a good wife and loving mother" (贤妻良母), "supporting their husband and educating their children" (相夫教子) are considered the highest standards for a woman. For the returned women, their early understandings regarding the roles of wife and mother came from observations of their mother when they were little. As mentioned, parents intentionally train their daughter's housework skills through daily life. After the daughters drop out of school, the parents' expectations for their daughters and sons' lives differ greatly. Boys spend more time with their male peers, and girls' living focus becomes the anticipation of marriage. Parents think of skills that their daughter must master before marriage and teach their daughter how to behave in social situations. The overriding purpose is to make a good match. Relatives and neighbors tell girls from their youth on to "stop fooling around or nobody will marry you" and "if you keep being so stubborn, you will suffer a lot when you live with your mother in-law". Until there is an agreed upon match, the notion of getting ready for marriage is central to a girls' life. Mothers always ask their daughter to do chores around the house because they believe their daughter will need these skills after marriage.

> *I remember my mother always asking me to stay beside her to watch and learn while she was doing housework. She is competent in everything she*

*does, and she always told me to learn all the household chores, whether big or small. One reason is so I can be independent. Another reason is that I would get my future mother in-law's approval and not be looked down on. I knew she said all of these things because she believed it was good for me. But I often thought that I would not be doing such things in the future. I did not know why I was so sure about that. Now I realize how self-determined I am and my life is in my own hands. I remember one time my mother asking me to watch her sifting rice, I refused and kept playing in the courtyard. In the end, she demanded I stand beside her, so I had no choice, but I kept my eyes closed the whole time. My mother got really angry and hit me with a broom because I was so stubborn. My brother would run away immediately if my mother hit him. I was not like him at all. I just stood there. I cried because of the pain, but I still kept my eyes closed, refusing to watch or run away. I did not know how to explain to my mother that I would not be doing this kind of work in the future, so I just let her hit me. Finally she was so mad that she ran back to the house, closed the door and cried. She kept saying that I was a bad child, and that my future mother in-law would talk bad about me. She said that she would rather commit suicide by drinking poison than be blamed for not teaching me well. I was very scared and afraid that she was going to die. I pounded on the door and kept saying "don't do it, don't do it", but I still refused to give her any promise that I would learn to do those things. (Li Hua, 33 years old)*

Li Hua's childhood memories provide a good representation of how mothers emphasize the importance of mastering housework and labor skills before their daughters get married. Li Hua refused to learn how to sift rice because she expected she would not stay in a rural area. In her mind, sifting rice is related to farming, and she has no hard feelings against doing housework. Even more, she actually agreed with her mother's idea of "no need to ask help from anyone". From her recollections of her working life in cities and her marriage, she often emphasized that "relying upon oneself is better than relying upon others (求人不如求己)". The fact is, all informants learned basic housework skills whether their parents taught them intentionally or unintentionally. Some of them even had farming experience even though they kept saying that they are not familiar with

farming techniques. When I asked how they feel about their parents' intention to teach them housework skills, they did not complain or show any dislike. Most of them thought it was a reasonable expectation from their parents, and replied "I did not give much thought to it". Some even asked me "If girls do not learn to do these things, should we just mess around like boys?" The cultivation of these unmarried daughters' domestic work ability with its associated meaning of indoors and femininity cannot exist without its opposite: their brothers' work and activities are always associated with outdoors and masculinity. This is not only a spatial separation, but rather a psychological one which can extend to the rural village as a whole. As Bourdieu states, "the growth of awareness of sexual identity and the incorporation of the dispositions associated with a particular social definition of the social functions assigned to men and women come hand in hand with the adoption of a socially defined vision of the sexual division of labor"(Bourdieu 1990b:78). We could say, then, that these women all internalized the Confucian gender ideology that "men rule outside, women rule inside" at the earliest stage of their life.

However, the division of "indoor" and "outdoor" in practice is a relative one and is based on men's point of view. Women's life is not restricted to their family completely. As early as the Collectivization period, the returned women's mothers started to work "outside" under the influence of publicized slogan like "men and women are the same" and "women hold up half of the sky". They stepped out their house and worked with men in the open fields. When I talked to these mothers, I found that they were emotionally attached to that time because their traditional gender roles and their daily lives changed fundamentally; however, they might not be able to describe their experience with defined time frames and logical reasoning. The increase of labor work brought some painful experience to many of them, but the emotional satisfaction and memories from the collective group work at that period helped them understand their daughter's choice of seeking jobs in cities positively. When teaching their daughters, their emphasis on

qualities such as hard work and independence were identical to the qualities of an "Iron Woman", an ideal image of women during the collectivization period. At the same time, there were huge economic changes in rural areas at the reform and opening period. Income from agricultural products kept decreasing, while peasants' demand for cash income kept increasing. Parents wanted their daughters, who had dropped out of school, to learn professional skills in addition to household skills in order to get cash income for their future. They also hoped that their daughters greater cash income help make them more competitive when seeking a good match. Tailoring was the top professional choice for the girls after they dropped out of school. Parents would ask acquaintances to refer their daughters to work in tailor shops at nearby towns for one or two years. Eight out of the seventeen informants had experience working in tailor shops, and this experience gave them a foundation for seeking related work in cities. Most girls were happy to do such work. "There was no better option" in rural areas, they said, and tailoring seemed in their minds to be the best professional choice for a girl. This kind of reasoning is related to Qianjiang's historical culture and economic makeup. Cotton and hemp are widely grown agricultural products in the area, and they are great materials for making clothes. Tailoring shops have been everywhere in Qianjiang's villages and towns since the Qing dynasty. For example, the Happiness clothing factory in Zhang Jin rural township was well known in China in the 90's, and Qianjiang tailors' skills have earned nationwide respect. Being a tailor requires one to be detail oriented, dexterous and hardworking, these all being extensions of housework skills. Parents and girls thought it a well-respected and tidy profession. The tailor shops were close to home, and the girls did not have to work in the fields, so it was a "suitable profession for girls."

### 4.2.2 The Relational Gender Order within the Qianjiang Rural Family

The concept of filial piety that is emphasized in Confucianism recognizes the priority of paternalistic power within the rural family. This means that the younger generation should show no disobedience to the most senior people in the family,

the latter persons being living embodiments of tradition (Fei 1992). However, studies on family relationships in rural China have shown that paternalistic power has been dramatically weakened due to dwindling family size and the kernelization of the family structure that began in China's collectivism period (Wang 2009b). Chinese sociologists believes that rural society in China has changed a lot from what Fei's study once located, and that the parent-child axis has become less important than the husband-wife axis. Indeed, statistics show that Qianjiang's rural family makeup has become smaller, a typical household now having only two generations of extended family (i.e. children and their grandparents). According to the population census of 1982, 60.2% of the household had two generations, and 26.1% of the household had three generations[26]. Many of the villages in Qianjiang did not have much clan power. It is difficult to find stable and long lineages, and small lineages have been the majority. One reason is the limited time period for lineage development. According to historical records, Qianjiang started to develop extensively only around the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), even though Qianjiang county was established in the Song dynasty (960-1279). Another reason is that people migrated to this area as a sole household, or two to three households. Therefore, the basic resources for lineage development were lacking. Since New China's reform of group power, local lineages have weakened, one sign of which is that tradition rituals for honorary ancestors are rarely practiced in Qianjiang areas, even in villages where people share the same family name. One should note that the self-efficient life style was hard to sustain due to the village clan's lack of power and resources. These villages were easy targets for outside forces (government, market); therefore, households from these villages were easily influenced by the migration working economy.

However, the decline of clan power and the core tendency for family structure do

[26] Qianjiang Local Chronicles Compilation Committee. 1990. Qianjiang County Annals (1906-1985). Beijing: Chinese Cultural and Historical Press, pp 98.

not mean that family members entirely abandoned Confucian ideology. Habitus is a relatively stable entity. The women I interviewed have grown up believing that filial piety should be the basic characteristic of all children. Taking good care of parents and respecting the elderly are common moral standards, applied in the family and in social settings. In Bing's narratives, she repeatedly emphasized the importance of filial piety, in accordance with which she would abide with her parents' will:

> *Since I was little, my parents taught me the importance of filial piety, respecting the elderly, and abiding with the 'three followings and four virtues' if you are a woman, and the 'three guidelines and five constant relationships'*[27] *if you are a man. Filial piety is the basic rule. If you can't show filial piety towards your parents, you'll have a hard time relating to others. So it's a fundamental moral trait. I was taught these values since I was little, and I found them very helpful. I was quite a character in my family. I was not a typical steady girl, and I enjoyed trying new things. But when it comes to treating parents and the elderly respectfully, all the children are the same in my family and we never argue with our parents. Even if they say something wrong, we don't disrespect them in words. Many years ago, I wanted to get into the field of beauty and hair. My parents forbade it and said it was not a suitable career for a good girl. At that time, the field of beauty and hair had a very bad name, it was viewed the same as prostitution in villagers' minds, and they'd talk bad about you. Reputation is critical for a girl and my parents were afraid I wouldn't be able to find a good match. I tried explaining to them, but still they disapproved. So I had to put my dream on hold temporally. Actually, I understand them totally because you never expect your parents to fully understand you and what you want to do with your life. They have been living in the rural area their whole life, and it's understandable that they find it hard to accept new things. Even though I had to drop out of school because my family was poor, the cultural manners my parents taught me were rooted in me. When I worked as a beautician in Shenzhen and Dongguan, I met customers from Hong Kong*

[27] The three guidelines explained the loyalty and piety between the emperor and his officers, the father and his son, the husband and his wife, with the former being the guideline for the latter. The five constant virtues refers to kindness(仁), righteousness(义), propriety(礼), wisdom(智), sincerity(信).

*and Taiwan, and I found they had similar ideologies as me. They have better material conditions, but our values are the same.（Bing，34 years old）*

Bing's father was a famous barefoot doctor. He was home schooled, and was systematically educated in Confucianism. Under her father's influence, Bing and her brothers firmly adopted the Confucian ideology of filial piety, and behaved accordingly through their daily life. When Bing was working in the city, she suffered feelings of indifference and loss because of the huge material conditions gap between her and her customers. She tried to cope with these feelings through finding common cultural values with her customers, and in so doing enforced her belief as to the commonalty and effectiveness of filial piety. There were times when she disobeyed her parents, such as in becoming a beautician. To avoid the bad name of "unfilial daughter" and direct conflicts with parents, women prefer to obey their parents on the surface while seeking roundabout ways to fulfill their own wishes. Fei insightfully points out that when dramatic changes occur in society, people maintain only the form of paternalistic power, while creatively changing its content (Fei 1992:132). When Bing faced her parents' strong disapproval, she chose to work in a cotton mill with her aunt temporally, as this was what her parents wanted. However, she found ways to learn beautician skills behind her parents' back. The skill set she learned influenced her later career choices in the city and helped her realize her dream of becoming an entrepreneur. In the end, she gained her parents' understanding and approval.

Under Confucianism, filial piety includes "respecting parents" and "taking care of parents". Because of the sons' position within the patriarchal family system, sons inherit their parents' fortune and have the obligation to perpetuate the family line, while doing their best to shelter their parents from the ravages of old age. In comparison, daughters' roles are temporary. Their obligation to bring income to the family and take care of their parents is not laid out explicitly in Confucianism.

Through my interviews with returned women and their parents, I found that even though traditional rural families are changing and there are inefficient nursing practices in rural areas, daughters still met the needs of their parents. By national law, sons and daughters have equal right of inheritance, and equal obligation to nurse their aging parents. However, the patriarchal family system has not changed so much, and daughters are in a different position compared to sons. Daughters who get married lose their right of inheritance. This kind of ideology was highly internalized by the women themselves and they found it reasonable. And so it is fair to say that sons take care of their parents because of cultural rules, responsibilities, and their position within the family, while daughters show their filial piety based on the dispositional schema characterized by emotion, *liangxin* (良心, conscience) and kindness toward their parents.

At a very young age, girls realize clearly and deeply that they are in a different position compared to their brothers. The difference appears in rites of worship and rights of inheritance, and also in the mothers' practice of favoring their sons in sibling conflicts. In many similar ways, girls develop an identity that differs from their brothers, and always put their brothers' needs before theirs. For example, many of the girls who were born before the enforcement of One Child Policy, such as Cai Hong, Bing and Li Hua, had to drop out of school to save money for their younger or older brother's education, because their family could not afford tuition for all the children. This kind of situation had changed by the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s because rural families had less children under the enforcement of the One Child Policy. Women such as Yan Hua and Wang Man did not have to sacrifice their chance of education for their brother. In general, parents would "let her be" if girls showed little interest in attending school; however, parents were determined that their sons would finish middle school, better yet high school, despite the economic burden and even if their sons refused.

*I am the second child in my family. I have an older sister and two*

> *younger brothers. My sister was married and she could not support the family much. So I am responsible for my brothers' education. We have big age differences. My sister is four years older than me. I am seven years older than my first younger brother, and fourteen years older than my youngest brother. So the age spread is just under eighteen years. At that time, except me, people were either very old or very young in my family. I was born in the period when people were extremely poor. There weren't many resources, and you couldn't buy things even if you had money. It was very difficult for my parents to raise us. I hoped I could do something to make my parents and brothers' life better. Sometimes, material needs can change a person's heart. They were boys and they might get into trouble if they had too much hardship in their life. So I was willing to sacrifice what I had. The elderly and my parents in my family all have similar attitudes. They taught us to put other's needs before our own, and everyone would turn out to be happy at the end. They'll pay me back some day in the future. When you're young, you should try your best to support your family and provide the best for your brothers or sisters as you can. When your parents, your sisters and your brothers are living poorly, you should try your best to support them. Otherwise, no one else is going to do it. Kinship is what I care about the most.（Bing，34 years old）*

In Bing's narratives, she kept rationalizing her sacrifices for her family. In order to support her two younger brothers' education, Bing dropped out before completing middle school. Following her parents' will, she worked at a cotton mill with her aunt in the neighboring rural township. She emphasized that the objective conditions of her family, such as poor economic conditions and big age gaps between family members, were the critical reasons for her to start working at a young age. She also emphasized the importance of filial piety and kinship. The family perspective trumped the social perspective. She worried that because of their material impoverishment her brothers might develop feelings of resentment and hurt others, and so she began working at a young age to bring cash income into the family. In the following chapters we will see that Bing kept chasing her dream during the whole process of her working migration and return, but at the

same time maintained the role of caretaker, even after her two brothers married. Her devotion may in part be due to the fact that she is still single and so relies more than otherwise she might on the emotional sustenance from her kinship ties. She also may believe that her investment in her family will be reciprocated in the future. Nonetheless, it should be kept in mind that her gendered habitus embodies filial piety and the belief that men are in some ways superior to women, the upshot being that she views her sacrifices as natural and justifiable.

Bourdieu uses the term "symbolic power" to represent the force on social actors who initially are willing to act along. The actors do not see the power as enforcement, but rather internally accept and approve it. Bourdieu defines such a phenomenon as miscognition. He specifically states, "the male order is so deeply grounded as to need no justification: it imposes itself as self-evident, universal. It tends to be taken for granted by virtue of the quasi-perfect and immediate agreement which obtains between, on the one hand, social structures such as those expressed in the social organization of space and time and in the sexual division of labor and, on the other, cognitive structures inscribed in bodies and in minds. The case of gender domination shows better than any other that symbolic violence accomplishes itself through an act of cognition and of mis-recognition that lies beyond-or beneath-the consciousness and will, in the obscurities of the schemata of habitus that are once gendered and gendering" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:171). The generation of this misrecognition is closely related to the lived world of these women workers, enabling them to complicitly support Confucian gender norms and values. Enmeshed as we are in everyday life, developing an awareness of how we support or even figure out a possible way of resisting dominant ideologies is not that easy. Born and growing up in a family where the Confucian gender ideology is practiced at every moment, these women have a fair chance of adopting the classifications and differential treatment between women and men. They tend to take all these classifications and differences for granted, but also creatively understand and explain them in practice.

### 4.3 Conducting Oneself (做人): Social Relationships and Daily Interactions in Rural Community

"Conduct oneself" is an expression that frequently appears in villagers' life. The expression has two interrelated meanings. First, it is a set of behaviors conducted by villagers to establish and maintain social relationships. As villagers explained, "conduct oneself" means "establish relationships", "maintain good relationships" and "interact with others". In fact, every active, self-promoted behavior concerning relationships can be included under the expression "conduct oneself". Another of its meanings is the evaluation of a person or a family's performance in interpersonal relationships. Comments such as "Aunt Rong conducts herself really well and everyone says she is a good person", and "this family does not know how to conduct themselves" are examples in this regard. Such comments not only evaluate whether a person/family has good or bad social relationships with others, but they also evaluate a person's morality, as well as overall personality.

During an interview, an elderly person once explained to me the dual meaning of this expression as "you need to learn how to conduct yourself, then you can become a real man." Later I realized that social interactions with others and evaluation standards for oneself overlapped in villagers' minds; people can only be considered human beings when they interact socially with others. Therefore, we can understand "conduct oneself" as a cultural system: a person/family establishes interpersonal relationships with others by providing their belongings, labor and emotions, and these interpersonal relationships are critical standards for one to become "a social human being". In other words, while people build their interpersonal relationships with others, they construct their self-identity in society. In rural communities I am evaluated according to how well I interact socially, forging and maintaining relationships with others. If I conduct myself well, I attain a high social position. Otherwise I am marginalized, shut out of social events. In terms of individual life course, villagers do not have specific standards

of conduct for underage children or for single women because they are not deemed to be “completed human beings”. But as noted, these informants spent their early lives in close union with their parents, observing and practicing behavior in every social situation. They learned, continuously, the social rules and manners to interact with different people. In this section I discuss how the returned women perceive the social rules and manners they acquired in their rural community before working in cities. In process of discussion I hope to understand the coping strategies these women employed in cities and in the rural hometown they returned to.

To conduct oneself well is an important requirement of rural life, and the target of “conduct oneself” includes all social relationships that a person has. I have already discussed the different gender roles and ethical standards the returned women learned from their families. Therefore, this section is going to focus on their social norms and strategies for social interactions with relatives, neighbors and friends. The range of relatives includes two or three generations of extended family on the father’s side, who usually live within the same village or in nearby villages, and also includes relatives from other villages who are connected with families through marriage. Because clans are relatively spread out in Qianjiang area, it follows that there are important social interactions with relatives and with neighbors who live in the same village. Some neighbors live close by and there are frequent daily interactions (as people usually say “a far-off relative is not as helpful as a near neighbor”); some interactions occur on account of similar background (e.g. married women who come from the same village interact with each other more often); some interactions are due to relationships of power (as for instance with local government officials); and some interactions derive from mutual relationships. Lastly, there are social interactions with good friends who live in other villages.

Situations for one to “conduct oneself” can be divided into formal (events) and

informal (daily) situations. First, every family experiences life events such as birthdays, weddings, funerals, housewarmings, and these are formal situations in which the need to conduct oneself is put into practice. For a host, these situations and practices are directly associated with saving "face" (面子, or simply translated as "reputation"). For villagers, the codes of conduct determine whether one should attend the event, bring a gift and if so how much, and whether to help out with the event. My informants recall that relatives always helped out in family events, whether big or small, contributing with money and labor. To illustrate, during event banquets close male relatives would help arrange tables and greet guests, while female relatives and neighbors were in charge of cooking. A well prepared event was an important test of a host family's conduct. The amount of relatives and friends who attended or came to help in an event was a direct reflection as to whether a host family had conducted itself well in the past.

To conduct oneself in daily life is not as symbolic as in formal events, but it influences interpersonal relationships greatly in terms of maintaining, deepening or worsening relationships. Such interactions are divided in two situations. One situation involves set date visits and visits based on particular matters. Set date visits are visits during festivals. According to the returned women, spring festival, lantern festival, dragon boat festival and mid-autumn festival are important dates for relatives, neighbors and friends to visit each other. For instance, as apprentices, their parents would bring them to see their teachers and give gifts during the dragon boat festival. During the spring festival, they needed to visit their relatives' houses to wish elders and teachers a "happy new year". Visits based on particular matters usually involve unexpected events such as a sudden illness or life crisis. In such situations, relatives and neighbors demonstrate right conduct by visits to the misfortunate family while bearing gifts. Another situation involves helping out in daily life, such as help with farming, house building, lending money in times of crisis, lending small things and looking after others' children etc. Behaviors such as the exchange of gifts, and right conduct in daily social interactions are mainly

carried out by women, and the returned women I interviewed told me they had been required by their mothers to participate in such activities since they were little.

Confucianism holds that propriety is an important feature of interpersonal relationships. In family relationships propriety is shown in expected values between father and son and in male superiority. Specifically, we see emphasis on filial piety and the idea that men are superior to women. At the rural community level, propriety is emphasized in right conduct and in *renqing*（人情） interactions. *Renqing* is often translated as "human sentiments," but it does not only refer to one's natural emotions. In Confucianism, *renqing* is also emphasized as "obligation and indebtedness" in social interactions (Yang 1994:109). In Qianjiang, people always referred to the giving of gifts at formal events as "*gan renqing*（赶人情）". *Gan* has such meanings as "chase" and "pursue," and these are conceived as continuous actions. Thus *gan* reflects the reciprocity and continuity of *renqing*. As Oxfeld notes *renqing* "need not necessarily involve hierarchy, but it does entail both reciprocity and modeling"(2010:47). Reciprocity and continuity are basic standards for right conduct. For example, in formal events, the monetary amount of a gift is an important criterion for evaluating one's right conduct. The monetary gifts a family receives in formal events constitute deference paid to their right conduct in the past, a reciprocation of *renqing*. And yet every formal event is a fresh opportunity for a host to practice right conduct. It is therefore essential that event assistants make a list of the monetary gifts received from each guest, so that future reciprocations can be made with all due parity. Other than as *renqing* in formal events, reciprocation for kindness and generosity in daily life is not guaranteed. But what is most important is that this kindness and generosity not be forgotten (Yan 1996:144). "Differential far-off and near" is another general rule for "conduct oneself". It means a person of family employs proper social manners based on the sequence of kinship, especially relationships with relatives. A person's or family's sequence of kinship depends on

the relationship network on the father's side and on the marriage network. Fei Xiaotong's "differential model of association" is a specific example of such a principle. The closeness and importance of a relationship is reflected in the practice of right conduct. People show propriety, give gifts, and provide help in forms that accord with their sequence of kinship. Near relations always receive better treatment than far relations. People often use the word "immature" for the impropriety of failing to distinguish near from far. In the returned women's narratives, right conduct is shown in specific situations. For example, a villager who had not much interacted with Xu Yan introduced her to a tailor shop, so she had an opportunity to learn tailoring. Even though the villager was not invited to any of Xu Yan's formal family events, when the villager's family hosted a birthday party for his son, Xu Yan sent him a monetary gift as token of her appreciation, thereby establishing a social connection between the two families. This example illustrated people's subjective choices and actions in social interactions based on their personal situations. Because cultural norms require a self-driven practice of right conduct, social relationship networks are formed between people. These social networks are fluid and open, to the extent of not being determined by fixed social policies.

Whether it is exchanging gifts in formal events or helping out in daily life, right conduct has a double significance: on one level, people providing materials, money and labor to others to share happiness and sorrow and in so doing establish or expand their social network; on another level, *renqing* is a form of debt. Once a gift or favor is received, it must, come opportunity, be returned, and in the meantime there is a close connection with the giver. The locals always use "*renqing* debt" to describe the give and take in right conduct, and emphasize that "a monetary debt is easy to pay off, but a *renqing* debt is hard to pay back." Because there is no measurement for emotions, one cannot reciprocate by specific amount of money or labor. However, it does not mean that one does not pay back. Still, favor exchanging is an important factor in forming mutual relationships

between villagers, a factor that ties individuals closely with their group. The forming of mutual relationships helps a village form united moral standards. These moral standards represent what the villagers are seeking, and are in line with villager's ultimate value standards. Ultimately these values become the basis of collective action within a village.

While villagers are denounced as "immature" when deemed guilty of impropriety, they are pronounced as "lacking *liangxin*" (没良心) when they do not reciprocate, or do not recognize their obligations to others. Both denunciations operate on a moral level. *Liangxin* is always translated into English as "conscience"; however, its implicit meaning is not equal to its English translation. We can only understand its meaning better when we consider it in the context of Chinese culture. To put it simply, this word contains two parts. *Liang* means "good", *xin* has meanings of "heart" and "mind" (Oxfeld 2010:51-52). Literally, *liangxin* is used to describe people who have good morals and a pure heart. It emphasizes people's right conduct in reciprocating others' kindness. Certainly, paying back has different levels of meaning. It can imply revenge. The idea of paying back activates the concept of responsibility. People who have *liangxin* can remember and actively practice their moral responsibilities, and those who forget their moral responsibilities lack conscience. All these concepts emphasize that people are the ultimate actors for their moral responsibilities, and such emphasis has been embodied in Chinese ideology for a long time. "Benevolence depending on oneself" (为仁由己) is a Confucian saying. It asserts that "benevolence", the highest moral characteristic in Confucian moral ideology, is in one's own hands. In addition, the question as to whether a person has *liangxin* reflects the moral responsibilities and value judgements internalized in a critic's habitus.

The moral judgment related to *liangxin* exists in social interactions at the rural community level and at the family level; at the family level it consists in a daughters' responsibility to take care of her aging parents. Such responsibilities

are based on the dispositional schema characterized by emotion, *liangxin* (conscience). The reason is that moral debt was internalized within the relationships between parents and children, ancestors and descendants in Chinese culture. When using *liangxin* in this context, it does not mean that daughters have higher moral standards than sons. It is used to emphasize daughters' "heartfelt" sense of taking care of their parents, the "emotion" and "mindfulness" involved are compared to the explicit caring responsibility that Confucianism outlines for sons. If a son does not fulfill his responsibility to take care of his parents, he lacks conscience, a moral fault.

In studies on Chinese rural communities, a general conclusion is that Chinese rural society in the reform era did not have clearly defined moral standards or a value system for people to use in their daily lives because of the frequent historical change. Moreover, some scholars assert that moral standards in Confucianism and in Communism became obsolete when rural communities entered the post-collective era. Villagers' sense of responsibility and mission for individual and group dramatically decreased at the public and personal level, and morality was absent (Ci 1994; Liu 2000; Yan 2002). However, the existence of the concept of *liangxin* and its frequent usage made the phenomenon of moral vacancy less obvious. In my interviews, the *liangxin* was used by informants in reference to situations like taking care of aged parents, showing appreciation for a friend's help, and remembering a relatives' kindness. Villagers feel their moral responsibilities strongly, and use them to judge or evaluate others. Cai Hong once told me how her family helped out her uncles' famililies when her mother was alive, but her family did not receive any help from her uncles' families after her mother passed away.

