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**THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Yearning for *Zaan* or Home

**Gender, Development and Home in *Zhuang* Women's
Narratives on Migration in a Southwest Chinese Village**

Xiang Rong

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

June 2006



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Abstract

This study is the first to incorporate women of varying age cohorts and life stages, both in migration and related to migration, and to study them in the context of family and the community.

Based on six months' participant observation between 2002 and 2004, and oral narratives gathered from twenty-four *Zhuang* women of different cohorts and life courses- young single, young married, middle-aged and elderly in a Southwestern Chinese village, migrating and not migrating, I find that, contrary to dominant discourses, migration is widely practiced by the *Zhuang*, and this migration occurs in myriad and gendered forms. Moreover, the narratives of women unfold a wide range of meanings attached to various forms of migration, which not only go beyond the dominant explanation of an economic analysis, but unveil *Zhuang* women's yearnings for *Zaan*, or home.

However, the meanings of home are far from uniform, and they vary significantly among and across women of different age cohorts. For some young single women, migration and marriage serve as one means to pursue a "home" with a secure livelihood, less work and less drudgery. To most young married women, migration encompasses a range of conflicting meanings, from meeting survival needs, to a temporary escape from multiple burdens in the family, to a

sense of humiliation derived from selling labor, to disillusionment with the migrating husband. To most middle-aged women, migration implies the separation of family members and disrupts their hope for a complete family. Most elderly women perceive migration as an assault on their old age security and the continuation of the family lineage.

In employing the indigenous concept of *Zaan*, or home, I contribute to the existing discussion on migration, gender and development while transcending the binary trap of an assumed universal knowledge that constructs rural women as either beneficiaries or victims of migration. Through *Zaan*, I aim to capture the gendered well being of *Zhuang* rural women in diverse situations with regards to migration. I argue that the debates on migration are meaningless if they are taken out of the context in which women live and do not consider the micro-politics of everyday life through which women negotiate their marginal status in the family, the village, and the wider society. The micro politics of *Zhuang* rural women lie in their individually negotiating the process of migration, in handling various abuses and in their survival strategies for maneuvering through a complex web of power and domination. Through these negotiations, strategies and maneuvers, *Zhuang* women create their own space for work and survival, and search for a “home” that makes sense to them.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

“Development holds the unbeatable way” (*fazhan caishi yingdaoli*), as Deng Xiaoping launched the Economic Reform in 1978 transforming contemporary Chinese society from a stagnant economy and political struggle as the main theme to a society in which nothing counts but development, or rather, money and profit. Though both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping equally believe that only a wealthy and powerful nation like the United States or the United Kingdom can win in the world, they differ in their approaches. While Mao Zedong deployed orthodox Marxism and a socialist system as the guiding ideology in ruling the country, Deng Xiaoping advocates that whatever system, as long as it leads to accumulating wealth for individuals and the country, is acceptable, be it contradictory or not, socialist, capitalist or not. An innovative term is coined to denote the significant change from Mao’s China is that China is a socialist country with Chinese characteristics, specifically with capitalist elements. It seems that the conflicting systems are married into one family.

Now more than two decades have passed, this “family” has gone through its “honeymoon stage”, and is at present increasingly dominated by capitalist power. The ruling party has finally invited the owners of the private enterprises into the legislature as the “representatives of the advanced powers of production”(*daibiao xianjin shengchanli*) in Jiang Zemin’s Three Representatives (*sange daibiao*).

Though the most recent discourse on “constructing the harmonious society through scientific development” begins to incorporate the critiques on developmentalism as anti-humanistic and environmentally risky, urban bound migration remains the government’s key answer to increasing the income of the rural peasants. In a “socialist country with Chinese characteristics”, what does this “marriage” between capitalism and socialism imply for its members, and specifically women? While most feminists are skeptical about it, some believe that it has largely failed women, except for those highly educated women (Judd, 2002; Cartier, 1999; Jacka, 1997; Li Xiaojiang, 1994, Dai Jinhua, 2006). There exists a growing literature on understanding Chinese women in contemporary China from various perspectives. While this literature provides rich insights into Chinese women’s lives from a macro structural and institutional level, such as family, state policy, economic restructuring, and capitalist production, to me, they responses are limited in failing to incorporate women’s voices into their analysis, especially women who are situated in a specific historical, cultural and geographical context. This leads to serious problems in that the discourse of “vulnerable others” created by Western and Western-educated Southern feminists, critiqued by the post-colonial feminists such as Mohanty (1988) and Spivak (1996), and later by postmodern feminists, serves to treat women as a homogeneous group, ignoring other social categories affecting different women’s lives, such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and age. The underlying assumption behind this discourse is that the western and urban based feminists

who are equipped with modern knowledge, skills and technology, and with more open and “advanced” values are there to help or even rescue the “vulnerable, powerless, and helpless” disadvantaged women (Marchand and Parpart ed., 1995; Sachs, Carolyn, 1996). This victim discourse is powerful in patronizing women, and in perpetuating the unequal relationship between the “enlightened” feminists and “backward, low quality, traditional” rural women. This approach continues to neglect the voices of women different in their class, ethnicity, age cohorts, educational attainment situated in specific spatial, historical and cultural context, and does not allow us to examine how these women, in their daily lives exert their power, their agency and ability in negotiating and stratifying the ways to interact with the dominant forces even under the most restricted and limited conditions.

Contemporary scholars, both Chinese and international, discuss migration as one of the manifestations reflecting current social transformations in China. Currently, migration is marked by its rising massive population movement, from rural to urban, west to east, economically disadvantaged to relatively better off regions. And it is estimated that over 100 million of Chinese are on the move. Large scale surveys and the national census have been used to document this trend in regard to patterns, causes and effects, which are reflected in the works done by scholars such as Cai Fan (2001, 2006), Zhao Shukai (1998), and Du Ying and Bai Nansheng (1997,2006). However, they are mostly within the discourse of developmentalism, and their analyses are heavily dominated by theories of

modernization, industrialization and urbanization. Under the discourse of development, officials and many intellectuals encourage rural migrations a method for the rural poor to achieve better lives. It is written into the No.1 Dogma document issued by the State Council of 2004 as one of the main avenues for increasing the income of the peasants, and helps to lessen the intensity of “three rural problems”, namely agriculture, rural areas and peasants. For peasants to be engaged in modernization, the government at all levels encourages them to embark on migration. Still, despite the loud applause for migration, there has been much criticism leveled against it for subjecting rural migrants to multiple oppressions by state apparatus, and discriminatory practices of capitalism (Pun Ngai, 1997). There remains a lack of critical reflexivity on the assumption of this Western model of development. While the earlier period of migration studies between the 1980s and mid 1990s largely ignores gender as a category of analysis, the recent years witness an increasing shift with more attention given to gender-specific migration (Cai Fan, 2000; Huang Ping, 1997) and its likely effect on women.

Huang noted as more male peasants migrated to the cities seeking paid labor; those people left in the village are women, the elderly and children, a term he borrowed from frequently cited newspaper “38-61-99 regiment” (38 referring to women in general as March 8 is the National Women’s Day in China, a token for state’s emphasis on women’s liberation; June 1 is the national Children’s Day,

when children under 12 years old enjoy a day off from school; 99 share the same pronunciation of “forever and eternal”(jiu jiu) referring the elderly that have been living long, but not without a certain degree of discrimination (Huang Ping, 1997). Huang discusses that this highly gendered or skewed migration will likely have an impact on social relations, especially gender relations. However, he did not go into details as to how and to what extent gender relations are affected.

In my study, I describe how the rapid transformation taking place on the macro level is understood by rural ethnic women in their daily life, particularly regarding the issue of migration, and how migration, either participating or staying behind is interpreted in different women in their specific life stage.

My question in this thesis is: how do rural women view their own development under such rapid social and structural change? Any attempt to understand this question must take into account the multiple factors that might affect this. So, in my study I approach “rural women” not as a single category, but as a group of women, diverse in age, ethnicity, educational attainment, marital status and socio-economic locations, a group of women situated in specific local, historical and cultural contexts. Do the development policies and programs carried out by the government and NGOs really tackle the needs of rural women? How do these policies and programs influence rural women's livelihood? Is development a illusion or a reality? Even if it is a reality, who are the real

beneficiaries? On the other hand, what is sacrificed? Who bears the costs? What price is being paid? In addition, how do differently situated rural women demonstrate their agency and resistance? How do they view their own development, particularly in regard to migration? Where are their voices and what are they saying?

My study is in a southwestern mountainous *Zhuang* village and seeks to explore women's own understandings of development, specifically regarding the issue of migration, and their interpretations of the dominant development discourses. I explore how the women consciously and unconsciously employ discourses of deviation in actively seeking their livelihood. Furthermore, I include the voices of women left behind during migration and through this, I demonstrate their power of negotiation and resistance.

I adopt both ethnography and oral history methodologies for my study. Through an accumulated period of six months living in the village between 2002 and 2004, I talked with and interviewed a wide range of people regarding migration in the village, which I refer to as “*Di’an* Village”, meaning “beautiful” in *Zhuang*. In addition, under the assistance of some local *Zhuang* women, together we collected oral narratives of 24 women of different age cohorts, young, including single and married, middle aged and elderly women. I moved beyond narration through participant observation, and I was able to observe the daily lives of the women, as well as their interaction within their family members and

communities. Collecting oral history on women of diverse backgrounds enabled me to go beyond the goal of identifying women's power and served as a means of self-exploration and personal growth for the women involved, including me. I unravel the issues of dominance and resistance through collecting and analyzing the similarities and discrepancies of these discourses and combining them with ethnography and oral history.

My study is an attempt to respond to the postcolonial feminist studies which call for decentering western middle class and urban women as the standard to analyze rural women's lives (Townsend, 1996; Parpart, 1998; Sachs, 1998; Spivak, 2001). I hope to contribute to the enterprise of decentering Chinese urban women as the standard from which to analyze rural women's lives, and this is a new theoretical approach and methodology in both Chinese rural studies and feminist studies on migration in China. I believe that scholars working on Chinese issues, especially concerning Chinese rural women, must critically reflect on our role in constructing knowledge that is culturally situated and partial. Until we learn to acknowledge our position in the process of research and forgo the often patronizing attitudes and assumptions towards our subjects of study, we are still constructing knowledge that is "othering" (Partpart, 1998), oppressive and exclusive, and continuing to treat women as a homogenous group, ignoring their agency and undermining their subjectivities. The attention given in this study to rural women's voices on migration, as opposed to the dominant discourses,

situated in a specific cultural, historical and geographical context should challenge economic development discourse as well as the recent feminist theorizing in the “West” and urban settings. Here, I share with Gilmartin, Hershatter, Rofel and White that writing on gender in China today does not always involve a rejection of socialism or every aspect of state gender policy; it does, however, involve a challenge to old state paradigms and an attempt to help shape new ones (Gilmartin, Hershatter, Rofel and White, 1994).

Inspired by the post-structural/postcolonial feminist critiques on women and development, the main issues that are given special attention throughout the study are: the diversity among Chinese rural women, especially the rural women who did not participate in migration directly and who have been ignored by the existing literature on the subject; various coping mechanisms rural women deploy to demonstrate their agency; situatedness of the rural women’s voices in their life trajectories, in their family and community; and reflexivity on the part of the researcher towards rural women’s representation. Much of the current work on rural women, development and migration is compromised by its failure to include women who have been left behind in the rural community. Attention to these differences brings out a much richer picture, demonstrating that not much about Chinese rural women is easily generalizable. Then, the search for women’s agency must include a discussion of the manner in which different groups of Chinese rural women, in different times and places, which have taken up and

responded to the powerful social forces shaping their lives. My study details women's voices and actions in the rural setting where women often have not been visible, to open up new ways of presenting an awareness of women's lives. The study does much to dispel the notion of rural women as victims of overwhelming social structures, an approach that is still dominant in gender research. Instead, I trace a range of women's actions- accommodation, negotiation and resistance- complicating any portrait of Chinese rural women as the uncritical embodiment of official and cultural virtue.

Organization of the dissertation

The dissertation is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 presents an introduction and overview of the purpose and focus of the study and Chapter 2 is devoted to a review of literature on women and migration in the changing Chinese context. In Chapter 2, I discuss how most of the existing literature on women and migration tends to employ a developmentalist approach and tends to emphasize the experiences of the migrant women in urban settings, on their changing modern attitudes and behavior towards family and child rearing, and on the dilemmas they face when caught in between rural and urban constraints. I will argue that when cultural dimension is incorporated in an attempt to achieve the interpretive understanding of the rural women in the family and in the community regarding migration, the concerns and even the questions centering on

migration alter drastically. Searching for the *Zaan*, or Home, is what the rural women within and across different cohorts aspire/ desire/ and long for.

Chapter 3 provides an ethnographic account of entering the field from the city to the county, to the town, to the village.¹ This chapter serves as a bridge linking the theoretical discussion on the abstract level to the real flesh and blood life in the rural community that would be given detailed accounts in the following chapters. Chapters 4 to 7 are devoted to the presentation and analysis of the data collected in this research. The structure of each chapter is the same in that: first I introduce the dominant representation of women and migration specific to that particular age cohort; then I situate the narratives of the six women highlighted, centering on their aspirations and life goals and the relevance of these to migration. I then discuss the controls of family and community that these women face as well as the agency each woman employs to cope with various levels of controls. In the third part, through comparing the similarity and differences among women in each cohort, I describe the underlying mechanisms that work to control and enable women of different age cohorts with regards to migration. The final part of the chapter is the discussion of the cohort, briefly summarizing the points for further theoretical discussion in Chapter 8.

¹ Throughout this dissertation, pseudonyms will be used for the names of the places below the county level as well as informants.

In Chapter 4, through presenting and comparing the narratives of six young single women and their experiences on migration, I demonstrate how young single women are drawn to the urban-bound and Han-like living and aspire to create home, or the *Zaan*, in *Zhuang*, through migration. As the communal discourse on “trafficking in women” instills fear in them and serves to control their sexuality and bodies to negotiate the space between their aspirations, family and community controls, they migrate in short distance and usually sell their labor, namely *maigong*, in group form.

In Chapter 5, in presenting the six situated narratives of the young married women on migration, I portray the myriad forms of migration: the stayers, the tied-migrant (following her husband), the independent migrant, the gendered relayed migration in the *Zhuang* women’s life in coping with multiple burdens of the family. Equally aspiring for *Zaan* like their young single counterparts, however, the young married women demonstrate their multiple understanding of *Zaan*.

Chapter 6 presents the situated narratives of the middle-aged *Zhuang* women on migration, I summarize and analyze the central themes of this age cohort, paying special attention to the multiple tensions within the family due to the husband’s as well as the son’s migration, and the middle-aged women’s reluctance to take part in *maigong* to cover the children’s increased education and medical expenses. For this cohort, *Zaan* is even more at the center of attention.

However, as their husbands continue to be away and grown up sons begin to move away, this cohort of women experiences migration more as a blow to their much desired *Zaan*, in which members of family are together, despite they have to go through hardship together. And it is also for the sake of *Zaan*, in which the younger generation could be lifted up from rural life, the middle-aged women are willing to give much to support their children in education, and so this cohort is even willing to participate in the highly stigmatized *maigong* and to risk jeopardizing their health.

In Chapter 7, I begin by presenting the situated narratives of six of the elderly women. I summarize and analyze the central themes of migration for this cohort and discuss how migration is perceived as an assault on the integrity of the family, rather than a positive means of change. This intensifies the sense of powerlessness that the elderly women feel about their whole lives. Similar to the middle-aged women, *Zaan* has been desired by the elderly women throughout their lives, but upon coming to an advanced age, *Zaan* seems to be inaccessible to them due to migration.

In Chapter 8, I summarize the narratives of the *Zhuang* women of all cohorts in my study on migration, paying particular attention to the variations and similarities within and across the age cohorts to gain a deeper and localized understanding of the forces that shape different women's aspirations and desires, and the forces that control and enable women's decisions regarding migration.

In the process, I discuss the problems of the mainstream discourses on migration and gender, and point out their shortcomings for analyzing my data. Through engaging the theoretical discussion with the dominant literature on women and development and migration, I argue that when additional categories such as culture are taken into the analysis of gender and development in migration, migration as a sign of modernization (and therefore much celebrated under the dominant developmentalist discourses) becomes marginal to *Zhuang* women's lives in *Di'an* Village. However marginal migration is for some of these women, it affects their lives in ways that are dynamic and complex, and are not adequately described by mainstream official and scholarly discourses. In developing the indigenous concept of *Zaan*, I attempt to capture the complexity of the webs of the power- gender, ethnicity, age cohorts, class, varying understanding of modernity in rural women's choices regarding migration. The limitations of the study and future studies are included at the end of the chapter.

In epilogue, I construct research narratives to demonstrate how the research is a series of dialectical processes in which my life interacts with lives of women in my study and that our lives intertwined together in which the voices of the *Zhuang* women are represented, as well as my self is re-discovered.

Chapter 2 Conceptualizing Rural Women, Development and Migration

Introduction

There appear to be four theoretical approaches in gender and development, namely, women in development (WID), women and development (WAD), gender and development (GAD), and women, culture and development (WCD). But these four approaches do not carry with them the same amount of weight in application in the field regarding women and development. To my observation, currently WID and GAD are widely dominant with WAD more marginal and WCD having the potential to emerge as the central theory. Each perspective varies in regard to its explanation of and solution to women's subordination. While WID views the improvement of women's socio-economic status as means to achieve gender equality, WAD looks at fundamental change in the patriarchal systems. The GAD approaches attend to the issues of class and gender and their interconnection together with other social categories in subjugating women of diverse backgrounds and situations in profound and different ways. GAD aims at the fundamental transformation of unequal gender relationships, together with the elimination of other oppressive relationships related to the issues of race/ethnicity, class, sexual identity. As a relatively new approach, WCD places women's lived experiences at the center so that we can understand the highly dynamic and complex interplay between the macro and the micro, between global forces and

micro daily practices on the part of rural women. Through this approach, we can reveal the forms of agency among women, and finally grasp the unequal power relations in knowledge construction and practices.

In this chapter, I devote four major sections to provide an overview of these theoretical discussions in order to situate my study on migration on a theoretical terrain. Section one is on the theoretical overview on gender, development and migration. Focusing on issues of rural migration, I first attempt a closer look at the dominant approaches WID and GAD, and discuss their strengths as well as their limitations. Then I discuss the post-structural/post-colonial feminist perspectives on studying gender, development and migration. The second section is devoted to the overview of the mainstream discourses on migration in Chinese literature. In the third section, inspired by WCD, I conceptualize my study on gender, development and migration. The final section is a note on methodology.

Gender and migration in the dominant discourses

A review of the international literature on gender and migration shows major paradigm shifts. Social theory has moved away from liberal neo-classical economics, in which individuals (women as well as) are perceived as free from macro external forces and making rational choices in maximizing economic profit while minimizing risk. Many theorists (Young et al., 1981; Moser, 1993; Sen and Grown, 1987) employ neo-Marxist structural perspectives in which women and

men are differently influenced by structural forces such as market expansion, increasing industrialization and urbanization, structural economic adjustment, environmental degradation as well as cultural patriarchal practices and thereby some are forced to engage in migration for their livelihood. A more recent paradigm (Wright, 1995) criticizes the previous two for being either structure or agency-exclusive and calls for a new approach that attends to the dialectic relations between agency and structure. The structuration theory developed by Anthony Giddens has been employed by scholars in the field to understand migration, and gender and migration in particular. Huang Ping's work, *Chinese Peasants Seeking Livelihood: A Sociological Investigation* (Huang Ping, 1997) is an attempt in this direction. Caroline Wright also employs it in her study of gender and migration in the African context (Wright, 1995). Hondagneu-Sotelo (2000) provides a "gynecology" of the literature on gender and migration in America, in which the studies move from gender bias or blindness, to documenting women's experiences in migration which are different from men's to looking at migration as intrinsically gendered. Gender relations are increasingly placed as the key determinants in understanding migration.

Migration in women in development (WID)

Rising from its critique on conventional development policy and practices before 1970s for excluding women, the WID approach, which largely draws on a liberal feminist perspective, calls for the integration of women into development

policies and projects. As described earlier, WID is the term used by women-concerned development groups to challenge the assumption that modernization would automatically increase gender equality and that women eventually benefit from development through the trickle down effect. It aims to integrate women into national economies through influencing policy. Working within the modernization paradigm and from a liberal feminist perspective, the WID approach assumes that development was measured by the adoption of Western technologies, institutions, and values (Connelly et.al., 2000: 57). Their strength lies in its persistence in asking how to include women in the development process. In order to enhance women's access to development, the WID planners call for more accurate measurement of women's and for improvements in women's access to education, training, property and credit and for more and better employment.

According to the WID perspective, which stresses women's active involvement in paid labor as a means to gender equality, the migration of rural women for paid jobs is largely encouraged. Much influenced by neo-classical economics, WID shares the basic assumptions and tenets of the free market approach, which assumes that human beings act rationally in the pursuit of their self-interests and are guided by the principle of maximizing gain and minimizing cost and effort. Rural women are perceived as economic agents capable of making rational choices. Assumed under this rubric is that women's earnings

will help develop rural communities eventually through the trickle down effect, despite the empirical studies that show that most of the remittance from migrant workers goes to consumer goods, housing construction, and children's education. Moreover, as the most mobile people tend to be physically strong, young or middle-aged, better educated and with higher aspirations, the rural communities are left with the elderly, women and children.

Generally, WID theorists envisage that the integration of women into the labor market will liberate women from patriarchal control and lead them to economic independence. Under this line of thought, social policy targeting enhancing women's social position should encourage rural women migrating to the cities, through providing training and encouraging networks to facilitate their process of migration. Such theorists claim that the obstacles preventing rural women from fully engaging in paid labor are the women's lack of appropriate knowledge and skills. Women-oriented policies are advocated to provide the necessary training to the migrant rural women. They are being "pulled" to new opportunities and "pushed" out of the home to earn wages to support their families.

While the WID perspective has been important in enhancing the understanding of women's development needs, in providing a checklist for ensuring women's status in societies, however, WID is critiqued for failing to

challenge the structural forces perpetuating women's subordination (Connelly et.al., 2000: 58).

Migration in gender and development (GAD)

Critiquing WID for failing to challenge the fundamental structures that subjugate women gives rise to a rich sub-field of development studies- gender and development, in which gender, perceived as a social construct, is placed as the center of analysis in both theory building and practice. Different feminist perspectives enrich the field, with socialist feminism and post-colonial feminism particularly active. Drawing on socialist feminist perspectives, the GAD approaches argues that women's status in society is deeply affected by their material conditions of life and by their position in the national, regional and global economics. It also recognizes that women are deeply affected by the nature of patriarchal power in their societies at the national, community, and household level. Moreover, women's material conditions and patriarchal authority are both defined and maintained by the accepted norms and values that define women and men's roles and duties in a particular society. GAD adopts a two-pronged approach to the study of women and development, investigating women's material conditions and class positions, as well as the patriarchal structures and ideas that define and maintain women's subordination. The focus is on the relationship between women and men, not just women alone. Gender relations

are seen as the key determinants of women's position in society (Connelly et.al., 2000: 62).

Migration studies inspired by this paradigm perceive migration as a gendered process. Hondagneu-Sotelo is critical of the dominant approaches to women and migration for failing to capture the full extent of the gendered nature of the migration decision, nor the impacts that migration has on gender relations (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). She criticized the household strategy model long adopted for analyzing women and migration and claims that "Household models, which generally treat all members as democratic equals in migration decision-making, also fail to recognize that domestic gender relations are a vital factor in conditioning who moves where and when", that "household is inappropriate as a unit of observation"(Ellis, Conway & Bailey, 1996: 31-62). Migration decisions are made in contexts in which men and women have different access to critical resources, such as migrant networks and money to pay for moving. Furthermore, migration itself may affect gender relations as both men and women, whether they migrate or not, are exposed to new socio-economic and cultural forces that moderate or restructure the patriarchal system (Ellis, Conway & Bailey, 1996: 33).

While liberal feminists and modernization theorists view migration as generally positive, though not without its drawbacks, socialist feminists look at it as more a means of exploitation and oppression of women under the capitalist

system and patriarchy. The debate about how development processes, in particular industrialization and economic restructuring, affect Asian women gives rise to the “exploitation” thesis, which dominates neo-Marxist/dependency theory and socialist feminist scholarship. It posits that industrialization marginalizes women as exploited laborers, particularly those employed by transnational corporations in export processing zones. Global strategies for capital accumulation see women as secondary wage earners who work for meager money and can be paid less than men and as disposable laborers who can be recruited or laid off depending upon the demands of the labor market. Their presupposed “natural feminine” qualities of “nimble fingers,” docility, and a lack of skills are used to justify low pay and poor working conditions (Pun Ngai, 1997).

As for those women who are left behind, Barbara Brown’s (Brown, 1983) study on the impact of male labor migration on women in Botswana shows the negative impacts on women as “marriage and family relations have shifted significantly, placing women in a more isolated position” and “reciprocal obligations and cooperation are no longer as strong as in the past when women with children have to rely on their families for support” (Brown, 1983: 375). In Brown’s view, the process of industrialization increases the vulnerability of those with limited resources, such as women. Traditional agricultural production is family-based, but employment in the labor market is individual-based.

A series of issues remain after reviewing the dominant theories on women, development and migration in China: One is the embracement of modernization discourse by both WID and GAD perspectives. Is modernization the only way to improve rural women's lives? Second, rural women, whether directly participating in migration or not will be affected by the process, but the literature tends to only focus on those who are directly involved in migration and who are mostly from young cohorts with more education than those left behind, who are often older, or with fewer resources, etc. But women left behind are equally affected by migration of their migrant family members, and they may have to work more both in agricultural production and in the domestic sphere, and worry more as their beloved ones are away. But these large groups of women tend to be ignored by the literature, making the understanding of migration on rural women a limited one. Thirdly, we need to continue to ask questions of what it means to be a rural woman, what it is that makes their lives so distinctly different or similar from urban women. To do that, we cannot simply place them either in the city or back in their rural communities. We need more nuanced understanding of the shifting of boundaries and the subjectivities involved in various social situations. Fourthly, more attention must be given to the role and position of researchers themselves, based in urban centers, as this makes the knowledge construction of rural women a seemingly objective and true one, and continuing the representation of rural Chinese women to be the "others".

Migration in GAD and post-structural feminism

While acknowledging the importance of GAD's revolutionary potential in recognizing the differential impacts of development policies and practices on women and men, and in seeing women as agents, not simply as recipients of developments, post-structural/post-colonial feminists interested in development challenge the very essence of mainstream and leftist development discourse. They question the universal pretensions of modernity and call for a new approach to development that not just acknowledges women's differences and agencies but searches out previously silenced voices and knowledge through decentering western and urban-based "expert" constructions of discourse and knowledge (Parpart, 1995). This theoretical discussion, combined with focusing on rural women's lived experiences gives rise to a new approach termed as women, culture and development (WCD) (Bhavnani, Foran & Kurian, 2003). Different from the previous three theories on gender and development, WCD incorporates cultural dimensions, and gives special attention to the lived experiences, identity and representation of third world women.

Post-colonial feminists, generally agree with socialist feminists' perception of women's continuing suffering as arising from dual systems of oppressions based on gender and class. Post-colonial feminist theorists draw largely from the postmodern feminist critiques of Enlightenment thinking, and especially their focus on language and power, and their emphasis on previously subjugated

knowledge. They move the discourse of GAD further by critiquing the universal knowledge claims of the often Western and Southern urban-based elitist feminists, who fail to pay sufficient attention to differences among women in regard to race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and other social categories and who problematically represent and construct “different ”women as the “vulnerable others”. Scholars such as Jane Parpart (1995), Carolyn Sachs (1996) and Janet Townsend (1995) are especially wary of the conventional feminists’ top-down, universal knowledge claim and patronizing approaches to the studies of rural women and development and call for a new approach to uncover women’s voices and knowledge by situating women’s voices/experiences in their specific, historical, spatial and social cultural and local context in which women live and work through decentering western and urban based expert knowledge. As Jane Parpart writes:

Postmodern feminist thinking, with its skepticism towards Western hegemony, particularly the assumption of a hierarchical North/South divide, provides new ways of thinking about women’s development. It welcomes diversity, acknowledges previously subjugated voices and knowledge(s) and encourages dialogue between development practitioners and their “clients” (Parpart, 1995:17)

The equal weight given to decentering urban-based feminist theorizing and situating women in their specific context is especially elaborated in Sachs’s work

on rural women. Sachs found that while theories of rural societies do provide clues to questions about rural areas as distinct contexts for women and gender relations, and how these contexts are shifting, she found that “for the most part, rural social theories inadequately conceptualize gender relations”(Sachs, 1996:3). However, urban-based feminist theory and practice also inadequately address the context of rural women’s lives. She proposes that “a major project of feminist thinking involves decentering, that is, altering the concept that Western, white, urban, middle-class women universally represent women” (Sachs, 1996:3)

But how to decenter urban-based feminist theorizing? Sachs thinks that Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge proves particularly helpful in grappling with questions relating to rural women. She writes:

In most cultural settings, rural women’s situated perspectives come from their connections to the environment, from their work in subsistence, reproductive, and productive realms, and from the patriarchal nature of rural families. These experiences provide particular angles of vision or partial perspectives that offer the possibility of seeing differently than from dominant perspectives... ”
(Sachs, 1996:17)

Haraway insists that the core to women’s situated knowledge lies not just in acknowledging that knowledge is partial and incomplete, but also in researchers

acknowledging themselves as instruments of research situated in the process of knowledge construction (Haraway, 1998). Until the researcher and her ethnographic self is fully explored and developed in the process, the situated knowledge, which is believed to be able to go beyond women's standpoints can not be emancipatory. However, situating oneself in the entire research process entails the full disclosure of oneself starting from the choice of subject matter, theoretical framework, and methodology to the method of representation.

Migration in Chinese mainstream discourses

Migration in Chinese mainstream discourses has been perceived as generally positive to women's lives, liberating them from poverty and control of traditional patriarchal control (Li, Dun 23, 2000:23). However, the side effects of the migration cost women secure marriages and futures, and catch them in a dilemma between the choices of being a sojourner of marginal status in cities, or the dissatisfaction of returning to a rustic and simple life in the countryside.

Migration as liberation

Since massive population movement began in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the result of the economic reform, it has been seen as both means and ends of the rapid industrialization and urbanization that are transforming China. Government officials, scholars and practitioners who are engaged in advancing rural women's position generally perceive migration as a positive means of

helping rural Chinese women lift themselves out of poverty, achieve economic autonomy and move away from traditional patriarchal control.

Based on this assumption, efforts have been made to facilitate young rural women in the process of migration, ranging from training provisions to job placement services, to publication, which assist in this process. *Rural Migrant Women*, a branch of *China Women's Newspaper* (the voice of All China Women's Federation) is especially designed to "serve migrants women and promote urbanization" as it claims on the magazine cover. The magazine replaced the magazine *Rural Women Knowing All* which is originally established to reach and serve the wider audiences of rural women living in both rural and urban areas. Coming from the position that rural women have better prospects in the cities, the magazine changes to target only migrant rural women as their readers. Besides, publications, night schools and networks are set up and designed to help young migrant women to adapt to urban life.

In China, mainstream discourse perceives migration as positive to rural women's development in that, for the families in which men migrate and leave women behind, women benefit from remittances migrant men send home. While their men are away, women are forced to make decisions around the household, to face outsiders and to go to public meetings in the community representing the household. These tasks are normally believed to be done by husbands, and so going to the post office and to banks requires rural women to pick up some basic

skills of writing and calculating, and all are beneficial to these women left behind. Studies observe that those newly rich and are able to afford to “build new brick houses in the village” normally are those who have family members migrated to cities (Jin Yihong, 2000:182).

For rural women who directly participate in migration, their exposure to different values and lifestyles is perceived to turn them into a new kind of “modern rural women”, more independent, both economically and in life choices. Breaking away from the traditional patriarchal control, young unmarried women have more say over their marriage partners, courtship style, and the fertility rate among married rural women are lower than their counterparts in the village, and their expectation for their children’s education is also higher.

I find that the studies done by Chinese scholars on migration are largely characteristic of their uniform adoption of quantitative research methods and in treating gender as insignificant and marginal (Zhao Shukai, 1996; Qian Wenbao, 1996; Huang Ping, 1997; Cai Fan, et al, 1997; 2001, Ke, Lanjun & Li, Hanlin, 2001; Bai, Nansheng and He, Yupeng, 2002; Bai, Nansheng & Song, Hongyuan 2004, 2004; Cai Fan and Bai Nansheng, 2006). Recent years witness an influx of research done on women and migration using interview research methods, which are reflected in the works by Cindy Fan (2000), Delia Davin (1999), and Tan Sheng (1998; 2002), Tang Chan (2000), Feng Xiaoshuang (2000), Jin Yihong (2000), Zheng Zhenzhen (2004) and Gaetano and Tamara (2004). In

these women and migration studies, migration is still mostly perceived as liberating for rural women. For example, on the impact of migration on rural women, Zheng Zhenzhen wrote²:

“Eventually, the majority of women return to their place of origin. Those who managed to stay in the cities are among the few. Therefore, relatively modern ideas, values and social norms are transferred from the urban to the rural. These women play a crucial role in their dissemination. In a village with more migrant women, the effect of this dissemination is more obvious, and this serves to transform the traditional custom of the source region and promote its social development”. (Zheng Zhenzhen, 2001:38)

Zheng Zhenzhen continues that

“....in the village who is slow to respond to the migration wave, and migration has not yet developed into a trend, the returned migrant women expressed their frustration and confusion due to the traditional forces. They felt that it is the traditional forces that forced them to readjust to the lifestyle in the countryside, and resulted in their change of the lifestyle formed in the cities against their will. Despite these setbacks, the positive impact of migration on women themselves exists

² For the Chinese works under discussion in this thesis, all translations are my own.

objectively and should not be underestimated...To measure from economic indicators, their contribution may not be as much as men's. However, the changes in life style, hygiene habit and child's education will play an important role in promoting rural modernization" (Zheng Zhenzhen, 2001:41)

Zheng Zhenzhen calls for providing training to rural migrant women on knowledge and skills in daily living and production, so as to "improve the quality of manufactured products in factories, and build these rural women's future development capacity, which will be beneficial to the construction of rural migrant women" (Zheng Zhenzhen, 2001:41). The underlying assumption is that rural women can only have a better life when they obtain and sustain a kind of urban life style and knowledge. The obstacles to achieving this are seen as "the traditional forces". Other structural forces such as unequal access to resources on different levels, international, national and regional are ignored. Moreover, there is a deep assumption of a clear division of gender labor embedded in her analysis that women are only supplementary to men's wage earning, even if they do earn. Women's major contribution to the family lies in their change of lifestyle, and its influence on children.

The rhetoric resonates in the work of other Chinese woman scholars. After interviewing 48 rural migrant women in Beijing (Feng Xiaoshuang, 2000), Feng Xiaoshuang found that the effects of migration on rural women are: one,

economic gains; two, human resource development (meaning that technology and cultural knowledge such as urban civilization and values are acquired), and, in addition, a change in values. Feng Xiaoshuang writes that migrant women have “quest for new and change, an emphasis on studying, a strong individual sense of accomplishment, perception of time, rights and obligations are gradually acknowledged and accepted by rural migrant women. These changes in value perceptions, without doubt, enable these women equipped with modernity” (Feng Xiaoshuang, 2000:93).

The social cost of migration

After assessing the generally positive impact of migration on women, Feng cautions that these positive impacts are not without costs, which are reflected in the general lack of sense of security, emergence of single rural migrant woman over a marriageable age and infertile married women, the separation of the family members and finally the loss of traditional sense of tranquility and content. Overall, migrant life is only a phase of migrant women’s life course:

“The majority of women rushed to work for a short period of time before marriage, and then return home to get married. Though a small number of them stayed in the cities, it is difficult for them to become an urban migrant. Eventually, these people return to their rural origins. In this way, migration is only one phase of their life. But this phase usually interrupts their predetermined life course rendering their life

incomplete, as well as causing value clashes, a psychological imbalance, and a feeling of life misplacement... These women finally fall into a dilemma of not wanting to return their rural homes, yet finding it difficult to stay in the city...In the process, rural women's costs were heavy. Take marriage and reproduction for example, they are both closely related to women's life cycle. However, the life cycle does not repeat and is hard to change. Therefore, those caught in the conflict between two cultures, and two different lifestyles wandered to and fro and missed the marriage age resulting in tragedy. Take the frustration of being rootless, in actuality, not just rural migrant women are concerned, but their children, either left behind or accompanying them, two generations are facing the challenges of being rootless" (Feng Xiaoshuang, 2000:97).

Even in the places where migration appears to be detrimental to women, some scholars just brushed away these negative implications by stating that "naturally, migration is not without its cost" (Tang Shen & Feng Xiaoshuang, 2000:149). One difficulty discussed is that migration may put strain on marriages when husbands and wives have to separate. Davin discusses that whereas in Africa, similar migration patterns result in a growing number of female-headed single-parent households, in China, this does not pose as a problem as Chinese

men are still generally family- bound and family values still hold for them (Davin, 1998:57).

Though the above conventional representations of women, migration and development differ in their approaches, they all fail to address a series of issues: First, reflexivity on the part of the researcher and the issue of representation. Individual scholars and state officials write about Chinese rural women and frame the category of Chinese rural women without critically and self-reflexively positioning themselves; Two, these works pay no attention to difference among Chinese rural women. The multiplicity of identities, voices, locations, and moments are hidden when the general category “rural women” is invoked. Attention to these differences brings out a much richer picture, demonstrating that not much about Chinese rural women is easily generalizable; Lastly, such discussions do not include women’s agency-the manner in which different groups of Chinese rural women, in different times and places, have taken up and responded to the powerful social forces shaping their lives.

A postmodern/postcolonial critique of gender, development and migration studies of China

Scholars from the Sociology Institute in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences have conducted research on rural migrant women since 1993 supported by Ford Foundation, and produced a book entitled *Peasant Migration and Gender* (2000), the first targeting gender and migration in China. Even in this collected

work, there remain problems of continuing gender bias. Gender is confined to family related issues. In addition, these scholars show an unquestioning and total embrace of development as modernization, patronizing attitude towards the subjects of the studies, and confine their analyses within the macro and structural. Women's voices and their agency in encountering these macro forces are not given attention to. The following provides a more elaborate critique on these issues.

Androcentric gender blindness.

As mentioned earlier, studies on migration in contemporary China during the early phase of the Reform simply neglected gender in their works. This neglect continues well into the 1990s, when a group of women scholars begin to add their understanding of women in migration from their perspectives following either liberal feminism, or Marxist feminism and socialist feminism. However, these attempts fail to push beyond the works done by male scholars. In the Introduction of the book *Rural Migration and Gender* (Li Dun, 2000:23), Li Dun provide a strong and convincing analysis of the historical and political, and economic forces shaping migration. Li Dun constructs the rural migrants as the marginal, but in so doing he neglects gender playing a role in the construction. Moreover, when he advocates trainings be provided to migrants so as to better prepare them for urban living, one training is on gender education. He writes that "they would understand and adjust to their own gender roles during social

change. They would learn to deal well in interpersonal relationships at work, in society and at home according to their specific gender roles, and assist the younger generation to adjust to development and develop in a healthy way” (Li Dun, 2000:23) Here Li Dun shows his uncritical embracement and even advocacy of gender division of labor that serves to perpetuate subordination of women.