> *My mother was a highly competent person and she was working in a carpet factory in town. People who work in factories were highly competent people at that time. Because my mother earned a stable salary*

*and with my father's income from farming, our family's economic status was pretty good compared to others in the villages. My uncles' families were less well off compared to us. My mother knew my cousins did not get to eat meat often, so she usually brought meat to my uncles' families after she got her monthly pay. My mother would give money, as well as provide labor to my uncles' families whenever they needed help, and she never said no to them. After my mother's accidental death my father had to take care of three children by himself. We were all in school at the time, and he was in charge of work inside and outside of the house. It was very difficult for him to take care of everything, and my family's income decreased a lot because of the absence of my mother's income. But none of my uncles helped. I remember one incident clearly. I found out we had no matchsticks to make fire for cooking after school. So I went to my older uncle's house nearby. My aunt was chatting with two other women from the same village in her courtyard, and she did not pay any attention to me. But I went ahead and asked her quietly whether she could lend me some matchsticks. She stared at me for a second, then turned away and said 'you should go to the village store to buy matchsticks if you need some'. The two women burst out laughing when they heard her reply. It felt like my face was being pinched by needles, and I walked away in silence. I still remember the stare she gave me. My younger uncle's family were 'lacking conscience' as well. They went to the city for work at an earlier time because they were poor. A few years after my mother died, they started a small clothing process factory in Guangzhou and came back to our village to recruit young girls and boys my age who dropped out from school to work for them. My father wanted me to go with them and he thought it's better to have relatives who could look after me. So he took me to see them and asked me to beg them for an opportunity. My aunt told me that I could bring my belongings with me to meet them the next afternoon. But when we arrived at their house the next day they had already left. Their neighbor told us they'd left in the morning. Only at that moment did we realize they saw me as a burden and had no intention of bringing me along. (Cai Hong, 33 years old)*

In Cai Hong's narrative, her uncles are described as lacking *liangxin* because they did not return her family's help. She then added that her relatives looked at her differently later on because of her hardworking spirit. Her older uncle helped her

to look after her father when her father was ill, and her younger uncle and aunt invited her to work in their factory later. The interactions between their families were restored. Lastly, she said that the past had passed and that she no longer dwells on those unhappy memories. Cai Hong's act of "repaying evil with good" was praised by her relatives, and people said she conducted herself very well. In the next chapter we will see that Cai Hong's strong sense of moral responsibility and her highly competent abilities have made her a core figure in her family, and she is trusted and supported by all the members of her extended family. Unlike Cai Hong, villagers often use idioms such as "when you feed a dog a meat bun, the dog will never pay back" to express their anger towards people who refuse to pay back others' favors. People have different understandings of responsibilities and standards, and it's hard to reach consensus.

People tend to focus on immoral actions instead of on moral actions or supererogation when they talk about morality. Following moral standards are considered natural things to do, and people do not talk about these rules explicitly unless they are broken. However, *liangxin* is not only used to negatively describe people's relationships, but also to praise a person's good character of repaying good with good. For instance, Li Hua mentioned the case of an orphan from her village. The orphan's parents died when he was very little, so he was raised by every family in his village. The orphan went to a city for work when still very young. He ultimately became rich, but never forgot the villagers' help. He returned to the village, paid the travel expenses of a person over 60, paid for road repairs and continues to provide help for those in need. When villagers speak of him, he is praised as someone who has *liangxin*.

Traditional moral responsibilities often involve hierarchical systems, such as children's responsibilities in taking care of aged parents, showing filial piety and the responsibilities that elders expect of their descendants. Fei has argued that moral concepts were highly related to one's specific position within the rural

community and to the particular relationship network in which one is located (Fei 1992). Fei says that one's specific moral obligations were restrained by the particular role one played. However, as we have seen in these informants' narratives, the villagers' moral practices ran counter to hierarchical systems. For example, Cai Hong blamed her two uncles for lack of *liangxin*. The villagers' praise of the orphan's *liangxin* was not just the older generation's approval of a person from a younger generation. Li Hua, who is the same age as the orphan, has the same positive assessment of his moral character. Villagers' moral expectations do function within hierarchical systems, but they also expect the same from their peers. The younger generation could even have same moral expectations of the older generation. Furthermore, *liangxin* emphasizes the memory of past moral acts, and represents the continuous nature of moral responsibility. The moral practices are subject to change precisely because they do not exist only in traditional hierarchical relationships. And certainly, the villagers have internalized *liangxin* as a moral standard and as a means of moral judgment.

### 4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have reviewed the returned women's memories about their rural life and discussed social institutions related to the development and practice of their reproductive habitus. When these women grew up in rural Qianjiang there was constant change. The ideologies of each historical era were exhibited in people's habitus, such as the Confucian ideal of "filiality", "men are superior to women", and "men rule outside, women rule inside", women's independent spirit during the collective period, villagers' emphasis on remembering others' favors from the past, the moral responsibility of paying back in conformity with *liangxin*, etc. Through the exploration of their habitus before migration, we can conclude that there were discrepancies during the establishment of New China, in Mao's period and in the reform period. However, people maintained values and moral standards throughout these periods. Even though these returned women did not themselves experience the pre-reform events, these events influenced their growth

and development in rural areas. Their reproductive habitus bears the impress of Confucianism and the collective period, and contributes to their strategic responses to specific rural situations during the reform period. Most importantly, stable relationships within the family and the rural community have not much changed. Because peasants hold tightly onto their land and their life style remains substantially unchanged for generations, it is hard for these women to step out of their world and reflect on their lives. When they face gender roles and behavioral standards, they accept and internalize them as part of themselves. The habitus is reproduced by everyone, and maintained through their knowledge and practices for generations within this rural field. It is within their rural family and during the daily practices in the rural community that these women's sense of themselves was originally formed. Knowing what to expect and what was expected of them, these women were able to feel secure and did not much challenge or question the Confucian gender norms and values before migrating out for work. Recollections are saved images we pull from our brain as needed, and facilitate interactions between past and present. The returned women's recollections of childhood life can serve as an important reference point for us to understand their identity transformation in the process of their migration and return.

# Chapter 5 Being Outside: Migration Experiences in Cities

As discussed in the Literature Review chapter, numerous scholars have asserted that the labor migration has liberated women migrant workers from the Chinese traditional Confucian patriarchal culture and improve their status within their families, especially in their rural origins as a whole. However, others also disagreed and emphasized that women migrant workers in fact were confronted with new vulnerabilities in their migration and settlement process. In public discourse, the image of women migrant workers is somewhat ambiguous. In general, official national political documents always dismiss the ramifications of gender, and consider them as part of a "new labor army" essential for actuating China's modernization. And some media reports specifically acknowledge their hard work in fulfilling their dream while successful preserving their legal rights[28].

Still many media reports have focused on how women migrant workers are suppressed and abused, or how their behavior violated social norms, like not keeping their cleanliness and kept ignoring personal safety, or committing acts of crime[29]. At the same time, they were also portrayed as helpless victims, or targets for bullying and suppression because they were not well-educated. Because of such stories appearing regularly on mass media, in turn their relationships and

[28] Related reports can be easily found on the website. Here are some examples: "Dagongmei achieves her art dream after learning pyrography for 15 years" reported by Zhang Zhandou on Yangtze Evening Post, source: http://news.163.com/15/0722/06/AV415FOQ00014AED.html ; "Dagongmei from Chongqing successfully became a boss after wandering in cities for 20 years" reported by Li Sheng on Chongqing Morning News, source: http://cq.qq.com/a/20161011/004702.html ; "Eleven Dagongmei in Shenzhen online broadcast the process of safeguarding their legal rights" on South Metropolis Daily, source : http://news.163.com/06/1226/06/338EU6LQ00011229.html

[29] Related reports can be easily found on the website. Here are some examples: "A 19-year-old female migrant workers who is so credulous was raped and murdered by a motorbike-taxi driver on the road of hunting jobs" reported by Tao Pan on Wuhan Evening News, source: http://www.china.com.cn/shehui/2016-11/09/content_39668072.html; "Dagongmei killed her friend with her lover for the sake of robbing money and dumped the corpse in the river " reported by Sheng Wei on Chutian Metropolis Daily, source: http://news.sohu.com/20060623/n243905909.shtml; "Dagongmei was tried for smothering her newborn baby without realizing her behavior had offended the law" on Beijing Youth Daily, source：http://news.sohu.com/20080924/n259713610.shtml.

marriage status were constantly put on the spot for public scrutiny. Most popular is the notion that they are using marriage or relationship instrumentally to make their lives better, like marrying for money or becoming some married man’s mistress for material gains and pleasures. However, some are seen as constant failures or becoming victims of fraud.

Even in rare positive reports, women migrant workers face obstacles such as low education, low income, occupational diseases, lack of social security benefits, sexual harassment, interpersonal relationship issues and other hardships, and they need to work extra hard compared to their urban counterparts to achieve their dreams at even incremental levels. And yet their urban counterparts view women migrant workers as not having earned what gains they’ve made.

The obstacles and hardships that women migrant workers experienced reveal their social and economic subordination. As Prior (1997:70) states, representations cannot accurately reflect the outside world, but rather should be regarded “as something to be explained and accounted for through the discursive rules and themes predominant in a particular socio-historical context”. From the historical point of view, the privileged social class in Mao’s period has became today’s underprivileged class: factory workers’ and peasants’ social status declined dramatically after China’s economic reform. In today’s transitional Chinese society, getting rich, development, and modernization are the major logics from top to bottom. Under the discourse of a post-Mao modernization project, women migrant workers who have low income appear to be unfit for modern life. While people in cities are the ones who make official public announcements or write media reports, women migrant workers are reductively constructed as “modernization losers”. Such public representations actually reflect the unequal power relationship within contemporary Chinese society. Owing to women migrant workers’ lack of social and cultural capital, they do not have a voice to speak out against negative stereotypes. Through the exploration of these women’s

self-representations, this section and the following chapter (their returning rural lives) will try to disclose these women's own perceptions and creative responses to their underprivileged material conditions, which contribute to their marginalized status in contemporary Chinese society.

Ever since they started working in cities, the lives of women migrant workers have changed dramatically as new experiences and new temptations arise in the new urban environment. Unlike in their rural hometowns, where gender roles and responsibilities are precisely prescribed under Confucian ideology, urban life exposes these women to new alternatives. Their new practices and responsibilities, although definitely influenced by the reproductive habitus inculcated in the rural field, have to be negotiated, leading most likely to the development of a new, transformative habitus, germane to their urban lives. In contradistinction to the aforementioned media reports I will refrain from pity or praise, when describing these women's changed social status. My aim is to explore the macro social system's influences on or restrictions to these women's personal choices. The main focus is to discuss how these rural women juggle different expectations, roles and personal wishes in urban cities; how their habitus changes; and how their overlapping or contradictory value systems conduce to the fulfillment of their life goals.

### 5. 1 Reasons for Migrating Out to Cities

Urbanization scholars took peasants' cross-regional movement for work as primarily an economic issue, and employed theories of labor and institutional economics to explain their choice of migration, while proletarianization scholars ascribed Chinese peasants' labor migration to the expansion of the global capitalist economy. These two approaches certainly explicated the rationality and necessity of peasants' migration behaviors. However, whether viewing peasants as abstract "economic man" whose choices are designed to pursue maximum economic benefits, or as passive recipients of the exploitation of the capitalist

economy, it is easy to miss the cultural values behind this migration, and in so doing, lose sight of these women's subjectivity. Moreover, analyzing women migrant workers as a whole group, we could easily miss individual differences and logics behind special situations. Therefore, these are not the ideal approaches to help us understand these women migrant workers' individual experiences during the process of "migrating out for work and returning to the rural field". In specific areas, the choice of migrating out for work is not only influenced by the historical conditions of local society, but also is influenced by individual differences and family conditions, thus yielding variegated motives and behaviors as regards job seeking. Therefore, we need to consider these women in the context of specific life situations, and examine their reasons for seeking jobs in cities through a micro perspective.

In Qianjiang, every rural household has family members who either have worked or are working in cities. However, migrating out for work was not a positively perceived behavior before the early 90's. As previously noted, when Li Hua's father faced financial difficulties, he chose to seek local opportunities for making income besides farming. He chose to buy and resell eggs, regarded people who work in cities rather than in rural fields as "triflers". Public opinion of girls who migrate out was even more negative. Parents would rather send their daughters to factories in nearby towns than allow them to leave home and seek jobs in faraway cities. Living in the relatively closed rural environment, the most immediate way for these women's parents to learn about the outside world was through television, and they did not entirely like what they saw. They saw uncertainty, thus instability and danger, and sought to preserve their daughters from these ills. According to Confucian gender ideology, a good reputation is a crucial component in a woman's marriage prospects. Therefore, parents do not want their daughters to be placed in an uncertain world. For example, Bing's parents stopped her from learning beauty and hair styling because it's not a standard career choice in the rural field, and indeed is often associated with prostitution.

When I asked “Why did you choose to migrate out to work?”, the 17 returned women answered according to their different family status, social environment and historical background. Marriage status was indeed a major influence in their outward migration. Women who migrated out to work after marriage often emphasized family financial pressure as a reason, and their goal of working in cities seemed rather clear: making money. Five out of the 17 informants were married when they first migrated out to work; they are: Yue E, Xu Yan, Cai Feng, Liu Zhen, and Qin. As for Cai Hong and Yan Hua, who returned to their rural hometowns to get married while they were still working in cities, they repeatedly emphasized family financial pressure as the motivation to return to work in cities. Obviously, family is a central element of these women’s habitus, and plays an essential role in their life strategies. When Yue E talked about her reasons to migrate out to work for the first time in 1992, she said:

> *My husband was a teacher at a local public elementary school at that time. How much do you earn as a public school teacher? The wage was so low, and sometimes you did not get paid on time. My father-in-law broke his leg in an accident; we were in debt because we borrowed money for him to see a doctor. There was no way we could pay off the debt by working in the field. My daughter was born around that time too. "Above are the elderly, below are the young", everyone in the family needed to eat. I was very anxious and life was very difficult. It happened that one of my friends who worked in Longgang, Shenzhen came to visit me during the Spring Festival. She was gone less than two years, but she looked like a completely new person. She paid a lot more attention to her clothes and shoes compared to before. She told me a lot about her experience in Shenzhen, and I wanted to migrate out to work there too after I talked to her. I asked her to bring me with her. My husband refused to migrate out to work because he did not want to give up his job as a teacher. Even though you do not earn much by being a teacher, people respect you. My husband did not want me to migrate out to work for two reasons. First, he did not know the outside world very well and questioned whether I could earn much money there. Also, he did not want*

> *us to stay apart. He was afraid that my feelings for him would change because of the temptations in the outside world* [laughing]. *But we had no choice. If the family was financially stable, who would want to leave their family? I decided to migrate out to work by myself. I was not fully aware what the outside world looked like, so I wanted to assess it first and my husband could join me later if it seemed a workable plan. I went to Shenzhen with my friend after the Spring Festival. I got familiar with working there after two or three years, and my income was much higher compared to farming or being a public school teacher. So I asked my husband to quit his job and join me. He was very hesitant at the beginning, but I forced him to come in the end* [laughing]. *（Yue E, 40 years old）*

Yue E did not at first mention her father in law's medical condition. She just said that her husband's income was very low and unstable, and that the family's income was very limited because of the heavy tax on farming. But in fact 1992 was not the most difficult time for peasants in Qianjiang. Before Yue E went to work in Shenzhen, her household of four had 16 *mu* (1 hectare) of farmland, a financially sustainable amount. Later, Yue E revealed that her immediate reason for seeking work in cities was to pay off family debt. She worked in a toy factory and a shoe factory in Shenzhen briefly before working for three years in a clothing factory in Dongguan. Because she had no experience in tailoring she performed the less technical work: cutting threads for 900RMB per month. She quit work on July 29, 1995 because she was 9 months pregnant and needed to go back to the countryside to identify the sex of her baby. I will discuss Yue E's determination to have a boy and her painful experience in this regard later. After several months of convalescence, she returned to Dongguang, where she opened a marketplace deli shop under the introduction of her friend. But she finally closed the shop after having an abortion. There followed a quick succession of jobs, such as wholesale vegetable supplier (by which time her family's financial system had begun to improve), Majhong house owner, and insurance agent. After three years in Dongguan, Yue E managed to persuade her husband to quit his rural teaching job,

and come join her. He first worked at a small weaving factory, where he earned about 1100 RMB per month. Later, he went to a bigger factory, where he worked for ten years, shaping dyed fabrics. Clearly, Yue E played a leading role in her and her husband's outward migration, a role that runs counter to research reports that depict women as followers.

The experience of Xu Yan bears similarity with that of Yue E. Xu Yan's father died when she was young, and the ensuing financial shortfall induced her to drop out of elementary school. Later, she went to a nearby town to learn tailoring. She got married at 16 and became a mother at 17, uncommon and precocious acts for the time. Xu Yan's husband worked as a truck driver at a construction site in a rural township, transporting sand and concrete. Her husband's boss drove without a license and got into a car accident. In order to avoid being arrested or penalized, he asked Xu Yan's husband to lie to the police that he was the one who drove the car. Her husband thought that nobody was seriously injured or died from the accident, and that the matter could be resolved by the payment of fines. So he agreed to lie. His driver's license was voided and he was not allowed to reapply a driver's license for three years.

The penalty was like a death sentence for the family; without the husband's income, their financial state dramatically declined. Now, many years later, Xu Yan still blames her husband for his carelessness, and her husband's boss for doing nothing to ameliorate their dire financial straits. In order to better her family's income, Xu Yan migrated out for work for the first time in 1996. Drawing on her experience as a tailor, she worked with a friend in a clothing factory in Shenyang. But the factory did not pay her, and she felt she could not trust the owner. So she came back home empty handed after three months of work. Later, a friend introduced her to a weaving factory in Fujian, and her husband followed her after she'd worked there for a year. The family has since sustained itself financially. After working in Fujian for three years, her husband reapplied for a driver's

license and started driving coach buses between Xi'an and Xinjiang, and Xu Yan followed him to work as a bus ticket vendor. During the mid and late 90's, the labor migration trend spread to Midwest China, and inland people started to go to coastal cities for jobs. Coach bus lines along the Northwest were neither popular nor lucrative, and when gas costs rose, Xu Yan and her husband had to seek alternative employment. Xu Yan leased a four square meter retail outlet near a high school and sold accessories. Because high school students were busy with study and had a very limited allowance, business was slow. Xu Yan wanted to quit many times, but she kept at it because there was no better choice. Only in recent years, after a nearby professional school upgraded to a college, and more students came to study, has business incrementally improved.

Yue E and Xu Yan's experience shows that, since the early 90's, peasant families have had a hard time meeting their living expenses with farming and side jobs. Once a family gets in debt on account of an unexpected incident, the family financial situation loses its balance. Yue E and Xu Yan realized that their farming income would never be able to help them pay off their debts, and that their rural hometown lacked opportunities for alternative income, so they migrated out for work as a means of survival. At that time, even though everyone had farmland, there were still differences between peasants because of inequities in social resources. Families with better incomes, for instance families whose members were official workers in rural township factories, had less impetus for outward migration. But people like Yue E, who came from poor families or had marginalized status, started working in cities in the early 90's. If Yue E's father had not fallen sick, she would perhaps not have migrated out to supplement the family's income. Borrowing money was not an option, which left work in the cities as a final option.

The other three married women -- Cai Feng, Liu Zhen, and Qin -- did not migrate out for work until the mid or late 90's. Heavy farming taxation, limited farming

incomes, and poor family resources were their objective reasons for migrating out. The period between 1994 and 2001 was the worst for Qianjiang's agricultural economy. Peasants had to pay an average of 400 RMB in tax per *mu* (1/16 of a hectare) of farmland. However, prices of agricultural products were very low. In the mid 90's, the price for a gram of rice was about 0.5RMB. Usually a *mu* of farmland could produce 1800 grams of rice, worth about 900RMB. After taking out the cost of production inputs and taxes, peasants felt that they were losing money in farming even if they did not take their labor investment into account. At that time, rural families' farming income could not support their expenses except basic living expenses. Therefore, more and more middle age and young people migrated out for work and many farmlands were abandoned. Through this process, negative public opinions regarding working in cities were dismissed and the labor migration trend was gradually formed in Qianjiang.

People tend to use objective reasons to justify their behavior. These women's decisions to migrate out are the result of interactions between several factors, therefore we must understand their migration decision and strategies during this whole process within specific living contexts. When describing specific situations they faced at that time, Cai Feng and Liu Zhen commented that having no money to pay for their children's tuition was the direct reason. For Qin, she emphasized that she decided to migrate out for work with her husband because she did not get along well with her mother-in-law. For women who went to work in cities in the late 90's, they have peers who went before them. Also, under the pressure of specific family difficulties, migrating out for work was not thought a trifling matter, but rather an "effective way" to solve a family crisis. Overall, getting money for children's education, paying off debt etc. were all extended results of the worsening rural economy in rural families, and it became the ultimate reason for married women to migrate out for work. Increasing incomes was these women and their families' primary goal, and working in cities gave them opportunities to increase nonagricultural related income to solve their family crisis.

Like the married women, single women also used objective reasons such as unfavorable family financial situation, school dropouts and nothing to do at the rural field to justify their decision to migrate out for work. All these objective reasons reflect the decreased agricultural economy and lack of nonagricultural related career opportunities in the rural field at that time. It is especially single women, such as Li Hua, Cai Hong and Bing, women who migrated out for work around the mid and late 90's, who emphasized poverty as the major influence of their decision to work in cities. The association they made between family financial conditions and migrating out for work proved that working in cities was an obvious choice for them to solve their family poverty. It is generally believed that "the man of the house" should support the economic welfare of their families. However, when facing the new and difficult material conditions within the Chinese modernization project, the Confucian gender division of labor was always challenged, and had the possibilities to change to serve the collective benefits of the survival of the family. For example, when Cai Hong explained her reasons to migrate out for work, she said:

> *When my mother was working in the carpet factory in the township, my family's financial situation was pretty good compared to other families in the village. The carpet factory was among the most profitable rural factories in Haokou township. Once girls who worked in the factory started to wear new trendy headwear, my mother would buy it for me before girls in the rural field had it. I felt superior by that. But everything changed when my mother died. My family's financial situation became very bad without her income. My father could only rely on farming to support my brothers and I, plus the expenses of maintaining good relationships with others, he found it hard to sustain our family expenses. A motherless child was an easy target for bullying, and even your own relatives did not appreciate your presence, so my self-esteem was very low. I dropped out of school after I finished elementary school and my brothers both finished middle school. It was not because my father favored my brothers. I actually think that my father favors me the most,*

*but he was not able to support all of us. I thought I was going to blame him, but I did not and I understand him. I had nothing to do expect help him with housework. I did not know what to do and what I could do. I was afraid to think of my future and felt devastated. At the time, many school dropouts who were at a similar age as me migrated out for work. I heard that they could earn money, so I thought it could be a chance for me as well. All villagers went to work in clothing factories in Guangzhou and I'd have to work in a clothing factory if I followed them. My family had no money to support me to learn tailoring, so I had no experience in making clothes. I went anyway even thought I had so much self-doubt. 'The poor children manage household affairs early'*(穷人的孩子早当家)*, I thought no matter how much I earn, I can improve my family's situation if I keep working hard. (Cai Hong, 33 years old)*

The accidental death of Cai Hong's mother was the major reason for the dramatic decline in the family's income, and it led to Cai Hong's decision to migrate out for work. When facing the worsening family financial situation, as a daughter, she was willing to sacrifice her chance of attending school to take on family responsibilities. More importantly, this may be self-encouragement, self-comfort or her justification for her past choice, but the ideal of "managing household affairs early" (早当家, zǎo dāng jīa) shows the women's unique strengths when they faced difficult material conditions under the Chinese modernization project. Cai Hong put this ideal into practice when working in cities. She never gave up trying to change her destiny and reach her goal of early household management. Family poverty was just one of the reasons why these single women migrated out for work. However, it at least shows that rural women's choices for life opportunities are closely related to their family situation throughout their life course, and their experience of working in cities is never disconnected from their family burden. Bing's explanations for migrating out for work are quite different from Cai Hong's, more reflexive:

*I studied beauty and hair styling in Qianjiang behind my parent's backs because I found it a very interesting industry and I like it very much. You*

> *cut long hair into short hair and make straight hair into curly hair. It's amazing to see how someone can look more beautiful just by a change of hair style. But the villagers didn't respect the job— they thought it very inappropriate for women and men to get together. I was only 18 years old and felt very angry when I heard people talk like that. They saw me as a prostitute. I think they were very close-minded, so I went to Guangdong.* (Bing, 34 years old)

In later interviews, I found out that the immediate reason Bing migrated out for work was that she'd borrowed 500RMB from a friend to become a direct selling agent for a beauty line, and lost all the money. She did not want her parents to bear her debt when the family already faced great financial difficulties. In order to pay off her debt quickly, migrating out for work seemed the most effective option. Bing's predicament reflects the limited career opportunities in Qianjiang from the mid to late 90's. Before the labor migration trend started, the migration of young labor from rural to urban areas, from farming to industry, happened in two ways: one way was to take the national college entrance exam, join the army or other policy related methods. Only very few children of peasants could luckily go to cities through these methods. Another way was to choose from among the limited choice of commercial side jobs, professions like tailor, carpenter, bricklayer, or hair stylist. During the Reform period, marketization and commercialization in daily living continued to suppress the rural economy's inner substation, and traditional commerce industries, which provided nonagricultural-related career opportunities, continued to suffer, and became very unstable. After the rise of labor migration and the decreased negative public opinions of migrating out for work, young women found migration effective and practical. For example, Bing, who learned beauty and hair styling skills, was very confident in finding a job in cities. Even though such a choice could not contribute much income to the family, it helped to reduce the family's financial burden. One's social position determines one's range of life choices. We can conclude that migrating out for work was an adaptive strategy that the women and their family made under the pressure of a

market economy, and such strategy would influence their life development profoundly.