Unquestioning embracement of developmentalism or modernity

In the analyses of Chinese scholars, the traits, lifestyle, and values of modernity are picked up and applauded as the referent framework to illustrate the transformation of rural migrant women. Guo Zhenglin and Zhou Daming’s report on *Hunnan Jiahe County* (Guo Zhenglin and Zhou Daming, 2000) with a subtitle of “labor migration and peasant’s acquisition of modernity” is an extreme case. In the book, they write that:

Modernity is a symbol of a new being with characteristics in aspects of an individual lifestyle, mental state, value perceptions and mode of thinking. The acquisition of modernity is a transformatory process from traditional to modern individuals... rural labor migration serves as an essential mobilizational power in pushing rural village from isolation to openness, from tradition to modernization. (Guo, Zhenglin and Zhou, Daming, 2000:119-126)

Guo and Zhou go on to analyze various examples of shifts to modern traits; aspects of rural migrants in engaging in circular migration (attributing it to their “engaging in double foci on both food cropping at home and cash income from outside”); changes of life style (such as women’s dresses are more colorful and stylish, “changing their past all year round unchangeable blue and black traditional clothes”); higher expectations for their children’s education; strong desires to acquire new technology; and an emphasis on individual achievement according to Guo and Zhou, such changes in migrants will turn them into “the agents of transforming the backward rural hometowns”. When it comes to women’s social status, they write that:

Since the Economic Reforms and Open Door policies, especially after rural labor migration reaches peak, rural women’s position has improved greatly, which is seen in: firstly, the perception of equality between men and women has strengthened. Nowadays, parents provide both boys and girls equal educational opportunities, free from gender discrimination; Secondly, women’s status within the household has increased. As men migrate leaving women at home to shoulder the burdens of field and house work, what the women make from their work at home is not necessarily considered lower than their men’s contributions. Therefore, as women’s economic position at home improves, so does their social positions; Lastly, as women have more

opportunities to migrate, they gain more chances to develop themselves.

(Guo, Zhenglin & Zhou, Daming 2000: 126)

Guo and Zhou sum up that “to those underdeveloped rural societies, for peasants to experience industrial civilization and modern lifestyle so as to increase their level of modernity, the basic channel and motivation is through labor migration” (Guo, Zhenglin & Zhou, Daming 2000: 126). In this representation, peasants are portrayed as the beneficiaries of reform, women especially benefiting more.

Such kind of uncritical embracement of modernity is also found among works which discuss the negative effect of modernization on rural women. Gao Xiaoxian proposes to improve the level of rural women’s knowledge to remedy the effect as “modernization first and foremost requires cultural and technical skills”. Compared to traditional society, modernization provides a competitive arena that is relatively fair. Competent women can rely on their own knowledge and abilities to change their status...” (Gao Xiaoxian, 1994: 96).

Universal knowledge and the construction of rural Chinese women

Initially, western feminists engaged in a concerted effort to understand not just their own systems of gender hierarchy but also the experiences of women elsewhere in the world. “The goals were several: to uncover commonalities and universals that might point to the sources of women’s secondary status; to

envisage alternative paths for social change presented by the record of cross-cultural variation; to find those factors that, when they intersected with gender, produced fundamental transformations in women's lives; and to build an international women's movement"(Gilmartin et al., 1994:5). However, the knowledge produced is criticized for "establishing a unitary standard for what constitutes a feminist agenda elsewhere in the world. Universal needs, desires, and social circumstances are then extrapolated from this agenda, which is often rooted in western experiences, and used to measure women's status. The result is an effacement of the diversity of women's lives and their agency in constructing specific gender relations and meanings" (Gilmartin et al., 1994:6). The same critiques of western feminists for neglecting differences of women in different world also apply to Chinese urban-based elite feminists in constructing rural women. Placed in the context of a universalist feminist agenda, the problems Chinese rural women face are often attributed to differences that seem unalterably "other" to the urban, and the urban remains the unmarked standard against which difference is measured. The subordination of Chinese rural women, for example, is explained by reference to frameworks of "traditional cultures" without sufficient recognition of the historically contingent quality of the broad categories. Too often Chinese rural women come up short when compared to women living in the urban. They are made to seem not only oppressed but unaware of the true nature of their oppression. Gao Xiaoxian analyzes the gendered effects of the

economic reform policy in her essay entitled “China’s Modernization and Changes in the Social Status of Rural Women”. In the paper she states that

“To summarize, rural Chinese women have experienced a great deal of change during the years of reform. But China covers a vast territory, and the external circumstances and the specific policies vary with each local context in the course of industrialization and the introduction of market mechanisms. Consequently, regions have developed unevenly: eastern coastal areas have developed faster because of geographic advantage and preferential policies; remote western mountainous regions and those adjoining ethnic minority areas are lagging behind somewhat. Relatively speaking, changes for women in areas with developed industry are greater whereas in the backward areas many women still live amidst tradition. This shows that the transformation of rural women’s status depends on the process of modernization” (Gao Xiaoxian, 1994:90)

Acknowledging the varying and uneven effect of rural modernization on rural women, with its central features being industrialization, urbanization, market mechanisms, and commodity economy, and that “social modernization will not in itself automatically liberate women”, Gao’s prescription to solving the problems is:

“...to improve resolutely the level of rural women’s knowledge. Modernization first and foremost requires cultural and technical skills. Women’s present disadvantage in the context of competition can be attributed to their gender, but it actually has more to do with their low level of education... the government and the Women’s Federation must use every method at their disposal to improve rural women’s level of education. They must particularly encourage girls and young women to go to school, where they will master cultural and scientific skills to improve their individual status as well as the situation of all rural women”(Gao Xiaoxian, 1994: 96)

The tendency to construct the universal knowledge of rural women and failure to challenge the cultural patriarchy and state which enforce rural and urban segregation system as the roots of the rural women’s problems are largely ignored in such analysis. This kind of universal knowledge construction dominates in Chinese academia. Feng Xiaoshuang emphasizes rural migrant women’s dilemma as if distinctly and only faced by this group of rural women. She writes that “during the entire migration process, women bear heavy costs, such as marriage, reproduction, which are all closely linked to women’s life cycle, non-repetitive and hard to alter. Thus, those women over the marriageable age are caught between rural and urban cultures, and their distinctive lifestyles, and

they wander in between and miss the marriage age, which results in tragedies in their lives.” (Feng Xiaoshuang, 2000:97)

Patronizing and urban elite bias

An obvious patronizing and urban elite bias shows in “expert” approaches to the subject of migration in the construction of rural migrants as either the “detestable others” or rural women as “vulnerable others”. In the face of massive rural urban migration, there are even experts who ignore the principles of justice, equity and democracy. Such experts propose that the government follow a policy of “selecting the excellent migrant” and draw rural elites, with their economic as well as human resources to the city, instead of “selecting low quality migrants” and allowing the impoverished and “poorest quality” peasants to enter the city. Li Yinhe claims that

“These people enter the cities hoping to make a living engaging in types of work that are most labor intensive and energy sapping because they do not have work to do in the countryside and cannot make a living there. If they fail to find work in the cities, they would end up joining the criminal gangs. They are like economic refugees in western countries. Their presence in the cities will decrease the level of income for urban dwellers, a phenomenon unwelcomed by the city people. Moreover, serious public security problems are incurred. It can be

predicted that unconstrained flow of low quality migrants will bring the national Africanization” (Li Yinhe, 2000: 47) .

Through interviewing 48 rural migrant women in Beijing, Feng Xiaoshuang concludes that the effects of migration on women are both positive and negative. Positive in that women do gain economically, and their “human resources are able to be developed”, meaning that “rural women learned technology and cultural knowledge, as well as urban civilization and their values and perceptions transformed” (Feng Xiaoshuang, 2000:90-92). However, Feng writes that:

“...Accompanying the migration experience and urban civilizing influence is the transformation of the perceptions of the rural women, such as the view of life, from a past view of blindly following to a sense of their own pursuit; from a majority of them pursuing an ideal marriage to a life goal of pursuing a career, and of becoming a person that is useful to society. Accordingly, the development perception and sense of autonomy grow, back home, they are affiliated to their natal family before marriage, and to their husband and children after married, and very seldom on their own. It is the experiences of working in the cities that teach them that as far as they work hard, women can earn as men do, and can create better opportunities of making a living and development ...”(Feng Xiaoshuang, 2000: 93)

In places where rural migrant women seem to exert strong agency, it is measured by the urban elitist standard that

“... the rights of women both within families and in society cannot be neglected or breached. On the issue of marriage and reproduction, they are increasingly free from the constraints of tradition, and accepting gender equality, freedom of love, and choice of their marriage partners and the late marriage and late child birth perceptions, including stress on child’s education...”(Feng Xiaoshuang, 2000: 93)

Feng describes the rural women migrant who engage in odd jobs and peddling as “blind floaters” and writes that

Due to rural women’s low education, narrow views, and strong dependency and passivity, they are easily manipulated by strong waves and therefore their migration is even more characterized as being blind... which is likely to cause bad consequences, and they bear the cost of migration more than their male counterparts. For example, some middle age and elder rural women who have no education nor skills, and are totally unequipped with the basic ability to find work in the big cities, crowd into groups and gangs, making a living either by begging or scavenging. Their life and security are in no way protected,

and this proves no good to them nor to the cities, and the negatives are more than the positives (Feng Xiaoshuang, 2000: 97)

Failing to situate rural women in their specific and spatial context

Among almost all the studies of rural women and migration, only women who participated in migration become the subject of studies. Research methods employed to comprehend their life are surveys and interviews, mostly based in the cities and some going back to their home origins. To me, focusing on one aspect of their migrant life is not just insufficient but inadequate to capture the shifting boundaries and identities that rural women experience in between the urban and rural. Besides, targeting only migrant rural women excludes other rural women who are not migrants themselves but are integral to migrant women's experiences by virtue of staying behind, and taking on the double even triple burdens of productive and reproductive work. These women left behind can encompass a wide spectrum, old and young economically better off and worse off, healthy and disabled, and so on. To understand the issues of rural women, migration and development, it is essential that women be put back in the community. To remedy this distorted understanding of rural women, Carolyn Sachs calls for a more nuanced study of rural women, situating them in their specific context while paying particular attention to changes that are taking place on a wider and structural level. She writes that:

High levels of poverty in the countryside are often ignored because of the dominance of urban places. Environmental degradation creates new sources of stress for rural people and places, and agricultural intensification changes work and livelihood strategies. Global restructuring brings new employment to rural places. All of these factors set the stage for particular forms of social and gender relations in rural localities. (Sachs, 1996:3)

For Sachs, rural women's lives are different from urban women in that they have a special connection to nature in their connection to land, plants, and animals. Economic restructuring has affected them and reshaped their work and lives in ways that need to be understood in the context they live. Otherwise, urban-based feminist approach as to understanding rural women and migration often fail to listen to the women's voices and only serve to further perpetuate the unequal relationship among women and widen the existing gap between urban and rural.

In order to overcome this, feminist scholars have called upon a strong reflexivity in research as well as representation, and strive to respect and listen to woman and what they have to say. Only through rural women's voices on migration, can we begin to gain a better understanding about what migration entails to men and women, young and old in different contexts, and then we can begin to capture what the implication of the present macro forces (global

economic restructuring, state policy, or market expansion) are as they are translated into the daily lives of individuals in their work, in their family and community.

Ignoring or distorting voices from women themselves

Though claiming to hear voices from women, throughout the entire process of research, starting from formulating research questions, to ways of collecting data and representation, women's voices are effectively subdued due to researchers' lack of critical self-reflexivity on the political positionality between the researchers and the women studied. Most studies adopt surveys to collect data from migrant women in the cities. As Janet Townsend points out that this research method with its likely representation is from an outsider's view, far from women's view and their voice (Townsend, 1996). Interviews are also used on migrant women based in the cities as well back to their rural homes. Interviews are also used to study migrant women based in the cities as well as in their rural homes. Some interviews are able to provide the full account of participant women's stories. However, even among these full accounts, the notes written by the researchers as the afterthought at the end of the account serve to patronize, marginalize, and eventually subdue the voices of these women. To take an extreme example, Tang Chan was able to collect a full account of a young and assertive maid from Anhui (Tang Chan, 2000:301), who claims that she was greatly transformed from working as a maid at a senior intellectual's home. The

maid even requested to double check the details of the written transcripts as well as to have a copy of the book including her story. At the end of the account, the researcher also recounted a conversation between the maid's employer and herself after the interview. The employer implies to the researcher that the young maid is not to be trusted, and discloses her true name, different from what Tang Chan was told. I worry what the audience would take from this, "after all, this young migrant woman lies!" and then what she has narrated about herself cannot be taken seriously. Moreover, if the young migrant woman read her story together with this note, what would she feel? A sense of betrayal and more distrust? I wonder just what gives the researchers rights into others' lives and to pass on judgment, consciously or unconsciously, that can inflict pain on an informant. Where is the researcher's positionality? When we claim to be listening to women's voices, are we actually doing that? What are the barriers obstructing us from engaging in a conversation and representation based on equal relationship?

Despite the above critiques, post-structural insights have inspired some exceptional works on the social construction of rural migrant women—"dagongmei". While government policy makers and practitioners, as well as academics, contribute most to the formation of the mainstream discourses on women, development and migration, some scholars, such as Pun Ngai and Lee Ching Kwan, begin to pay attention to the more nuanced analysis of structural forces that shape women's lives in regard to migration (Pun Ngai 1997; Lee Ching

Kwan 1998). They consider the main structural forces that constrain and enable rural women's migration, such as state policy restricting population movement through household registration, the structural adjustment of economic programs on regional, national as well as global level, market expansion, and localized patriarchal cultural practices. Pun Ngai (1997) in her study of migrant women workers in the export-oriented manufacturing factories, demonstrated how state, capitalism and patriarchy have worked to subject rural migrant women to exploitation and inhumane treatment. Single women are caught between a rural and urban divide, after spending their youth in the factory and are under pressure of getting married found themselves nowhere to turn to. In Pun Ngai's words, it is the triple systems of oppressions, namely state, capitalism and patriarchal systems that contribute to the making of the identity "migrant woman worker (*da gong mei*)" (Pun Ngai, 1997).

Tang Chan focuses on migrant women's encountering sexual harassment and employs black feminist perspectives, which discuss how women of minority, lower class and non-heterosexual orientation are subjected to multiple oppressions. Tang Chan attributes her empirical findings of migrant women subjected to sexual harassment at work and in the cities to their double jeopardy as peasants and women (Tang Chan, 2000:204-222). She writes that

“...the female migrant workers' living situation from the view of sexual harassment reflects the double prejudices that rural women, as a

social group of peasants go through, due to their gender and occupational identities. As women, they are increasingly marginalized as society is going through transition, and thus discriminated against based on gender; as a rural worker, they are the minority of urban lower class, a target for collective discrimination.” (Tang Chan, 2000: 215-216)

Conceptual framework of the study

Unsatisfied with GAD in its overemphasis on structural and institutional controls over women, and treating women as victims, an alternative approach is developed to attend to the cultural aspect of development in which women’s agencies in their lived experiences are put at the center of observation and analysis. A women, culture and development, or WCD approach is located at the intersection of three cutting edge interdisciplinary areas in the academic world: feminist studies, cultural studies and critical development studies (or, more generally, Third World studies) (Bhavanani, Foran and Kurian, 2004: 6). Bhavnani wrote:

“In drawing on culture as lived experience, a WCD lens brings women’s agency into the foreground (side by side with, and within, the cultural, social, political and economic domains) as a means for understanding how inequalities are challenged and reproduced. In integrating production with reproduction alongside women’s agency, a

WCD approach can interrogate issues of ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality and livelihood simultaneously, thereby providing a nuanced examination of social process. Through a WCD lens, ethnicity, religion, age, and sexualities, in addition to class and gender, become aspects of women's lives that cannot be omitted from any analysis or practice. A WCD perspective argues that to speak of 'culture' simultaneously with development encompasses more poignantly the everyday experience, practice, ideology and politics of Third World women, and thus may provide clearer ideas for a transformative development, and a development that attends to aspects of people's lives beyond the economic" (Bhavanini, Foran and Kurian, 2004: 8).

Inspired by the critical post-structuralist feminism, which questions the universal and binary construction of knowledge of rural women and migration that are either beneficiaries under the neo-liberalism feminism or victims under the socialist feminism, I employ the women's situated narratives to transcend the binary. This approach focuses on aspiration, frustration as well as coping mechanisms of the women of different age cohorts that link women of diverse experiences in regards to migration to their life trajectories, financial situations, their family and village relations in their production as well as reproduction, linking the micro lived experiences to the macro structures that are both constraining as well as enabling to the rural women's movement. Though

participant observation and oral history collection, I argue to understand the rural ethnic women and migration, alternative forms of migration and a critical understanding of development are called for.

Starting from the prior critique of gender, development and migration studies in China, and building on the works inspired by post-structural/postcolonial studies, I intend to approach my study on rural women, development and migration guided by the following concepts:

Deconstruct developmentalism or modernization discourse

Scholars influenced by postmodernist perspectives have challenged the very essence of mainstream development (Escobar, 1984; Ku, 1998). They question the universal pretensions of modernity, and the Eurocentric certainty of both liberal and Marxist development studies. They point out that much of the discourse and practices have exaggerated Western knowledge claims, dismissed and silenced knowledge from the Third World countries and perpetuated dependence on the First World “expertise”. Therefore, such scholars seek local and indigenous knowledge to undermine and even dismantle modernization discourses. The awareness that not all societies succumb to the ideology and forms of Western development is of great importance for me in my research. I must strive to see, to understand, and to respect rural women’s lives, and their struggles to survive. Most of all, a deconstruction of modernization discourse does not leave me room to avoid taking a political stance against the kind of

exploitative state-initiated modernization policies and programs. Such exploitation cannot be swept under the cover of kindness. Furthermore, in my work I am continuously mindful that the dominant discourses- that rural poverty is due to peasants, especially rural women's being "too traditional, slow in learning new things, backward, etc.", that are often cited in newspapers and in official discourses, are demeaning and disempowering to rural women.

Attend to diversity and heterogeneity among rural women

As previously critiqued, rural women are portrayed as a homogeneous group, and this representation is problematic. Failing to address the diverse groups of women serves to erase a great number of women's experiences and knowledge. In the end, only a small percentage of women, mostly young, more educated elite women get their voices heard, as they are the ones who are most likely to engage in migration.

The notion of diversity and heterogeneity has greatly inspired me in my study of gender, development and migration in that it helps me to place my gaze at a broader spectrum of population, instead of only on women participating in migration, who are normally young, and relatively elite among rural women. Through addressing this issue, I will be able to include or rather bring back voices and experiences of "other women", ignored or neglected in the existing literature. I include as broad a spectrum of rural women as possible in my participant observation as well as in gathering oral histories. I include rural women of

different age cohorts, with and without education, married and single, migrants or staying behind, better off and worse off, and situate their localized political subject positions based on kinship, ethnicity, class or other categories. Here, the long-standing life course perspective serves to me a powerful tool in dealing with the issues of diversity of women (Cohler & Hostetler, 2003: 555-578)

Feminist situated knowledge

To move beyond the universal knowledge claims of the feminist standpoint perspectives, Haraway advocates the concept of situated knowledge. Rather than arguing for any one privileged feminist standpoint, Haraway sees knowledge as situated and embodied and calls for “politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people’s lives; the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity” (Haraway, 1991, 195).

This concept serves as a powerful tool guiding me to approach the rural women, to be in close contact to their existence and to be alert to my urban and educated bias in interacting with them.

Situated voices

Feminist studies at its onset have been advocating listening to women's voices, a means to uncover long subdued voices. However, given to the constraints of academic knowledge production that have effectively excluded those who do not have resources to speak for themselves, it will be still a long time before we achieve the reality of rural women genuinely speaking for themselves. It is still the elite researchers who represent the former's voice. There has been much debate on the nature of representing women's voice.

Janet Townsend in her work on *Women's Voices from the Rainforest* (1996) compares outsider's voices and insiders', and concludes that "etic, outsiders' accounts that build up on short visits without a determined search for emic, insiders' views are of extremely limited use for planning purpose." (Townsend, 1995:49) For me, this extends to theoretical reconstruction as well. However, how to represent the insider's voice remains problematic. Haraway cautions us about the dangers of romanticizing and uncritically accepting the views of the less powerful in that:

The standpoints of the subjugated are not 'innocent' positions. On the contrary, they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge. They are savvy to modes of denial through repression, forgetting, and

disappearing acts- ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively... (Haraway, 1991:191)

Situatedness of oral narratives

The women in development perspective (WID) generally perceives migration as positive to rural women's development, whereas gender and development (GAD) sees it as a potential process of further subjugating rural women. I will attempt a more nuanced analysis of migration by looking at causes of migration, processes of migration decision-making and its effect on women. This study differs from the conventional gender, development and migration studies, which focus only on women participating in migration, as I also include women who are left behind by their husbands, sons, and daughters in my observation and analysis, and whose lives are changed due to migration.

Women in the family in the community

Urban based feminists have been advocating that women be treated as an independent subject, however, in a rural setting, women's subjectivities are integral to their families and the community. That is, their experiences and ways of looking at things are deeply embedded in their families and the community to which they belong. Based on this understanding, I look closely at how a particular group of rural women are situated within their families and in the community, and how that different situation relates to their experiences and views on their lives, particularly in regard to migration.

Women's work Liberal feminism and neoclassical economics see work is valued work only when it is paid. However, most rural women engaged in subsistence work and reproductive activities are not paid. How is work understood and viewed by rural women? Which of the activities in which they engage do they consider work? What they do they do not consider work? In regard to a sexual division of labor, some scholars observe that the sexual division of labor in rural settings is changing from “the traditional practice of man plow and woman weave” to the contemporary form of “men work and women plow”. I will observe and ask how women look at these changes.

Power dynamics within the family and in the community How do men and women interact within the family and the community? Who controls resources? Besides gender, which other variables interact in major household decisions, such as educational attainment, age, kinship ties, political affiliation etc.?

Agency and resistance Given the disadvantaged situations rural women generally find themselves in, what strategies do they employ to negotiate and resist the dominant powers? Are these determined by political power, gender, age, educational attainment, etc.? And in what ways, do they demonstrate their agencies?

Use of self-reflection

Feminist researchers are especially emphatic in stating how researchers' social positions shape research questions and how these questions are analysed (Xia Xiaojuan, 2002). When they do not self-consciously explore how their personal, professional and structural positions might frame ethnographic investigations, ethnographers inevitably reproduce dominant gender, race and class bias (Naple, 2000:194-214). Burawoy sees dialogue as offered as a strategy to enhance the reflexivity required for deepened ethnographic understanding (Burawoy, 1998).

Chesney (2001) supports the autobiographical analysis of self, not as separate from or in competition with the ethnographic words of the women but as a nurturing bed to place the research findings in and as a part of the transparency of the research process. She writes that:

Reflecting honestly and openly has helped me retain some integrity and develop insight and self-awareness, and it has given me a certain confidence. Ignoring, suppressing, or falsifying the self places the fieldwork on shifting sand and sets a bad example for the researched. (Chesney, 2001: 127-135)

Self-reflection is the key in my study of rural women, development and migration. Without it, all the above concepts with which I intend my study to diverge from the mainstream literature on the subject are useless, and my claim to a new approach meaningless. However, the extent to which I can reflect on my subject position (in the field and post-field) poses a great challenge to my work. For example, due to language barriers, I needed the help of other *Di'an* women in helping me to gather and interpret oral testimonies from other less visible women. Because of the time constraints, we had to work on a schedule that put these women under more burdens. We took early mornings between eight and ten to interview, and evenings after eight to have group interpretation. Though the lively discussion on their life seem to put more perspectives into their lives, but they are not in anyway, being able to transfer to empower them in their life as feminist oral history promises. Rather, I feel that the research process, which I intend to be emancipatory to the informants and to me becomes an ideal beyond my grasp in this study. Instead of equalising the power relationship existing between us, the research process seems to reinforce it. In various parts throughout this work, I will elaborate them in details.

Yearning for Zaan, or home in Di'an women's narratives on migration

Through *Di'an* women's narratives on migration, I develop an indigenous concept of *Zaan* or Home in interpreting/explaining how migration is related to *Zhuang* women in their pursuit of well being through marriage and home-making.

It is at the point of aspiration for home that my study diverges from the mainstream studies on migration. In the existing migration studies, very few relate migration to home, or home making. At most, it is related to the family when it is looked at from the gender perspective, and foci are on the gender relations, and family strategies, marriage, women's reproduction and health, rather than on home. As a core concept in understanding Chinese society and culture, family has been the focus of much discussions especially in anthropology reflected in the work of family structure, marriage, gender relations, lineage, kinships and division of labor, and family crisis, etc. (Baker, 1979; Davis & Harrell, 1993; Hamilton & Zheng, 1992; Evans, 1993). While there exist rich literature on family, there still little done on home. However, some scholars (Bi Hengda, 2000) points out that home and family are not the same (Bi hengda, 2000:58). Bi Hengda elaborates that

“Home encompasses psychological, social and cultural significance we attach to space. Therefore, we can purchase house with money, but not a home. But what we refer to the home may not be a house, it can be a park, a city or a country. Home maybe the most important place in our life, it may help us grow up, and it can threaten our basic survival.... As for the family, it refers to two or more than two people who form a group through marriage, blood ties, or adoption. If there is no common place that the family lives together, the significance and

function of the family will disappear. However, even under the same roof, different gender, sexual orientation, and differently situated in power hierarchy would feel differently about the home” (translation is mine).

Through the narratives of *Di'an Zhuang* women on migration, I find that it is the aspiration/desire/longing for the home that link up women's diverse experiences with migration. To what extent migration can serve to satisfy their hope is contingent on the situated contexts that all women are caught in the family and in the community.

On methodology

As the section on critiques of studies on rural women, migration and development shows, rural women's voices remain hidden because of the researchers' western and urban based elitist status. This is reflected in two aspects, one is prevalent application of quantitative methodology, mostly with surveys, some with interviews; another is the lack of critical self-reflection of the hierarchical power relationship between researchers and those they study.

Using quantitative studies in approaching the disadvantaged is problematic in that the pre-designed questions suppress subjects' voices (Vandemb, 1995:411-424). Studies of rural migration in China have been predominantly large-scale surveys conducted by distributing questionnaires. Such research on

rural women's lives proceeds largely from a positivist perspective, and claims to be "value free" and to construct a true and complete knowledge. This approach is doomed to fail as it further marginalizes rural women and reinforces the kind of hierarchy and boundaries that exist between rural women as the subject of studies and researchers.

The goal of this study is not to arrive at a set of universal generalizations, predications, or propositions regarding migration, but rather to uncover rural women's situated voices/experiences in regard to the issue of migration in their specific, historical, spatial and cultural context. To do that, I plan to adopt both ethnography and oral history in my study. Through participant observation, I will be able to observe the daily lives of the women I study, as well as their mutual interaction within the family and the community.

On ethnography

According to Clifford, since the 1920s, the social scientists have brought to completion a powerful new scientific and literary genre, the ethnography, a synthetic cultural description based on participant-observation (Clifford, 1983). This methodology implies that "the fieldworker was to live in the native village, use the vernacular, stay a sufficient length of time, investigate certain classic subjects... through maintaining rapport and getting along in the culture while obtaining good research results in particular areas of concentration" (Clifford, 1983: 122-123).

Employing ethnography methodology on gender and migration, I share with Hondagneu-Sotelo that “Settlement... is an ongoing process that unfolds over time, and ethnographic methods are uniquely suited to capture what people actually do and how this changes over time. Unlike large-scale surveys based on probability samples, intensive participant observation and interviews conducted ... enable one to gain insights into the everyday activities, meanings, and motives of immigrant women and men, so that knowledge is derived from the perspectives of the principal actors as well as established theory” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Petra Weyland criticized that the macro-structure statistical analysis of migration is problematic in that such highly abstract paradigms tend to lose sight of their very objects: the migrants, who, after all, are human beings (Weyland, 1993:3). She dismisses the dominant approaches to migration as having little analytical value for her undertaking, “Often these proved to be ahistorical, too economic, too static, and imprisoned in conceptions based on a kind of homo migrants circulating between push and pull poles of supply and demand” (Weyland, 1993:17-18). She proposed in her *Third World Village* (1993) another path to clarification consisting in scrutinizing, as closely as possible, one specific empirical form of migration and producing a case study. It is only by engaging in such a project that the migrants themselves, their families and the communities they are part of, emerge from behind abstract concepts and structures derived from highly sophisticated statistical procedures thus enabling us

to reach an understanding of the relevance of migration to their practical every day lives.

I lived in the village for an accumulated period of six months, to establish relationships as well as to identify potential subjects for conducting oral interviews. I stayed in the *Di'an* area to conduct my participant observation and collected oral narratives as the other three sub-villages were far away. Language was a barrier as they talked in *Zhuang* and the majority of the elderly women could not speak Mandarin, nor local dialect. To overcome this barrier, I sought assistance from four women with whom I became close through our project in the village. I was able to hear women's voices through their interpretation and discussion. The experience turned out to be quite educational and even supporting to the women involved as they had a chance to share their life together. However, I am aware that given the differing positions I am in from the *Di'an* women, if I aim to construct an objective and value free knowledge on them, I would deem to fail. But as Clifford points out, the participant observation can be valid "if reformulated in hermeneutic terms as a dialectic of experiences and interpretation" (Clifford, 1983: 125).

On feminist oral history

While feminist ethnography tears the veil from scientific pretensions of neutral observation or description, attempts to bring to the research an awareness that ethnographic writing is not cultural reportage, cultural construction is always

a construction of the self as well as of the other (Ribbens & Edwards, 1998), there lies the inherent danger that Judy Stacy perceives in the ethnographic method. The ethnographic method exposes subjects to far greater danger and exploitation than do more positivist, abstract, and “masculinist” research methods. “The greater the intimacy- the greater the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship- the greater is the danger” (Stacy, 1991:114). To Stacy, the solution to the problem can be borrowed from postmodern ethnography in its “attempts first to acknowledge fully and own up to the interpretive authorial self, and second, to experiment with dialogic forms of ethnographic representation that place more of the voices and perspectives of the researched into the narrative and that more authentically reflect the dissonance and particularity of the ethnographic research process (Stacy, 1991: 115). Therefore, collecting women’s life narratives in my ethnographic study turns out to be integral to fulfill my aim of the study- uncovering the voices of rural women, which has long been ignored, subjugated, hidden and distorted. Oral history provides a channel and space for the subjugated groups to express themselves, to narrate their own history, their life experiences and views in regard to present and future (Ku and Luk, 2002: 192).

Instead of homogenizing the voices of the rural *Zhuang* women as my previous critique suggested, my study adopts the life course and cohort approaches to capture the diversity of women’s experiences related to migration.

While the *Zhuang* women share common values, social and cultural practices in the community, their experiences to migration, however, are significantly shaped by the life course they are situated along their childhood, pre-marital, marriage, and agedness (Dex, 1991). The cohort approach argues that even though the *Zhuang* women are subjected to similar values, social and cultural practices along their life courses, the various cohorts in which they are embedded subjected them to specific constraints and opportunities in the community, society, economy and polity in that specific historical circumstances (Elder, 1974/1999). In other words, the cross-cutting of individual life courses into various age cohorts lead to divergent experiences of how *Zhuang* women are related to migration.

On the basis of life course and cohort approach, I have further collected the life stories of women differentiated in ethnicity, marriage status, socio-economic and political status, and educational attainment. Life course, cohort and the social-economic status of individual *Zhuang* women shapes various notions of poverty and development as well as their frustrations and joys in engaging in migration.

In the selection of cases for oral story collection, I have adopted a theoretically heuristic sampling strategy to highlight the extent that the *Zhuang* women's experiences with migration are shaped by the life course, cohort and social-economic status of *Zhuang* women (Ragin, 1992). Furthermore, the cases of *Zhuang* women are not regarded as an individual, I employ the snow-ball

sampling to connect individual women to their mother or mother-in-law, to their daughters or daughter-in-law within the same household. Other members of the household will be interviewed to reveal how their lives and voices are interconnected. Through the household approach, the inter-connectedness of *Zhuang* women in the same household gives a better understanding of how cohorts and life courses affect the women's experiences with migration.

Through snowballing techniques, I selected and interviewed 24 women of various age cohorts, on their views on their life as a woman in general within the family and the community; and in particular their possible differences brought about due to participating in migration or being left behind by other family members.

By taking the peasant household as a unit of analysis, I am interested in the oral narratives of women of four age cohorts: those single women 17-25 years of age, young married women from 22-39; middle-aged women from 40-59; and those above 60 years of age. Instead of homogenizing the experiences of each cohort, my approach highlights the intra-cohort differences between the better off and the poor, the vulnerable and the under-privileged. Women are not interviewed as individuals, but as individuals interconnected with other members in the household and the community. Other members of the household will be interviewed to reveal how their lives and voices are interconnected. The reasons for four age-cohort groups are:

Those in the 17-39 age group the generation which supposedly has benefited by the implementation of compulsory basic education and happening to be coming of age when China began its massive population movement in the early 1990s. They are the ones who are most likely to participate in migration and are affected by it. Prior research on rural women and migration has mostly focused on this age cohort. However, in considering marriage status and migration, there is a sharp contrast between those who are married and those who stay single. So I divide this generation into two groups- the single young woman and young married women.

Those in the 40-59 age groups are mostly those who face hard choices surrounding farm work, labor migration, and marriage. Some engage in migration following their husbands, most of them stay behind taking care of the farm, elderly and children at home. Their work, as a result, is much burdened, in addition to the tension and anxiety caused by the spousal separation. But some studies also celebrated their newly found power in family decisions as the “head” of the household while their men are away.

The elderly cohorts are becoming parents-in-laws and grandparents as their children get married and give birth to grandchildren. Usually this is thought to be the age at which they stop working in the field and enjoy an old age surrounded by the extended family members. However, their farm work and domestic labor

might be even intensified as they take up the farm work and childcare that their migrating children leave behind.

Throughout the whole process of collecting narratives, I encouraged narrators to talk in their own words, and express their views and experiences on theirs or other family members' migration. The topics discussed while collecting life histories were open. Here I share with some feminist studies, which found that when women are free to talk about their lives, they are more eager to talk about topics that are relevant to their lives beyond researchers' agendas (Townsend, 1996). As all the women I chose to conduct oral history were all related to migration, they would come to the topic even without me purposely guiding them to it. They shared with us their hardships in childhood, the death of the family members, the breaking up of their families, in endless tears and in fragmented words, and in silence. Many of the middle-aged and elderly women perceived their own participation in migration as involuntary or their family member's participating in migration as the continuing suffering that has accompanied them throughout their life.

Limitations in Methodology

In practice, the snow balling method might have channeled the researcher to skew towards certain *Zhuang* women and families. The stories were tended to be collected among those were more accessible and were willing to share their stories. For some families, the absence or inaccessibility of other female members

hindered the researcher to undertake a more thorough understanding of the stories told. Further more, although most of *Zhuang* women could communicate in local *Han* dialect, the researcher had experienced the difficulties of communicating with the *Zhuang* women not mastering local *Han* dialect well. There was a potential constraint that the voices of those *Zhuang* women were not represented adequately in this study.

Unit of observation and analysis

There are three levels of observation and analysis in my study. Women of different life course cohorts are my primary unit analysis. I observed and interviewed women according to their identity and roles within the family such as the daughters of a migrant father and/or mother, the wives of a migrant husband, and mothers of migrant children. Questions were raised to each targeted group concerning the causes, process and consequences of migration that are related to their lives as well as their views towards them. Specific questions are:

- What are the causes, motivation or goals for the migrant women deciding to leave home seeking for paid jobs in the cities or deciding to stay behind in the village? Is it a decision out of the concern of family survival or purely an individualistic interest such as motivated by “urban desire”?
- How does the decision take place? Is it an individual event, or a series of events in which the targeted women, their families and community interact in shaping their decision to leave or to stay, or to return? Does

it have to do with the cultural expectations of a woman, their roles and obligations within the family? Does it have to do with the cultural conception of women's work in the community and the practices of a sexual division of labor? Or does it have to do with external forces such as economic restructuring policies and population movement policies etc.?

- What possible effects or consequences can migration have on women participating in migration or staying behind? Are women able to gain economic autonomy and escape control of patriarchy (such as arranged marriages) as WID feminists claimed? Or are women further marginalized due to their pressure to leave school to support their family by engaging in highly exploitative work in the cities, as criticized by GAD feminists? How about women left behind by their fathers, husbands, or children? Do they gain more ability or confidence in handling family matters or have more burdens fallen on their shoulders, from both increased productive and reproductive work? What is most important in understanding how these women in different situations view their experiences?

However, as rural women's experiences and views are closely tied to their families and their specific localized culture, their interactions with other family members and other villagers in the community greatly determine or exert a strong influence on their experiences and views, households with the participant migrants will be my second level unit of observation and the village where women of my study reside will be the third level of observation. In other words, in order to gain a complete picture of rural women in my study, it is not suffice

just to focus on them alone, I must also situate them in their family and community context. To do that, I observed and interviewed villagers extensively on the topic during informal gatherings, and my informants particularly in various situations when they were out in the field cutting grasses or taking care of children while making food by the fire place.

Conclusion

Though previous studies are rich in helping me understand gender and migration, the phenomenon is insufficiently understood and analyzed within a larger issue of development. Moreover, the representation of women still remains in the hands of the mostly Western and urban-based elite experts and professionals and their studies are limited in uncovering the voices of women of diverse backgrounds. This serves to perpetuate the unequal hierarchy that exists between the researchers and women under study. Women concerned studies are never, for the most part, value-free since its conception and committing to the ideal of gender equality towards equality of human kinds, free from any forms of oppression has been always on the political agenda that motivate researchers working with/on women's issues. Until women situated voices and knowledge are uncovered and given due respect and weight throughout the actual interaction with women and writing, the ideal will always remain beyond reach and unequal power relationships will be reinforced, and never subverted.

Chapter 3 Migration and *Zhuang* women in *Di'an* Village: An Ethnographic Account

Introduction

This chapter provides an ethnographic account of entering the field from the city to the county, to the town, to the village.³ It serves as a bridge linking the theoretical discussion on the abstract level to the real flesh and blood life in the rural community of *Di'an*. My own experience on each level centers on migration, how the contrasting understanding of migration unfolds. Through the account of my own experiences with a migrant family on a bus to the field site, I set a stage for an embodied understanding of the narratives of women on their migration experiences. In discussing my encounters with the local officials and dominant groups, I show the contrast of the dominant discourses on migration which are condescending, detached, lifeless, and far from reality. My understanding of rural women and migration has been much enriched by living among the villagers and engaging women from their standpoints.

³ Throughout this dissertation, pseudonyms will be used for the names of the places below the county level as well as informants

An Ethnographic Account

Before I set out on my studies on rural women and migration, I was advised by well-intentioned friends who have been to *Di'an* Village not to engage in this topic as “migration does not appear to be an obvious phenomenon in the village”, and “people in the *Di'an* Village do not engage in migration much, and therefore there is not much to find and to look into”. However, my co-supervisor Dr. Ben Ku was encouraging, he reasoned with me: “first, you need to find out if it is true empirically that people in the village do not migrate; even it is true, you should find out why it is so, why the *Di'an* villagers seemed to be exempted from the process of migration which obviously had much impact on peasants and rural communities in other parts of China... Understanding the anomaly is also important to understanding the dynamic interface between macro structures and actors living in a specific, situated context”. With this encouragement, I continued to pursue my enquiries on rural women’s lives and migration.

In this chapter, I will first provide a general account of the political economy of *Di'an* Village, then I will present how I entered the field, my encounters with the local dominant discourses on ethnicity, gender and migration, and how I was able to come up with the situated understanding of migration for these local people from *Di'an* women’s standpoint. This process unveiled to me the myriad forms of migration people experienced in the village.

A note on the politically economy of Di'an Village

Zhuang women in our studies are from a southwest Chinese village located in the southeast part of Yunnan province. Yunnan lies southwest China and is known for its multi-ethnic cultures as well as its “under-development”, and is frequently associated with the terms “poverty ‘*pinqiong*’, backwardness ‘*luohou*’” in *Han* mainstream discourse. *Luohuo* town these *Zhuang* reside is located at the southeast of Yunnan province, about fifty- nine kilometers away from its governing city, at the intersection of three provinces: Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi.