Bing repeatedly denounced people from her village as “vulgar,” so as to differentiate herself and justify her alternative career path. She always tried to think creatively, and made judgments based on personal experience. Bing is still unmarried at 34, a fact that draws village gossip. In response she officially became a Taoist (she had long been a practitioner), thus gaining religious warrant for her unmarried status. She even held an official banquet in her village and invited all the villagers. She feels the public pressure on her and her parents has been alleviated. She repeatedly said that she is different from others, but her return to her rural hometown gives her a liminal status. In the following chapters, we will see that Bing keeps her distance from the local villagers, spatially and psychologically.

For these single women who migrated out for work, reducing their family’s financial burden and improving their economy situation were considerations they took into account. But there is more to be said. Not everyone who migrated out for work earned more income than from farming; some even lost money and had to return home. Li Hua’s first attempt of working in cities was a great example. When she first arrived in Guangzhou, she wanted to find a job in a factory. However, she got introduced into a multilevel marketing organization for a beauty line by her elementary classmate; she didn’t realize that such an organization is illegal, and invested the 3000RMB she’d earned from doing side jobs in the rural field, and lost everything. She only got to go home after her friend gave her money to buy tickets. Li Hua had lots of pride in herself and she did not want her family to know what happened, so she bought new clothes to wear home by borrowing 200RMB from her friend. She said that she wanted others to think that she did well in the city.

For women who were born after the 80's, their strong and unspeakable yearning for city life is even more obvious. Compared to Li Hua, Cai Hong who are older, the women who were born after the 80's tended to be more vague when they talked about their reasons for migrating out for work. Most of them migrated out for work after they finished middle school or dropped out from middle school, and they were about 15 or 16 years old when they first migrated out for work. Their reasons include "I want to see the outside world and have more life experience", "everyone goes to cities for jobs, so I think I should do the same", "I could not focus in school, so I migrated out for work after I left school", "I can't stay home my whole life. I should get out and explore the outside world", and etc. These kind of subjective motives reflect that rural society had changed a lot during the Reform period. On the one hand, the development of the internet and mobile phones since the 90's opened up a window for rural women to learn about city life. On the other hand, the rural society's inner pressure for change broke the traditional restrictions on women's choice of migrating out for work, and the effects of peer modeling increased. People who migrated out for work earlier, went home with fashionable clothes during the Spring Festival, and brought home new consumer goods. Their descriptions of the colorful outside world had a strong effect on rural young people. "If they can do it, why can I?" Under peer modeling effects, many young women who did not have much life experience migrated out for work with their romantic ideals. Migrating out for work represents their desire and hope for a beautiful life in cities. Yu Wei described her thoughts about going to work in cities for the first time as follows:

> *I heard people talk about all the good things about working in cities when I was in school. You can earn money each month. You don't have to ask your parents for money again, and the outside world is full of fun. I didn't do well in school, and quit, even though my dad wanted me to continue. I was thinking about going to work in cities all the time. I thought of the colorful lights. It's always dark at home at night. You need to bring a flashlight with you when you go out at night, and you have*

> *nothing to do except watch TV. But I found the outside world was not as fun as I thought and I didn't even have time to have fun. I worked every day and only had a half day off in a week. It's more comfortable at home. (Yu Wei,20 years old)*

Like Yu Wei's parents, parents in rural Qianjiang have generally approved and supported their children's decision to migrate out for work since 2000. In fact, young people's choice of migrating out for work became a social expectation in rural villages. The changes of social environment and the changes of social construction of migrating for work in rural society are parallel. Young people who don't seek jobs in cities are perceived as lazy and without a future. Family members acknowledged their daughters' decision to migrate out for work and tried to provide them opportunities. They hoped their daughters could gain some life experience through working in cities. La Mei mentioned that her young aunt gave her 400RMB as travel expenses and encouraged her to leave the village and seek work in the city. Yu Hua's father even believed that migrating out for work is a part of growing up.

> [My daughter] *told me that she wants to migrate out for work and I had no objection. She had no interest in schoolwork and it was no use pushing her. Her sister was working in cities for several years already at that time, so I felt very comfortable to let her follow her sister's steps. Both of them didn't do much farming when they were young. They didn't know how to farm, had no interest in school and had no specific skills. How were they going to survive? I let her go because she wanted to go. I had no expectation for her to bring home money. I just wanted them to see the outside world and learn some skills. The family situation was ok and there were not many ways to earn extra money in the village. They can only rely on themselves. The most important thing for a girl is to find a good match. She'll save some money if she has good sense, and she'll be more appreciated by her husband's family if she can afford a better wedding.（Uncle Lian, 52 years old）*

When a behavior is accepted by the public, it becomes a part of life. Unlike the

married women I interviewed, the single women's expectations for working in cities did not include specific life goals or career plans. Their decision to migrate out for work was mostly influenced by social norms and values towards labor migration which have changed since the 90's. Their imaginations of city life and eagerness for economic independence were just proof that they were following the labor migration trend that was formed in the rural field. The labor migration culture in the rural field was being internalized in the single women's mental schema, and they put it into practice without much thought. According to their life experience, migrating out for work is a part of growing up. In this sense, outward migration has become part of their habitus, and it's a choice that women and their families have made through the interactions between life practices and external social structures. "Why did you migrate out for work?" was just a constructed question that the researcher used to better understand the women's working experience in cities. Such constructed questions indicate assumptions or expectations for certain answers which could be an issue for the women. It assumed that the women's decision to migrate out for work was a chosen behavior with clear consciousness, but it omitted the fact that the women possibly did not have a clear plan of their actions under the specific situation. That's why the returned women, especially the single women, responded with shock and hesitation when they heard the question. Therefore, I needed to use indirect questions to assess their experience of working in cities and returning to the rural field to better capture their logics behind their behavior in practice.

Moreover, through our discussions about the women's reasons for migrating out for work, we got to understand the effects of cultural values on behavior. From "Whoever doesn't farm is a trifler" to "You're worthless if you don't migrate out for work", we can see that peasants' values towards labor migration have changed dramatically under the Chinese modernization context. Such changes can be understood as a part of the globalization of modern culture or modernization. The information society expands through time and space, and information is shared by

everyone in the world. Peasants are recipients of a modernization culture that is spread through technologies without exception. It not only breaks down spatial distance (urban and rural, local and foreign), but it also changes the way that culture is transmitted. The younger generation does not entirely copy the older generation's values; in specific situations they need to seek answers for their questions through real life practices. And their practices are influenced by interactions and inter-restrictions between structures, policies, actors, actions, cultural values, etc. Even though compared to economic structures and institutional arrangements, cultural ideologies may not be the most major or direct reasons for the women's choices and strategies, the interactions between these various factors could help us better understand their actions of migrating out for work and returning to the rural field. Certainly, the results of interactions between structures, actions and cultural values are at times unpredictable. For example, the women never expected to find it difficult to reintegrate themselves into rural life after many years spent in cities.

Within different social spaces, people have different life experiences and make different life choices, and that leaves people different social memories. The reasons for migrating out for work are the returned women's explanations for the goals they made after they have returned home, and are reflective descriptions of their working experiences in cities. Also, their memory recalls do not necessarily represent the absolute truths of their past, but are rather the products of comparisons between past and present experiences. For these women, the recalls are important parts to help them justify their choices of migrating out and then returning to the rural field. More importantly, whether these women were married or not married before they migrated out for work, it is hard to see they have a long-term and specific urbanization goal in their working experience in cities. The former migrated out for work because their families' financial conditions and family was the first priority in their reasoning. The latter migrated out because that was expected by the rural society. They had romantic imaginations about the

outside world. However, they did not have specific life or career goals. Therefore, their futures were full of uncertainties, and they needed to readjust their expectations for their lives and make clear career goals gradually to get used to city life through their working experiences. Besides, their motives for migrating out for work determined their working experiences in cities and life strategies to a relative extent. In the following sections, our focuses will be: with different motives for migrating out for work, how these women migrant workers put their roles of being daughters, wives and mothers into practices while they were away from home, and how their working experience, city lives helped them restructure their identity.

## 5.2 Women Migrant Workers, Family Relations and Gender Practices during Migration

As mentioned above, existing studies on Chinese women migrant workers focus on the poor working conditions and the abuse of labor rights these women are experiencing in urban cities (Jacka 2006; Pun 2007). These studies are of great significances given the gendered exploitations these women are going through within the context of the Chinese modernization project. However, the importance of these women's continuous connections with their rural families in maintaining and reshaping their identity in urban field tends to be underplayed. It is impossible to understand the formation and transformation of these women migrant workers' gendered habitus without taking their rural family into account. During my fieldwork, I found that these women were always aware of their gendered responsibilities and roles in relation to their family life. In their memory recalls of the past city working experiences, they expressed strong attachment to their family. Their livelihoods actually take on a multi-local dimension ever since they have left their home villages. Despite the spatial distances between these women and their rural families, working in cities never detached them from their families, and family relationships were always a part of their working life in cities. These women are nevertheless expected to fulfill their gender responsibilities as

daughters, wives, daughters-in-law, sisters, mothers, as well as being income earners. In the meantime, their rural families and connections were also important resources for them to deal with the difficulties and confusions, and help them adjust to the emerging new social relations in new urban field. This section seeks to find out the relations between their family and the reconstruction of these women's subjectivities in the urban field. Specifically, it will explore whether the urban migration experiences have transformed these women's reproductive gendered habitus they inculcated from their rural families, and changed their perceptions towards themselves and the outside world. Lastly, it aims to capture the complex interplay of continuities and discontinuities of these women migrant workers' familial gender relations in the formation of their transformative habitus emerging from their post-migration work.

By reviewing these women's narratives, I analyze their interactions with their family members while they worked in cities in two ways to better understand how such interactions influenced the changes of familial gender order and gender relations. Firstly, I assess familial gender practices between these women migrant workers and their family members who migrated out for work with them within the urban field. The existing gender roles and responsibilities were challenged as these women and their family members (mostly their husbands) started establishing their new lives in the urban field, so different from the rural field whence they came. For both these rural women and their migrating partners, living and working in urban field not only provide access to paid jobs, but also provide new experiences that enable them to rethink who they are and how they relate to others. Secondly, I assess the interactions between these women and their "left-behind" rural families while they worked in cities. Their narratives illustrate that migration from rural to urban has led to the difficulties of fulfilling their gender roles within the rural family, and the dislocation of these women's familial practices. They always reported the need to negotiate different expectations and different roles in relation to their family life within the urban field.

### 5.2.1 Reconstruction of Gender Order and Identities during Migration

In their recollections of their rural lives, we have seen that women were mainly charged with the responsibilities of doing the inside work of the family according to the Confucian gender ideology. As the head of the family, men were supposed to migrate for work first, to alleviate the financial pressure on the family. Therefore, some studies have placed their attention on the "agriculturalization of females" (Li, Fang, and Pu 2000) or "feminization of agriculture" (Gao 1994) resulting from the large amounts of male peasants going out for work. Some other studies have highlighted the follower role of rural women in China's labor migration, arguing that Chinese rural women tend to join their husbands who have already migrated for work in cities after getting married (Tan 1997). This is because, according to the Confucian gender order, women should be dependent on men. However, evidence in my research shows another story. As women are migrating more and more to contribute their share of family income, their left-behind husbands and male family members (mostly brothers) join them.

Eight out of the 17 returned women had experience working in cities with their family members, and most of them migrated out for work as couples. The only exception is Bing. In 2004, the seventh year of her working life in cities, she opened a Sichuan restaurant in a factory zone in Dongguan using the money she saved from working as a technician in beauty salons. She asked her sister Cui Ping and her older brother to take care of the business with her, so they could improve the family's financial situation. Bing's investment was not a blind one; she had her analyses and judgments throughout the preparation stage. Bing thought that the restaurant business does not require tons of money and she should be able to make money fast. It's a great choice for someone like her who did not have much money. Also, the reason to open a Sichuan restaurant was to secure certain groups of customers. She found that many of the workers who worked in the factory zone were from Yunan, Guizhou and Sichuan provinces. She knew that

Sichuan cuisine is widely accepted by people, and people from other provinces like it too. The restaurant did pretty well at the beginning as she expected. However, once the business started to run smoothly, Bing developed acute pneumonia from working too much and had to stay in the hospital. Her body was very weak after she got out of the hospital, so she had to go back to Qianjiang to take rest for three months. The restaurant's business went downhill day by day while Cui Ping and her older brother were running it, so the restaurant was finally closed. According to Bing's narratives, her experience of working in the beauty salon not only helped her earn money for her investment, but it also helped her gain valuable experience in making contacts with people from cities. In contrast, her sister and brother who never left rural Qianjiang did not have those people skills. As Bing put it in her own words, she was the "core" (主心骨, zhǔ xīn gǔ) of their new constituted urban family. Once she got sick, her sister and brother, who had limited knowledge of urban lives, found it hard to survive. In this process, Bing played the caretaker role for her family members in the urban field even though her sister is older than her and her older brother is supposed to be a bigger contributor for the family. Certainly, we should not simply conclude that Bing's role in the urban field is a representation of continuous patriarchal oppression. As feminists have argued, these rural women's gender roles and gender relations become more complicated in real life practices ever since they migrated out for work (Jacka 2006). In Bing's narratives, she viewed her responsibilities for her family and her sister and brother's dependence as proofs of her strong abilities. In this sense, migrating out for work not only helped her to become independent economically, it also brought her changes at the nonmaterial level. She found herself able to do different things and see more possibilities in herself. This would definitely contribute to her self-reconstruction within the urban field.

Seven married women I interviewed had experience working in cities with their husbands. Among them, Yue E, Xu Yan, Qin, Liu Zhen and Cai Feng migrated out for work for the first time after they got married. The interesting thing is that their

husbands played the role of followers compared to the previous studies in which wives were always described as followers. Certainly, it could be related to these five women's personalities, and they are relatively independent-minded. When they faced family difficulties, they took an initiative to solve issues by making the decision to migrate out for work instead of waiting for rescue by others. When they found relatively stable positions in cities and had positive economic incomes, they asked or demanded their husbands to migrate out for work with them to solve the family crisis together. Their husbands could not withstand their persistence or persuasiveness, so finally quit their job in Qianjiang and follow their wives to work in cities.

Yue E, Xu Yan and Cai Feng's husbands all expressed similar feelings of hesitation regarding the decision to migrate out for work. However, under the pressure of the family's financial difficulties, they all had to compromise his masculinity status and finally chose to migrate out for work with their wives to support their families. For example, Yue E's husband, Chen Zhe, quit his respectable position in the rural field as a primary school teacher to help release his wife's stress and improve the family finances by working in Dongguan. Such a choice runs counter to the traditional image of women always sacrificing themselves for men in accordance with Confucian gender ideology. As noted above, values and standards always are changed and reconstructed by real life practices within specific social contexts. These husbands' narratives revealed the subordinated status of these rural men and their wives under the Chinese modernization discourse in which economic development was the primary goal. Economic necessities challenged the original gender relations with reference to women. These rural women had to walk out of the domestic housework and change themselves into income earners for their families. In the meantime, in order to be united with their wives and improve their families' financial situation, their husbands also had to make compromises within the Confucian gender order. In these cases, both husbands and wives appear not to manage and operate their

families in the same way as their parents' generation used to do. They have to keep readjusting the meanings of Confucian gender norms in response to their current unfavorable material conditions. Within their narratives, the Confucian gender order which demands that women depend on men became less obvious.

Another situation was that both wives and husbands had experienced working in cities before getting married, and migrating out for work as couples was like a continuation of their working lives. Cai Hong, Yan Hua and their husbands are examples. They met each other while working in cities, went home to get married, and then returned to the cities to work again, as couples. However, their working goals changed after they got married and migrated out for work again. As discussed before, working in cities is a part of growing up for single people, and it's a necessary process for their continuous socialization. However, they focused on taking care of their families after they got married and migrated out for work again. Nevertheless, for these rural women who migrated out for work, they not only earned incomes, but also discovered new possibilities and alternatives for their lives and personal growth. For instance, Cai Hong had no tailoring experience, and she felt lost when she first worked in a clothing factory. And yet through hard work she received the highest income of 1300RMB by being the first place worker in her team. She was very proud of herself when she talked about that award, "For the first time in my life I felt that I could make it." It is fair to say that their experiences of overcoming difficulties while working in cities brought fundamental changes to their highly prescribed reproductive gender habitus. Through their family practices under the newly constituted urban family, they appear to be more independent compared to their mothers and peers, who never leave the rural field. While taking care of their families, these women are more willing to think about the meaning and value of life as independent individuals. Meanwhile, their husbands, who had personal experiences of facing hardship in cities, tend to value their families and their wives, respect their wives' abilities, and be more empathetic with their wives' suffering than before marriage.

In Cai Hong's narratives, she mentioned repeatedly that her husband, who was quick-tempered and rude before they got married, became more patient and respectful with her after they got married. Sometimes she even found that her husband was not so "independent-minded," since he'd asks for her opinions about everything. But her husband Yang Tangbing's narratives illustrate the complexities of changing gendered relations within their family practices in the urban field. He repeatedly emphasized his supportive role in their migrating family. His patience and good temper can pacify his wife who always worked overtime in the factory and bear a lot of work pressure.

The experiences of Chen Zhe and Yang Tangbing suggest that gender relationships are fluid, relational and open to change during the process of labor migration. These rural migrant women and their male partners had to negotiate and reconstruct their identities and gendered relations within the modern urban field. Another important indicator in this regard is that the traditional gender role divisions such as "men rule outside, women rural inside" had to be changed fundamentally due to the fact that women and men were forced to take on new family roles in the urban field. As discussed above, these women recall having been taught to take on duties such as doing housework, which was partly constituted their reproductive habitus. However, from my interviews with them, I discovered these rural women and their husbands did not have clear divisions in doing housework when they lived in the urban field. These women tended to describe the particular aspects of the gender norms they acted on in specific situations. For example, Yue E told me that she did not have much time to take care of her daughter because she was very busy during the day. In order to make up for her daughter as a good mother, she would sacrifice her precious sleeping time to wake up during the midnight hours and make nutritious congee as breakfast for her daughter. As no longer the sole breadwinner for their families, their husbands explained their need to take on housework. For instance, when his wife was busy with work, Chen Zhe was responsible for taking their daughter to

school, bringing her home after school and making dinner for her. Yang Tangbing helped to clean the house, do laundry and boil hot water for her wife's bath before she came back home from working overtime. Chen Zhe and Yang Tanbing's jobs were not easy, but their working hours were more stable, so they were willing to take on more housework when they had the time and energy to do so. When the husbands needed to work overtime, the wives would adjust their working hours to take care of their families. The couples worked together and complemented each other. Indeed, as I tried to formulate patterns of the changed gender relations within these newly constituted urban families, the response I received was always that "it depends on the circumstances". This statement actually represented the way how these new constituted families were operating within the modern urban field. Within the family practices, the couples often used work intensity and working hours to decide who should become the primary housework actor, rather than act in consonance with traditional gender norms. In doing so, they got to maintain a high efficiency in running their families under the urban new material conditions. Doing housework is then not a particular gender's designated responsibility, and through specific family practices, new gender meanings from which these women and their husbands can make sense of their relational identity as wives and husbands in the modern urban field, were developed.

However, the changes in the family practices mentioned in the previous section do not mean that Confucian gender ideology is irrelevant to the maintenance of their family lives. As a matter of fact, it remains an important aspect in these women's gendered habitus. The internalized ideology of "men rule outside, women rural inside" does not change completely. For these women, they expect their husbands to step out and take charge when they face difficulties in their urban lives. For example, as we can see from the previous section, Cai Hong complained about her husband not being "independent-minded," for asking her to make decisions on everything. For their husbands, the unavoidable paradox is they need to scarify their masculinity to play the role of dependent follower, while still needing

culturally and symbolically to maintain their role as head of the household, particularly under difficult material conditions. The conflicts of these couple's narratives reflect the complexity within the process of reconstructing their gender identities in the modern urban field.

In conclusion, migrating out for work let the women to play more and more important roles in the maintenance and reproduction of their newly constituted urban family. In order to resolve their family crisis, their husbands were willing to downplay their masculine assertiveness, follow their wives, and rely on their wives' connections to find work. In order to adapt the high work intensity and fast-paced lives in the urban field, housework is no longer considered as a gendered task, a task that was allocated to women as prescribed by Confucian gender ideology. The experiences of working in cities brought these women reconstructed roles as wives and sisters through their family practices. They found new possibilities for themselves through the process, so that they could reconstruct their self-identities and make sense of their positions in the process of modernization in China.

### 5.2.2 Women Migrant Workers and Their Left-behind Families

In feminist studies, it is generally accepted that labor migration provides an opportunity for these rural women to escape the control of the rural patriarchal family and develop their personal autonomy (Davin 1996; Yan 2008). These rural women were reported to make choices according to their own life aspirations and deploy a more individualized life-style (Yan 2003). However, when talking with my informants about their city lives, I found little evidence for the universality of this phenomenon. Urban life does not necessarily diminish these women's traditional responsibilities, their roles as daughters, daughters-in-law, mothers and wives. Certainly, their individual gender patriarchal position within their individual family determines the extensity of responsibilities in their family practices to a certain degree. For example, as an eldest sister or daughter-in-law,

one tends to take on more family responsibilities compared to younger brothers or sisters. As suggested above, family is an indispensable factor in the formation of these women's gendered habitus. It guides their daily living strategies and justifies their urban toils. In other words, their strong attachment to their rural families as aspects of cultural inheritance is actually an important social capital in guiding their daily practices, practices not necessarily confined to an individualized life style. In their narratives, they mentioned lots of interactions with their left behind family members while they worked in the urban field. However, since they worked far away from their rural homes, their absence in rural family practices brought unavoidable changes to their family structure and relations. And such changes in turn influenced their reconstruction of self-identity.

#### 5.2.2.1 Changing Practices of Conscientious Daughter and Inescapable Responsibility of Daughter-in-law

As discussed before, daughters are the temporary members in their paternal families, and their lives are practices for their future marriages. As unmarried daughters, they do not have to take on much in the way of family responsibilities. Migrating out for work means an alleviation of the family burden. Li Hua's mother often mentioned to me that she did not expect Li Hua to earn and send money back home when she migrated out for work. Her reason is that "We paid some money for both of her brothers to learn professional skills, but we did not spend extra money on Li Hua." Rural families invest differently in their sons and daughters' education and they also have different expectations for them, and their daughters take such unequal treatments for granted. Therefore, compared to sons, daughters have more freedom in spending their incomes. However, it does not mean that they can leave their parents behind and not take good care of them. Even though these women worked far away from their rural homes, the expectations of proper conduct and conscientiousness inculcated in the rural field since they were young kept influencing their behavior. For families with multiple siblings, taking care of aged parents might not necessary be a responsibility for

daughters, but showing filial piety to parents was internalized in the daughters' gender habitus since their childhood, and plays an important role for these women in making sense of their self-identity as conscientious daughters.

Daughters show their filial piety to parents based on kinship and conscience, and they provide help and psychological comfort to parents as needed. Nevertheless, rural–urban migration removed migrants from the context of traditional family practices. The spatial distance forced daughters to rework the traditional values of "filial piety" they inculcated from their childhood. The most common way to make up for their absence was to provide material and money to help their parents. Li Hua mentioned that she used this way to show her filial piety to her parents when she worked in the urban field. In turn, through these practices, their self-identity, which was characterized by their independence and capability of caring for their parents, was reconstructed.

> *My parents always ask me to save up money for my own use. They hope I can eat well and stay warm in the city. I am not a picky eater. The wholesale clothing supplier I worked for included housing and meals, so I saved some money from those expenses. I love buying clothes [laughing]. Maybe it's my way to make up for myself because I rarely had new clothes when I was little. I went to buy new clothes whenever I got paid. I saved up some money, and also sent it back to my mother even though it was not a lot. My mother never spent it, she said she would save it for me to use for my wedding. Parents are all like that, they always think of their children first* [laughing]. *So I bought things for them. Whenever I went home, I brought my parents new clothes, new shoes, or some delicious food. They also complained that I was not careful with money, but I could tell they were very happy. I was happy as well. I feel the sense of accomplishment when I have the ability to make money and buy them gifts. (Li Hua, 33 years old)*

Actually, for these rural women, sending money back home or buying gifts for family members to provide them better material life conditions did not seem like a

responsibility, but rather the result of the new gender meanings they developed through their new family practices and from which they demonstrated and reconstructed their relational identity as conscientious daughters, good wives, and caring mothers within the modern urban field. Certainly, their recognition of the value of money was closely related to their working experience in the urban field, which was materially oriented. For these women, who needed to bear family separation and the difficulties of urban life, sending money back home and buying gifts seemed to be the only effective ways to maintain their relations with their rural family members and show their conscientiousness. According to research, women put more focus on their families and are more willing to spend money for their children, clothes and living goods, and migrant women workers send more money back home compared to their male counterparts. From my interviews, I found that labor migration not only helped these women to provide financial supports to their rural families through money and gifts, but also helped them to build new houses for their parents, which is usually considered to be the sons' responsibility. For example, Bing has two brothers, but she emphasized that her ambition was to build a new house for her parents when she worked at the beauty salons in Dongguan and Guangzhou.

> *I worked in the urban field for 11 years. I like the urban environment, but I never thought I belonged there. I worked in Dongguan and Guangzhou, but my roots are in Qianjiang. Not long after I migrated out for work, I was able to pay off my debt. And I wanted to build a new house in my rural home. The idea was so intense that I worked night and day, as a ready substitute for others' shifts. I was exhausted, but very determined* [laughing]. *We needed about 30,000RMB to build a new house in the village at that time, and it was an astronomical figure I was afraid to think of before I migrated out for work. I was not afraid anymore after I worked in the city* [laughing]. *I earned more as a beauty technician than working in factories. I earned seven to eight thousand RMB a month during the high season, and about two to three thousand during the low season. The average annual salary was about 30,000RMB. The best year for me was 2002 or 2003; I earned about 60,000RMB in a year. After*

*deducting basic living expenses and training fees for beauty school, I was able to save some money. Our house was old and shabby, so I wanted to build a new house for my parents to live more comfortably. Also, it would be easier for my brothers to find wives, because no girl wants to live in an old and shabby house. I did not want others to look down upon my parents and brothers. My older sister was married and my brothers were still young. Even though I am a daughter, I have the ability to take on these responsibilities. After I helped my family build a new house, the villagers were very envious of my parents. They even told my mother that daughters are more reliable than sons. (Bing, 34 years old)*

"(Daughters are) more reliable than sons" is not only a recognition for Bing's capability, but also a representation of her success in reconstructing her relational identity as an independent and conscientious daughter. More and more rural daughters face the need of taking care of their aged parents. One reason is strict enforcement of the One Child Policy. Many families have a daughter but no son. Another reason is that the development of a market economy puts the rural field at an economic disadvantage. A child often cannot support aged parents without help from siblings. The textile industry needs a large amount of female labor, so women find it easy to get a job and support their aged parents. Initially, I assumed that women who were born after the late 90's would have different family values compared to the women who migrated out for work at an earlier period, and they may tend to uphold individualized values and lifestyles. Surprisingly, I could see the similar recognitions for the role and responsibilities of being daughters in these single women's narratives, and they supported their families financially while working in the urban field. Maybe it is like what Cai Hong said about poor children managing household affairs early. Compared to married women, single women had more freedom and possibilities to make personal choices because they did not have to take on too many family responsibilities at an early age, but the traditional gender norms they inculcated from their early childhood were reconstructed during their urban practices. When they were not around their parents to provide emotional support or do housework, working hard and taking

on some part of family responsibilities were the major ways for them to show their piety to parents.