Luohuo town is composed of 13 administrative villages, totaling 129 natural villages. According to the statistics provided by the township officials, there are 7,260 households and 30,400 in population, among whom 29,248 residents live on agricultural farming. Indigenous peoples, *Zhuang*, *Miao*, *Yi*, *Hui* and *Hao*, comprise altogether 11,548, or about 38%, of the total population in the town. The total land coverage of the town is 476.11 square kilometers, among which 34,037 are arable land, averaging 1.13 *mu* per person. Rice cropping is their supporting economy, with rape, tobacco, and ginger next.

Di'an is an administrative village in *Luohuo* town, made of eight natural villages, among which six are *Zhuang* and two others are *Han*. There is limited interaction between villagers from the village of *Han* and *Zhuang* villages. In *Di'an* Village, in the summer of 2003, there are 347 households, 1,512 people,

among which *Zhuang* covers 84%, with its 287 households, and 1,241 people. Greater *Di'an* Village refers to the administrative village structure as a whole, which encompasses all eight teams or natural villages. Following Bossen (Bossen, 2002) in her work on *Lu* Village, I distinguish *Di'an* village Center and *Di'an* Village Hamlets respectively. The five teams of *Di'an* Village Center form a single, fairly compact settlement in the valleys of four separate yet closely tied mountains. According to village head, residents in this compact community account for over sixty percent of the total population of *Di'an* Village.

Di'an Village lies in the valley of the mountains. Although it is only about ten kilometers away from the *Luohuo* town, it takes as long as thirty to sixty minutes by trucks, and two to three hours on foot to reach the village. During the rainy seasons, the road becomes so muddy and slippery that it is too dangerous to travel on by any motor vehicles. *Di'an* means beautiful and flat in *Zhuang*. One may wonder how it can be flat when one only sees mountains and hills there. But comparatively speaking, the location occupied by *Di'an Zhuang* people is relatively flat in comparison with other administrative villages, which virtually are on the top of mountains. As the local *Zhuang* mainly live on rice, which can only grow on relatively flat land, the name may entail the *Di'an* people's good wish and gratitude towards this piece of land that they live on.

Di'an Village appears to be high in its altitude in its northeast, about 1,200-1,500 meters high, and low in its southwest, about 750-850 meters low.

As climate changes with the altitude, the northwest is cooler and scarcely populated, whereas the southeast valley with warmer temperature is densely populated. The *Phoenix River* runs through six villages, making the areas rich in water resources. In *Di'an*, according to the village head Lao Wu, there are 91.2 acres of arable land, among which 39.2 is for rice cropping and rape planting, and the rest is dry land used mainly for growing corn, beans, and gingers.

Di'an Village is the target of the poverty reduction program in the county. Having mainly a subsistence economy, *Di'an* villagers increasingly find themselves unable to survive under the rapidly changing economy of China society. Every year, there are about twenty families short of food for four to six months. To survive, the villagers are forced to keep their living and production at minimum. Their cash requirements mainly: fertilizers, child's education, medical care, funeral and marriage ceremony gift-giving. To minimize the expenses, many children, especially girls of school age, end up dropping out of school, and families avoid the medical costs as much as possibly by either simply putting up with it or for the majority of the elder people, simply "waiting to die".

It is worth noting here that there remains debate as to exactly by what ethnic name the people in this area residing by the mountain streams and in the river valley should be called. They were officially called *Zhuang* by the government under the Communist Party during the early 1950s when it first took control, and there are over 16.18 million people who are grouped under this term (Mackerras,

2003:192). The *Zhuang* are one of the largest indigenous populations in China (Mackerras, 2003:192). However, in talking with the elderly people in *Di'an* and its nearby villages, I find that they do not think that they are *Zhuang*. There is no consensus reached among them either. Some say that they belong to *Buyi* people, smaller in numbers and mostly found in the nearby county, for they share the same language with *Buyi* people as well as their customs. Others say that they are neither *Zhuang* nor *Buyi*, but *Sha* people, typical in their life style of living among the mountain valleys, by streams and of the women weaving. Then some object to the term, to them, *Sha* is a derogatory term given by *Han* centuries before when they and the dominant *Han* group drove them further inland and into mountains. *Sha* entails a sense of backwardness, and weakness, therefore should not be used. Among themselves, they do not call themselves anything, but when talking with people from outside, they say “we *Zhuang* people”. After all, they have been given the term *Zhuang* for over half a century, and the younger generations have stopped questioning their origins, and are simply accustomed to it. Amidst these debates, I choose to call them *Zhuang* people of *Di'an* village in my study.

Zhuang women in Di'an Village

Endless work both in the field and around the house would best describe the life of *Di'an* village women. The following is how *Zhuang* women in *Di'an* village describe the work they do in the field for me:

In January, we spend most of the time preparing for the Chinese New Year. In February, the field has to be tilled in preparing for planting ginger in March. April is the busiest month for the big spring (“*da chun*”) to plant rice. In May, we start planting beans and corns in the field, and in June, we begin to harvest the corn. July seems to be relatively easier. August and September are the harvesting season, also very busy months. October welcomes the small spring (“*xiao chun*”) when we plant rape or other supplementary crops to bring additional income. In both November and December the work in the field are relatively light. When the work (“*huoji*”) in the field is lighter, we can spare some time on weaving and sewing.

Ah Xing, a women-concerned man in the village, calculated that a *Di'an* woman in her entire life would have to weave about 800 *zhang* (one *zhang* is equivalent to about 3.3 meters long) long fabric used for their clothing, beddings as well as for funerals. To produce this large amount of cloth, they need to work constantly after the field daytime work and weave into the late night by the dim light, which, to Ah Xing, costs their health. But this does not mean that they only engage in weaving and sewing during the slack season. In addition to the year-long endless work in the field and making fabric, other daily tasks, including caring for family members, animals husbandry (which requires them to go up in the hills to attend to the cows), collect foddors and wood for fuels. “Always

endless work”, is just about their most frequently repeated words when the *Di’an* women described their lives.

Women of *Di’an* village are known throughout the whole area as the toughest group of women, who could endure much pain and hardship. One woman doctor working in *Luohuo* town hospital could not help but be impressed by the strength and toughness of the *Di’an* village women at child delivery. She said that over the years of working in the child delivery section in the town hospital, she has not met one woman from the *Di’an* village who would cry or even utter a sound of pain while other women would scream all over the place when giving birth. The *Han* peasants, living on the periphery of the Shizhong city, are better off due to the value of their land and their access to the city during the recent years of rapid urbanization. They can afford to hire helping hands to engage in the tedious and strenuous farm labor. They especially like to hire the women from *Di’an* village, claiming that they are strong for harvesting rice and corn cropping during the fall season, have “nimble fingers” (Pun Ngai, 1997) for planting rice during the spring season, and are especially mild in dispositions, therefore, easy to control. As the hiring process is self-initiated by the peasants involved, the work is called “*maigong*”, meaning to sell labor, or “*zhangong*”, meaning to stand to sell labor by the local peasants. Under these discourses, *Zhuang* women seem to be easier to find highly seasonal and short-term jobs in the city, hired by the local *Han* peasants, as compared to other people standing on the street looking for jobs.

Peasants who are in need of work would stand together on one particular street that they have all grown to recognize over the recent years. The city peasants, who are in need of labor, come there to inspect them and negotiate the terms of work, right in the middle of the street. As the inspection is generally perceived as quite humiliating, *maigong* or *zhangong* is regarded as the lowest work and much despised, and avoided if it can be managed. As *Di'an* women have to choose this form of labor to help to survive, they are looked down by their peers who live in town. So the women of *Di'an* village are perceived as strong and tough, are able to stand hardships with mixture of appraisal as well as contempt by *Han* and even their *Zhuang* peers in the same region.

Entering the field- my ethnographic account of encountering migration in the field

It was close to the spring rush during which more people were on the way back home for the holiday. I decided to go against the trend, instead of joining the crowd returning to the comfort and warmth of the home, I decided to leave the comfort of my home to visit the villagers who had their family members coming back for the holiday. Amidst the rushing crowd, I shared the same kind of anxieties of reaching the destiny but with different ends. For them, a warm home to return to, for me, just the opposite, a warm home to leave, and leave with much anticipation and anxiety ahead of me. “Could this be how the migrant workers feel when they leave from the security of the home?” I wandered to myself and decided “no, not even close to!”. After all, I am a well-established

university professor with all the security and prestige. Still, the anxiety continued to follow me.

The bus station across the city usually took half an hour to get to, but on that day, it took almost forty minutes. Because of the heavy traffic, I was a few minutes late, and failed to make it to the 10 o'clock bus. I told myself not to panic as there was supposedly one bus every hour. But the 11:00 o'clock bus was not on time. A driver who drove a small van which could hold up to 21 people approached me and invited me to join his van for a rate cheaper than the regular bus. I declined his offer first, as I felt that the kind of vehicle was known for its unsafety and prone to accidents. As I waited more, the bus still did not show up. Finally, after twenty minutes passed the hour, I decided to take the van. At least, I thought that I could secure a seat by the window, then I would not be too jammed as this type of transportation was known for over-crowdedness.

A woman in her thirties already sitting across from me complained to me that the driver of the 10 o'clock did not wait for her as he had promised. She told him that she would go away for a minute to fetch her merchandise. But upon her return, he was gone. She thought he did this out of distrusting her and that was an insult to her. She thought that the driver must have taken her to be one of those migrants who were not to be trusted. She explained that she managed a private primary school in *Meng* town, known for coal mining in Shizhong county, and that she graduated from junior school and she was a respectable woman with

a respectable profession. He (the 10 o'clock driver) really should not have looked down upon her and treated her as if she was a migrant worker with no education, and no job. I listened to her, and she was very encouraged by my attentiveness. She further told me that her husband, also from the same village, got his degree from Yunnan Normal University and was the head of the state primary school. When they saw the chance of providing the education for the needs of children from the migrant families, they decided to open the school for them. They hired two young women to teach and she was in charge of the administration and running a small stationary store for the community. As the spring holiday was approaching, she came up to Kunming to purchase some spring merchandise (“*nian huo*”) such as the spring paintings (“*nian hua*”), spring couplets (“*dui lian*”) and so on to sell in her store.

As we waited, we chatted, and she invited me to visit her school in the town. Meanwhile, the van was getting full. It looked to me as if almost all the passengers were migrant workers now returning to the countryside for the spring holiday. There were three young men looking in their mid and late twenties dressed in cheap grey suits and talking very loud in the front. One of them was constantly calling up people from a pile of name cards he held in his hand. From his conversation on the phone, he seemed to be talking business and constantly changing his identities and the business he said that he ran. Two other young men by his side tried to suppress their amusement and always burst into roars by

his pretentious acts and words. They seemed to enjoy his air of self-importance, pretence and performance. I was annoyed somewhat by them as they made so much noise that I could hardly carry on the conversation with the school lady.

About half an hour later, the van was getting full, not just all seats are taken but the space of the isle was also filled in and passengers squeezed on the small stools. It was definitely overcrowded and the driver was taking more passengers than the van was permitted. A family of four, husband and wife and two young children, a toddler girl, and an infant boy came to be squeezed in between our seats in the isle. Sitting next to me was the wife and her infant boy, her husband holding their young daughter sitting behind us, it was so crowded that I could feel their breath on my neck, I turned my face to the window in order to put up with the stuffy air, despite my urge to strike up another conversation with the newcomers. What they told us confirmed my suspicion, they were a migrant family working Kunming now returning to their rural family for the spring holidays in Luoping.

Finally, in an hour or so, the van set out. We were all quiet, as for the school lady, having the mother and the kid in between us, we could not continue with our conversation, either. I was amazed by the quietness of the two young children, as the air was so bad in the car, there was little room to adjust our position either. In my mind, I was imagining my son of their age in the car when we traveled in our private car back to my hometown from Kunming during those

years. He was a pretty agreeable boy, I admit, and did not make much fuss along the way. But then he had so much space and so much food to keep him busy. If he was in the same situation, I was sure that he would not be as quiet as these two young children, and he would definitely protest. Then I tried to imagine how I would deal with the situation, but I soon realized that there was no way that I would be able to cope with it. So half dozing, I peeped at the mother to show my admiration for her. To my surprise, I noticed that she kept her eyes shut and there was an expression of pain and almost agony on her face. The infant was playing with her breast and her face, yet she showed no response. It suddenly occurred to me that she was getting car-sick. "Oh, dear!" I know how that felt and I also knew how I would be affected if she continued that way. My mind began to work fast and tried to remember if there was any plastic bag I could spare from my backpack for her to use if she needed one and to protect myself in case that happened. Thinking about all these, I already felt a sense of nausea in my stomach. I prayed that please do not let her vomit, there was no place for her to do that. But I was too late, she quickly thrust her baby onto me and with her whole body almost over me trying to reach out of the window to vomit, and those waste, rice and everything from her stomach flied outside window as well inside the the van. Still holding her baby, I quickly drew my outfit to cover my whole head, at least my head was exempted of the disaster. But boy! That was some terrible experience. The baby cried in my arms. And I, always bragging about my skills with children, found myself totally helpless and powerless in that

situation. I did not know how to comfort the baby stuck in this crowd. I managed to pull out some tissue paper for her while succeeding in emptying a plastic bag for her. I switched my seat with her, and she got to sit by the window.

The father behind the seat took the baby from me, and he complained that her wife always was like this, she never got better. The young baby cried struggling to return to the arms of the sick mother. The mother showed much appreciation towards me but was too weak and sick to express it fully. She continued to hold on to the rail of the seat to steady herself. But when the husband's complaints reached a certain point, she yelled back at him and asked him to shut up. Then she turned her head back quickly to start another round of vomit. I felt that not just the food from her stomach but everything inside including intestines and other interior organs were out. Meanwhile, I was amazed by this woman, the way she so openly challenged her husband. She succeeded and her husband's complaint stopped. Again I was amazed by the way she dealt with the situation. In contrast, in my own marriage, whenever there was a conflict between me and my former husband, I always withdrew and kept myself quiet, and believing that this was a proper and good woman's behavior. How I suffered during those marriage years by suppressing my anger at my husband even when we were in private. I admired this woman's courage.

I noticed that the school lady had a keen expression on her face, but instead of looking at the family, she was directing her attention to me. I looked around, everyone in the van had either dozed off or had no expression on their face, as if nothing bothered them. The van sped fast and showed no sign of stop for the mother to rest a little. It seemed that everyone was so used to such a scene. The Chinese saying was powerful in that after the initial shock of pain, we can be immuned to it as the pain has become part of daily life (“*ri jiu cheng tian ran*”). I wondered what could be possibly on the school lady’s mind, when she saw me showing my concerns to the family, that I was a good hearted woman, a rarity nowadays? Or, a dumb woman helping others who did not concern for herself? Who does she think she is here to be so different from the rest of others? I have no way to tell, I only smiled back wearily. I was exhausted and longing to arrive at the destination the soonest the van could.

The words of one of my informants, Yaling echoed in my ears repeating how hard and awful it was when she and her husband with their several month old infant traveled by train to Guangxi to seek work. I remembered that when she said those words, I sensed a chill of horrors running through her face and her body. Back then, I was thinking to myself what it could be that was so horrible. Now after my experience with the family in the van, I thought with much dismay that my life was so far removed from their life and how I could ever understand them.

Mainstream and dominant discourses on Zhuang and migration

The county middle school principal and his theory on “the immobility of the Zhuang men, and the underdevelopment of Zhuang ethnic people”

Fangzhi met me and the social worker, Meng, at the county high school gate. Over the phone, he said that the school was willing to accept him but he has to start from the year one even he had had one year’s study before he dropped out two years ago, and that he still needed to pay for his school fees after the transferal fees were taken out. Honestly, seeing what his high school graduate brother was doing in the village, I was not all enthusiastic in his returning school. I did not see the chances of him surviving the highly competitive and *Han* dominated formal educational system. Why waste time, energy and valuable resources and in the end, there was only a dead end ahead? But Fengzhi believed continuing his school was where his future lied. To respect him, our rural development project sought out ways to help him back to school. After much negotiation with the educational department, finally, he was admitted back to school, and our influence with the school was only to get them to waive the fee of transferal from the school prior to his dropping out. Since we started the process, it had rekindled the hope he once had for the formal education as a chance to escape drudgery of farm work in his family and the village. So, I decided to see to it that he was properly registered and settled down in the school.

The reserved Fangzhi had all his anxiety written on his face, and we followed him and found the director Zhang of the teaching section, and through him, he

found us their principal. At first, the principal was reluctant to come to meet with us and had us wait in the teachers' common room for over thirty minutes. As we were planning to arrive at *Luohu* town on that day, and the last mini-van left from *Shizhong* city for *Luohu* around five o'clock, I was concerned that if we kept on waiting like this, we would not be able to make it to the town on the same day. So I drew my last name card and handed to the director. Taking my card in his hand, he quickly left the room, and a few minutes later, a middle-aged stocky man dressed in a gray and poorly fitted suit followed him in. Looking quite suspicious, he gazed at me intently. Nevertheless, he sat down on a chair opposite to me. I began to explain who we were and why we were there and how we became connected to the "poor student" Fangzhi, who was standing straight by the side with hands at the back, looking anxious and solemn. While I was explaining to him who we were, I kept on apologizing for having brought so much trouble to him and to the school. That, he readily accepted. Ten minutes later, the cost of the supplementary books, and also the insurance was waived. Still, we needed to pay 800 *yuan* for the school fee. While all this was carried out, the principal complained to us how difficult it was for education to continue in a poverty-stricken area. Then we touched upon the causes of poverty. The principal said with a tone of much authority that it had more to do with the ethnic minorities, particularly *Miao* and *Zhuang*, that predominated in the area, and their unwillingness to engage in modernization. He said that if they were willing to give up upon their traditional and backward farming life style, and not to just rely

on “three inches of land” (“*san cun tudì*”) for their livelihood, and if they would learn from the peasants in east and central China, and dare to venture out of their land, they would not be so poor and so backward any more. He used a criminal case to illustrate his point. In this case, two *Miao* young men from a village in *Luohu* town were arrested for drug trafficking and sentenced to death. The principal had an “unusual” way of looking at these two ethnic men and event. In his opinion, the kind of spirit shown by two young *Miao* men leaving their village and embarking on a new venture to get rich should be encouraged. The principal believed that the majority of ethnic minority men were not willing to leave their village were not just due to their stubborn and backward thinking, but also their laziness. He commented that their wives worked very hard, and “those 30 something women already looked fifty something” (“*sanshi jisui de funv kan shangqu xiang wushi ji de*”), aging fast due to hard work under the blazing sun and in the rain. He concluded that until those *Zhuang* men knew how to change, to be more active, and to abandon their traditional life style and come out into modern urban society to learn new things, they would doom to suffer from poverty, and would not be able to afford to have their younger generation educated, and there would be no hope for their people.

I was trying to reason with him by citing the historical, and structural causes of the poverty of the rural ethnic people. But very soon, I realized that he was not interested in having a dialogue with me, but more in proving that he was more

pragmatic than the “intellectuals in the ivory tower” (*“xiangyata li de xuezhe men”*), whom he saw as idealistic but far removed from the reality. Still, he was willing to support us in our attempt to step out from the “ivory tower” to see what reality was. So to “see from our face” (*“kanzai women de mianzi shang”*), meaning to give us credit, he reduced Fangzhi’s educational expenses. Then he turned to Fangzhi to give him a thorough lecture on how he should appreciate so many people coming so far to help him and that he should work hard and achieve good grades. With his head lower, Fangzhi stood listening in total obedience and in humiliation.

The township head Liu’s “migration economy (dagong jingji)”

The self-initiated and self-organized *Zhuang* Youth Cultural Groupe based in *Luohu* town was falling apart, and some of them left the town for the city to seek for paid work. Still, majority of them would like to continue with the group, but finding it difficult, mostly because of the conflicts regarding poor leadership, lack of management and misuse of funds. I decided to assist the project worker Meng to conduct five sessions of group work to help strengthen and reunite the team. To do that, we had to leave the village every weekend to go to the town where the youth group was located and had the group sessions with them on every Saturday night. Every Saturday morning, I and Meng walked out of the village, and rested in the newly constructed Chinese “bed and breakfast” lodgings (*“nong jia le”*) for a while before the evening’s workshops.

On one such afternoon, we left the village and arrived at the lodging around the noon. After taking a long awaited “weekly shower”, I lied on my bed writing my field journal, and someone knocked at the door. I opened the door and found the office manager of the township government Yang outside the cottage. He came to invite us to join the officials playing cards in the yard. He said that he was instructed to get me by Director Zhang of the county government office, who came down from the county to supervise their work and heard about us staying in the lodging there. Still in my slippers, I followed Yang to the yard, and found two tables full of officials already busy playing cards. Zhang signaled to me to sit on the empty straw stool prepared by other officials next to him. I followed his signal and went to sit down next to him, but made it clear that I did not know how to play cards. “Then watch us play...”, at their constant urges, I complied and stayed on watching them play. While they played, they would strike up occasional conversations on wide range of topics, from local politics, to casual sexual remarks but without intending any of them to be of serious and in-depth discussion. I was amazed by this kind of official exchange, looking very casual and informal, but in fact, a vast amount of information flowed in it, yet only known and recognized by the insiders. It was hard for someone like me not in their context to tell the underlied meanings of their exchanges. I was feeling both inadequate and embarrassed, and at the same time getting resentful and angry, especially after so many times of accompanying them to drink and play cards, at their request. I asked myself why these men were so disrespectful and

presumptuous in assigning me a role to sit by them, being there but invisible. I decided to do something about it. So I rose, went to my room, fetched the journal I left on my bed, and came back to continue to accompany the official playing cards, but not as a passive company. While they played cards, I read my field notes. I gave a subtle message to them that I could be sitting next to them as they wanted, but not there to entertain them. A single notebook and a pen seemed to have the power to disturb the balance that was at ease and comfortable a moment ago. The officials grew to be uncomfortable. Still playing cards and changing their topics of interests, they could not help glancing at me who pretended to be buried in my work. They took turns interrupting me to ask me what I had written, commenting on my handwriting. There was a sense of uneasiness in the air. However, when they learned about my interest in migration and *Zhuang* rural women in *Di'an* Village, they let out an air of triumph, and repeated what the county school principal said to me: *Zhuang* men were too lazy, they only drank and gambled, leaving all their work to their women. If they were willing to leave the village, they would be rich. As for their women, they were pitiful. As many of them could not speak much *Han* dialect, there was nothing I could find and worthy of my research. There was a sense of contempt in their bragging about their knowledge of *Zhuang* people, and women in particular. Overall, there was nothing there to know about. From their comments amidst laughs and casual remarks, I read a clear message to me: “women study women, and nothing significant could be achieve”, like the popular

saying that women were long with their hair but short in their eyesight (“*nvren toufa chang, jianshi duan!*”). Accompanying this message was a sense of relief on their part that my studying women constituted no possible harm to them, and could not challenge their position of power.

The township head (“*xiang zhang*”) Liu later joined us. He was a young man in his early thirties. Being of *Zhuang* origin himself, he began to brag about how much he knew about this topic, which he termed as the “migration economy”. When I asked him to define what the migration economy was, he said: “...we refer it as a kind of labor exportation (“*laowu shuchu*”)... labor is like capital, once it becomes surplus, it can be moved to other places”. To explicate his point, he cited experiences of other provinces:

“Take Sichuan for example, they have been engaging in this migration economy for a long time. Sichuan has more population than the land can support, and the conflict between the land and population has been serious. So right after the planned economy era ends, they leave their land and come out to find work in carpentry, shoe shining, carrying heavy luggage for others...anyway, they seek whatever work available, no matter how hard and difficult. In this way, they guarantee that they can survive, also they bring money back to build their own hometown(‘*gao jiaxiang jianshe*’) and push the development of the local economy (‘*tuidong difang jingji jianshe*’).”

I pointed out that most of the *Zhuang* men were not equipped with the kind of skills, and questioned how they could survive from what he described as “migration economy”. Liu said that even if they went out and could not bring any money home, at least their awareness was changed due to the exposure:

“...they will see different ways of life and the changes people are going through. There have been many new crops developed by the state. By partaking in the production in migration, they would learn to master the new technology. Take the traditional rice crops here for example, it is no longer adaptable to our place, and new crops and new technology are needed. Through exposure to different ways of life, and acquiring new technology, he return with those... Going out is better than staying at home. One is to broaden his horizon (“*kaikai yanjie*”), two is that even he cannot make any money, at least he can feed his own mouth”.

I continued to push him by providing the familiar scenario to him. While migrants’ awareness increased due to the exposure, yet to improve their lives required much more than the awareness of things that were beyond their control. I also asked whether that would cause much discontentment and distress for *Zhuang* peasants, Liu acknowledged that, but insisted on believing that this kind of “rotten woods (*xiumu*’, referring to *Zhuang* peasants)” could still be carved. It just took time. Liu assured me not to worry about them. According to him:

“Objectively speaking, work at home was bitter than outside. There was only straight work (“*zhihuo*”) outside, but at home, life was continuously full of miscellaneous work. Outside, *dagong* was only done mechanically. Once done, it was done. But at home, after returning home from the work done in the field, there were tons of other work to do- finding fuels, feeding pigs, etc. After being outside for long, a man would grow to be lazy and when he had some money on him, he would play *majeong*. But even that, once he gambled away his money, he would stop...Of course, to look at this from women’s perspective, it seemed that all problems were tossed to women, and the family conflicts may intensify as the result... maybe this was a process... In the long run, migration was positive”.

Based on my participant observation and conversations with the county principle, the township head and other male officials in Shizhong county and *Luohu* town, I was able to sum up their discourse on *Zhuang* ethnic groups or specifically *Di’an* villagers and gender:

Di’an villagers are a backward group and live on subsistence economy (“*xiao nong jingji*”), very much lack the commodity awareness (“*shangping yishi*”). Because of low productivity, and no exposure to the outside world, they continue to live in poverty. The *Di’an* men are especially hopeless, for they are lazy, self-indulgent and lack of aspiration. Because of that the *Zhuang* men, their

women are also hopeless. They work hard, endlessly, but still they will not get anywhere. Many of them cannot even speak *Han* dialect. How can they educate their younger generation to compete in this world? So, until the *Zhuang* men learn to leave their village and break away from their traditional bondage in both land and mind, they are unable to join the rest of the world to get rich. That is why their hope lies in the migration economy, not in their traditional subsistence economy.

Divided village, divided views on migration

When I came into the village, I began to ask people in the village about migration. Quickly I found that there was much division based on gender.

Village officials and men's discourse on migration

When I asked the village officials about migration situation in the village, they all uniformly told me that very few villagers engaged in migration. When they had to fill in the forms for the records of township government on migrants, they did not even need to pay visit to the individual household, “because the number of the villagers in migration out of the county were just a handful, and there was not much to fill in the form as there were so few people moving out”, I was told by the Village Head Yonghong. So same with the officials outside the village, the village officials also believed that very few villagers in *Di'an* Village engaged in migration. When I asked them how come they were not willing to migrate as other peasants in other provinces did, they offered different views from

the officials in town and in the county. They said that first they did not have much money to go very far to find work, second was that they did not make money either. But in explaining why they could not make money, they said that they did not have education, nor skills, and that they were low in quality (“*suzhi di*”). However, Lao Wu, the former party secretary told me that the villagers considered those who engaged in migration lazy and shunned farm work in the family in the village. Normally it was only those few families whose irresponsible and immature teenage sons engaged in it, and even they were regarded as “good for nothing” (“*cheng bu liao qihou*”), and despised by their family members and villagers for that. I had the feeling of coming to a dead end and began to question if I had chosen the wrong topic to study.

Encountering the elderly Zhuang woman whose son was on his way out

One day I was walking in the village of *Bantai* feeling anxious about my studies, I came into a family. I saw two young women hanging their yarns to dry in their open courtyard. I greeted them and they looked shy, and giggled whenever I tried to say anything to them. I was getting frustrated by my inability to communicate with them, then I heard a voice answering me back from the inside the room. I looked inside the room and saw a woman in her early sixties sitting by a wooden device sorting out yarns and a young man sitting by him packing. Though stern looking, the elderly woman gestured me to take a seat near her. She told us that both young women in the courtyard were her

daughters-in-law, the young one just came to stay for a couple of days and would be gone back to her family in another village. Her husband, the young man sitting next to the mother, was getting ready to leave for a job mining coal. The young man had been doing this for over a year now. Since he got married in the spring of that year, he came back once a month after he was paid. When I asked if he could help the family with what he earned from the work, his mother said no, showing much of discontent towards this son who was quiet by her side, busy with his preparation. She added that he could not bring any money home. Besides he had developed lung problems after working in the coal mining, and always coughed. The elderly mother explained to me that he constantly caught cold from taking bath, despite cold weather, every time after coming out of the mining well. I asked the mother since he was not be able to bring much money and ran the risk of his life and health, why he would continue with the dangerous work. His mother answered matter of factly that he had no choice. He had incurred much debt from his marriage and he had to repay his debt which was the kind of money the family would not be able to raise purely from farm work.

From this instance, I realized that I had used the migration in a narrow sense. When I asked people about migration “*dagong*”, to the villagers in the *Di’an* Village, it actually referred to a form of migration, entailing regular work on regular basis and affiliated to a certain officially recognized institution. Digging coal was not considered *dagong*, because of the danger the work entailed. It

seemed that only desperate men in the village engaged in it. Otherwise, no one would be willing to engage in it. *Dagong* is more decent and respectable than digging coals. Because of its low status and high risk, the villagers whose family members participated in mining coal were not willing to talk about it in the open. Nonetheless, reluctance in the family member's talking about it did not obscure the fact that quite a number of men, especially young and middle-aged men partook in seeking paid work at the coal mines, with some more steady while some changed between mining and *dagong*, and *maigong*.

Maigong was another form of migration that the majority of people in *Di'an* Village participated, though the kind of work they engaged differed between men and women. For men, *maigong* meant to seek for odd jobs available in the city, such as helping people move heavy furniture, or filling at a construction site or in a brick factory. These kinds of odd jobs could be available the whole year around but each job lasted for rather short time, and it was usually within the area, without having to leave the place of their household registration. However, *maigong* for the women in *Di'an* village referred particularly to the farm work available to them during the two busy farm seasons, one in planting the seedlings during the spring and one for harvesting crops during the fall. Both kinds of farm work were considered the women's work in *Di'an* Village or, rather, in the *Zhuang* community. *Zhuang* women were believed to be especially adept at these two forms of farm work. Over the past few years, as the work in the city's

fringe for the peasants area became diversified, when it came to the busy farm season, there was a shortage of farms hands. So the predominantly *Han* peasants hired farm hands to assist their farm work in high season. As the weather in the Shizhong county was about five degrees centigrade lower than that of *Di'an* Village, so the busy season in Shizhong always came late, about half an month to one month later than in *Di'an* Village. This allowed time for the women in *Di'an* Village to finish their family farm work and continued to seek for *maigong* in the city. At one point, Fong, a woman assisting me with my research in the village told me that in the spring of 2003, almost all women in the village left to *maigong*, leaving only the elderly and children at home. She said that the village was almost emptied of adult women.

Realizing the different and multiple forms of migration was a breakthrough to me. When I talked to people again, I learned to use the specific terms such as *dagong*, *wamei* (digging coal), *maigong* or *zhangong* (standing to sell labor), *xiaoshengyi* (petty trade) to mean different forms of work that entailed different degrees of leaving the family and the village, and had different implications for different people, women and men alike.

Gender, myriad forms of migration and hierarchical values of work

To women in *Di'an* Village, all these forms of migration are not equally participated by men and women, and have gendered meanings. Migration is associated with gender. The different forms of migration show a hierarchical order

of work, ranking from high to low in the order of official migration, trade, *dagong*, *maigong*, and digging coals, and family farm work (“*zuo huoji*”), and reproductive work (“*zahuo*”) in the house.

Official migration

The most respected and most desirable form of migration is official migration, meaning holding a government work with pay and benefits. One informant, Meicui, gave the name to official migrants as “the state’s people (‘*guojia ren*’)”. Throughout *Di’an* village, there were about a dozen of her villagers who belonged to the state owned work unit, or rather, were employed by state, and their family ranked in the highest socio-economic status in the village. Only men were part of this group of official migrants. While their wives and children stayed behind in the village and worked on the family lots, the migrating men commuted between state jobs in the town or the city and the family in the village, sometimes on weekly basis, but mostly on a seasonal basis. With the regular income from the government, these families normally were able to afford to build their own houses and purchase consumer items such as color TVs, and even had VCD players, etc. that were considered luxurious.

Petty Trade

Next to official migration, the preferred work was to engage in trade. While it was better to be the boss of others, no one in the village was up to that level. Petty trade was still respectable, as one was one’s own boss. One did not have to

obey others and take orders. With relative autonomy, and the chance of making some money, petty trade was considered quite desirable among villagers. However, as it required capital, as well as the sophistication and people skills to interact with urban and predominately *Han* people, very few *Di'an* villagers could survive on it alone. They tended to switch between petty trade and other forms of migrant labor such as *maigong* and mining. When men made some money through mining, they would try to start a small business. Normally they would lose money and return to the coal mining. A small number of young single men had been alternating between these two forms of migration for many years, yet still found themselves penniless.

Different from men, women alternated between *maigong* and petty trade. Like their male counterparts, it was more the single young women who used them on the petty business, mostly selling fruits and vegetables. These young women believed that when they dressed in their *Zhuang* costumes, the urban residents would be more inclined to purchase the produces from them, imagining that they were produced by them, and so organic and natural, therefore, more healthy. However, it was hard for them to compete with local merchants, mostly due to their rather limited capital. So before they had developed their own steady network of customers, they ran out of money, and had to return home. Still, doing small business would provide young single *Di'an* women longer time to stay in the city. So even though eventually they returned to their families with

little money, they had no regrets. Engaging in a small business remained as something they aspired to.

Dagong

The next work preferred after petty trade was *dagong*. By *dagong*, villagers meant to seek paid work to the far place, mostly out of the area. *Dagong* jobs were hard to get, and people in the village did not have strong networks to participate in *dagong*. Besides, as the economy in general in the whole area was not as urbanized, the *dagong* opportunities were rather limited. In going far, to the major cities, and other provinces where industries were more developed, the traveling expenses were naturally higher. Without social network, as well as money for traveling, very few of the villagers could venture very far. Besides, being able to move freely was a luxury for married men. Those who participated in *dagong* were normally the young single men from families of middle income. In *Di'an* Village, there were approximately ten young men between the age of sixteen to twenty nine partaking in long distance and long-term *dagong*. However, they were notorious in the village for their “irresponsibility, laziness, and shunning farm work”. To most of the villagers, men and women alike, their *dagong* behavior was a sign of immaturity and therefore discouraged and condemned, as the participation in *dagong* generally yielded little gains for the family. Worse, it even induced more burdens on their family when they ended up having to send the traveling fare for them to return home or they acquired bad

habits such as gambling and excessive drinking from outside. For these problems, the young women in the village did not regard them as promising marriage suitors.

Women engaging in *dagong* were rare. Women who migrated to *dagong* were stigmatized as “trafficked women”. As illustrated by those who had left over the past decades, those rumors circulating in the village were powerful in instilling fear and anxiety into the young women who aspired to leave the village and take part in long distance and long-term migration. As much as Lifan has been aspired to pursue a life that is different from *Di'an* Village through *dagong*, she did not dare to make the move for the much- feared talk on trafficking in women.

Maigong or zhangong

Though very few women engaging in *dagong*, the majority of them, young, middle aged, even occasional elderly women, engaged in *maigong* or *zhangong*. *Maigong* or *zhangong* (literally meaning standing to sell labor) referred to a form of labor migration that was characterized for being casual, short term, short distance, seasonal and highly cyclical. The work involved was generally agricultural. More women engage in *maigong* than men. Men also *maigong*, but they were more reluctant to acknowledge it for its lack of status. At one point, Fong told me that last year, almost every woman with who could labor left the village for *maigong*, only a couple of them were left in the village. She said that

for a while, the whole village was almost emptied of women, both the young and the middle-aged.

For women, most of them go to *maigong* during two busy seasons. One was the spring season when rice was planted, and another was in the fall when rice was harvested. Both planting and cutting the grass of the rice were considered to be women's work. Normally, Zhuang women in *Di'an* Village left the village together after they finished their farm work at home. That was also the time that the demand for farm labor began in Shizhong county as the weather in the county tended to be five degrees centigrade lower than that of *Di'an* Village and their farm season tended to lag behind *Di'an* Village by two weeks to a month. During the times of high demand for farm labor, everyone, young, old, men and women could find work. After the busy season, before the next season began, the supply of labor would become more abundant than local job market could take. Then the women would return home with money they make from their labor. In this way, while earning extra money, their work at home would not be affected.

Usually the *Zhuang* women could make between twelve to eighteen yuan on daily basis. If they kept working throughout the whole season, they would make 200 or 300 yuan in cash. With the money earned, the young single women either would spend some on themselves, such as buying modern garments (“*xiao yishan*”), or pieces of fabrics to bring back home to make their own *Zhuang*

dresses (“*da yishan*”), while some would try to invest in some small business to earn more money. Usually, they would not be able to return to their villages without much delay. For the married women, they would use the earnings from *maigong* to purchase fertilizers to improve on the productivity of the field in the coming year to their families to have a life.

Summary

Migration is not a new phenomenon in *Di’an* Village. During the old days, men and women left the village seeking paid work, either as “*chang gong*” (long term laborer) or “*duan gong*” (short term laborer), or *maigong*, or coal mining. It was after the introduction of the household registration system in the late 1950s that various forms of labor migration stopped. As the control slacked after the recent market reform, people began to move again.

However migration was different from before in *Di’an* Village in that it was perceived as a potential channel towards a better life for women. This came through opportunities, interact with more prominent young men, away from control from both the family and the community, through chances to meet different people, and to experience life with others, through an exposure to the city, and in making some money for their own use. However, *maigong* was also seen as a double edge sword for *Di’an* women. In addition to dreams which never realized, there was humiliation involved in the recruiting process, (standing

to be scrutinized and assessed from the head and toe for physical strength), and the nature of the work was deskilling, unstable and exploitative.

Based on the assumptions of mainstream discourses on migration, migration was strongly encouraged by the state officials. When *dagong* was the only form of the migration recognized by the mainstream society, the myriad other forms, alternative to *dagong* escaped the gaze of the state and the people participating in them became invisible. While the mainstream discourse continued to condemn the *Zhuang* people for their unwillingness to participate in modernization, undercurrents of migration were actively going on in which men and women of *Di'an* Village were doing their utmost to make a living.

Chapter 4 Discipline and Control and the *Zhuang* Young
Single Women’s Pursuit of “*Zaan*”, or “Home”
Between Marriage and Migration

Introduction

As discussed in chapter 3, the local engagement includes migration in various forms, such as petty trade, *dagong*, *maigong*, etc. When these are taken into account, migration is very much part of life of villagers in *Di’an* Village, for both women as well as men. However, the differing forms of migration have different meanings for different people. Adopting the interpretive life course approach to the study on migration and women, discussed in Chapter 2, I devote the following four chapters to four cohorts of women, encompassing single young women between seventeen and twenty five years old, young married women from twenty to thirty- nine years old, middle aged women from forty to fifty nine years old, and the elderly women over sixty. In each cohort, I present the life stories of six women and focus on these women’s life goals. I examine how these goals developed within the women’s respective life trajectories and how they are rooted in the women’s history, family, and the community. I then discuss how their aspirations are related to the central issues of migration, and describe the mechanisms that work both to constrain and enable each woman as she engages

actively in life, whether through migration or not, and how these women make meaning of their life. In presenting their life experiences, I compare young women in a similar situation, yet with different responses to that situation. Through these differences, I uncover the mechanisms that work to constrain these women's movement as well as agencies they demonstrate within their specific contexts. The narratives of single *Zhuang* women and their stories of migration capture the intricate yet dynamic relations between gender and migration. In particular, they demonstrate how gender as a central organizing concept interacts with other mechanisms such as ethnicity, class, state and age that are specific to the young single women in *Di'an* Village,

In this chapter I present and discuss the first cohort, single young women. Through their stories, we see how they negotiate with different institutions such as marriage, family and the village in pursuing as well as creating a life that is meaningful to them. Also, through the voices of the young women, my study attempts to unfold the multiple structures confronting those local young women and the meanings of their activities outside the village.