For married women, besides providing money and gifts to show their piety to their parents-in-law, they could not escape from certain traditional gender norms. One of them is to carry on the family line. They were usually expected to give birth to sons in order to carry on the family name. Under Confucian ideology, "there are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no descendants" (不孝有三，无后为大). Even though it appears to be the men's responsibility according to the Confucian gender ideology, women are perceived as the real actors, and they have lots of pressure from her husbands' families. Rural women who worked in the urban field faced not only the pressure to have a son, but also faced difficulties from their urban working and living lives because of their subordinated class position. Yue E's story is a typical example. She gave birth to a daughter before migrating out for work, and her parents-in-law wanted her to give birth to a boy to carry on the family name because her husband is the only son of her parents-in-law. In order to have a son, Yue E suffered tremendous pain physically and psychologically. While she worked in cities, she got pregnant twice. The first time, she had to have an abortion because the baby was identified as a girl through sex identification testing. The second time, she had a miscarriage because she worked too hard. Despite her optimistic personality, Yue E broke down into sobs when relating these experiences.

> *I was working in a clothing factory when I found out I was pregnant. The factory didn't fire me, so I kept working there. Usually, pregnant women only worked overtime till nine or ten at night, but I worked the same hours as others. I even worked overnight for two days straight. I didn't know how to make clothes, so my job was to cut threads. You earned by pieces. You'd earn 12 cents RMB for a dozen for some pieces, and seventy cents a dozen for others. Cutting threads didn't pay as much as making clothes. The clothes makers could earn about 7000RMB a month,*

> *and we only earned about 1000RMB a month. Some of the threads were harder to cut, so I only earned about 900RMB for some months. Usually I earned about 1200 or 1300RMB per month. I wanted to have more income, so I needed to work more hours. I quit my job when I was nine months pregnant, and my belly was huge. I always wanted to have a son, but we found out the baby was a girl when I had a sex identification test at home. I cried badly on the bus on our way home. Everyone was staring at me, with puzzled faces. I was very sad. Others would call you a 'left alone elder', if you didn't have a son. People from the village told me 'You should stay strong and crying is no use. You don't have anyone to help you take care of your child and your family is not in great shape. Why don't you have an abortion?' I had another sex identification test, hoping there'd been a mistake. But the doctor told me it was a girl for sure. So I had an abortion 13 days before my due date. I suffered a lot and my feet and legs were very swollen. The operation lasted the whole night and finally the baby came out. I lost a lot of weight after the operation. My husband was holding me, crying and said that he doesn't want me to suffer like this ever again. But I knew that in his heart he really wanted a son. I went to Dongguan to rest up a while and my husband went with me. He went to the weaving factory to work and I opened a deli at a local market with a fellow villager's recommendation. The deli business went well, but it was a lot of work. I got pregnant again after a year and had a miscarriage because I worked too hard. My husband had to work during the day and had no time to take care of me. I couldn't run the deli after the miscarriage, and so our income was cut in half. He couldn't quit his job because our daughter was studying at Dongguan and we had huge expenses. Later, I got pregnant again and I was afraid to do anything. So I went back home and did nothing. My husband kept working in Dongguan to earn money for the family. I gave a birth to a son and finally felt relieved. I don't know why. But I felt sad and happy at the same time when I held my son in my arms. (Yue E, 40 years old）*

Yue E's determination to have a son seems inconsistent with feminist research that claims that by migrating out to work in cities, women escape the rural patriarchy. The high intensity work environment and unsustainable living expenses did not make Yue E give up her family responsibilities of being a good wife and

daughter-in-law. In Yue E's narratives, the heavy burden to have a son was not only an inner expectation from the family for a daughter-in-law, but also represented the expectations of village social networks. Yue E had internalized the Confucian gender values as part of her gendered habitus, and continued to work towards expectations despite repeated "failures".

5.2.2.2 Parenting, Motherhood and Migration

The need for money for their children's education and future development was the impetus for married women's outward migration, but not their ultimate life goal. They repeatedly used words such as "one's hopes" and "one's meanings of life", and children became the answer and guidance for these questions. When they recalled their sufferings and accomplishments during their urban lives, they always spoke of their children. Confucian ideology expects women to play roles such as "a good wife and loving mother", "to support the husband and teach the children", and such standards have been internalized in their reproductive habitus. As wives, they got to be united with their husbands by following their husbands or being followed by their husbands. However, as mothers, the high intensity work and difficult material conditions made it hard for most of them to take their children with them, and they often had to leave their children behind with parents or parents-in-law. In doing so, the traditional structure of family care relationships was changed. My fieldwork shows that labor migration brings challenges to traditional mothering and their emotional attachment to their left-behind children because of spatial distance. Therefore, new questions emerged. How do such challenges affect these rural women's identities as regards motherhood? How does motherhood affect these women's subjective understandings of their rural–urban migration?

As argued before, Confucian adages such as "the more sons the more happiness", "Raising sons for support in old age", and paternalistic authority in the rural field have direct influence on peasant's reproductive habitus. It's not hard to understand

that women who have internalized these cultural values hold expect their children to take care of them when they get old. However, in these returned women's narratives, I find that this expectation has changed. Within the Chinese modernization project, even though the women had to bear the pain of separation from their children, migrating out for work was still an effective way for these rural women to fulfill their roles as mothers since it helped them to provide financial security for their children. Nevertheless, such mothering practices do not aim to have their children take care of them when they are old, but rather to provide their children the resources to live a better life and develop themselves in the modern Chinese society. Qin has two children, a ten-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son. She worked in the urban field for eight years before returning to her rural hometown. She first worked as a department store sales clerk in Beijing, and later followed her husband to work in a clothing factory in Guangzhou. In 2002, when Qin's older daughter was about a year old, she migrated out for work again with her husband and worked in a clothing factory in Guangzhou. She missed her daughter very much during the four years she worked in Shenzhen, so she chose to work in a clothing factory in Haokou rural township with her husband after she gave birth to her son in 2006. In this way, she got to spend more time with her children.

> *After I stopped nursing my baby, I went out to work again. My mother-in-law helped me take care of her. Everyone was like that in the factory where I worked. The elders always say that we, the younger generation, care about 'giving birth, but not parenting'. It's not that we don't want to take care of our children, it's just that we can't* [sigh]. *I want to have my children by my side every day; but then my income would be cut in half. Everything costs money nowadays. We can save money by limiting our expenses, but we can't limit our children's expenses. I heard that studying a good major in a university will cost around 10,000RMB per year, and the average cost of a major is 4000 or 5000 RMB and this doesn't include living expenses. I feel stressed when I think of this. I want to save up as much money as possible for their*

*college education when I can still work, and I want her to have a good education. Education is the key for a better future. I didn't like school when I was little and I regret that now. I can only do manual labor. I sit more than 10 hours a day at work and suffer severe back pain. There are no good opportunities for you when you don't have a good education. You can only work for others, and I don't want my daughter to have the same life I have. She was still very little when I left her. It was really heart breaking. I was holding her in my arms, tears kept running down...I didn't want to leave her, my heart was aching. It's still painful to think about it. My mother-in-law said 'Why do you cry like that? She's our granddaughter. Don't think we're going to abuse her.' I had to let go when she said that. I stood up and left the house without turning back. My baby was crying loud and hard, and I felt like there were a thousand knives stabbing into my heart. For the first few months I worked at the factory I would return to the dorm at night only to lie weeping, thinking of my baby. I wept silently because multiple couples shared the dorm, the space divided by a cloth hung on our beds. It's not good to disturb others. I called home all the time, and asked fellow townsmen to bring snacks and clothes to my daughter when they returned home. I also asked my in-laws to take my daughter to a photo studio for photos that the townsmen could bring to me on return. I missed my daughter because I couldn't see her, but when I saw her photos I missed her even more; and my heart ached when she looked skinnier or darker. My daughter is not close to me. Maybe it's because I'm not a good mother. I wasn't by her side when she was little, the time she needed me most. We've been back home for several years now, but she's still closer to her grandparents than her dad and I, because her grandparents take care of her more. She's a good child, and doesn't do unnecessary spending. She saves up all her allowances. I'm happy and sad at the same time—happy because she knows earning money is not easy; sad because she's so mature, not childish or naughty like others her age... maybe it's because we can't stay with her all the time. We told her we need to work to save money for her education in the future, so she's afraid to spend any money. I blame myself for that and I feel helpless. She is very quiet and doesn't talk much. Does she blame me? I don't care if she understands me, but I just want both of my children to study hard and attend college later. I don't expect them to be hugely successful. I just want them to be able to support themselves and their families when they grow up, so they don't have to*

*labor like me and their father. It will be great if they're conscientious, but I don't expect them to take care of me. I'll try my best to save more money for them when I can. It's not just education; everything costs money. I'm just trying my best to provide them the resources they need. Even though they can't live like rich kids, their basic needs have to be met. (Qin, 30 years old)*

In Qin's narratives, we can see the complicated emotions she felt when she was separated from her children: self-blame, heartbreak, puzzlement, and the sad pride over maturity, because the maturation was missed. Being confined in the urban field because of current and foreseeable financial stress, she had to keep adjusting her mothering practices. She felt the pangs of separation, while supporting her children from afar, as financial provider but absent caregiver, and does not expect them to care for her, when her work life ends and her life dwindles down. This is completely at variance with Confucian ideology, which requires that children take care of their aged parents. One reason could be that after these women lived in the urban field, the material difficulties forced them to step out their usual mind sets and adjust their future life expectations in light of their current living conditions. This is a strategic response to the current Chinese society in which money and material needs are the major focuses. Also, we can view the reflective adjustment as a helpless response to the current society to some extent. Because these women realize that they have limited social capital and low social status in the modern Chinese society, they do not want themselves to become a barrier for their children's future life. However, they repeatedly emphasized their duties to their children as mothers. In fact, the living choices they made under the notion of "living for others" prove that their reproductive habitus in terms of motherhood values and gender responsibilities did not change in their urban field family practices even though their methods of mothering practices changed because of spatial distance.

In Qin's narratives, besides her changed expectations from her children to take

care of her when she gets old, I also notice that their urban field working experience made them confused in terms of being a good mother. When rural families face difficult material conditions under the current society, these rural women must play the role of income earner and save more education and living capital for their children through hard work. However, the traditional motherhood practices of spending time and taking care of their children were not fulfilled because of the spatial distance. Because of long separation from their mothers, the left behind children show signs of psychological and emotional imbalances. For instance, Qin missed the critical period to build a strong relationship with her daughter, so she and her daughter are hard to get close again even after she returned to the rural field. Another extreme example is Cai Feng's son. In Cai Feng's narratives, her son was very hard working and had great grades. He got into the top high school in Qianjiang with high scores, and it was quite an honor for his middle school as it had relatively limited teaching recourses. So she and her husband worked even harder, thinking her son could attend a good college without worrying about the money later. However, the long separation made it difficult for her to notice that her son suffered from great stress and pain. Cai Feng's son took his own life by jumping off a school building. After her son's death, she stayed at home for a half year. Later, through a villager's referral, she started working in a clothing workshop owned by one of the villagers. She was hoping she could forget her pain of losing her son by working again. I did not know about the tragedy before I interviewed her. She'd often pause, staring at a point with hollow eyes, until finally she told me. I was in shock and did not know how to respond, but Cai Feng seemingly did not wait for my empathic or comfort words to come out and started telling me more:

> *I don't understand why he did it...* [choking and sobbing] *the school called. We couldn't believe it...It's impossible. He was all good, it's impossible... I don't remember how I got back* [from Guangzhou] *and arrived at the hospital...* [my brain] *went blank, I didnt believe it... only when I saw him lying there. I felt like someone hit me really hard with a*

*hammer at that moment... my eyes went black and I couldn't remember anything after that... by the time I woke up, my child was gone... I didn't even get to see him the last time* [crying]... [Paused for a while] *my relatives and friends came to comfort me. I saw their mouths were moving, but I couldn't hear a single word they said... I couldn't remember anything after that, and I don't know how I went on living. Maybe my son hated me, so he left us like that. Maybe he thought we didn't care about him? He was very well-behaved. He always said he was well, so I thought he was all good... I only thought about saving money for his college and life would be better... he must have blamed me... I should have called him and come home to see him more often... he was such a good child... I don't understand... maybe it's karma* (缘分) *that we can't stay together for long... this is our destiny...we were mother and son, but our karma wasn't deep enough for us to stay together for long... (Cai Feng, 35 years old）*

Like Qin and Cai Feng, the women who left their children in the rural field while they migrated out for work, struggled to provide better material conditions for their left-behind children by working in cities while trying to maintain emotional ties. Because of their work, the women were restricted in the urban field. They can only use phone calls and send living products and gifts to their children periodically. For women who rent houses in cities, they would bring their children to cities and spend summer and winter holidays with them. Very few of them brought their children along, and sent them to urban schools specialized for migrant workers' children. However, new issues emerged. Without urban Hukou, their children needed to go back to their hometown for high school and college entrance exams. And because the books vary regionally and the teaching and educational resources are limited in migrant worker children's schools, their children are at a disadvantage when they take exams that determine their future livelihood. Yue E's daughter Ruo Nan faced such issues. Ruo Nan attended schools in Guangzhou, but she had to go back to Qianjiang for her high school entrance exam. She lost her chance to attend high school because she did not do well on the exam. For the sake of getting a stable education for their children,

most women would rather suffer the separation pain if someone at home could take care of their children for them. In fact, the difficulties these women and their children encountered illustrate the class issues in terms of rural–urban division, education, social benefits etc. in today's transitional Chinese society.

Whether they live in the rural field or urban field, the fulfillment of motherhood is an important aspect in these rural women's transformation of self-identity. Through discussing these rural women's memories of their interactions with their families while they migrated out for work, I find that the methods of motherhood fulfillment have to be changed due to the restricted material conditions. Financial and material supports became the substitutions for daily care and spiritual support. However, these women's ideologies for the roles and responsibilities of being mothers did not change. Such values did not decrease or show the tendency of changing into individualism because of the increase of space. Actually, to a certain degree, the distance and the objective material conditions between the rural and urban field reinforced their recognition for traditional roles of being mothers, thus further strengthened their emotional attachments with their rural families. Therefore, they suffered and felt much pain while they lived in the urban field.

In this section, I discussed the effects of migrating out for work to these rural women's family relations and family practices. Through the practices of roles of being wives, daughters, daughters-in-aw and mothers, and related family interactions, these women were able to make sense of who they are, what they want and what they can do in the modernized Chinese society. In this process, we see traditional gender ideologies continuing to influence their habitus, and we also see changes in their transformation of self-identity and family relations practices which developed from their work experience in the urban field. It is not the same as the urbanization studies which argue that rural–urban labor migration frees the women from patriarchal oppression and changes their subordinated position in the

family, nor is it the same as the proletarianization studies which emphasize labor migration does no good to these rural women but rather reinforces women's subordination and inferiority. According to my fieldwork, whether it was the self-identity of these female migrant workers or the patriarchal system, the women are always under continuous negotiation as both these rural women and their family members are living in an entirely new circumstance brought by the labor migration. Actually, to better understand the complexity of changing power relations within their families, it is necessary to address the interconnections between gender and class. Even though they were materially subordinated within the urban field, these women never saw themselves as passive victims. As a matter of fact, they view their working experience in urban cities as a way to change their living circumstance and density. Even though they had to bear the double pressure from their rural families and urban work, they are satisfied with successes they achieved through their hard work, and that became an important part for them to reconstruct their self-identity.

## 5.3 Gendered Migrant Work, Social Relations and Development of Transformative Habitus

Whether they migrated out for work to solve their family's financial crisis or to satisfy the dream of a new life in the modern city, these women got used to their new environments, and their new working lives. From being invisible laborers in the rural household to becoming urban wage earners, these women had to further socialize themselves, and place themselves in new power relations. They have to constantly negotiate their identity in response to the complex and unstable situations brought about by the intersections of gender and class. The existing studies on women migrant workers' identity transformation tend to suggest a "black-or-white" conclusion by arguing that these women would either discard their rural identity (Gaetano 2004) or further strengthen their rural values upon migration. However, my informants' recollections of their work experiences in cities illustrate that their identity always appeared to be fluid and multi-layered,

and it became more obvious after they migrated out and became part of the globalizing labor force. To better illustrate such fluidity and multiplicity, this section focuses on the shifting identities of these rural women within their urban workplace. More specifically, it will discuss what their urban wage work meant to them, how the differences between the past and present experiences brought by their urban work affect their self-identity and their perceptions of life. For example, through the exploration of these women's narratives, the social relations and interactions in urban workplace are obviously different from rural notions as to self-conduct. Within their urban workplace, these women actively adjusted themselves and used corresponding strategies to face these differences. In the process, we see the values and standards they learned in the rural field still influencing their decisions and practices. But most importantly, the urban workplace provided these women with lots of new standards. Some came from work requirements, and some are learned from the social interactions in their workplace. The urban values and standards which are different from the rural society become an important part of their transformative habitus, which enables them to see more possible opportunities for themselves and their life. Therefore, the reproductive habitus they inculcated from the rural society and the transformative habitus they learned from the brand new urban field influence their life practices together, in which they employed different strategies to deal with the complicated and changeable external environment.

### 5.3.1 Social Contacts and the Formation of Gendered-classed Labor

Studies have proved that women migrant workers are concentrated in the labor-intensive factory and service industry (Fan 2003; Tan 1997). The 17 informants' work experiences prove this conclusion as 10 of them had experience working in factories, most of them worked in clothing factories, and the other 7 women worked in the service industry such as in sales, beauty and restaurant. Such highly gendered segregation of labor was thought to result from the joint effects of the state institutional controls (e.g. Hukou system), Confucian gender

ideology and demands of the migrant labor regime (Fan 2004b). Under Confucian ideology, women have qualities such as being detail oriented, smart and obedient, which match with requirements for workers in the globalizing factory system. Also, the service industry, which uses social interactions as method of labor, and customer satisfaction as labor evaluation, fits even more with Confucian ideology as to women's roles. The analysis of the formation of gendered labor at the macro level can help us grasp women migrant workers' overall working experience in an effective way. However, focusing on women migrant workers' subordinated position in a fixed gender system could underplay their subjectivity and agency in their occupational choices and gender practices. Particularly, because of the gendered labor, the assumption that the dominant position of male migrant workers over female migrant workers within the urban workplace overlooks the potential fluidity of the gendered meanings of masculinity and femininity (Lin 2010). Actually, under today's modern Chinese society in which development and money are the main focuses, waged work has both gender and class meanings for these migrant women. To better understand how gender and class bring complexity in their urban working practices, Bourdieu's notion of social capital must be applied to these women's occupational choices and the formation of gender labor division among migrant workers.

Here, I would argue that the social contacts these women had formed in original rural field before migration are the most important social capital for them to search for a new survival means in cities, which always channel them into specific gendered-classed jobs rather than "open access to the entire array of jobs" (Fan 2003:27). My seventeen informants all reported that they got their first jobs in cities through their relatives, fellow townsmen or acquaintances' introduction or help. For instance, Yue E knew about the shoe factory's hiring information from one of her friends who migrated out for work before her, and Cai Hong became a clothing factory worker in Guangzhou by following one of her fellow townsmen. In this process, all these rural women took a positive posture in transforming the

social contacts in rural field, mostly the relations of consanguinity and region, into the social capitals for job searching in cities. Interestingly, the labor migration based on such social relations made the sending rural areas and receiving urban cities show certain matching relationships in terms of area and industry. In other words, migrant workers who are from the same area (province, city, town, and village) tend to choose certain working areas and industries. As mentioned above, tailoring is a natural advantage and historical tradition in Qianjiang, most of the girls who drop out from school end up learning tailoring skills. Therefore, the early group of Qianjiang women who migrated out for work is more likely to find work in garment factories. And under their introduction and help, more and more women who migrated out for work chose to work in the garment industry.

> *I didn't become an apprentice tailor after I dropped out of school. I trained in computers for several months. I figured I could be an office clerk—a proper career for girls. But it turns out that I don't need to use my computer skills in my work. The only circumstance for me to use it is when I chatted with people on QQ in internet cafes. My internet friends all said that I type very fast* [laughing]. *Most of the people from my village work in garment factories when they migrate out for work. Usually the first ones who went out introduced the newcomers. The old ones lead the new ones, and more and more people work in clothing factories. The workers in my factory are mostly from Hubei province. Our boss is from Hubei province as well though not the area of Qianjiang. There were a couple of times that the factory even sent cars to recruit people from Qianjiang after the Spring Festival. I followed my cousin's lead, and she had been working there for a few years. She came by my house around the Spring Festival. I said I wanted to migrate out for work. She told me to follow her and said many workers who worked in factories are from nearby villages. I was a little bit hesitant at first, because I had never learned tailoring and was afraid that I could not do it well. My cousin told me not to worry and just learn it as I go, as you don't need to make whole clothes by yourself, because each person is only in charge of a certain part of the process. As a beginner, you are in charge of the simplest process and slowly take on more complicated parts as you advance. You learn the whole process after working in the factory for a*

*while. My cousin had no tailoring skills before she worked in the factory, but she still became a team leader. I thought she could take care of me, so I decided to go with her. I can at least cut clothing threads if I cannot learn to do the process well. I wanted to start working in the clothing factory and see if I could switch to an office clerk position in the cities. But I ended up staying in the clothing industry. I followed my cousin and changed to a different clothing factory, where there were many workers from Qianjiang. I do not have a diploma or special skills; how could I find a good job in the city? I learned some computer skills, but they are only simple word processing skills. I can't compete with college graduates. Even many of them can't find a good job, so I don't stand a chance. (Yu Wei, 20 years old)*

Through Yu Wei's narratives, we can see that destinations of labor migration and career choices are closely related to the societal economy foundation build in the particular destinations by relatives and fellow townsmen. The early migrant workers are willing to take their relatives or friends with them, and most of the returned women had the experience of leading people to migrate out for work. The "leading" includes taking people out of the rural villages and taking care of them while they work in the urban cities. For these rural women, taking their family members or relatives out of the rural field has both practical and symbolic meanings. On one hand, it helps to build a support network for their urban life. Since they are from a common area and have similar cultural background, relatives and fellow townsmen can keep frequent and close interactions with each other. They can have each other's back in work, have fun together during breaks, and help each other out when they face difficulties, thus these interactions help to decrease difficulties and unsafe issues they may face in their urban life. On the other hand, it relates to their "face" and family responsibility. In these women, their families and fellow townsmen's eyes, the actions of taking their relatives and friends out of the rural field and taking care of them when they work in the urban field is a proof of being competent and responsible. Such actions obviously set a positive image of these women in their villages. They are granted with good

words such as "competent" (能干) "conscientious" (有良心) and "conduct oneself well" (会做人) in their villages, which would then become important cultural capital for them and their families in their following life practices in their villages. For example, after becoming a team leader through her hard work, Cai Hong began to introduce her family relatives, family friends, even neighbors and friends from her village to work in the clothing factory she worked in, and most of them worked in Cai Hong's team. Because they all are socially connected with Cai Hong in some way, they trust her a lot. There was very low turnover rate in her team, which increased their work efficiency. In our interview, Cai Hong was very proud to tell me that her team was always the most efficient in the factory. However, the overlap between rural social relations and factory work policies brought complications in her work practices. As a team leader, Cai Hong needed to find a balance between factory work policies and relations between team members. She invested a lot both physically and emotionally. She felt stressed as she needed to make sure the production requirements were met and her relation responsibilities were fulfilled, but she never gave up. She explained as follows:

> *I did not pick who to bring out for work in particular. My team needed members when I became a team leader. I went to ask people who appeared to be competent and hard-working if they wanted to migrate out for work in my village. I wanted to have people like that in my team because my team's work efficiency would increase and our incomes would increase too. My team did really well and our team members' incomes were higher than other teams'. They told people in the village that it's great to follow my lead, so people started to come to me and ask for jobs. I don't know how to reject people. Not to mention relatives, I found it hard to say no to fellow townsmen. If I reject them, they would think that I am being full of myself after I earn more money as a team leader. I was not doing extremely well and I earned money by lots of hard work. Even if I earn lots of money, I would not be someone like that. You have to have a conscience. The whole Haokou Township is not big and people see each other all the time. If someone says bad things about me, I may not hear it (as I work in the urban field). But my children and the*

*elderly in my family are living in the village, and I need to conduct myself well for them. Besides, I won't work in the city my whole life; I'll come back home sooner or later. Even though I bought a house with mortgages in Qianjian, the things I do, the people I connect with are all related to the Haokou township. As I look back, I realized helping others is also helping yourself. Taking them out of the villages, teaching them skills hand by hand, giving them specific parts in the work process according to their ability and expectation, being a mediator in their conflicts and looking after their living situation, everything needs to be balanced. I felt I was the head of a big family and needed to be in charge of small and big things. Many times I felt tired and thought I would rather be a team member, so I do not have to think too much. How do I describe it…? Even though I felt tired, I also felt accomplished throughout the process. Everyone earned good money and they trusted me a lot. I had low self-esteem because of my family* [her mother passed away when she was little]*, and work made my life normal again. I never thought that I could take care of some many things. I continued to lead a team after I came back from my hometown, many of the team members who worked under me for several years in the city followed my lead to come back. This kind of trust makes me feel a sense of worth.* *（Cai Hong, 33 years old）*

Cai Hong's narratives once again prove that these women never got disconnected with the rural society even though they were physically in the urban field, and the personal relation norms from the rural society still guided their working practices in the urban field. Actually, such social capital which is formed by relations based on consanguinity and geography, supports these women's whole experience of migrating out for work and returning to the rural field. Similar age background, shared experience, concentrated work and life made the cultural standards these women learned from the rural society to extend in their daily practices in urban field. It is said, since Chinese rural areas have materially and ideologically become wastelands within the post-Mao's discourse of modernity (Yan 2008), migrant workers try every means to become modern, and women migrant workers are more active than male migrant workers in this regard. Certainly their working and living experience in cities had direct and strong influences on these women.

For example, even though they needed to bear hardships imposed by the factory system, they are still proud that they no longer need to do farming. Also, even though their incomes are limited, they are still willing to spend money on clothes and distinguish themselves from those who have no experience working in cities. Nevertheless, embracing the urban life styles or having the dream of becoming modern does not mean these women can get rid of their peasant identity and related stereotypes of low quality. Their disadvantaged social position in modernizing China enables them to rely heavily on their rural *guanxi* networks for support in terms of job searching and working practices in cities. Even though they are far from the rural society they come from, still their continuous dependence on their rural *guanxi* capital pushes them to take in their peasant identity.

Obviously, although it was easy for them to find a job in cities through their rural social contacts, their unfavorable economic status and low educational qualifications (cultural capital) denied them access to modern skilled jobs. Because of having "no diploma, no skills, no relation background", Yu Wei, who wanted to find a general office clerk position, had to continue working as an assembly line worker in the clothing factory. No special technical skills needed to be mastered, just a repetition of a simple part in the big process. Other than bringing these women limited incomes, their work could not help them to build useful skills to meet modern society's requirements for personal growth and development. Cai Hong admitted that she can't make clothes independently even though she worked in the clothing factory for more than 10 years and was a team leader. Ever since these women entered into migrant labor forces, such double alienations from labor process and labor outcome they are experiencing determined their difficulties in chasing modernity.

Another remarkable phenomenon is that under the influence of personal relations, not only rural women entered production and service industries, many rural men

in Qianjiang were also involved within these sectors. In this case, we should not simply assume that migrant men enjoy a higher stratification position than female migrant workers as part of the patriarchal privilege. Rather, it is necessary to rethink the understandings of gendered occupations within the current economic context (Fan 2003). The fact is, within the hierarchy of this rural–urban dichotomy, both rural men and women's social position in the urban field were subordinated. But in the specific work environment, these women are by no means passive recipients of all forms of control. They actively construct and reconstruct their self-identity by differentiating themselves from others in their workplace. For example, those women who worked in the assembly line of the garment factories reported that they actually enjoy higher status than their male colleagues who also work in the assembly line of the factories. The clumsy performance of male migrant workers in the assembly line not only received jokes and blames from women migrant workers, but also earned scolding and criticisms from managers. This is not only because women's work efficiency and incomes are higher than men workers, but also because the masculinity of migrant men are thought to be undercut by working in what traditionally is considered a feminine occupation. The complexities within such phenomenon will require specialized studies for discussions. For women migrant workers who are the focus of my thesis, as I argued above, their gendered identity should be regarded as being relational, fluid, and needs to be considered under specific situations, especially in the rapidly changing Chinese society.

### 5.3.2 The Mixture of Joy and Pain: the Adaptation and Endurance of Urban Working Life

Through my interviews with these women, I found that these women's memory recalls of their urban working experience appear to be a garden with overlapping paths, and they are mixtures without specific and defined patterns. Their narratives are very individualistic and body-related. Their working experiences were connected with their body and soul. These physical memories show that their

working experience brought fundamental changes to their living conditions, thus influenced their opinions about themselves and their life. In their narratives, there are angry complaints, as well as encouraging and joyful emotional outpouring. Such mixture of joy and pain in fact reflects these women's adaptive strategies in dealing with their specific living conditions in the urban field.

> *When you work in a factory, working overtime is common. After sitting for more than 10 hours a day, you even can't keep your spine straight. Usually a team leader would not change a person's position in the assembly line within a same production order. You are in charge of the same part throughout the process. You keep doing the same action and it becomes a reflex, no brain work is involved at all. The pay for each position in the assembly line is different, but all are very low. Most of the positions get a couple of cents, the better ones get 20 or 30 cents. You can get paid higher for complicated work such as cutting pockets, assembling zippers and sewing linings. I remember you can earn 9 cents per piece if you cut pockets, and sewing linings (sewing front material with lining, usually for fall and winter clothes) is about 1.5RMB per piece. But you have to spend more time for complicated work, and usually only the masters or skillful worker can do the work. Beginning workers are not allowed to take part in this kind of work. You work from the basics. Otherwise, the whole team's performance is affected if one person is too slow. If the production is stuck in your position, it's ok to be blamed. But it's not good to affect your team's performance and everyone's income. Even if people don't complain to your face, they're probably not happy inside. People have to do more to earn more money because the pay is so low. Everyone works nonstop and our mind is constantly at a high pitch. I am really sick of working overtime. During the years I worked in the factory, my spine sometimes was too painful to stand up. We only have one day off per week, and I have no time or money to see the doctor. So I have to put up with the pain. As I look back, I have to say I was able to endure all of this because I was young. As I work in this factory after return, I feel less stressed. I go to see a Chinese medicine doctor for acupuncture treatment every week now because I'm afraid that I may become paralyzed when I get older. One of my friends is a manager for a clothing factory in Yangshi township, and she wants me to become a team leader in her factory. I refused her after I went in for a tour. The way they*

*manage the factory and the discipline they require for the workers are as same as those factories in the outside cities. It is very strict and depressing. Once I stepped inside the factory, all the emotions came back and I couldn't even breathe. So I made an excuse to get out; otherwise, I was going to suffocate. (Cai Hong, 33 years old)*

*The food in the cafeteria was really bad. You can only wish you won't get hungry, and it will be a joke if you wish the food to be delicious. When you work overtime, you only have 15 minutes to eat and each department takes turns. One of the fellow workers wrote a funny poem and it goes like this 'You run to the cafeteria after you get off work / But you don't get full so you faint and your manager asks why. / You say there's little of everything: rice, vegetables, oil or salt.' I still remember this poem clearly even after being back for many years. Popular songs like 'The Song of Wandering' or 'The Working Song' by Xing Chen were really close to how we felt. When we got back to our dorms at night, we always listened to radio shows. I usually listened to shows like 'The Sky of Mu Fan' and 'You're not alone under the night sky'. The radio hosts talked about feelings and the songs they played were very touching. Sometimes people cried while they listened to the songs because the songs helped us express our emotions. The new girls even cried while they were at work. They couldn't get used to the work environment. I didn't cry, but my heart was filled with sorrow. (Xu Yan, 33 years old)*

Obviously, restrictions on personal freedom, stressful and heavy workloads, and terrible living conditions are strong memories. Complaints are common, and most of the women have similar narratives. Actually, every narrative reflects current conditions. These complaints show the women's reflexive reconstruction of their past experiences based on their current living conditions. To some extent, their memories of suffering make the meaning of their labor migration more clear. As Rollins states, women migrant workers would not see themselves from their employers' point of view nor define themselves based on their working conditions; instead, their real self-identity comes from activities outside their workplace (Rollins 1985:218). For married migrant workers, migrating out for work is a way to increase family incomes. For single migrant workers, the suffering they

experienced in the workplace became a positive life experience and a choice they made even though their yearning for urban life and pursuit of modernity could not be fully satisfied under capitalist working systems.

> *I am the type of person who understands there is suffering in everyone's life, and it's just a matter of big or small. I understand that you are meant to suffer when you decide to migrate out for work. So when I felt wronged, I thought it a temporary thing. And if I work harder, I may become a boss one day. When you see your sufferings as lighting the future, then you won't feel wronged. You have to face your sufferings with a positive attitude. I was thinking that no way will I be a worker my whole life. I may not become a big boss, but I may become a small owner who is free to decide when to sleep and when to get up. I would not have to rush to work at 9 AM every morning, and I can be there at 10 or 11 if I am a small owner. I had this kind of thought at that time. I know I was meant to be exploited. When you are clear on this point, the rest is just to endure your time at your workplace. (Bing, 34 years old）*

Bing's narratives represent most women's enduring attitude toward the injustices and sufferings they experienced in the urban workplace. But this exercise of endurance was not completely negative. In fact, it was a positive coping strategy these women used to face their subordinated position. For these women, their peasant identity determined their position of being exploited once they started their life in the urban field. They clearly understood the point that they migrated out for work to fulfill their wishes such as earning money, gaining experience and seeking development rather than avoid being exploited. Therefore, being exploited in the urban workplace occurred by default to some extent. Such coping strategy not only reflects the reproductive habitus of "bearing hardship and standing hard work" they learned in their rural childhood, but also reflects their anticipation and dream for their future life. In this way, rural field, urban field, past, present and future overlap in these women's imaginations, contributing to their daily practices within their urban workplace and their post-return lives as well. In past studies and official statements regarding women migrant workers, "present" and "urban"

occupy a higher position in the hierarchy of values than do “past” and “rural”. When describing the living situation of this group of people, “present” stands in priority in terms of time, and “urban” stands in priority in terms of space. The logics behind such descriptions match with the focus of development in mainstream discourse of Chinese modernization. However, such descriptions overlook these women’s logics of real life practices. The shortcomings of this type of description were even more obvious throughout my interviews with these women since the informants usually did not describe their experiences in a strictly linear time manner.

As active actors, endurance does not equal to complete obedience to everything for these women. As gender is added as a new perspective in labor studies, some scholars pointed out that gender itself is an important capital for women to cope with oppression and constraint even though it is often used as a tool to restrict women. In practices, based on personal experience and traditional culture values, women actively reinterpret the meanings of their gender roles to build new understandings about their environment. In doing so, personal and group goals can be achieved. Women tend to use unofficial and casual forms to expand political conflicts in workplace to daily life (Ong 1991; Spradley and Mann 1974). In Xu Yan’s narratives, the poem written by migrant workers may be just for fun, but it was form of daily resistance expressed by migrant workers. In Cai Hong’s dairies, which were written while she worked in an urban factory, she used resisting words such as “Feeling wronged is not the worst, but feeling wronged and having to bite your tongue is worst”, “A person is like a feather; life is like a weed, humble but proud” when she dealt with harshly restrictive management policies and overly picky managers in her workplace. Obviously, migrant workers recognize their oppressive work conditions, but they only let out their anger, frustration and helplessness through sardonic poems and dairy entries. In their narratives of urban life, there were no confrontations between workers and capitalists, or influential group protests.

Strictly speaking, such resistance forms cannot be counted as "protest", and it is only for protecting basic rights. These individualistic and defensive daily let-outs are closely related to these women's perceptions of their gender roles and individual orientations. For those married women workers, the experiences of migrating out for work were temporary. Their decisions were made based on their families' plans, and the significance of their work is exhibited through their families' development. Things such as having stable incomes to take care of the elderly and children, turning tile-roofed houses into multilevel buildings in their rural homes, replenishing the house with new furniture etc., were their sources of meaning and accomplishment. How to go against capitalism's control was not their concern, and achieving family goals were their reasons to exercise patience and bear all hardships. For those unmarried women workers, because they were not expected to support their families, relatively speaking they had more freedom to take advantage of specific situations to express their resistance. Such as Wang Man who promoted alcohol sales in KTV, reported that they often talk bad things about her manager with coworkers behind the manager's back or delay customers' requests intentionally. However, migrating out for work was an important process for them to reconstruct their self-identity, and because they perceived themselves as young and inexperienced, they viewed work disciplines as an important part of learning self-conduct. Such consensus from their end made their experiences less painful, thus they were able to bear the agonies of work.

Unlike the tragic and negative image of women migrant workers from existing research and official statements, these women's memories contain positive emotions. An important part was the sense of self-accomplishment they received from their work. In their narratives, these women all felt proud that they could take care of their families and became financially independent by working in cities. Moreover, they happily mentioned those achievements at work which they made through tremendous efforts to overcome difficulties. As mentioned above,

Cai Hong, who had no tailoring skills became a champion in work efficiency through hard work and was finally promoted to team leader. Her work made her townsfolk, who kept a distance from her family because of their poor financial situation, look at her with new eyes. She also gained her husband and her coworkers' trust and support both in life and work. She was very excited to give detailed descriptions of steps in making a piece of clothing, and how she distributed different tasks to team members based on their characteristics to improve the team production efficiency and enable her team members to earn more income than other teams. In her mind, migrating out for work made her feel "I can if I do it" and "my life finally becomes normal" (把日子过正常了). Li Hua, who worked in clothes sales in Wuhan, is also very proud of her outstanding work performance. She believes that her mother's saying "Being independent is better than asking for help" (求人不如求己) really helped her face hardships in their city work and gain self-development by actively learning. Besides finishing her duties at work, she learned about sales and fashion by herself after work. Her self-motivated attitude not only helped her gain trust and reputation from her boss, but also helped realize her dream of owning a clothing store. Bing, who worked in a beauty salon, became a master after only three months of hard work and learning. However, she was not satisfied and paid high tuition at beauty schools to learn new hair and beauty techniques.

> *I was very clear about my position when I first started working in a beauty salon. I needed a manual job and I did not have much education. Even though I learned some beauty techniques when I was at home, I couldn't claim to be 'someone who has professional skill'. I was not as qualified as that, so I worked as a manual worker to earn money. But I can't go on being a manual worker forever, and I need to change my situation by active learning. Our profession requires us to have both knowledge and practical experience. If you get comfortable with yourself and keep being a manual worker, you get weeded out eventually. I went to Jinsha Hair Styling and Beauty School to study after I saved some money. It cost me 12,000 RMB for a half month of study the first time. It was in*

*2000, and that was a lot of money for me since it amounted to a few months' salary. But if you don't keep learning or have professional skills, you can't survive. I hoped to own a beauty salon, but you can't open a salon if you don't have good skills. One of my coworkers from the beauty salon went to that school before. Her skills were different and our customers had great experiences from her. As people always say, you need to advance and keep learning as time goes. People spend their money for their learning, so you can't keep taking advantage of others by asking them to keep teaching you. You just can't be that kind of person. So I went to the school. I think you can't just sit there and wait to receive things from others. There is no pie falling from the sky. You have to live your own life step by step.（Bing, 34 years old）*

Cai Hong, Li Hua, and Bing worked very hard on self-development while working in the cities, and they are not the only cases. All my informants emphasized the importance of self-development in contemporary China and tried various means to achieve it. To some extent, their emphases on self-development reflect the differences between urban cities and the countryside. Within the post-Mao discourse of modernity, these rural women not only needed to face the huge economic gap from their urban counterparts, but also needed to bear cultural labels such as "lack of education" (没文化), "lack of knowledge and experience" (见识短) and "low quality" (低素质). Their efforts at self-development show that they were not willing to accept these labels and worked to counter them. Besides developing their work abilities, they dressed according to urban beauty standards. As Bourdieu states, body itself is a capital that represents values, and embodies the various social power and the differentiations of social inequity (Bourdieu 1984). The cultural differentiations on whether a body is "rustic and outdated (土气)" or "modern and fashionable (洋气)" represent the hierarchical discrepancies between cities and the countryside. In addition, mastering urban dialects was another active strategy these women, used to get rid of their peasant labels and play their new identity as workers in urban cities. Since most of my informants worked in Guangdong province, being able to speak Cantonese fluently and

Mandarin without an accent were important cultural capitals which helped them cover their peasant identity and get used to their urban lives. This is particularly the case for those women who worked in sales and service industries. They all reported that they learned to speak Cantonese for their jobs. The learning process of specific dialects or language enculturates individuals. These women's acceptances, understandings and applications of Mandarin and Cantonese were the processes in which they learned and internalized the local culture of the receiving cities. In academic studies, women migrant workers' bodily and language transformations are viewed as the results of restricted work disciplines. Nevertheless, these women themselves do not think like that. Their narratives show that they had great passion in changing their bodies and learning languages and the process was fun and self-fulfilling. We probably could say that the urban values and norms were internalized as higher standards.

Feminist studies always emphasize that the combined forces of Confucian patriarchy and capitalist system result in women migrant workers' subordination and inferiority within the current economic context (Pun 1999; Pun 2005). Indeed，through their narratives, we see that the cultural values and ethics they inculcated from the past experiences in rural field, or in other words, their reproductive habitus cater to the expectations the capitalist system for workers to an extent. Such as their "bear hardships and capable in doing hard work" (吃苦耐劳) spirit made harsh factory working life bearable. Nevertheless, we also need to see that labor migration provided a platform for these women to gain new insights into themselves and practice their new identity as workers in an entirely new place. Bing, Li Hua, and Cai Hong's memory recalls about their urban lives actually demonstrate their continuous struggle and contention in a constrained world. Moreover, memories are mental reconstructions. Such active and positive recollections are in fact the explanations for their current living conditions after return. For instance, Both Bing and Li Hua finally realized their dreams while working in cities. Bing now operates a beauty salon and Li Hua owns her own

clothing shop. Their beautiful recollections also illustrate their current liminal status in the rural context. In the next chapter, we will see that being in a state of transition, these women keep negotiating among different power relations and making adjustments to their post-return lives. Their emphases on self-improvement in their narratives show that survival ideas and rules were internalized in these women's mind, which constitutes an important part in their transformative habitus. The next chapter will explain such transformations in detail.

I was also impressed by these women's emphasis on approvals and the simplicity of their working life. Thompson, who analyzed the influence of industrial capitalism on British people's understanding of time, pointed out that in the pre-industrial period, labor had no pattern, being affected by natural rhythms and the demands of the tasks performed. But industrial capitalism brought strict time discipline (Thompson 1967). His analysis was built on traditional Marxism, so "time discipline" has strong "alienation" characteristics. However, my informants told me a different story. For these women, having fixed working hours means they can spend their spare time freely. In this sense, fixed working hours actually bring some freedom to them. Fixed working hours provide a possibility for them to separate their work from their lives; thus they are able to enjoy purely "spare time". The concept of accurate time discipline is completely different from farming life, which spans from sunrise to sunset.

> *The life of working outside was much simpler. You go to work and get off work. Even though you may need to work overtime sometimes, you are in a complete control during spare time and you are free to do whatever. This could be quite different when I was at home. My parents got up at rooster crow and came home from the farm at nightfall. I remember we didn't even have a watch at home, and we largely relied on our land for food and followed the natural rhythm for work. There seems to be so many little things you have to do, but you do not even know what you*

*were doing. We felt we kept doing things even though we couldn't get everything done in one day, and did not see any specific results from our work at the end of the day. When I was working in the factory, I could see how many clothes I made each day. So I was at ease and felt I didn't waste any of my time. You have to deal with your relationships with your coworkers and managers, but things related to work are strictly guided by regulations. So the relationships are simpler than the ones at home, and people don't gossip as much. (Liu Zhen, 31 years old)*

Within the rural field, peasants can arrange their own time. There are no specific working hours or spare time or strictly stipulated labor standards; however, such vague boundaries between work and life make these returned women complain about the pettiness of their rural lives. To further understand the vague boundaries between work and life, we need to consider women's gender roles under Confucianism. For these women, rural family economy means miscellaneous and toilsome household chores, and their contribution to these chores is often viewed as "natural" and "tiny". Since it cannot bring instant economic value to the family, their contribution is always underappreciated. Even though women may have more spare time at home, their spare time is fractured. Such fractured spare time is not used for relaxing, but to loaf away. They always find they need to spend their spare time at home "goofing around". The industrial work schedule gave them specified working hours in cities, and off-work hours became their real personal time. Even under the dormitory labor regime, which combines the production and daily reproduction of labor, these women still had concentrated personal spare time to spend freely. Such personal spare time gave these women initiatives to choose and plan. Moreover, the conveniences in cities made these women get to spend their personal time without being tangled too much by household chores, and they could avoid spending their personal time on complicated social relationships to some extent as they were far away from their home and its social contacts. Therefore, they felt they were "freed'.

In general，unlike rural lives which contain unequally divided time, loose task plans, and complicated social routines, working in cities brought these women into a brand new, highly organized environment to which their reproductive habitus had to adjust. Their repeated narratives of “simple” working lives are in fact an emphasis on order and reflect their adherence to urban time and urban lifestyles. It’s hard to deny that the practice rule which emphasizes order, time efficiency is closely related to the discipline of their workplace. Ever since these women entered into the production system of global capitalism, they were required to accept a new set of disciplines in terms of body, values and emotions in order to meet the demands of capitalist production. Nevertheless, as we pay attention to the restrictions of the structures, we can’t also ignore individuals’ subjectivity and agency. As Yu Hua said, “as your environment changes, you need to change. You can’t ask the environment to change for you.” It’s obvious that these women did not accept the new set of disciplines completely, and their expressions of resistance in specific situations we mentioned above are proofs. Their acceptance for discipline in terms of time-efficiency and order was not a passive but rather an active choice these women made to achieve their goals of working in cities. For instance, under the factory system in which workers earns income by piece work, highly effective and organized work is a key for women to increase their income in an assembly line, thus higher incomes help them to improve their families’ financial situation and spend money to achieve their new modern identity. Team members who delay a team’s efficiency would become targets of ridicule from other team members. Therefore, even a worker who has just entered a factory would try hard to become more efficient.

### 5.3.3 “Learn to Conduct Oneself”: Social Relationships within the Urban Workplace

As discussed, when they were in rural field before labor migration, these women’s social relationships were formed on blood and geographical connections, organized by hierarchical position and age, and frequency and favor of social

connections were based on closeness of kinship ties. Such social relationships are common and not political, most of them are unofficial (e.g. between neighbors and friends) but stable. When they moved to the urban field, they had to learn new hierarchical orders in urban organizations and build new social relationships with people from different places based on work connections. In this process, their social relationships based on blood and geographical connections became their initial support system to lead them into the urban field, and remained to be important for them throughout their urban lives and post-return lives. The social relationships they built based on work connections became an extension for their social networks and the process was an important part of learning to "conduct oneself" in the urban field. The social relationships based on work connections included their relationships with their coworkers, their managers, as well as their urban colleagues and customers. In this section, I am going to discuss these women's standards and practices of self-conduct in dealing with the relationships they formed in their workplace, and how these women changed and reconstructed their identities in dealing with these relationships.

As these women talked about their coworkers, there were not many narratives on close friendships. Contrariwise I saw a lot of differentiations between workers because of factory policies, individual networks, work positions, age, education, marital status and other factors. In their narratives, these women often differentiate themselves from their coworkers according to the abovementioned factors. La Mei, who is 23, and Yu Hua, who is 24, are cousins, and they followed one of her townsmen's lead and went to work in a garment factory in Guangzhou. La Mei, who has professional school education, was assigned to a stock recording position, and Yu Hua worked on an assembly line. Even though they worked in the same factory, La Mei thinks her work was much different from Yu Hua's work. She used the word "*zuoshi*" (做事, doing something) to describe her position and "*dagong*" (打工) for performing Yu Hua's tasks, thinking Yu Hua's position was "low requirement, no future" (要求低，没前景). Bing, who worked in a beauty

salon, talked about her distant relationships with her coworkers, and her narratives illustrate marital status, age, culture and other factors' influences on the relationships.

> *I did not have much in common with my coworkers, so we didn't communicate much. We talked to each other when we were on breaks for lunch or dinner, but just simple greetings. I talked to my customers more often. They are from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, have higher education and good manners. I feel I can communicate with them better. All my coworkers talked about was earning money, especially the married women. They always counted their savings with their fingers, and they had no other things on their mind. Earning money and supporting your family are important, but you need to keep learning, something they didn't recognize as important. I remember there was a bookstore right beside the beauty salon where I worked. I always went there to read books such as Thick Black Theory* (《厚黑学》), *Thirty-Six Stratagems*(《三十六计》) *and Doctrine of Confucius and Mencius* (孔孟之道) *when I was off work. These books talk about the doctrine of self-conduct, of doing business and of living one's life. I think these books are very helpful for us in terms of life and work. People need to keep on learning, so we can improve and develop. Otherwise, we'll be eliminated from society.（Bing, 34 years old）*

Based on different recognitions of self and others, these women always used the strategy of "Minding one's own nobleness" (独善其身) as Bing said in dealing socially with coworkers. This word is cited from "Cherish one's nobleness as a nobody, endeavor the society's righteousness as a somebody" (达则兼济天下，穷则独善其身), an expression from the classic Confucian book《Meng Zi》(《孟子》). It means that when you are successful, you should work to benefit others in society; and when you are poor, you should focus on being a good citizen. Because of its major influences from Taoism, the first half of the phrase shows the Confucian ideal of treating others in society; the second half of the phrase shows the Taoist focus on self-development. As mentioned before, Bing's father, who was home schooled when he was little, influenced Bing a lot. She lives by

Confucian values and became a Taoist after she returned to Qianjiang. Based on her cultural and religious background, it's understandable that Bing used such words to summarize her social relationships with her coworkers. In Bing's narratives, she tried to minimize her interactions with her coworkers and chose to read books for self-improvement. In this sense, her strategy of "cherishing one's own nobleness" strategy was not a shallow play but a meaningful way of living which reflects Confucian ideology of cultivating one's own moral character and focusing on self-development. However, when we take these women's subordinated position in cities into consideration, such a life strategy shows that these women felt lost and frustrated when they faced the organized hierarchical order and unstable working connections in unknown cities. When working in the urban field where security was lacking, Bing's strategy of "cherishing one's own nobleness" also contains the meaning of "mind one's own business" (事不关己高高挂起). For instance, she refused to put herself in the same group with other married migrant workers and her ways of "minding one's own nobleness" (reading books and attending beauty training school) meant to achieve her ultimate goal of becoming a small business owner.

All relationships within the urban workplace are actually involved with production relationships. Once these women entered into the capitalist production system, the political meanings of social relationships were emphasized, whether it's their relationships with their coworkers or their bosses. The abovementioned divisions between workers resulted partly from the exclusive type of competition under the capitalist production system. In the garment factories where these rural women mostly concentrated, relationships between workers were formed based on a combination of blood, geographical and work connections. In other words, they were not only coworkers in their workplace, but they also had relationships such as "fellow townsmen", "relatives" and "friends" from their origin families and villages. Even though relationships based on blood and geographical connections provided important support networks for these women's urban lives and work,

these origin relationships were being challenged by the production relationships in their workplace, and kept changing. When they were conflicts because of production interests, secretive or open fights existed between workers. Cai Hong who was a team leader, complained to me several times that conflicts happened when she assigned tasks to team members. Some team members thought they could get easy and high paid tasks because they are closer to her because of blood and geographical connections. However, she tried her best to be fair to every team member as she believed that "working is very different from chitchatting, you have to have the abilities to work besides being able to speak well." Therefore, she was blamed by her relatives and friends as they thought she "favors outsiders (non-relatives or friends)". She had to spend much time and energy to resolve and maintain relationships with team members, tried hard to find a balance between interest and emotion, thus made sure the team work efficiently. Even after tasks were assigned, workers who did the same task would compete with each other. Women who wanted to get higher incomes than others, would try to sneak more products in their basket even though they hadn't finished the products at hand. Certainly the competition between workers did not mean they never cooperated with each other. When they had a common interest, such as asking for a salary raise at work, a temporary alliance could be formed.