In this chapter, through the life stories of six young single women in *Di'an* Village, I will demonstrate how these women aspired to creating a home or "*Zaan*", and to a better life. In their words, this would be one in which they do not have to work endlessly like their mothers, and they are free from the worries of meeting their survival needs, and are able to enjoy more urban and modern living.

They regard migration as a potential means of change. However, they are not free to come and go and encounter various controls in the process of migration from the family, the community and the larger society. These controls are economic, political, and cultural. One example is the discourse on “trafficking in women”. Either as compromise or as negotiation, most of the young women use short-distance and short-term highly seasonal labor (“*maigong*”) or petty trade to search for a space in which they have opportunities to meet a man with whom they would be able to build their “*Zaan*”.

The situated narratives of the young single women on migration The young single women in *Di'an* Village aspired to a life that was free from poverty. In their words: “you (the future husband) do not have to come from a good family, but you at least do not starve”. They also aspired to live a life different from their mothers. Their mothers’ lives were, again in their words: “always endless work, up on the hills during the day, weaving at night”. They tended to describe the life in *Di'an* Village as “economically backward... looked down upon by others”, the young women generally looked forward to leaving *Di'an* Village through finding a husband elsewhere as a desirable means of change. However, *dagong*, long distance migration, entailed going to far unknown places, and they felt that they did not have the means and resources to do so. In addition, single young women leaving the village alone and going far run the risk of being labeled as a “trafficked woman”, and perceived as disgrace both to their families and to the

village. Alternative to this double bind was *maigong* and petty trade (“*xiao shengyi*”). Both entailed some degree of leaving the village but the trips involved were of shorter distance, shorter time, and normally done in groups. Both *maigong* and petty trade provided some exposure to different ways of life, and as well as opportunities to meet prospective partners who were not as “lazy as the young men in *Di’an* Village”, and “not as arrogant as the young men in *Shui* village by the town government seat”. Therefore, despite the long hours, harsh working environment and the humiliation involved in *maigong* involves, the majority of young single women actively pursued it.

Maigong might serve as an alternative or temporary break from the bind of either risky *dagong* or stagnant home life, however, it was a harsh life and brought humiliation both in finding work (*zhangong*, “standing for the sale of labor”) and at work, under the constant supervision of others. Petty trade was less harsh and less humiliating, and gives more autonomy and respectability, but it required capital, which most of the young women did not have access to. Some young women combined both *maigong* and petty trade, by first engaging in *maigong* then moving on to petty trade with money they earned from *maigong*. However, in the long run, both failed to deliver what the young women wanted. Young village women wandered between the village and the city, sometimes getting stuck or lost in between. In the process, different women deployed different strategies from their specific contexts of family relations and community, in

searching and pursuing a life that was meaningful to them, be it through migration or not.

The discourses on “trafficking in women” and communal control over the young single woman’s body and sexuality

Both Fengling and Xiaolei’s lives were directly affected by the discourse on “trafficking women”. However, to what degree it had changed their life varied.

Fengling’s story: Living a maigong life, cohabiting with a Han boyfriend, resisting sexual control and trespassing boundaries

Fengling was a good-looking young woman in her late teens, with a pair of big and communicative eyes. She was about nineteen years old when we met in Shizhong city, in the fall of 2003 in her single room which she cohabitated with her *Han* boyfriend. She was a woman of few words, always wore a nice and friendly smile, but one could feel an unbending and independent spirit beneath the gentle appearance. Twice when I met her in Shizhong, she wore jeans and a hat, and dressed all in blue.

I did not get to talk much with Fengling in person. Of three times we met, we did not get to communicate much, for various reasons, the language barrier, her reticence, and there were always many people around. In between what she was able to tell me, and the parts of her stories filled in by others, especially by her younger sister Fengxian (with whom we grew to be close through our project

on aiding the children continuing with school education), I was able to form a relatively complete picture of her. The first time we met was in the village in 2001 in the shacks where her family used to live in. She and her elder sister were at home. Without Fengxian as the translator, we could not communicate with them at all. So we sat with them in their shack a little bit before moving on to different families. The second time was the fall of 2003, when I followed Lifan and other young women going to *maigong* in Shizhong to see how *maigong* worked. Lifan and others took me to where most of the migrant *Di'an* villagers stayed. There, among the group of *maigong* young women, I spotted her, much to my surprise and delight. Her boyfriend and other young men were standing by. No one seemed to pay much attention to the rumor that had circulated in the village in the summer of 2002, the rumor that went around that Fengling was trafficked and sold by her Han boyfriend. Now seeing them very comfortably hanging out together in their room, I was surprised that the rumor did not cause much of their concern. The third time I saw her was half a year later in the spring break of 2004. The compound where they stayed looked deserted and quiet. I did not meet anyone except for Fengling. She was alone there starting a fire stove to keep the room warm. This time, as it was quiet, we could communicate more with local dialect.

Through piecing together our conversations, and her sister's reports, I was able to draw a relatively complete picture of Fengling.

Fengling's life trajectory Since Fengling was born, her family had been very poor. Most of the families in *Di'an* village were poor. But Fengling's family was exceptionally poor. Of the whole year, her family had up to four and five months in shortage of food. The simple shack they lived in was collapsing under the wind. Fengling's father seldom worked in the fields, but wandered about in the village and on the mountains doing nothing, leaving most of the field work and domestic chores to her, her mother and her elder sister. Since she could remember, she had been tending cows, collecting fuel and carrying waters for the family, as well as doing endless work at home. Though the family had land for four people, they could not harvest much due to the lack of labor and money for fertilizers. What they obtained each year from the field could hardly support the whole family. Every year, her father needed to go to government to receive assistance in grains. Her mother had constant fights with her father. I heard comments on their parents from other elder villagers that Fengling's father was lazy, her mother "dumb in her head", and that she "did not know how to plan for the family" ("*naozi ben, buhui dasuan*"). For the sympathetic villagers, they would add that it was because the family did not have a male descendant, as their only male heir died at young age, before Fengling was born. Fengling and her sister believed that it was the death of their only brother that took away their father's sense of hope and led to his apparent laziness, and the financial difficulties in the family. Despite Fengling, her elder sister and her mother worked endlessly, they suffered from a shortage of food and dangerous housing.

Fengling only went to school for half a year and was pulled back by her elder sister, who never attended school, to help out in the family.

Fengling's life of working on the mountains and feeding poultry continued day in and day out until she was seventeen years old, when village women of various ages started to go to Shizhong to *maigong* in groups. With her parents' consent, she joined a group in the spring of 2002. When she came to Shizhong and spent about one month there at *maigong*, she found herself to be more free and felt that she had more control over her own life than she did at home. She liked her life in Shizhong. After one month's work to help with planting rice, she decided to stay and continued to live on *maigong*. Someone offered to take her to work in the brick factory in Qujing, the capital city of the prefecture and further away from the village. She readily accepted. When she worked in Qujing, she met her boyfriend who was also there making bricks. They started dating. Her boyfriend was a Han young man from Zhaotong, another prefecture up north and he came to join her brother's family in Qujing, who were also living on *dagong*. After spending a couple of months in Qujing, Fengling wanted to return to Shizhong, where she was more comfortable around her village fellows. Her boyfriend followed her back. Meanwhile, she knew that the villagers were talking about her being trafficked. But she did not care. Her father came to find her in Qujing and tried to force her back, but she refused.

She continued to be away from the control of her family, and the watchful eyes of the village. In the spring of 2003, she followed her boyfriend to Zhaotong. In her eyes, their life was a little better than *Di'an* Village, but they were “still poor”. They returned to continue with their migrant life in Shizhong. That same year during the *Zhuang* March 3 festival, she returned *Di'an* Village without bringing her boyfriend along, as she was fully aware that her family and the villagers would not approve their relationship. Her boyfriend waited for her in *Luohu* town. For the few days at home, she talked to no one in her family. “She was very defensive”, when Fengxian tried to show her concerns for her, Fengling rejected her. By then, her elder sister was married by “*zhaoqin*”⁴ and her brother-in-law came to live with them. Finally, with his joining the family, the house was rebuilt and they no longer had to live in dangerous shacks.

⁴ *Zhao qin*, a practice of matrilineal marriage arrangement under which man live with the wife's family. *Zhaoqin* is commonly practiced in *Zhuang* communities. However, it differs from *Han* in that while *Han zhaoqin* is more permanent, therefore little practiced, the *Zhuang zhaoqin* ranges from being permanent to short terms of a few years. It is normally practiced under such circumstances under which the wife's family do not have adult men but only younger sisters or younger brothers. *Zhaoqin* would be practiced for a few years and end when the younger sister is old enough to marry and have her husband to come to live with them, or the younger brother has grown old enough to be responsible for the family. These are short term *zhaoqin*, and are widely practiced throughout generations of *Zhuang*. The long term *Zhaoqin* takes place when the family has too many sons yet insufficient land. It is employed as a redistribution of land resources across families in the community.

Her family was still against her having a *Han* boyfriend, claiming that they knew nothing about him, neither about his family background (“*bu zhi gen bu zhi di*”). She thought about getting married, but being still under age, it was required by the law that she must have her father’s consent and have him escort her to obtain the marriage certificate. Both would be humiliating for her to endure. So she said to herself, “Just as well! Without marriage, I am free to go anywhere as I like”. She did not want to be like her mother, who spent her whole life unhappy with her father, but was unable to escape from it. She chose to continue to cohabit with her boyfriend among *Di’an* Village migrants in Shizhong.

After some time, she made up her mind to leave the village and returned to Shizhong. In one afternoon, when she was leaving, she was alone with her mother at home. Except for Fengxian who was in her last semester in the primary school, her sister and brother-in-law had gone up to the hills to work. As usual, her father was nowhere to be seen. She stuck a few clothes into her handmade bag, and was on her way out. Noticing her departure, her mother came to stop her, crying. She tried to block her way out by the gate, but Fengling pushed her aside. Then her mother dragged her by the bag, she pulled with all her strength and her mother slipped and fell to the ground. Without looking back, tears in her eyes, Fengling left with resolution, not returning to a life without hope in *Di’an* Village.

When Fengling left again, it was against her mother's wishes. Fengxian told me that after Fengling left, her mother cried endlessly for days, even when she was up on the hill, tending cows, and since then she has been complaining about headaches. Fengling settled down in Shizhong. She did care for her family. From the comings and goings of the fellow villagers, she was kept well informed about what was going on in the village and with her family. Four days after Fengxian dropped out of middle school, we met Fengling in Shizhong and she already knew the news about her younger sister. She continued to live with her *Han* boyfriend. That was why when I went to visit Shizhong during the spring holiday, though most villagers had gone back home to celebrate the holiday, I found her to be among the very few who stayed. She told me that she had just returned from Guangxi, the nearby province, to cook on a construction site for the past month. She did not know where her boyfriend was, "...must be somewhere *dagong*, or playing *majeong*", which she said without much emotion and appeared to be no interest in finding out his whereabouts. A cool, mature and independent woman, she was surviving on her own. I noticed a calm yet determined expression on her face, which was hard to believe for a young woman who was barely twenty years old.

In the summer of 2004, upon returning to the village, the first thing Fengxian told me was that her sister had given birth to a baby boy. I wondered if she had, after all, managed to obtain a marriage certificate. Fengxian seemed to be better at

accepting her, and so did her family. Fengxian told me that she was joining Fengling in Shizhong, but “to *dagong*, not to marry”, Fengxian stressed, and that she would not be like her sister, “who went there to get married!” Fengxian had been to middle school, despite only for a couple of months. Still, she was much better off than the majority of her peers, who did not even finish the primary school. In her eyes, going *dagong* for the purpose of marriage seemed to be shameful. “Really?” I responded to her while trying to distinguish her from Fengling in my mind. And the young women of her age standing by were also smiling with expressions of understanding on their faces.

Fengling’s hopes and her migration Fengling wanted to have a life different from that of her mother and the other women in *Di’an* Village. Suffering from poverty and the humiliation of no male heir in her family, Fengling wanted to leave this unhappy environment. She was aspired to a life free from poverty, with more freedom.

Controls over Fengling and her agency Fengling did not want to follow those women who was supposed to be trafficked to far away provinces. It was not clear to her if she was afraid of the rumors that her family would be subjected to if she did go, or it was out of fear for the unfamiliar environment outside she might get herself into. By the time she grew up to be a young woman, people from *maigong* came back to circulate the news that for a few weeks for each

busy season, there were *maigong* opportunities in fringe of city. So when waves of women left for Shizhong, in the spring of 2002, Fengling joined them.

Fengling reached out to the outside world. However, she was still among people she could not communicate freely with, so she chose to come back to Shizhong, despite the job opportunities being fewer than in the bigger city. She and her boyfriend could manage with the money from *maigong*, surrounded by people she was familiar with, who spoke the same language, and shared the same joys and sufferings. *Maigong* provided an outlet for Fengling to leave behind her oppressive life without having to be in a totally strange and unfamiliar environment. In the larger city, her sense of alienation did not lessen even with her *Han* boyfriend and wearing modern clothes. To find a space where she could get away from the suffocating environment at home, and also the sense of alienation she felt in the wider *Han* world, and to counterbalance the rumors about her being trafficked by her *Han* boyfriend, and to be close to her family and fellow villagers, she chose to live on *maigong* in the county, among her village fellows who came and went between the village and the city. However, Fengling was not willing to totally identify herself with other *Zhuang* women either. By choosing a *Han* boyfriend and wearing *xiaoyishan* (modern clothes) all the time, and living in the *Zhuang* community in the city, she was already trespassing the boundaries between *Han* and *Zhuang*, resisting the control and pressures from

both her family and the village, and constructing a subjectivity that shifted in between *Di'an* Village and *Shizhong*, between *Hanness* and *Zhuangness*.

The story of Xiaolei - Village discourse on the trafficking of women, and the unbearable weight of the family and the community

Xiaolei had mixed and more negative feelings towards both *dagong* and marriage through migration. She was the “victim” of that in her family. Specifically, her mother and elder sister had arranged other young women’s marriages through migration and were then denounced by the village and threatened with imprisonment if they dared to return. In fright, both mother and daughter left the village when Xiaolei was only twelve years old. Unable to put up with the disgrace and unfriendliness of the village, her father rented out their land to other villagers, and also left to participate in *dagong* somewhere around *Shizhong*. Xiaolei was left behind with her younger brother. For a time, Xiaolei had no idea where her parents were, except that they were quite dispersed. She knew that her elder sister married a young man in Zhejiang and had two children. Some friendly villagers who saw her mother shopping in the city told her that her mother was with a family in Shizhong working as domestic help. Her father mostly found work in brick factories, and obviously her parents were separated. Xiaolei did not know if they contacted each other and she claimed she did not care. Since Xiaolei was young, she had been mostly on her own with her brother, living on grains shared with the family who planted it. She kept

some pieces of dry land on which she grew corns. With that, she raised a small pig. Her father would bring her money for her living expenses, such as for purchasing food and other necessities for the house keeping. The small house was getting rundown, for the past eight years, she lived, in her words, like “an orphan, as if I had no mother of my own”. In the summer of 2003, when I went to visit her, she was alone in her house. By then she was nineteen years old. A year before I met her, her sixteen-year old brother also left to go to Guangxi to *dagong*. She was alone and was left taking care of the house for the family. Xiaolei was angry and cynical. She repeated, “I am always alone in the house...Life is frustrating, and troublesome!” (“*wo yige ren zai wutou, tai fan le!*”) The following is how she described her life to me:

“...when I was little, I wanted to go to school, but the family was too difficult (*kunnan*), so I did not get to study. Even if I wanted to go out to *dagong*, I have no culture (*wenhua*, meaning education). No school, no culture, I have to do work (*zuo huoji*) around the house. I cannot do much, so it is difficult, with little economy (*jingji shao*), little income, not enough to eat...”.

Though much frustrated, she tried to understand the behavior of her parents by attributing it to the “bad economy” (“*jingji tai cha la*”), she said that: “... there was not enough to eat, if they stayed at home, we would have all gone hungry. Leaving me alone at home, at least they could survive by going out to *dagong*

(“*chuqu yeshi keyi taotao tamen de shenghuo*”). She persuaded herself to understand the arrangement with the excuse that “all staying at home would go hungry. I am alone at home... after all, what they did was to stay alive”.

What Xiaolei wanted most was an escape from the lonely and suffocating environment she was living in. She described to me her only attempt to escape:

“...I left, and for those two days, I felt very troubled, very frustrated. My father came back for the spring holidays, later he said that he would leave again. At home, there was enough rice to eat, but no money to use, I was alone at home. To be honest, when I was alone at home, I became very frustrated. I needed money, but there was nothing to sell in the house... So with money my father gave me for house keeping, I left to find my friends for some fun. Later my father could not wait for me to return, he did not know where I went, and thought that I was only somewhere close by. I went to *Luoping* to see my friends...When I returned, my father already left... I was feeling too frustrated those two days...”

Frustrated, she thought she would just sneak out quietly for a few days and returned without anyone’s notice, as any of her movements might arouse the concerns, suspicions and further scorns of the villagers. However, her plan failed. Upon return, she found her house was broken into, and the rice and meat

she stored for the whole year were stolen. Her attempt to leave the house to catch a breath outside was broadcasted with the news of her house being broken into.

Having to bear the suffering of a “broken” family and the condemnation of the village, Xiaolei was not enthusiastic about migration, *dagong* nor *maigong*. In her words “Even if I wanted to go out to *dagong*, I have no culture (‘*wenhua*’). No school, no culture, to *dagong* is to sell labor alone, to provide brute physical labor, that won’t bring much money either”.

When I asked her if she would consider marriage as a way out, she spoke vehemently against the idea: “To marry is worse than to die!” This is how she elaborated her point of views:

“In our place, there is no land, the economy is bad, the transportation is bad, whatever you produce cannot be sold. If you marry, you need more money for a family, life would be more difficult than it is now. ... (now) I am alone in the house, they (the parents) would give me some to use. If I married, there would be children, not enough food to eat for me now, how could you work enough to feed them?...If married, when the children are old enough, you need to send them to school. No money, no food to eat, what can you do?”

Xiaolei is more motivated to improve life through her own efforts, such as raising pigs at home or engaging in petty trade in the nearby town. When she

took a week off to see her friends in *Luoping*, they were making living through petty trade. She said that she wandered around *Luoping* with her friends and liked the city very much. She admired her friends because “they do business and make lots of money”. Her eyes sparkled with excitement, she described her trip to the city. Thinking about her lack of initial capital to go into business, she was like a balloon letting air out and sank back to her usual bored and cynical self.

In the summer of 2004, a year after we met, I returned to the village and went to visit her, only to find that her house was locked and wild grasses had grown hip high and blocked the entrance to her courtyard. A villager passing by told me that she had left, “married and moved to another village close to town during the spring festival”.

As a twenty-year-old young woman, Xiaolei was very smart and knew what to do and what not to do, that was, to do petty trade, and not to get married. But in the end, though, she did not have choices and married no matter how much she was against it.