These women migrant workers' relationship with their bosses or managers involved selling labor and getting rewards, which follow the market exchange rule to maximize interest. Such production-cored, formal and organized relationships were supposed to be stable. But the opposite was the case. Most of these women were not required to sign a labor contract with their bosses. Their labor relationship was bound only by interests and lack of corresponding protective policies or maintaining contracts; both the bosses and these migrant women could break such relationships easily. So the relationships were very unstable. Because of that, owners and these women migrant workers tried to make this unstable instrumental relationship better through other informal interactions. In these

women's recalls of their interactions with their bosses and leaders, there were warm and caring narratives. Li Hua mentioned how her boss took care of her and invited her to his house for dinner when she worked in a private wholesale clothing store in Wuhan. Of course, she emphasized that her boss trusted her because of her hard work and honesty, and such trust and caring attitudes from her boss was not something she could take for granted. She still worked with cautions in her workplace or in her words "keep a low profile" (夹着尾巴做人). At the end, Li Hua decided to change her job because the store's sales decreased day by day and her income was not stable. However, the once warm and caring employment relationship was gone when Li Hua left the store. Her boss blamed her for lacking "conscientiousness". Li Hua felt uneasy, but she couldn't devote herself completely to the store when she faced the stress of surviving. Li Hua has no regret for making the decision to quit; however, she still seems unhappy about the accusation of "lacking conscientiousness" since she considers herself as someone who has high emotional intelligence.

The warm and caring relationship on the surface can only cover up the intensive employment relationship temporarily, because their different positions in the production system determined the certain conflicts between these women and their bosses. "Keep a low profile" did not always work in dealing with their social relationships. As mentioned above, these women, especially who are young and unmarried, usually used some situational opportunities to express their dissatisfactions. They showed their dissatisfaction in a way that was bearable for their bosses, and quitting was their last option. Women, especially unmarried women, are often considered as emotional, sensitive, and society gives them the leeway to be carefree and at times grumpy. Their occasional individual resistance actions, which were regarded as women's particular "gender syndrome", were tolerated by their managers. Because of the different social expectations towards the gender roles of women and men, women have more freedom to express their resistance and dissatisfaction. The notions that women are overly sensitive and

emotional are discriminations against women in our society; however, in this situation, they are the reasons why these women got a free pass for their behavior. So compared to men, women were more proactive and able to keep their private space when they were exploited.

These women were active chasers of modernity. They often spent money to change their clothing, appearance and speaking to get rid of their peasant label. However, this did not mean that they were aimless or senseless. Actually, they are all fully aware that they are different from the urban citizens who enjoy higher social status than them. Zhi Li was one of the few informants who was able to enter the world of urban citizens through labor migration. She worked as an office clerk in a state-owned enterprise in Wuhan through a relative's connections. Even though it was a temporary position, she had a stable income, relatively relaxed work environment, and, most importantly, she got to interact with locals in her workplace. Hers was the dream position from the perspective of most women migrant workers; however, she quit and returned to Qianjiang after just one year. Being able to interact with locals did not make it easier for Zhi Li to become a part of the urban world, but pushed her away from the urban city.

> *Not that all the people there* [Local Wuhan people] *are bad, some of them are actually very nice. But you can tell that you are very different from them. For example, I was very serious with my work. However, some of them thought that I was too serious and made a big deal of small things because I lacked experience. They might not do it intentionally because their upraising was different from mine and we have different social circles. My appearance in their social life was strange and looked quite odd. As for work, they actually did a better job than me, and I respect them for that. Also, they talked about work only and did not gossip, so relationships between coworkers were rather straightforward. There were specific and defined rules to follow. Sometimes you might think it unkind, but there are less issues and you feel more relaxed as everyone does their work according to rules. (Zhi Li, 25 years old)*

Zhi Li's narratives show a complicated picture of boundaries and connections she built through her social interactions with her urban coworkers. In one way, she identified that she couldn't get into the urban colleagues' living circle because they have individual difference based on different living environment. In another way, she likes the fact that her urban coworkers do their work according to specific rules, and she has this conclusion after she compared it with the complicated social relationships in her home origins. Obviously, her recognition about the differences between the rural and urban was reinforced through the process of migration and return. When Zhi Li faced these differences in her workplace, she used the coping strategy "talk less and do more" (少说多做). It not only helped her minimize her mistakes in the workplace, but it also helped her to cover up her peasant status effectively so as to avoid being made fun of intentionally or unintentionally. For Zhi Li, it was not an easy decision for her to leave Wuhan and return to Qianjiang. Besides not getting along well with her urban coworkers, her temporary job position, taking care of her aged parents, limited social network in the city, difficulties in finding a marriage partner etc. were all reasons that made her decide to go home.

In general, as a passenger and stranger in urban cities, these women all reported that it is harder for them to establish stable and longstanding relationships with their migrant coworkers, superiors, and urban locals. In comparison, social relationships from the rural home seem more stable, which could provide better life prospects and emotional support to women migrant workers who were in a drifting status. Especially, the reproduction and maintenance of social relationships in the rural origins are not that utilitarian, and therefore seem more warm and caring. People build natural trust and closeness because they walk on the same road and get water from the same well, and their emotional expectations and rewards from each other surpass materialistic gains. The alienation these women experienced in their urban living and working environments would push these women to reevaluate and reinforce their connections with fellow villagers

they once wanted to dissociate from. Their memories of rural life became rosier, as did their sense of hometown belongingness. However, after they returned to their rural hometowns, they found that their hometowns had changed in their absence, and that they themselves had changed, so that memory jarred with reality, and belongingness was balanced with estrangement. We focus on such matters in the next chapter.

### 5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I present the changes these returned women experienced in themselves, their family and their social relationships through their experience of working in cities. Being a member of the construction army for China's modernization and staying in new modes of control and power relations, these women faced various challenges in their work and lives. Obviously, these women are by no means homogenous. As we have seen, their transformations and struggles, "which intersect with gender and class, amongst other factors, are shaped by every aspect of women's identity negotiation, construction and performance" (Zhang 2014:21). From their recollections of urban life, we can see the reproductive habitus they learned from rural field such as "filial piety", "bear hardship and hard work", "conscientiousness" and other values have changed due to time-space dislocation; however, these core values kept influencing their urban life, and constituted vital cultural capital, serving to reconstruct their identities and practices. Even though these women needed to bear separation from loved ones, as well as the hardship of work, they are proud of their achievements and happy about the possibilities for personal growth. New self-recognition, the sense of order they learned from their work, the utilitarian understandings of social relationships, have been important parts of their transformative habitus, as they returned to their rural home. As illustrated by their experiences in adapting to urban lives, their perception of the environments and their own identities are fluid and multilayered -- for them, rural and urban overlap, and both have contributed to their economic transformation and self-development.

# Chapter 6 Living with Rural Present

As mentioned in the previous chapters, labor migration is by no means a linear process, moving from rural areas and ending in urban cities. In fact, looking at the whole migration process of these migrant workers from a micro perspective, we see a continuous out-migration and return. All the migrant women I spoke with experienced such a process. Two years after my fieldwork, two of my informants, Yue E and Yan Hua, migrated out from Qianjiang for work again. According to proletarianization scholars, such repeated process illustrates migrant workers' reluctance to return to the spiritually and materially emaciated rural areas. Migrant workers' return is considered as an unwilling choice under the combination effects of factors such as capitalist exploitation, institutional barriers and a patriarchal system (Pun et al. 2009; Yan 2005). Rather than being actively involved in rural development, the utilitarian individualism these women gleaned from their urban experience, their non-traditional values, are considered toxic for the collective values of rural society (Connell 1981; Yan 2005). Even though urbanization scholars also emphasize economic and institutional effects on migrate workers' choice in returning home, they validate returned workers' positive influence on rural development and view migrants as messengers of modernization. The money, modern products, modern values and other manifestations of modern urban life they bring with them to the countryside are altogether regarded as capital for urban development and modernization (Ma 2002; Ma 1999; Zhang 2012).

Certainly, their choice of return and life practices can never be separated from social history, cultural institutions and structural restrictions. However, to fully understand such large scale population movement, one should take proper account of individual agency as it runs up against structural limitations. The outward and inward migrations are a response to exigencies, and reflect the migrants' perceptions of their past, present, and (projected) future lives, as dreams and goals

continually reverberate against reality. The narratives of the woman migrants I interview attest to hard-won wisdom, and the continual refinement of coping mechanisms, in light of gains and defeats, and a juggling of responsibilities, as they fulfilled simultaneous roles of daughter, wife, mother and worker. Since the 2008 outbreak of the global economic crisis, mainland China has witnessed a huge return wave of migrant workers, one that affects all sectors of Chinese society.

Therefore, unlike the views from studies which follow the urbanization and proletarianization approaches, this chapter aims to discover how these returned women, as social actors, reconstruct their post-return lives in the rural field. Specifically, it will explore the conflict between these women's life goals and their present living realities, and how they manage this conflict via coping strategies composed of rural values reconfigured by urban experience. I will discuss these matters in detail according to the three analytical levels (personal, family and rural community) proposed in chapter 2.

**6.1 Returning Home: a Forced Decision for Women?**

A consideration of these women migrants' reasons for return to Qianjiang is essential if we are to understand their post-return lives. Although urbanization and proletaraization studies hold contrasting views towards the outcomes and significances of internal return migration, they generally agree that institutional exclusion made it impossible for migrant workers to permanently stay in cities. Given that China's cities cannot accommodate a large rural population, such an argument has merit. Nevertheless, in practice, migrant workers' decision to return is the result of multiple factors, including financial need and social policies, the influence of a gendered culture, as well as migrant workers' active judgments on their life conditions and future plans. Certainly, if we take individual differences into account, we find different life experiences, such as length of stay in cities, type of employment, and attainment of goals.

In the last chapter, I discussed these women's original reasons for out-migration. Although their subsequent urban life experience and decision to return are related to these original reasons, these women's choice to migrate out did not involve a goal of urbanization. As Murphy states, "values embedded in society underpin an expectation among both migrants and family members (remaining in the origin areas) that the migrant will return home once sufficient resources have been accumulated to attain their goals" (Murphy 2002:88-89). When individuals achieve their goals, or come to feel that their goals are unachievable, they may choose to return home.

Individual practices vary, but one possibility is that these migrant workers changed their original goals and chose to stay in cities because their values changed and great opportunities appeared in front of them. One example is Yan Hua's male cousin Xu Tao. He graduated from a professional school and worked as a salesman at a kitchen appliances store in Guangzhou. While he was introducing and explaining products to customers, he found himself increasingly interested in industrial design. Later, and despite his limited education and experience, he was able to obtain an associate degree through self-study while continuing to work at the store, and eventually got a position in the design department of a branded store, along with a considerable rise in income. During our interview he kept complaining about the difficulties and pressures he experienced in the city, but repeatedly emphasized that "It is no longer easy to give up what I have right now." Clearly, he began to locate his future plans in the city.

When we talked about their decision of return, married women mentioned reasons related to family needs such as childbirth, concern for children's education, taking care of the elderly, etc., while going to blind dates and getting married were the most common reasons that unmarried women mentioned. Rural women's decision

of migration and return was always involved with their life events related to their traditional gender roles (Liu 2014). Many feminist scholars believe that it is the patriarchal culture that oppresses women's free will and forces them to compromise their migration choices in order to meet social expectations associated with their gendered roles as mothers, daughters and wives (Zhang 2013). But most of the returned women migrants I interviewed do not consider their decision to return as having been forced. Married women in particular viewed their return as a natural thing to do, and were excited about their post-return lives.

> *I always feel bad that I didn't spend enough time with Zi Jie* [Cai Hong's son]. *He's a good kid, never gets into trouble, but his grades aren't good. When we worked at the city, he was with his grandparents. His grandparents made sure he was fed and kept warm, but couldn't help with his studies. They themselves were short on education and couldn't understand the new textbooks. They think studying means to learn words, so he's good if he knows how to read and write. That's how we were taught by our parents. But things have changed. For rural families like us, children will have no future if they don't study well. I worked so hard for so many years because I want to have enough money for his higher education. But as I saw his grades getting worse and worse, and his study interest decreasing, I got really worried. It's hard for me to quit my job right now. My wages are much higher than my husband's, and the family couldn't survive without my income. I want to return home to take care of my son but I just can't. It's a dilemma. Later, the owner of my current factory decided to move the factory to Qianjiang, and asked if I wanted to come back and help him lead a team. I thought it was a great opportunity, so I said yes immediately. When I got back to the dorm and talked about it with my husband, I found out I'd agreed to take the position without asking about the salary or even considering whether I could find enough people to make a team* [laughing]. *But after I thought it through I still decided to come home. Even if I earn less it's still worth it being closer to my son. I found that the salary is pretty much the same as what I got before, and had no problem making a team, since lots of workers decided to follow my lead and return home. I felt so good*

*because everything was going the way I wanted.*（*Cai Hong, 33 years old*）

Cai Hong's narrative shows that returning home was her plan all along. As mentioned before, Confucian ideology in terms of gender roles and responsibilities have been internalized in these women's habitus since they were little. Guided by this reproductive habitus, they returned home in order better to fulfill their motherhood obligations. But first their family incomes needed to be secure, in line with their original impetus for outward migration. Cai Hong's vacillation regarding return shows the socioeconomic conflict between finance and motherhood, but it was a brief conflict because goals and responsibilities coincided.

For those unmarried women, when talking about the reasons for their return decision, going to blind dates and getting married is mixed with the belief that "there is no future in migrating life" (打工没前途). In lieu of a long term goal for labor migration, working in cities seems a process of self-discovery and -improvement. For example, Bing and Li Hua tried hard to realize their dream of running a small business. However, most of the young women migrant workers just wanted to return home, get married and end their drifting life style.

*I wanted to see the outside world and explore different opportunities when I decided to migrate out for work. I learned so much about the outside world and saw other people were living a good life. There were opportunities but not for me. Dagong is actually making a living on the strength of his youth* (打工就是吃青春饭)*. I was selling alcoholic drinks in KTV. It was really fun at first as you met different kinds of people, and it was a colorful world. But I lived nights as days. The work environment was very noisy, and I got headaches and a ringing in my ears after I'd worked there for a while. Some men who have low quality and bad manners would treat me as a prostitute. I felt disgusted when they tried to touch me. I still have my dignity even though my status is low. I'd feel really annoyed when I met people like that. My parents happened to call*

*me and asked me to come home for blind dates, so I came home. I know they're worried that I may not be able to get married if I keep working in that kind of place* [laughing] *and my sister has become the target of gossip in my village after she worked in bars for several years. Many of my classmates have returned home as well, and we don't want to migrate out for work again. My first requirement for my future husband is that he has a personality that matches mine, and he needs to respect me. Besides that, I hope he owns a small store—doesn't have to be in the town center, within Yangshi rural township is fine. That way we can own a small business and it will provide financial security for our future. (Wang Man, 25 years old)*

In contrast to married women, these young women did not have to assume their families' financial burdens, so their decision to return home had more to do with their own initiative. Wang Man decided to return home at the suggestion of her parents, and the choice involved a respite from unsavory work conditions. Unlike rural men, for whom marriage is always seen as a starting point for independence and the fulfillment of a masculine ideal that may well be realized in subsequent urban labors, rural women who get married can at least temporarily retreat from working in cities, as they fulfill Confucian ideals by for instance doing housework, taking care of in-laws, giving birth to a son to perpetuate the family line. Since youth these women have been living in the expectation of marriage, and have learned well about the responsibilities of a wife and daughter-in-law. Almost without exception, all of these women think that marriage is an essential step in one's life. In their home villages, age is an important factor in finding an ideal marriage partner. A woman who does not get married after a certain age would need to face the embarrassment of not finding a suitable partner, and parents would feel humiliated because other villagers would question and judge them if they have daughters who do not get married after a certain age. Therefore, parents go to relatives and friends for blind date opportunities for their daughters from the time their daughters reach 20. When I interviewed Wang Man, she had just turned 25 and in the eyes of her parents and other villagers was already considered a

mature woman. Even though she did not care much about what others think of her, she still went to blind dates arranged by her parents, because she did not want them to worry about her, nor did she want to be considered lacking in filial responsibility.

Feminists often criticize traditional marriage arrangements of "parents order, matchmakers speak (父母之命，媒妁之言)" as being a patriarchal suppression of women's free will. In the contemporary Chinese countryside, such marriages persist, but the practice is changing. For women and men who consent to go on blind dates, matchmakers exist as a residual formality and there is no longer a fixed practice involved. Matchmakers just explain each family's basic background and arrange a first date for the prospective couple, and the man and woman each have the right to opt out. Wang Man was very specific as to her requirements for a husband, but she did not at first have much success owing to the village gossip about her bartending older sister. Men and their family members who came to her and her family, used different ways to test the validity of the gossips and question whether Wang Man may have had drug issues or complicated relationships with men during her migration. No matter how hard she and her family tried, they could not clear up people's doubts and she was very frustrated. Since they did not give her the benefit of the doubt, she did not give them the benefit of the doubt. But Wang Man finally found a suitable man and they opted for a traditional wedding. She progressed within tradition, asserting her self-worth and relationship goals.

Wang Man's is not an isolated case, and many of the returned young women evinced similar qualities of self-determination. Lei Juan, who was 30 years old at the time of interview, also had strict requirements as to her future husband: a house, a car, and his employment in a government agency with stable social benefits. Also, her future in-laws need their own retirement incomes. Such requirements thinned the field, and her father accused her mother of not teaching

her right. In order to take care of her mother, who has limited mobility, Lei Juan does most of the housework in addition to her day job. She tries her best to be a filial daughter to her parents; however, she will not give in when it comes to her own marriage. Bing, who was 33 years old, remains single. She went for a few blind dates arranged by her relatives and friends, but she did not have much luck. As a Taoist, she used the word "destiny" to explain her single status. In order to protect her parents from getting laughed at and criticized by other villagers, Bing held a banquet to announce to her friends and relatives her decision to become a Taoist. As she said, "others hold banquets when they get married, so I held a banquet when I become a Taoist. We all leave our family behind to some extent. I just got married to my religion." It's hard to deny that these young women's sense of filial piety influenced their decision to migrate back for marriage, but they did not allow filial piety to dictate their marriage choices. Their standards as to ideal husbands represent an important avenue for research. These young women have material as well as romantic needs, and assert both. Their material needs are consistent with China's burgeoning consumption culture; money brings security, more so than ever before, and they want to be able to provide for their children. But their denunciations of Qianjiang people as being hypocritical, lazy, and ill-mannered suggest they will have difficulty finding a suitable match in their hometown.

With dreams about the urban cities, these young girls had their romantic imaginations about love encounters before they migrated out for work. It's fair to say that working in cities gave them more opportunities and a bigger platform to seek for marriage partners. Among the 17 informants, Cai Hong, Yu Wei, Yu Hua and Yan Hua married men they met while working in cities. Except for Yan Hua, who worked in sales at a department store, the women all worked in factories. The romantic partners of these factory girls are always young migrant workers who also are from rural areas. Studies show that young women migrant workers who work in the urban service industry have a greater chance of meeting urban male

partners (Ding 2011). Nevertheless, their peasant status in the urban marriage market cuts down their options. And most of them still relied on their relatives and friends' social networks to find a suitable marriage partner.

### 6.2 Return = Homecoming?

For these rural women, homecoming is not so simple as the purchase of a ticket. The nostalgic and idealized imaginations of hometown in their memories play an important symbolic role in maintaining their personal and social identities during their migration in cities. In their narratives of urban working experiences and their decision to return home, they always emphasized their sense of belonging and their inseparable connection with their hometown to justify their return choices. Both these women migrant themselves and the Qianjiang society as a whole see these women's return migration as a homecoming, which involves a take-it-for-granted expectation that all these women would re-integrate to their hometown unproblematically. However, as they set about making an independent life in urban cities, both the individual migrant women and their rural hometown in reality are undergoing considerable changes under the post-Mao modernization project. Finding themselves getting stuck in the disjuncture between home in imagination and home in reality would probably bring about complex negotiations of identity and belonging involved in their after-return lives. Therefore, this section introduces these objective changes occurring in their hometown Qianjiang at all levels during their migration. Also, I discuss how these women feel about the changes post-return, and how these changes influence their perceptions on self-identity and sense of belonging.

#### 6.2.1 The Changing Hometown

During the past decades of China's reform and opening up, the Chinese countryside has given people the impression of backwardness and lack of development compared to the speedy urban development. Indeed, the Chinese countryside is far behind the cities in terms of modernization and industrialization.

But Chinese rural society is by no means standing still. Now that the "three rural issues" have gain more attention from scholars and policy makers, a serious of policies regarding rural agricultural reform and peasant benefits have been implemented, and these policies bring huge changes within rural society. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 4, as the clan power gets weaker in Qianjiang area, Qianjiang's rural society is easily influenced by outside forces (e.g. government, market). In this section, I focus on the objective changes within these women's hometowns, which sets a time-and-space background for these women's post-return lives.

One of the major changes is the abolition of agricultural taxes. Since 2014, the state council of China has enforced policies such as "Four abolitions" (cut off agriculture tax, butchery tax, livestock tax and agriculture specialties tax) and "Six subsidies" (grain direct subsidy, seed subsidy, pig subsidy, rapeseed subsidy, agriculture machine subsidy and agriculture production resource material subsidy) to help peasants. By the end of 2005, the abolition of agriculture taxes became an official law in China and agricultural taxes was a thing of the past. At the same time, the increased prices of crops and other agriculture products show positive results in increasing peasants' incomes. The increased agriculture profit is the result of those policies on rural economy, and peasants' living situations have improved to some extent. The effects of these government policies are evident in peasants' production activities. The most obvious phenomenon is the increased conflicts regarding land management ownership, as more and more migrant workers return. When the agricultural taxes were heavy, many peasants chose to migrate out for work and abandoned their lands. And some of them subcontracted their lands to others. Some village officials collected the abandoned lands and let the creditors manage the lands to pay off the village's debts. In order to reach the taxation target, some villages also contracted the abandoned lands to other individuals without the consent of the original peasant contractors. However, as agriculture incomes increased after the taxation reforms, some migrant workers

returned to reclaim their lands. Due to the complicated management rights of the contractors and subcontractors, land disputes significantly increased in the countryside. As non-agricultural incomes increased in rural families, many returned migrant workers do not choose to do farming again and only the elderly in the rural families are in charge of farming. However, being regarded as “the basis for pursuing livelihood diversification” (Liu and Murphy 2006:617), land is still an important living resource for peasants. As there are more favorable farming policies, migrant workers become more reluctant to give up their lands.

At the same time, when agricultural taxes were cancelled, the central committee of the communist party of China proposed to propel the new rural construction following the requirement “production development, living in affluence, custom civilization, neatness of appearance, and democratic management” (生产发展、生活富裕、乡风文明、村容整洁、管理民主) in “Suggestions for the 11th Five-year Plan”. New rural construction is China government’s comprehensive strategic plan to increase rural development under the background of “nurturing agriculture by industry” (以工补农). However, in the process of enforcing new rural construction related policies, government at most levels always focused on infrastructure construction, projects that could easily show their official achievements. Starting from 2006, the Qianjiang government vigorously promoted “roads everywhere”, “ten thousand villages a thousand markets”, “domestic appliances to the countryside”, “cleaning up homes”, “farmer bookstores” and other livelihood projects. When the “roads everywhere” project finished in 2008, it solved the awkward situation in which peasants were not able to step out of their homes in days of heavy rain. Also, the correspondingly equipped transportation system makes it easier for these returned migrant workers to travel between the villages and downtown of Qianjiang city. The “ten thousand villages a thousand rural markets” project set up a completed consumption system around villages, so that returned migrant workers can easily buy different kinds of living products around rural townships without the need to go downtown. The

improvement of roads and the development of rural markets also enhanced each township's environment to attract outside investors. Therefore, each township's economy starts to present prosperity. "Domestic appliances to the countryside" and related information construction improved the cultural facilities in the countryside. The "cleaning up homes" project promotes water safety, country roads, marsh gas usage and general infrastructure. Lastly, social security courses such as the complete coverage of new rural cooperative medical system, the expansion of the rural minimum livelihood guarantee system, and the enhancement of the minimum livelihood guarantee ratio, have all developed to some extent.

Besides, in order to accelerate the process of urbanization and industrialization, Qianjiang government uses different ways to attract outside investment. It provides companies with land, infrastructure, tax deductions and other benefits. Therefore, the industrial ratio increases every year in Qianjiang, with its focus on gas mining, medication production, machinery production, clothing factory and agricultural and sideline products processing. The agricultural-oriented industrial system has been completely changed. In 2008, as the enforcement of the policy "vacate the nest and change the bird" (腾笼换鸟) was implemented in Guangdong province to transfer labor-intensive industry out and attract high-tech industry in, many garment factories run by Qianjiang people in Guangdong moved back to Qianjiang's rural townships, since the Qianjiang local government provided many benefits. This was also the policy background that made women like Cai Hong, Liu Zhen, La Mei, Yu Hua and Yu Wei decide to return home. The industrial development in Qianjiang actually has led to a growth in the commercial and service industry, which then creates many opportunities of non-agricultural jobs for these returned women. Moreover, Qianjiang's real estate industry got into its developmental period officially in 2009. Apartments were built and reconstructed in the Yuanlin district, and many rural farm lands were turned into apartments and factories by real estate developers. However, the increased promotion of

urbanization and industrialization in the countryside brought some negative consequences as well. Peasant's complaints are heard everywhere regarding the aggressive and forced expropriation of farm lands for industry development, and there is severe environment pollution because of illegal emissions by chemical factories.

It is fair to say that rural society is unavoidably undergoing transformations within current transitional China. On the one hand, thanks to these alterations of state policies, the relationship between cities and the countryside has been gradually changed in China. The continuous infiltration of the state's modernization forces has largely accelerated the modernization construction in almost all reaches of Chinese rural society. On the other hand, this state-initiative construction of new countryside implies that China's rural community is increasingly affected by outside forces, and its inner mechanism and order are unavoidably changing. Thanks to the state and local government's urbanization and new rural construction policies, nowadays rural Qianjiang is quite different from what these returned women experienced in childhood. After their return, they all feel these changes deeply in their own way. However, they did not applaud all these changes. Bing's hometown is at Gao Shibei rural township, which is the model township of new rural construction projects in Hubei Province. When Bing talked about her hometown's changes after her return, she said:

> *It's much more convenient nowadays. The roads are better to walk on and it's all concrete. You only get mud on your feet if you do farming. You don't have to wear rain shoes to avoid getting mud all over your feet. I don't like the factories to be built in the village. Maybe I saw too many concrete buildings when I worked outside. The new concrete buildings in our village just look odd and clash with the environment. Nowadays, every family has two-storied buildings as the government provided the building model design. You may laugh at me about this. I rarely go to my home in the village but when I go home, I'm afraid of stepping into someone else's house if I'm not paying attention* [laughing]. *Seriously, all*

*the houses look the same. The government officials may think that unified designs are pretty, but I think it lacks character. There are more products for us to choose from. In the past, you couldn't buy things even if you had money, but nowadays if you have money you can buy whatever you can think of. Whenever you want something to eat, you can buy it in Qianjian if you can't get it around the township. You can buy food even when it's not in season. You can have watermelon in winter and carrots in summer, but they don't taste the same as before. When I was little, I always craved for food. I picked up a tomato from the field and it tasted delicious. The tomatoes we eat nowadays all grow in the indoor farms and the taste is very different. Sometimes I pity the kids because they don't have the fun we used to. Even when the children are playing around, they're not as free as us. There were all mud roads, and you didn't get hurt if you fell. But now they're all clean concrete roads and you have to be careful not to fall. Many families only have one child, and adults are very protective. They don't want their kids to touch this and that. And food safety is a tricky thing too. There are lots of additives in snacks. When your children beg you for snacks, you buy them unless you're poor. Especially people like me who returned home after working in the city, we always feel guilty toward our children and try our best to satisfy their needs for food and clothes. We could be doing bad things to our children. Some kids in our village have leukemia and lymphoma when there is no family history of such diseases. I think it could be related to the food we're eating nowadays. (Bing, 34 years old)*

Bing has her own reflections on the changes of rural environment and lifestyle, and such reflections are based on the comparisons between current and past rural lives. Because of the migration from rural to urban and back to rural, we can see such space-time transition made these women step out their living world and use a critical perspective to see people and things around them, and undoubtedly, such phenomena have transformative meanings. It should be noted that advanced information technologies have decreased gaps in terms of space and time in the fast developing Chinese society. People are able to get outside information at a fast pace, which influences people's perceptions towards their own living world. Bing has computer and internet in her beauty salon, she often spends her time

reading news on the internet besides using her computer for editing Taoist scripts. Bing, who did not finish middle school, had no computer skills, so she took night school courses for a half year. Even though she is not highly skilled, she keeps up what she knows because the internet has been an effective way for her to stay in touch with the outside world since she returned home. People's livelihood, society, environment, and politics are all subjects that Bing cares about. During our interviews, she often discussed recent hot issues with me. The language she used was simple and ordinary, and there were no mind-blowing opinions; however, I remember how passionate and enthusiastic she was when she talked about issues with me.

### 6.2.2 Familiar Strangers: Liminal status and Not-quite-belonging of Returned Women

Migration studies always highlight the profound impact of women's exposure to the urban world on their perceptions towards their post-return lives (Zhang 2013). Their rural hometown itself is never static but is undergoing continuous and conspicuous change. From the historical perspective, changes appear not only in terms of economic policies and organizational settings, but also in terms of rural culture. The marketization of Chinese society brought China into a period of rapid transition, and the cultural rules and values inherited from different historical systems coexist and at times clash within contemporary China (Lu 2016:41). For these returned women, they returned home with the embodiments of both reproductive habitus from original rural field and transformative habitus gained from urban work experience. In this sense, these returned women and their hometown are by no means the same as when they left. Returning back to their hometown, therefore, means these women have to face the objective disparity between the urban field and rural field, as well as the discrepancies between the hometown they recalled and longed for during the migration and the realities of their changed hometown. In this process, they always have to negotiate themselves between those two sets of cultural dispositions, which likely impairs

their sense of self-identity and belonging.

When discussing homecomers (returned migrants), Schuetz compared them to strangers, and pointed out that a stranger "is about to join in a group which is not and never has been his own. He knows that he will find himself in an unfamiliar world, differently organized than that from which he comes, full of pitfalls and hard to master. The homecomer, however, expects to return to an environment of which he always had and—so he thinks—still has intimate knowledge and which he has just to take for granted in order to find his bearings within it" (Schuetz 1945:369). Similarly, for these returned women migrant workers in Qianjiang, their childhood memories made them feel warm and familiar with their hometown. In this familiar hometown world, their original reproductive habitus helped them appropriately express themselves and interpret others' acts. The way people think and react in their hometown shows a fair degree of conformity. Nevertheless, just as Bing demonstrated in her narratives, their past experiences both in rural childhood and urban working cities always enable these returned women to keep a certain distance from their current rural hometown. In this sense, they are more like the most familiar strangers at home, playing roles of insider and outsider.

On the individual level, keeping a distance intentionally is shown directly in the bodily differences these women exhibit in their post-return lives. According to Bourdieu, the sociological body is different from the biological body we usually think of, but rather symbolic body of social orders and values. It is rooted inside the social interactions and it's an action system and practice scheme. The change and development of this symbolic body is determined by its position in a societal structure, and achieved through the continuous interactions between habitus and field. These returned women show their recognition and pursuit of fashion by dressing differently than their fellow townsmen, which reflects the ubiquitous consumption culture's influences on their bodily reconstruction. Certainly, as marketization continues to affect Chinese rural society, the influence of

consumption culture is not necessarily unique to these returned women. Even for girls who have never left the rural field, their lives are affected by consumption culture at different levels. However, within the discourse of post-Mao modernization, aesthetic differences within the consumption culture still separate peasants and their urban counterparts, and it has profound class meanings. Obviously, these returned women are highly sensitive about such aesthetic differences and its related divisions between the rural and urban field. In some contexts, their emphasis on and showing off of outfits different from their townsmen reflects part of their carefully-preserved peasant identity.

> *In Guangdong, if a married woman wears heavy makeup, people look down upon her and think she's a prostitute. People in Guangdong usually wear black, gray and white, and they like comfortable styles. People in the hometown like to wear colorful outfits, high heels and styles that define the waistline. They think they look pretty and fashionable, but I think they look very tacky. People who live in the big cities like casual styles, and they usually wear shorts, T-shirts and slippers in summer. Some people in the hometown have never been to the outside cities, so they think urban residents dress like actresses from TV commercials. Actresses only wear that kind of clothes for jobs, and they prefer casual and comfortable styles in their spare time too. It's not that you shouldn't dress fancy, but it depends on the occasion. People in my hometown don't understand that; they wear super high heels when they go out for grocery shopping or take a walk. They put on every gold necklace and bracelet they have and look like a bunch of wannabes. They laugh at my outfit and say that my clothes are too casual. I can't relate to them as we don't have the same tastes.（Yue E, 40 years old）*

Yue E thinks her definitions of "fashion" and "tacky" are different from her fellow townsmen's, and ascribes such differences to the different tastes they have. Actually, the term "taste" represents the hierarchically different living styles between the rural and urban field. Urban residents' preferences for casual and comfortable styles represent their pursuit of modernization, while hometown people's overly dressed styles make them look like clowns, and evidence a

shallow and vulgar part of rural culture.

In these women's narratives, besides aesthetic differences, cultural differences between the townsmen and urban residents are shown in all reaches of their lives. Bing rented an apartment on a busy commercial street in Qianjiang city, and she turned one of the rooms into her beauty salon. Because it's at a busy commercial area, her business is going well. However, her frequent interactions with Qianjiang locals do not help her reintegrate into local life. Instead, she realized how different she is from her fellow townsmen in terms of life attitude and principles. Because Bing can't find a mutual culture ground with the locals, she tries to avoid interactions with the locals outside of the business context, even to the point of worshipping not in a local Taoist temple, but a temple in Jinzhou city, a two-hour bus ride she takes several times a month.

> *This street is not long at all, but it has six mahjong houses and they're always busy. People in Guangzhou rarely play mahjong because they focus on their careers and they are very ambitious. People in my hometown are very lazy, and they only want an easy life. That's why they can spend a whole day playing mahjong. They don't have a sense of time and never keep their promises. When they're asked to do things, they act in one way in front of you and a different way behind your back. They are very hypocritical. When you go to an agency to get something done, you still need to have inside guanxi (connections) even though they're supposed to do their work according to policies. Otherwise, somehow something will always go wrong during the process. Even if it's a simple thing, they make it difficult for you. Many of my women customers don't work and depend on their husbands entirely. A monthly salary of 2,000 or 3,000 RMB is not bad for Qianjiang. But it can never satisfy their family expenses and their own expenses. So many of these women hook up with 'sugar daddies.' Even though as a business owner I need their money to going, I can't agree with their actions. They think they're attractive, so they act proud. There's a quote from a book I read that fits them really well: they're like 'cheap fashion puppets'*(廉价的时尚木偶)*. They live a hypocritical life, compete with each other materially and will sell their*

*dignity for money or a quick thrill. I don't have much education, but I value my reputation and dignity a lot and I need to call my own shots. I have legs and arms and can support myself on my own. I don't expect to live a glamorous life. I'll spend what I earn and accomplish what I can. I'd never have known how much people in my hometown changed if I didn't return home. We were very poor in the past, but people were simple and kind. Nowadays, people live in better material conditions, but they're empty spiritually and it's all because our culture is still underdeveloped. (Bing, 34 years old)*

As Schuetz notes, "separation interrupts the community of space and time" (Schuetz 1945:369). When these women talked about their urban working experiences and decision to return, they often focused on their entangled relational and blood connections with their hometown; however, they expressed their liminal status with words like "not-quite-belonging", "disappointment," and "frustration. The term "liminality" has been used by migration studies to highlight the hybrid and in-between nature of migrants' identities. In this thesis, I argue that this concept is even more suitable to understand the confusion and struggles return migrants are experiencing in their hometown. Because liminality only emerges when one feels uncertainty about oneself and one's future. For these returned women, rather than permanently staying in cities, returning home is a more foreseeable future for them. However, their return journey highlights the contradictions of the hometown between imaginations and reality, as well as the disparity between urban and rural fields. These contradictions make them feel lost about their identities and future lives. They have to keep involving themselves in countless contestations of identities in their everyday practices after return. During our interviews, I could see there are moments where these women wrestle with the tension of belonging and try to make sense of their own identities.

*Sometimes, I feel I'm no different from others around me because we're all Qianjiang residents. How do I describe it? But I am a little bit different from them. I don't know if I'm peasant or urban. My Hukou is*

*still in my village, but I bought a house in Qianjiang city already. But I only spend weekends in the city, and live in Haokou rural township most of time. I'm still interacting a lot with people from my village. It's a weird feeling. I don't know where I belong. I guess at least I belong to myself and my own family. (Cai Hong, 33 years old)*

Just like what Cai Hong has illustrated in her narratives, these returned women are puzzled about their rural or urban identity, and constantly shift between positions of "insider" and "outsider" in their hometown. The ambiguous identity between rural and urban is related to the fast moving urbanization. In recent years, in order to sell stock in commercial residential buildings, the Qianjiang local government has encouraged peasants to buy commercial residential buildings by implementing beneficial policies such as educational opportunities for children, social benefits, financial supports and other public services. Even though all 17 informants have houses in their home villages, they all chose to buy or rent houses in their rural townships or in Qianjiang city. Cai Feng is the only informant who lives in the village. Their residential choice is closely related to their work location and living habits, and it also reflects the liminal status of these returned women, which highlights the blurred and complex nature of their status as familiar strangers in their hometown. They are not willing to return to their village completely, but they can't establish a new life in big cities. Qianjiang city and those rural townships become their best options. They can keep their basic connections with their home villages, and still have their own space at the same time. As illustrated in Cai Hong's narratives, these women maintain a sense of self and individuality while searching for their status and belonging in their hometown. Although it is not necessarily unique to these returned women, these returned women's emphasis on self is more obvious compared to girls who never migrate out.

### 6.3 Reconstructing Post-return life in Qianjiang

As illustrated in their narratives, the liminal status of these returned women brought them difficulties in their post-return lives. The existing literature on return

migration has documented some difficulties returned migrant workers encounter (Fan 2008; Fu 2007; Murphy 2002; Tian 2009). However, while emphasizing the role of institutional measurements in helping migrants reintegrate into their rural communities, few studies have explained how individual returnees themselves deal with these difficulties. Moreover, most of the existing studies are gender blind, insofar as they consider returned migrant workers as a homogenous group. The fact is that whether migrating out for work or returning home, women faced different difficulties and hardships compared to their male counterparts, and their coping strategies for their problems were also unique. Therefore, this section will uncover these returned women's diversified daily life practices. And through detailed descriptions of their coping strategies toward specific situations, we will see their courage and wisdom in reconstructing their newly started lives.

Undeniably, the stresses from the economic, cultural and other structural forces always exist in these returned women daily lives. However, as emphasized before, they didn't choose to accept everything passively. What I have to emphasize here is that these women's coping strategies are not simply to maximize their interests but rather an active respond method. According to Bourdieu's theory of practice, the concept of "strategy" is by no means a form of economic determinism, or kind of rational choice, or materialistic-oriented. For him, strategy is not an achievement plan with a clear goal and beforehand steps, but routine obedience and reconstruction of a systematic, well-accepted and understandable mode within the field. But this does not mean that actors wouldn't find themselves entangled with other alternatives or they can't make active choices. Rather, the concept "strategy" emphasizes the practical aspects of individual's actions in specific situations. Such strategical actions reflect actors' possession of accumulated capital determined by their social position and their underlying dispositions which inculcated from their past experiences. For these returned women, their reproductive habitus from the original rural lives, together with cultural schemas they obtained through their urban experiences, will jointly contribute to their

reconstruction of their post-return lives. More importantly, the collision and tension between these two meaning system which place them in a liminal status after their return, would probably enable them to reflect on their current situations and lives and bring about certain unexpected or transformative responses and actions in their lives.

### 6.3.1 Restoration, Adjustment and Reconstruction of Family Relationships in Everyday Practices

In the previous chapter we saw that the family relationships prescribed by Confucian gender ideology—the expectation that daughters, mothers and wives will fulfill their gender roles, face great challenges during migration. In response to their unfavorable material conditions, migrant women have to navigate these gender norms while interacting with family elders, husbands and children, so that there is the double stress of family obligations and the obligations in the urban labor market. In the process of meeting these obligations, migrant women achieve personal growth while earning an independent income. Some studies argue that such benefits can easily disappear after their return, because they can no longer contribute to their family income and the social networks they've established in the urban labor market are of little use in preventing a "fall-back" position in the rural family (Zhang 2010b; Zhang 2013). But to argue thus is to ignore the returned migrant women's diversified daily practices. I have found in my fieldwork that there is little evidence these women become passive upon return. To the contrary, they contribute to family matters while adjusting to their new-old environment. They draw upon value standards and negotiating skills they learned from their pre-migration rural lives and in the urban workplace to justify their needs and expectations within the family, a context of mutual support and cooperation.

The preceding chapters should safeguard the reader from the misperception that post-return life was easy sailing. Of course there were conflicts, frustrations and

difficulties. We learned in the introductory chapter of Yan Hua and her mother-in-law's disagreement over how best to feed a child. Such conflicts are common. They are intergenerational and interspatial (rural–urban). Time, space and values clash. New modes of living infiltrate the rural home through information technology, even if the residents have never left that home, which is not to say that these new modes of urban living are all and fully applicable in a rural setting, or that the extent to which they are inapplicable is a sign of endemic parochialism. Getting and applying information are two different things, and the application varies with the individual. As individuals, the returned migrant women were notably changed by their experience, and brought new perspectives to such matters as childrearing, children's education, conjugal relationships, relationships with other family members and with the greater community. Compared with the left-behind family members, who had less chance to reconsider their ingrained values and behavior patterns, returned migrant women are more willing and able to bring new perspectives into practice, in the rural home.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Confucianism plays an essential role in forming Chinese peasants' reproductive habitus, to the extent that returned women migrants cannot well ignore the paternalistic power in the rural household, on pain of being branded "unfilial" and condemned for a "lack of *liangxin* (conscience)," among other consequences. However, women are located in different relationships at the same time. Within the family, they are daughter-in-law, wives and mothers. When one type of relationship is in conflict, they always find possible buffers by coordinating other types of family relationships. Qin's in-laws, for instance, think she spends too much and does not know how to run a household.

> *They* [her in-laws] *are very uptight and live frugally. They think money should be carefully spent in the right places and expect us to do the same. I don't spend money casually, but I want to treat myself better while I'm young. And the money I spend on food and clothes is always within my consumption range. I didn't have a job when I got married. I was living*

*with my in-laws, and I didn't spend much because "after dinner comes the reckoning"*(拿人手短吃人嘴软) [laughing]. *Now, I spend the money I earn and I earn more than my husband. But my mother-in-law was still unhappy when she knew I went to buy cherries. She didn't talk about it in front of me, but she told other people; she said I'm lazy for work but like expensive food. People from my village all like to gossip, and someone told me afterward. I was really angry, but I couldn't pick a fight with her because she didn't tell me directly. Also, if I had a fight with her the whole village would know instantly. Whenever there are conflicts between daughter-in-law and in-laws, the daughter-in-law gets blamed no matter who's right or wrong. Going against the elderly is bad manners. If I do it, people will say I have no manners* (没教养) *and my parents will get scolded. But I tell my husband about my complaints. He treats me really well. We went out for work together in Guangzhou for many years, and we both know how many difficulties and hardships we went through day and night. He has no objection to what I buy. He doesn't just know I don't spend money casually, he also understands the pain I suffered for many years and the effort I've made for our family. My husband is a well-qualified sandwich* [laughing], *and he always tries to speak for me in front of my in-laws. My in-laws are different. They always say that we're a family, but they treat me and my sister-in-law differently. My father-in-law needed to make payments for social benefits, but he never asked me directly. He'd go to my sister in-law, and my sister in-law would talk to my husband and my husband would tell me. He made it complicated because he still considers me as an outsider. I never told them I wouldn't make the payments for them. My husband is their only son and taking care of them is our responsibility. The way they approached the issue made me upset at first. But I don't care about that now, and it's actually better to keep some distance. We bought a house in the rural township and work in the factory on weekdays. We only go back to the village on weekends and there aren't as many conflicts now. Just like the saying that some things look better from far away. (Qin, 30 years old)*

Through Qin's narratives, we can see that Confucian ideology still governs villagers' behavior, and respecting the elderly remains an ethical standard that daughters-in-law are expected to follow if they wish to be known for their good

conduct (会做人). Qin's mother-in-law expressed her dissatisfaction externally, and Qin benefited from her husband's support and their common fund of urban work experience in order to avoid direct conflict with her mother-in-law. Moreover, neither Qin nor any of my women informants were in a position to give up work on their return, since peasants retain a disadvantaged socio-economic status in contemporary market-oriented society. The gaining of life security was a justification for returning home, but a significant and growing portion of that security is bought with urban labor. And one need no longer migrate out so far. In the process of vigorously promoting urbanization, Qianjiang's local manufacturing and service industry has expanded, and there are many more non-agricultural job opportunities, so that these women can work in their hometown. Women in the manufacturing industry can sometimes earn more than their male counterparts owing to greater manual dexterity. The women's continuous contribution to family incomes equates to more domestic bargaining power, and they are no longer in the awkward situation of "after dinner comes the reckoning." As Wang argues, "there is no 'totalitarian' family regime. Family should not be regarded as coherent unit to be either 'oppressive' or 'supportive'" (Wang 2007). One could say that patriarchal power is a negotiable quantity, dependent on circumstance.

When wife and husband have each experienced working life in cities, they have a degree of mutual understanding and shared intent. Nevertheless, women who return home for marriage often face conflicts and disagreements in their conjugal relationship. From a young age they were raised in expectation of marriage, as evidenced by their parents, and romanticized in social media. Those halcyon dreams of a stable and enriching life are one reason for women migrants' return home from a difficult urban environment. But reality differs from dreams.

Li Hua often told me how close her parents were to each other and how harmonious her family life was when she was little. She often mentioned a boss

she worked for, who created his own clothing brand and opened several stores after returning to China from studies in Japan. She was full of praise for this young man, whom she idealized as a brave, single-minded intellectual, gentle and polite, and with a strong sense of responsibility. As we talked more, I realized her memories of this man were triggered by her difficult relationship with her husband, Fu Bo, who has a son from a previous marriage, and who got rich in the wholesale clothing business, presently owning three stores in the busiest business district in the center of Qianjiang city. They met when he went to Wu Han to get clothes for his business. She was working in (clothing) sales, and had rejected all efforts on the part of her townsmen to introduce her to marriageable men in Wuhan, because she did not want to marry a man of higher social position than herself, out of concern that dominance in society would equate to dominance in the home. Men with a marriage history are generally at a disadvantage in the marriage market, but Li Hua went against her family and friends' advice, and married Fu Bo after a short courtship. Even though Fu Bo's financial situation was very much better than hers—she could only subsist by migrating out for work—Li Hua thought that their respective "deficits," his prior marriage and her peasant status, might balance out. Moreover, Fu Bo's clothing stores could help fulfill her dream of being a store owner, and so she believed that she made a right choice for her marriage. However, her husband's behaviors after their marriage surprised her, and frequent martial conflicts make her very tried.

> *I am busy with the store business, and I also have to keep the home. I'm busy all day. He's just an owner by title. He usually goes out for fun and does not get home until 2 or 3 AM, and wakes up around noon the next day. The salesgirls in our store say he's like a king because everyone around him has to do things for him. But even a king holds early meetings and he doesn't even do that. Not only does he not take care of the business, he has very bad public manners and curses people all the time. My parents were very strict about our manners, and they never used bad words when they had conflicts. I was shocked when my husband cursed me with bad words only a month after we got married. I felt so*

*sad and thought I picked the wrong person. As time passes, I realize cursing people is a usual thing for him, and this makes me feel really frustrated. I thought having a child would make it better, and he'd stop for the sake of our child. But the fact proved I was wrong and he curses in front of our child as well. He doesn't care if it's a bad influence. Besides, our son is just like his kingly toys. He'll play with him when he's happy, but he gets annoyed with our son most of the time and never tries to be a responsible father. Both of my parents like children, and I remember my father used to hold me in one hand and my older brother in the other hand, as we sat on a bamboo bed in the summertime. Even though my family was poor, my parents gave us all they had and they were very patient with us. Before I got married, I thought of my future husband and pictured our marriage life. It was filled with great ideas and hopes. But the reality broke my dreams into pieces and even now I can't believe I got married with someone like him. At the beginning, I tried to communicate with him, but I failed every time because he's impossible to communicate with. I never met a man like him before. The store owner I used to work for is a very intellectual, charming and polite man. I told him* [her husband] *that a man is more attractive when he's polite and hard-working, but he laughed at me and said I should have gotten married with a college graduate. I don't have any hope for him anymore, and I try to do things that make my life simpler and happier. I focus on myself and my child, and try to live day by day without having conflicts with him. I thought of getting a divorce, but my mother is still alive. I don't want her to feel ashamed in front of other villagers. Also, my child is still young. I don't want him to feel he's different from other families and develop low self-esteem. When you live in this world, it's hard for you to escape from all these relationships and become your true self. When my mother passes away and my son goes to college, I'll live for myself. I won't become an older woman who still takes care of her grown-up children or her grandchildren, I'll let everything go. I'll fulfill whatever responsibilities I have and then I'll leave. I don't need my son to take care of me when I get old, and I won't get married again if I get a divorce. I used to think that marriage is necessary for a person, but now I think being single is much happier if a woman can be financially independent and has an independent mind. My ideal life is to live a simple life where there are mountains and streams,* [I] *have a small land to grow food, and raise some chickens and a dog. What I'm doing today is trying to live a*

*life so that by the time I get old, it'll be perfect. (Li Hua, 33 years old)*

In Li Hua's narratives, she constantly compared her parents' marriage with her own, to the detriment of the latter. The apparently ideal man she'd known as her boss deepened her recognition of her husband's "low quality" (低素质) and bad manners. And yet filiality and motherhood preclude her getting a divorce. Li Hua used the term "live from day to day" (过一天算一天) to summarize the coping strategy for her predicament. This is not precisely depression, romanticized "resistance from the bottom," or some kind of false consciousness; it is simply the will to persist amid limited alternatives, and a sober-eyed maintenance of hope. As researchers we tend to focus on the social restrictions on people's lives, and individual subjectivity is often described as "resistance from the weak." In practice, these rural women know the limitations in their lives, but they also know the value of patience. They put their problems aside temporarily, in hopes of a better tomorrow. Li Hua pins her hope on the future, imagining a rural idyll. She is not unique. Many returned women's anticipations of their future lives echo the placid times of their rural childhood. Such hope is constructed in strongly communitarian terms, associated with an orderly living community and a strong sense of belonging, but also with more individualistic imperatives such as the desire for autonomy (Ní Laoire 2007:342). Moreover, Li Hua's liminal status in her current marriage has changed her views of marriage and family. She thinks more about gender status, and doubts that marriage is a necessary step in life, speculations that run counter to Confucian thought. Her thoughts are transformative, and perhaps she will work a change in her life before old age.

### 6.3.2. "*Renqing*", "Interests", and *Liangxin*: Practices of "Conducting Oneself" after Return

As mentioned in Chapter four, exchanging *renqing* in rural society is based on "propriety". Every village is a life community and everyone knows each other, to the extent that the Confucian codes of "reciprocity and continuity" and

"differential far-off and near" are quite comprehensive. There is rational calculation, face saving (reputation upholding) and practical initiative between individuals and for the community at large.

Nevertheless, as rural areas are marketized, peasants have more access to non-agricultural jobs. The local economy, and with it cultural values, are diversified. Different individuals or households may hold their own set of value systems, and these systems may be internally flawed or contradictory, or in some situations may run entirely counter to the core values of the village (Lu 2016). As value systems proliferate, so do interests, not least among returned women migrants, who have expanded experience in how to conduct themselves socially, and can bring that experience to bear on domestic relationships. And yet their post-return experiences are often contradictory. Remembering the warm social relationships they knew in childhood, they complain about how cold people are to each other. But then they think the contact law based on equal interests simplifies social relations, and shields them to some extent from more complicated blood ties and emotions.

> *In the past, whenever a household held an event* [banquet, house warming, funeral and other formal events]*, relatives and neighbors would come and help. These are renqing debts. Once you get help from others, you need to help back some day. This is give-and-take. Nowadays, people all employ food service teams to prepare banquets for household events. You tell the team the kinds of dishes you want, pay the money and then just let them take care of it. If they don't do a good job, you can ask for a discount. When you ask relatives and neighbors for favors, if they come up short, you can't say anything for fear of hurting their feelings and breaking your good relationships. After all, they come to help you without getting paid. It's ok if everything goes according to plan; if they mess up, you can only 'break your teeth on your stomach'* (打碎牙往肚里吞) *and still owe them a renqing debt. The events people held in the past were far more boisterous because people from half the village would come to help. Everyone worked busily for one event. Nowadays, people just pay their*

> *cash gift, have meals and then leave. Many people don't even attend the events, making some excuse or other. But they still ask others to help them bring cash gifts to the host because you still have to follow the proprieties at least in form. There are some people who just hold events for profit. One household in my village risked embarrassment by hosting a banquet in honor of their child's turning five. We all know about the one-year-old and ten-year-old banquets, and it was the first we heard of a five-year-old banquet* [laughing]. *Obviously they just wanted money. Usually only the poor households do things like this to get money for living. Even though people may not say it openly, we all look down on those kinds of households. Some rich households spend lots of money on banquets. They pay various groups to perform. People are singing and dancing and it's boisterous. But how do I put it? I just don't feel people are as close as before. (Qin, 30 years old)*

According to Qin's narratives, social cohesion is weakening as town life marketizes. Objectively speaking, such change is inseparable from population flows within villages. Helping is a *renqing* that needs to be paid back. If you can't pay back a *renqing*, you may be criticized for bad conduct or lack of *liangxin*. However, returned migrant workers are not like peasants before, who had slack times to help others. Most of them are working in factories or other non-agricultural positions in rural townships or Qianjiang city. This means they have to follow their work schedules strictly. Moreover, as the market economy becomes more prevalent in rural areas, utilitarianization in social relationships makes people's contacts rely largely on form. In villagers' minds, putting in their time and labor in accordance with *renqing* is not as practical as devoting those resources to earn money and enlarge their bank accounts. When there's need for extra hands, they'd rather pay someone to do the job. They figure it's a hassle-free (省事) method and that they needn't feel guilty for depriving others of resources by calling in favors. Such ostensible practicality is evident in the breakdown of cooperation between different classes in Southeast Asian villages, as described by Scott (1985). As the labor market expands in rural areas, job opportunities arise and with them the ability to get cash for cash-regulated life. New careers develop

to provide marketwise services to peasants caught up in industrialization, and women are prominent in these new careers.

Liu Ying, now 25, worked in a toy factory in Shenzhen for four years before returning home for marriage and childbirth. Because she'd grown averse to repetitive and intensive factory work, she turned down a chance to work in a clothing factory in her rural township. Being an extravert, she enjoys singing and dancing. When she found that villagers are moving towards professional service teams for banquets, she organized a small entertainment group out of former coworkers with similar interests. They get paid for performances. In order to meet the expectations of different customers, they learned, in addition to singing and dancing, how to play the waist drum, do crosstalk and other kinds of performance. Certainly, the original development of her team largely relied on traditional relations, family and geographic. At first, they only took performance requests from friends and relatives. Given the *renqing* ties with these customers, they charged lower than market price. As the organizer, Liu Ying was not concerned about the discounts, telling me that "favor is also a kind of investment" (人情也是一种投资). Just as she expected, her *renqing* investment finally paid off in the form of money. As Liu Ying's team becomes better known, she receives more performing requests, and not only among friends and relatives. She has expanded her team, while also organizing a team of older women to prepare banquet feasts. As Liu Ying's business continues to grow, her fees become more regulated. But she still gives discounts to her relatives, friends and select customers to save up *renqing* for herself. Such strategies help her earn a reputation for good conduct while promoting her business. One might say that she has found a balance between *renqing* and "interests," having transformed the latter into a career.

In practice, the relationship between *renqing* and "interests" is rather complicated. Although these women have since childhood been developing high sensitivity towards human relationships, they still find themselves in awkward situations and

have to keep adjusting themselves between these two schemas, *renqing* and interests, according to circumstance. Cai Hong, who works in a clothing factory, complained often that the boundary between her work and life is even fuzzier after her return. While organizing her team members, she faced even more stress in balancing interests and *renqing* relations.

> *Team leaders usually have great power* [in the garment factory]. *This is especially the case after my return. Factory owners, managers, team leaders and team members are all acquaintances outside of the workplace. So you can't really enforce all the rules as you did in Guangzhou because strict enforcement would probably hurt feelings and bring you a bad name in the village. In the actual operation process, team leaders are in charge of "life or death." If a team leader is biased, there could be huge gaps between members' incomes. Those relatives and friends who work in my team, always try to please me by bringing delicious food to me from their home. Those were all unintentional and small bribes. It may have appeared to be common contacts between acquaintances or friends on the surface, but I know it clearly in my heart that they wanted me to favor them more at work. I need to make them happy as well. I have to be very careful with my words in the daily interactions. If I slightly neglect my words and manners and offend anyone, I could get myself into trouble. For example, we only have one day off for sickness every month according to the factory regulations. If you take more than two sick days, your monetary award for perfect attendance will be taken away. Rules are dead, but* renqing *is alive. If someone is real sick and you still take his or her money away, it may seem a very cruel act. And so I always try to cover for those members who are sick. They can still get their awards, feel grateful toward me, and listen to me when I ask them to do things. But there are problems as well. There are people who aren't sick and take days off for personal matters. They ask me to cover for them as well. Some of them don't feel comfortable talking to me directly, so they go ask my in-laws to talk to me. That's really difficult for me. If I agree to do it, more and more people will take days off and the rule becomes meaningless. Also, the work efficiency of the team would be affected, and the income of those people who work hard all the time is affected as well. As a team leader, if your team members can't make money with you, they'll leave you. There are so*

> *many factory workers returned to Qianjiang in recent years, and they can easily find another job. If I reject them, then I become someone who's cold hearted because I don't pay my respect to the elderly. It's not only that the elderly will feel unhappy, but the people in the village will also label me as someone lacking* liangxin [conscience]. *I feel that my nerves are always tied up. I need to be in charge of production in the factory, and I also need to deal with all kinds of social relationships after work to make everyone happy. (Cai Hong, 33 years old)*

The return movement of labor intensive enterprises to the inland areas actually reflects the fact that capitalism is using rural resources (social relationships based on blood and area relations, lands) to decrease costs while improving profits. For example, Cai Hong's emotional and material investments in social relationships help the factory save in management costs. Certainly, the infiltration of capitalism into the Chinese countryside not only brings peasants with non-agricultural incomes, but also brings individuals with new practical experiences. Cai Hong, who is trying to find a balance between *renqing* and interests, repeatedly mentioned that she wants to leave the factory. As I finished my fieldwork, she was desperately looking for another job. Cai Hong's husband has expressed his support for whatever she decides. But as the major bread earner in her family, and facing apartment loans and increasing living expenses, Cai Hong finds it very hard to give up the high paying job in the factory. Although the migrating experience has somewhat broadened Cai Hong's horizons, she told me that in fact she has limited choice.

These returned women's practices are constantly influenced by ethical judgements of *liangxin* (conscience) in dealing with the conflicts between *renqing* and interests. Although these women are still at the bottom of contemporary China's socio-economic structure, they have improved their self-recognition and are also respected and recognized by their relatives and friends due to their great contributions to their family's financial situations. However, money and "face"

(面子, or reputation) do not prevent them from getting judged by others in terms of ethical conduct, and they are constantly mindful of being conscientious. For instance, Li Hua still feels uneasy about her boss's comment as to her lack of *liangxin*. And Cai Hong constantly struggles with *renqing*, interests, work and lives (her own and others') because she too does not want to achieve success at the price of *liangxin*. In the transition between urban and rural life, they may view their lives from a cognitive distance, as if passengers rather than drivers, only to find themselves alarmed and disoriented by the direction their lives have swung to.

### 6.4 Conclusion

While exploring migrant women's narratives about their post-return lives, this chapter has highlighted their liminal status, as the imagined hometown jars with reality. It is argued that the hometown and the women themselves have changed, and that different, at times incompatible value sets need constantly to be negotiated. Intentionally or not, these women identify themselves, in terms of their appearance and lifestyle, in contradistinction from villagers who did not migrate out. Standing thus apart, they reflect on their current lives while reinventing themselves, aided by the bargaining power that accrues to them as major contributors to family finances, while challenged by the traditional expectations that they no longer relate as strongly to, and sometimes reject, to the distress of others, and themselves. Still, returned migrants can develop social buffers by coordinating different types of family relationships. The strategy of "living from day to day" helps them maintain hope in difficult circumstances. They develop other coping strategies, for instance by integrating themselves into marketizing rural economies, and when conducting themselves at the community level, they are careful to balance *renqing* and interests, even though the social functions involved are decohering. They are conscious of their roles in their new-old hometowns, in accordance with *liangxin*.

# Chapter 7 Conclusion

## 7.1 Summary

This thesis's major focus is the different life experiences of returned women migrant workers and their identity changes in the context of China's rapid social transformation. While these topics are nothing new, most studies on Chinese women migrant workers, however, have focused on their living and working experiences in urban setting, and how they were dominated by patriarchy, state, market and other institutional powers. As Murphy(2002:216) aptly pointed out, in real life, "people are not simply swept along by social and economic forces, they also actively create and manipulate them". As active agents, these women have their own behavioral logics behind their decision to migrate between the rural and urban areas. Their understanding of what these decisions would entail, and what they desired and expected of living in these different environments, as well as the meanings they saw in their work, their accomplishment and frustration, and their other considerations, were all essential parts of their behavioral logics. Despite they had their own daily individual experiences and coping strategies, their lived experiences are the not only what labor migration was all about; at the same time, their presence and their actions also have brought changes to both rural and urban society.

The main body of this thesis examines these women's life experiences in three different time and spatial dimensions, i.e., their rural past, urban settlement, and returning to the rural present. It has revealed not only the various forces that shaped their livelihoods in the different settings, but also indicated that all along they were interacting as an active individual agency with the macro social structure and this is the process which has been commonly overlooked by the theoretical frameworks of previous studies. In the process of out and return migration, these women constantly reflected on their individual encounters, family changes, cultural

inheritance, state power, market expansion and other everyday situations they had to deal with. Hence their identities were always relational and fluid, responding to the ever-changing life situations in migration. More importantly, they were not what most previous studies have portrayed them to be -- as passive recipients of changes. Instead, they frequently reviewed their past narratives in life, from their childhood days to their decisions to emigrate to the urban to work and live, and eventually their determination to return home. They were agents who constantly responded creatively and fittingly to the challenges and opportunities derived from greater outside forces. And this chapter aims to recapitulate the insights one could gain from what their experiences.

In examining the memories and pre-migration life experiences of the returned migrant women workers in Qianjiang, it was clear that two cultural schemata had strongest influence on their habitus. One was the idea of living a life of "equality" through "hard work" that emphasized the individual spirit of self-reliance in "enduring hardships and hard work" that came from the collectivization period. The other, however, was the notion of Confucian morality of "propriety". Both became important elements of their reproductive habitus, and played unique and respective roles in their practices for responding to social structural changes in their rural setting. However, given China's economic reform, rural peasants who relied on their lands for incomes began to face great challenges from a market-oriented economy. With decreased family income, the simple, rural life of equality and hard work literally disappeared into a romanticized memory under continuous marketization and economic reform. Yet the Confucian moral of "propriety" remained and particularly for rural women, who are expected to "conducting themselves" decently appropriately. This means for women, not only they should have "*liangxin* (conscience)", but also know their place and look after their parents, respect elders, be grateful for help from others, and know how to differential between close and not-so-close social relationships.

Such Confucian morality in many ways also shaped the social networks of rural women since their childhood. However, the Confucian gender notion of “men are breadwinners, women are homemakers” was ultimately challenged by their changing economic position in their family. For example, when they decided to drop out of school and obtain a non-agricultural job elsewhere, they became respected by their family members not only for the incomes they could made from their jobs but also for the skills they obtained, which were considered something special within their hometown area. Yet despite they gained financial independence and recognition for reducing their family’s financial pressure and their power in negotiating their future marriage, their new occupation were still regarded as an extension of home making, that is, they were still responsible for looking after the wellbeing of their family members. This was particularly true for those who were married before they moved to work in the urban cities.

For these reasons, even when they worked in urban cities, the married women still anticipated one day they would return home and enjoy their own ideal family life. For those single women, family obligations, especially in helping their family to reduce financial problem was only part of their reasons to move to the city to work. More important for them is the opportunity to work in the city because working and living in the city had become common expectation, or a rite of passage, among young people in rural society, especially for achieving their own independence while also meeting their family obligations. Not surprisingly words like “endurance”, “minding one’s own nobleness” frequently appeared in their responses when interviewed and talked about how they coped with the difficulties and inequalities they faced working in the city rather than joining or organizing mass protests. Clearly their coping strategies and expectations of life were deeply shaped by the values of “enduring hardship and work hard” they had learned when growing up in rural villages. However, they also realized quickly that financial independence was equally significant for them as it allowed them to develop options for their future and think about the meaning and value of life as

human beings. At the same time, despite being away from home somehow did not have any impact on their idea about gender roles, filial piety and motherhood – they still maintained all the Confucian notions they had learned back home. In fact, being in the city, they tried even harder to perform their roles of being a dutiful daughter or wife, daughter-in-law and mother by spending a lot of their earnings on their parents and children to prove them they had not forgotten their responsibilities. Of course, in doing so they were challenging the traditional gender role of "men being breadwinners and women homemakers", and there were men who used to be "head of the household" who now had to engage in performing homemaking tasks, adding new dimensions and complications of gender identity for both these migrant women workers and their spouses.

Furthermore, given their work experience in the city where their income and performance were based on the assessment of their efficiency in production, competition among co-workers was commonplace, and unintentionally this eroded the Confucian notion of seniority among their peer or work networks from home. The fact that productive efficiency was sanctioned by their supervisors or management also made them more utilitarian in dealing with interpersonal relationships in some cases.

Having worked and living in the city for an extended period of time, many women did not find their identity had undergone tremendous changes until they returned home. Despite the fact that many remained rather traditional when they made their decisions to return home, particularly taking into consideration of what their family's expectation in terms of fulfilling their expected familial or filial obligations such as getting married or to be a mother/home-maker again, many found themselves having to make readjust themselves in order to fit in although some also struggled to change their home environment and traditional gender role practices upon their return.

For example, some tried to fulfill their filial obligation of getting married but insisted on selecting their suitable marital partner even though they would follow the traditional practice of allowing their parents or relatives to act as go-between to find their husband. This means that in doing so, many would made themselves very clear in terms of what they were looking for in their marital partner, and they would also develop their own views on the meaning of marriage while following the traditional practices. At the same time, they also learned to make compromise when getting into arguments with their elders at home just for the purpose of saving face for their family to avoid making the familial conflicts being aired in the public in their home village.

For many of these women, even when they returned home, they preferred to continue to work in the adjacent township so as to relieve their family's financial pressure but also for the practical reason of retaining their bargaining power at home when they made financial contributions. This is what they learned from their previous experience as a migrant worker – the more financial independence one had, the more empowered one became at home. For those who had marital setbacks and family problems, many reflected that they did not see "marriage is a must in a woman's life", and some believed that "living from day to day" is actually a sensible strategy to cope with the uncertainties of life while upholding up hope.

In sum, the experiences of these returned migrant women have indicated that their current status upon returning home was a continuation rather than an abrupt disruption of their past. In this regard, Bourdieu's theory of habitus and practice indeed provides a fitting analytical tool to understand the complex, multi-layered experiences these women had, especially in dealing with the changing external forces such as patriarchy, state and market, turning them from repressive impositions into empowering situations where they could creatively manipulate their resources to gain control of their lives, reaffirming their new self-identities

and realizing their life goals. Hence the narratives they revealed were stories of both bitterness and happiness. Like marriage. For some it was about restricted individual freedom, but simultaneously it was also a temporary relief from urban relentless exploitation and a way to find self-identify and belongingness amidst rapid social and economic changes. On the other hand, realizing work in the city was part of capitalist exploitation, but they also acknowledged that the experience had provided them a sense of achievement and a window to see options for their future, especially for returning home. In these contexts, their stories were not only tales about their strength and innovations in adapting to and responding to challenges, but also were testaments of their potential as agents of initiating changes in their hometown. Their circular migration experience, in close inspection, should thus be seen as more than a process of practical readjustment. It is also a validation of their power and ability of constructing transformative habitus, something which Bourdieu perhaps has overlooked.

### 7.2 Returned Women and Liminality

If the life stories of the returned migrant women were about how their transformative habitus have been meaningfully and actively constructed with their own resources and reflections, an additional contribution made by studying their return migration is on the concept of liminality. In the beginning of this thesis, Turner's notion of the concept was used to describe the ambivalent and often marginal situation of these women's existential condition in terms of conforming to social values, behaviors, and identity. It was also used as an entry point in hypothesizing the transitional stage where returned migrant women had to confront with in making themselves readjusted to a number of "recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification" when returned home (Turner 1967: 97). The idea for this study was that liminality was only a temporary stage these women had to go through before they found stability and comfort of fitting in again. However, based on the narratives delivered by these women, some of the liminalities, particularly those having to do with their immediate responses to

peripheral issues, such as not knowing how to deal with people's reactions to their peculiar ways in dressing, acting in certain ways that were considered less appropriate, led them to keep an intentional distance from certain local people to minimize their feelings of liminality. This could be seen in individual cases when they found themselves taking inconsistent perspective when looking at things in their hometown. For example, Bing, one of informants, considered herself as an "insider" when she lamented over the sad environmental situation in her home village polluted by rapid and irresponsible industrialization, yet when coming down to making a judgment on the ways how local Qianjiang-ers dress, she made it clear that she would not consider herself a part of "them" as she believes they looked "vulgar", and treated returned migrant women in ways which were "snobbish" and "hypocritical". Hence, even as a Taoist, she would not participate in local religious or ceremonial events because she preferred not to be seen as a "local"; instead she would spend money and time travelling to the nearest neighbouring city to take part in similar events.

Likewise, Qin, another informant, complained that relations and sentiments (*renqing*) among villagers in her hometown had changed so much that banquets now became an instrumental occasion for people showing off their social status, or as an occasion for collecting money, having very little to do with ensuring bonding among villagers were maintained or using the occasion to raise money to help others. For her, as a returned migrant woman, their experiences being away from home had made her feel somewhat like a stranger upon returning home because she felt she had seen the "modern" and all the uncertainties and hardship that came along with it. Yet at the same time she continued to hold on to a romanticized imagination of the rural past which she also realized to be not realistic. In this context, many returned migrant women agreed that they became a "stranger" in "familiar" landscape, and for them this is what liminality is all about – the constant and persistent feeling oscillating between belonging (as an "insider") and detachment (as an "outsider") will somehow continue and this is

something which they would have to deal with all their lives. In other words, their experiences have highlighted that perhaps Turners' notion of liminality needs to be reconsidered because liminality could be lifelong instead of being a brief transitional phase in life, particularly when these women continued to travel outside of their home turf when they had their independence and freedom.

Another interesting finding deriving from this study is that, according to these migrant women, the notion of liminality did not only relate to how they looked at themselves as "insider" or "outsider", but also about their identity. As indicated in their interviews, many return migrant women found it difficult to accept them being labeled as "peasant" despite their rural origin. To them, being called a "peasant" or "rural" person implied that they were not only poor but also not having enough to eat. They resented such labels because they were also "urban" salaried "workers" with very different "tastes" and "aspirations". For this reason, many women workers, upon their return, preferred to settle and find work in the nearby township(s) rather than re-engaging themselves in agricultural production. Even for those who were married, they wanted their children to receive education and medical services better than what had been offered in the 'rural" even though the costs involved were high and causing them lots of worries. Beneath all these is that they were unhappy about how they were entrapped in a rural origin and followed by an imposed permanent rural identity (based on their original official household registration) which they had little hope to change despite the fact that they had the experience of living and working in urban city. A point which they raised poignantly was the traditional urban-rural division in Chinese society should be reconsidered, particularly when rapid socio-economic changes had been taking place in the last thirty/forty years, leading such division becoming blurred, unnecessary and unfair. Caught in this situation, their feeling of liminality was real and heartfelt. As yet another informant concluded, "I do not know where I belong to. Perhaps the only answer I can have now is that I belong to myself and my family."

### 7.3 Localization of Western theory: Habitus and Field in Chinese Context

This thesis began with a review of urbanization and proletarianization of Chinese migrant workers. The topic has long attracted much scholarly attention in the past but most are focused on their work and lifeworld in urban cities, yet little work has been devoted to eventual return to their hometown in rural China. In preparation for the research for this study, two main concepts proved most useful in guiding the direction and framework for investigating the life experiences of these returned migrant workers. One is the Bourdieu-inspired notion of habitus and the other is Turner's concept of liminality. The intended hypothesis was that when migrant women workers left their hometown to work and live in cities, necessarily they had to readjust themselves and begin constructing a habitus to allow them to cope with the lifeworld in an urban setting. Yet when they decided to return to their hometown, bringing with them an urban habitus which in many ways had transformed their values, aspiration and worldview, they were expected to enter into a transitional phase of liminality before they would be able to fit in again resettling in their rural homeland. In the course of this study, indeed Bourdieu's concept of habitus has proved itself quite useful in capturing the fluid and complex process of time-space transformation of the daily practices and relationality of migrant women working and living in city. In particular, Bourdieu's concept of "field", defined as a network of objective relations of different positions or a relatively independent social space, is most valuable in guiding the study to highlight how these women moved from one "field' to another, they had to play by different rules in the different "field" where they also had to compete with one another to survive according to their possessions of various capitals. Although unequal capitals could lead to unfair competition and not everyone could achieve their goals as they wished, their social position somehow would still be changed because in the process, competition and conflicts in the "field" would also bring changes to its inner structure and boundaries (Bourdieu 1990b). However, he also regarded "field" and 'habitus" as separated

arenas of independence and self-governance, a conclusion he drew from his early empirical studies of kinship systems in isolated primitive tribes in Algeria. Yet when applied these concepts in Chinese society, one begins to realize some limitations are readily observable.

One is that in interviewing the returned migrant women, they did not see themselves engaged in simple, isolated "field" and hence their "habitus" they referred to was nothing categorical either. For example, when discussing their current situation of liminality, they saw themselves simultaneously involved their experiences in both the rural and urban "fields". When talking about their current lives and their views on the rules of fitting in, likewise they were incorporating both the "habitus" of rural and urban consciously. In many ways, they were constructing a hybrid "habitus" mixing urban and rural structures with different and incompatible values and norms competing with one another yet simultaneously also co-exist side by side one another in the daily practices of these women attempting to cope with their changing reality. Informed by these returned women's narratives, perhaps it would be more useful to see the structure of these women's daily practices in their "field" or lifeworlds as multi-layered, strung together by a continuous time-space continuum of rural-urban-rural "fields" where the "habitus" of these "fields" are neither isolated from one another nor static. In fact, given what has been happening in China in recent years, despite government institutional directives, the traditional rural-urban divisions have been undergoing enormous changes in recent times. Rural is no longer isolated as they were in the past from the urban, and given increased mobility among people, changing policies of urbanizing rural townships, it is increasingly obvious that the rural-urban divide may become blurred and transformed further. In this context, the Bourdieusian concepts of "field", "habitus" and "practice" may need continuous reconsideration, not only in spatial or temporal terms, but also in terms of how values, ethics and worldviews are fused.

Finally, some brief notes on gender. It must be pointed out that both Bourdieu and Turner's theories do not pay special attention to the notion of gender. Perhaps it is not their intention either to do so. Yet findings of this research have suggested that returned migrant women, in their resettlement in their hometown, they had to confront traditional gender roles and constraints to realize their independence and aspirations. Hence this thesis is not only an academic exercise in detailing the courage and efforts they had invested in re-making their lives and confining social structures, it is also a tribute to their strength, perseverance and determination as quiet achievers and agents of change in Chinese society.

# Appendix: Research Participants

| Interviewees | Age | Sex[30] | After-return Occupation | Return Year | Remark |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cai Hong | 33 | F | Garment Factory Worker | 2008 | |
| Bing | 34 | F | Self-employed Beautician | 2006 | |
| Zhi Li | 25 | F | Self-employed Wholesaler of Daily Necessities | 2009 | |
| Yue E | 40 | F | Door-to-door saleswoman | 2006 | |
| Yu Wei | 20 | F | Garment Factory Worker | 2010 | |
| Wang Man | 25 | F | Salesgirl of Shoe Store | 2010 | |
| Li Hua | 33 | F | Self-employed | 2004 | |
| Xu Yan | 33 | F | Self-employed | 2004 | |
| Lei Juan | 30 | F | Employee of Private Enterprise | 2007 | |
| La Mei | 23 | F | Garment Factory Worker | 2009 | |
| Yu Hua | 24 | F | Garment Factory Worker | 2009 | |
| Qin | 30 | F | Garment Factory Worker | 2008 | |
| Cai Feng | 35 | F | Worker of Garment Family-workshop | 2010 | |
| Liu Zhen | 31 | F | Garment Factory Worker | 2008 | |
| Xiao Qing | 22 | F | Employee of Toggery | 2007 | |
| Yan Hua | 26 | F | Hotel Front Desk Clerks | 2007 | |
| Liu Ying | 25 | F | Self-employed | 2007 | |
| Yang Tangbin | 40 | M | Garment Factory Worker | | Cai Hong's husband |
| Fu Bo | 42 | M | Self-empolyed | | Li Hua's husband |
| Cui Ping | 36 | F | Medical Equipment Factory Worker | | Bing's older sister |
| Aunt Rong | 68 | M | Unemployed | | Bing's mother |
| Chen Zhe | 41 | M | Door-to-door salesman | | Yue E's husband |
| Xu Tao | 32 | M | Product designer | | Yan Hua's cousin |
| Zi Jie | 14 | M | student | | Cai Hong's son |
| Ruo Nan | 15 | F | unemployed | | Yue E's daughter |
| Uncle Lian | 52 | F | Peasant | | Yu Hua's father |

[30] M: Male; F: Female

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