Xiao Lei's hope, forms of controls and her agency Compared to other young women in *Di'an* Village, Xiaolei had bad experiences with migration, be it *dagong* or *maigong*, and associated marriage. Her mother and sister tried to improve their lives through either migration or an associated marriage, but this only turned the family into living a homeless life. Meanwhile she kept the home

to which they could not return and lost her mental peace. Without parents around, she suffered more and at earlier age than her peers. With such negative experiences with migration and marriage, she did not count on them to improve her life. However, she was more motivated to engage in petty trade in the city. In her mind, doing petty trade would bring money better than selling brute labor. She reasoned that for herself, without much education and skills, this was the only way she could make a better living. However, it required capitals to start, and so doing small business became Xiaolei's hard fulfilled dream.

Xiaolei longed to have a *Zaan*, a home in which family members were together. Having suffered from poverty and lacking of care and attention from her mother since she was a little child, she was afraid to establish her own family. How much she was against marriage, it was the only means and resources available for her to escape from isolation and loneliness, as well as close supervision of the villagers. When the elders of the family arranged her to get married, she first protested and later complied.

Family disintegration and village control over young women's sexuality:

Fengling and Xiaolei compared

Though similar in age, and both initially against marriage, nevertheless married within a half a year of our meetings, Fengling and Xiaolei differed in their experiences in regards to migration, particularly with the village discourse on "trafficking in women" which is specifically associated with *dagong*. Unable to

put up with the poverty and humiliation in the village, Fengling took the opportunity of *maigong* and left the village. Without returning, she encountered the village discourse of her being trafficked because she chose to move out of the village. She chose to live among the village migrants on the margin of the city, to cohabit with her Han boyfriend, to demonstrate her strong resistance to the pressures of the village, and to negotiate discrimination and exclusion faced in the larger Han dominated society. Equally under the pressures of poverty and the humiliation, Xiaolei has more reasons to simply abandon her life in the village and join her migrating parents and brothers. However, she could not easily do that. She had to be there to stand for her family in the community. The fear of turning the family into a totally rootless and homeless state was a great stress to Xiaolei. Her mother believed that their behavior was unforgivable by the villagers. In sacrificing her own body and emotional wellbeing, Xiaolei is defending the dignity of her family, particularly on behalf of her mother. As much as she was against marriage, she eventually married because, however undesirable, it was the only legitimate way for her to get out of the lonely and suffocating environment.

For Fengling, a better living is to escape the sense of helplessness in the family, and be away from the sense of humiliation in the village. She could not even hold her head up having to live in the shacks. The accumulated shame that there was no male heir in the family, as well as the scorn from the villagers that

her father was lazy, and her mother did not know how to plan, and more, the endless quarrels between her parents were too much for her. She had worked endlessly around the house and in the fields since she could remember, but what she obtained was a feeling of endless helplessness. Her desire was to escape that helplessness and the anger she felt towards her family and the community.

Though Xiaolei shared the similar helplessness, frustration and anger towards her families and villagers, these negative feelings had different causes compared with Fengling. While Fengling's was rooted in the family's internalized shame in no male heirs, Xiaolei's laid in the shame of the punishment which was highly gendered. So when Fengling took the opportunity of *maigong* to leave the village, Xiaolei could not, because she had to stay in the village to guard for her family. She understood that economic improvement was the only reason for her mother and sister to take the stigmatized risk. However, through their *maigong* outside, their economic situation did not improved, and she disregarded *maigong* as a positive means of change. She most aspired to engaging in the small business that would allow her to leave the village with respect.

Both of them lived different life style from their peers. While Fengling cohabitated with her Han boyfriend among *Di'an* migrants in the city, and Xiaolei lived alone by herself in the empty house in the village. Both of them did not consider marriage as an option yet with different reasoning. For Fengling, marriage implied the obstacle to freedom of movement and constant family

violence in which she grew up, whereas for Xiaolei, marriage meant family particularly financial responsibilities for the younger generations, which she was afraid of. No matter how hard they resisted the marriage, it was difficult for them to pursue otherwise that would lift them beyond their limited environment and means. However, though ending in marriage, both varies in their strategies. While Fengling married her controversial *Han* boyfriend and made her family and village fellows to accept her marriage, Xiaolei married to deal with the increasing pressures from village and loneliness in the house.

False hope in aspiring for the “modern woman” in marriage and migration

To Fengling, it was not very clear to her initially that to *maigong* would later turn into marriage for her, but it did, nevertheless, which was something her younger sister Fengxian as a relatively better educated and therefore more “modern” woman denounced. Indeed, majority of the single young women took *maigong* as an opportunity to meet promising young men. Women like Lifeng and Hailian were definitely pursuing *maigong* more for the sake of finding young men they might like. For them, no promising and suitable young men were available for them anywhere around them either in *Di’an* village or in the villages close to the town government center:

“ ...Men in *Di’an* Village are very lazy. They only work for a few days during the busy seasons, play cards and *majeong* the rest of time... (we) cannot marry men like that, neither to men from outside the

province, it is too far... . Men in *Gou* village (better living condition being close to the town government seat) look down upon us because our (economic) situation is worse than theirs... we cannot find the true boyfriend to spend the whole life with...

We talked about the prospective partners, the following were their responses:

“...at least everyone should not become without food... (we) don't mind if his family is not (well off)... do not like those men migrating to the outside... (they) do not want to do farm work, young guys, only care for having fun themselves, if lazy at the beginning (when young), (they) would be lazy always...”

The above understanding on pool of *Zhuang* young men that used to be available to the older generations of *Zhuang* women frustrated young women in *Di'an* Village. On the surface, the choices of young men seemed to be more than before- young men in the village, in the nearby towns, and from afar. However, in reality their choices were more limited than before, as they witnessed how young men nowadays were becoming unreliable both in the traditional farming and migration. The young men in the village became difficult to choose. They looked to the relatively better off *Zhuang* life by the town government center. However, the depth of the poverty in *Di'an* Village was notorious in the areas, and *Di'an* Villagers were discriminated against due to the poverty, so the

way to finding a partner in the town was also blocked for the young single women in *Di'an* Village. Though over the years, there had been quite a number of young women who found their husband from far away in different provinces, such as Guangxi, Zhejiang, however, the uncertainty, stigmatization as well as absolute separation from the family and the village all combined making the choice a difficult one. Young women at marriage age in *Di'an* Village were absolutely frustrated in seeking the prospective partner.

Hailian and Lifan's story: Maigong to find a promising partner is a false hope

For the first year or two between 2001 and 2003, both of Hailian and Lifan were actively engaged in *maigong*, hoping that *maigong* would expose them to more opportunities to meet the “right man”, the man who would promise them a home that was free from poverty and endless work, better urban bound but not as a prerequisite. However, quickly Hailian found that *maigong* was not just humiliating, but also harsh and exhausting, and moreover with limited exposure to promising young men. Every morning, they had to stand by a street corner of the Shizhong city before dawn and waited for the hirers to come to scrutinize them from head to toe, and to assess if they could work well, fast and strong. At work, they were constantly hushed to speed up pace so that the work could be done quickly since they were paid on daily basis. The whole process was disrespectful and humiliating. That was the major reason why *maigong* was generally detested by *Zhuang* people in the villages whose social economic

condition were better. Since *Zhuang* women in *Di'an* Village had been known for engaging in *maigong* throughout the *Zhuang* community in *Luohu* town, *maigong* had become an additional cause of discrimination and exclusion for *Di'an* Village women to endure within the *Zhuang* community at large. Having been from a relatively better off family in the village, Hailian did not have to endure this humiliation.

Besides, even they were willing to pay for extra two *yuan* for the accommodation instead of free lodging in the hirers' home, normally at the city's fringe, she found that after a day's hard work, as much as she wanted to hang out with other young people by the movie theatre, taking walks under the street lights, she was too tired to do so. With the little money earned, she could only afford to buy a set of baby clothes for her nephew to make up for the work her sister-in-law did for her while she was gone. It was not worthy it. So quickly, Hailian dropped from *maigong*, and spent more time during market days over the weekends in the town, following other single young women in looking for prospective partners. One year after the women in *Di'an* Village started to make *maigong* more or less a norm, she married a young man from a different village by the river, about four hours' walking distance from *Di'an* Village. However, she became increasingly unhappy with the married life. According to her, her husband's family was poorer than hers, and her life simply followed that of her mother's, which was not what she was aspired to. In frustration and to escape,

she spent more time at home than at her husband's, which was permitted and practiced before the wife gave the first birth in *Zhuang* customary practice of “*bu luo fu jia*”. In Hailian's case, she wandered between the two families, more than just following the *Zhuang* customary practice, but more confused at what she was looking for.

However, Lifeng persisted hoping that eventually “her man of desire” would show up somehow in between her engaging petty trade in the nearby town and *maigong* in the cities. Though she claimed that she did not care where he was from and how his family was well off or not, as far as he would be responsible and feed the family, what she desired most was to leave the village. Lifeng was close to her mother. Often I sat with them while they wove. I asked Lifeng to tell me the exchanges between her mother and her. She told me that she did not feel like making the *Zhuang* clothes for herself, and she would leave here and get marry somewhere else so she did not have to make this clothes. Her mother would pretend to hush her up and said to me in slow Han dialect that Lifeng would not do such a thing. Lifeng turned to me and said with determination on her face that “I would do that, you wait and see” in *Putonghua*. Her mother said to me in slow and careful *Putonghua*: “she said that she would leave, she was only joking!”, and she smiled her gentle smile taking Lifeng's remarks as a childish language. Lifeng added: “I can do what I want, when I leave to *maigong*, I just leave, no need to ask them, sometimes, I did not even bother to say anything other

than ‘bye, I am leaving’ on the way out... they are used to me like this...haha... ”.

Lifen liked to think and acted as if she was free to do as she pleased. However, the internalized restriction of being a filial daughter obstructed her way of movement. She lived in conflict within herself.

Lifen and Hailian’s life trajectories Lifen and Hailian are cousins. Being the same age, they grew up together, went to school together and dropped out of the school together after they were in the school for three and four years. When they were young, they went to collect fodders and fuels from the hills together. After work, at nights, they would hang out together with other young men and women by the bridge, and had fun. Between them, they had a lot to share. However, though closely related in kinship, their family background was not closely identical. Hailian’s father was employed by the township government as a ranger in the state-owned forestry department. With the regular income of approximately 1000 *yuan* a month, her family amounted to be one of the wealthiest in the village. Her house was not just built on solid rocks, the floors both inside the house and in the courtyard were cemented, her family was also equipped with color TV set, CD player, “the luxurious objects” considered in the village. Lifen’s father was a peasant, but her family had been seen three grandmothers, all the wives of her late paternal grandfather’s well into the advanced age and decently buried after death of old age. Over the years, with

the funerals, three elderly women at home had drained much of the resources, leaving no more extra to build a better house. So the whole family was still in the old house that was built by the late grandfather and became rundown due to ages of rain and wind. Largely out of consideration of the poverty and scarcity of the land, Lifen's eldest brother married through *zhaoqin* and moved into his wife's family in the same village. Though the family could produce enough food for the family to sustain, they did not have more to engage in anything else.

Through information brought in from people going far to *dagong*, Lifen and Hailian knew that there was an unknown yet exciting world outside. Though women who left were seriously condemned by the elderly people and men especially in the village, whenever they returned, Lifen and other young women would like to gather around them to learn what different lifestyle it could be lying outside the realm of *Di'an* Village. Lifen was both fascinated and scared at the same time. She once said half seriously and half jokingly that if she was sure a good life waiting for her outside, she would not mind being trafficked.

Since she participated in *maigong* in *Shizhong*, she had enjoyed it, but not without mixed feelings. The following is an excerpt of our conversation to illustrate the mixed feelings she had towards *maigong*:

Xiang: What do you like about *Shizhong* city?

Lifen: Everything about it I like...haha...

Xiang: What particularly?

Lifen: I like the young guys... but they look down upon me, otherwise, they would marry me...

Xiang: Do you want to come back?

Lifen: I don't want to come back. But planting rice was really hard work ("spicy and bitter")! Those few days, it rained, we were all wet, it was so pitiful ("can ")! We went for a month...

Xiang: How did you find work?

Lifen: We went there to "zhangong" (stand for sale of labor), and other people would come to look for us...

Xiang: So you just stood there and wait...

Lifen: Yes, when I first went, I was very shy... feeling ashamed to stand there, and let other older women to go ahead of me first and followed them when they said come, come, then I would go...

Xiang: How much could you make?

Lifen: Not always the same, sometimes twenty "kuai" (yuan), some only fifteen *kuai*, with food and bed... but we were more willing to stay over night in the city, to rent the "nongmin fang" (peasants' house), costing two *kuai* one night...in this way, we had freedom to hang out together...

Xiang: How much did you make last time?

Lifen: Two hundred *kuai* for one month.

Xiang: Do you think it is worth it?

Lifen: Not worthy it (“*bu hua suan*”), it was too “*ku*” (bitter), from early morning till dark at night...

Xiang: ...What about *maigong* that you like?

Lifen: It was very tiring... but it was because of no constraints that I like to go “*meiyou sufu wo cai ke!*”

Lifen added self- mockingly that “...to *maigong*, to be picked by other people, it is quite humiliating... but we can have fun together, and away from control of the parents... also have some small change of money to use.... I may find a guy I like, who knows! Haha...”. But as years gone by, and with the increasing pressure of marriage, Lifen was wondering how ever she could pursue a life with a man of her dream through *maigong*. Observing that Hailian got unhappy with her marriage, she was half relieved that she did not choose the second best for herself. But where could she find the one? Lifen still continued searching through participation in *maigong* but the hope is increasingly fading as time went by.

Will Lifen be able to pursue a life that would be different from her mother?

Lifen was perplexed.

Lifen and Hailian's aspiration Both Lifen and Hailian were aspired to find a responsible husband, together to create a home, or *Zaan* which was not necessarily materially well off, but at least free of starvation, and free to move

about. In this *Zaan*, they would have a life different from their mothers who spent so much time on weaving the traditional clothes, beddings and other accessories for the family. Both as the youngest and the only daughter of the family, they contributed to the family's survival, despite their contribution was not counted on, and they were under protection of their brothers and parents, as well as the clan who was the most powerful one in the village. Both Lifen and Hailian were outspoken and had daring personality. Having had a relatively easier childhood free from sufferings and starvation, different from their older generations, they had a strong desire and confidence to create a better life unknown to and better than their mothers. Leaving the village and pursuing a different lifestyle was what Hailian and Lifen longed for. As long distance *dagong* was highly associated with trafficking of women in the village and might subject the family into condemnation and disgrace, they disregarded it. *Maigong* provided an outlet for them to venture into the wider world. But Hailian soon realized that *maigong* was limited in meeting and spending sufficient time with the promising young men, not to mention the harshness and humiliation the work involved, so soon, she disregarded *maigong* as an outlet for possible change as well. Despite its limitation, Lifen had not found any other way that would expose more different life to her without too much risk. She was torn and said that when she was outside for some time, she missed home, and feel guilty for being away, not helping with the family work. However when she returned, she wanted to leave again, she could not stand the monotonous life at home. Lifen

was still engaged in *maigong* to search for a life that would provide her to escape the kind of life at home without having to totally desert her family and be on her own in a strange world.

Maigong and the arranged marriages

Xiaohua's story: Dagong- marriage vs arranged marriage

Same with Lifen and Hailian, Xiaohua was aspired to leave the village through finding a man of her dream who would take her to create a new and better life, unknown to her mother. As a pretty, soft-spoken and good-natured young woman, she had better luck than both Hailian and Lifen, and she found one from a village by the river when going to the market in *Luohu*. This young man had been going to Beijing to *dagong*, and only returned for the holidays. After they met, they quickly fell in love and exchanged the gifts as the token of mutual and exclusive commitment to each other. For the past two years, they had been seeing each secretly whenever he returned for her. Finally, Xiaohua decided to break the news to her family and she looked forward to her life living with her loved one in Beijing on *dagong*. As he had his parent at home in a different village, the understanding Xiaohua would accept it if she had to stay at home in the village to take care of his parents and the house. She was ready to marry the man of her desire and lived the life of a wife of a migrant husband, tied or left behind. However, much to her distress, her family especially her mother turned down her plan firmly, claiming that the family would not allow her to leave home

this far, and that if something should happen to her, such as her husband or his family abused her, they would not be there to help her. At her mother's insistence and arrangement, Xiaohua was married to Hailian's second elder brother, who was four years younger than Xiaohua herself in the summer of 2003. Xiaohua protested in silence and in tears, but in vain. After years' taking care of everyone's needs in the family, the young woman was used to put everyone's needs ahead of hers, and unable to stand against persuasion and coercion of her firm mother, she finally conceded and married against her wish.

Xiaohua's life trajectories Xiaohua was twenty five years old in the summer of 2003. She came from a big family with seven other siblings. All together there were four boys and four girls in her family. Among girls, she was the youngest. All her elder sisters did not get any chance to pursue studies in the school. Xiaohua was the luckiest of them. Being the youngest, she was able to complete five years of study in the primary school. All the boys in the family were able to complete their school up to junior, and with the second brother Yusong even finishing senior high school, quite an unusual achievement for one single family in the village. In 2003, Xiaohua's youngest brother Fangzhi was readmitted to the high school with our assistance, after dropping out of high school for two years, due to the financial difficulty in the family.

With an educational attainment averaging around five and six years for men in the village, averaging ten years' education for men within a single family was

quite an exceptional achievement. Partly this was due to the father who himself received junior high education. For his generation, he would be considered as very well educated. In fact, before the Land Reform in 1958, he was working as a state employee in the town. Because his family was relatively well off before 1949, therefore was classified under the category of “the landowners”, he was black labeled and sent back to the village. After that, the family went through dark periods during various waves of political movements. When Xiaohua’s mother recalled those periods, the usual quiet and gentle elder woman could not help cursing under the breath: “damn the mothers’...they really did it to us!” However, the father believed in the education, so no matter how hard, they managed to send all the boys to school.

Such a high educational attainment among boys within one family, however, did not help to lift the family out of poverty. On the contrary, Xiaohua’s family was among the most impoverished in the village. Now with the two elder sisters married and left home, and the eldest brother married with wife and one child living under the same old house, they did not have any means to build another house. So ten people shared the house of three rooms with the second floor mostly used as storage for produces, they were both parents, the elder brother’s family, Yusong, Yunzhi, Fangzhi and their second eldest sister who had been mentally ill, and Xiaohua. In the fall of 2003, at insistence of the eldest brother’s wife, the couple, together with their six year old son, separated from the extended

family, but only in land ownership, not in living and cooking. With five people's land left, Yunsong, the third son of the house, told me that if they did not have to sell grains, the family could go without starvation. But the expenses for the youngest son who was still going to the high school in *Shizhong*, on fertilizers as well as attending various village activities such as funerals and marriage ceremonies would require them to sell grain. Not to mention, there was Xiaohua's second elder sister whose mental illness had worsened over the years due to lack of medical treatment, and she could now hardly function, even her daily hygiene was in need of care from Xiaohua and her mother. The little nephew of Xiaohua's was the jewel of the family and has lightened up much of the depressing atmosphere in the family, yet he was always sick and his medical treatment even just in the village clinic was quite a drain on their tight financial resources. All these expenses had nowhere to come but selling grain on the market, which was why they were always in short of food within the family. In order to bring more income for the family, most of the children at home tried various methods, including *dagong* and *maigong*, but all failed miserably. Yusong was able to secure an apprentice work in a carpentry factory in Kunming, but he had to abandon the job and returned the village after finding himself unable to support his relatives and friends from the village to seek for jobs in the city. Yunzhi found coal mining jobs in the nearby city and was able to support Fangzhi to school through the savings, but had to quit after he developed serious chest problems. Xiaohua recalled his illness, and every time she shared her concerns

and worries for everyone in her family with me, she was in tears. She said that he almost died. Since then, Yunzhi stopped going to coal mines to *dagong*, immediately after that, Fangzhi dropped out of the high school.

When Yunzhi got sick from the coal mines, Xiaohua was *maigong* in the nearby city *Luoping* with one of her friends from the village. They both stayed with a family who processed tobacco and worked from morning till evening, living and eating with the family. In this way, she made 100 *yuan* one month. After Yunzhi got sick, she was quickly sent back to help take care of him and the family. That was the only time Xiaohua tried to *maigong* and earn money through selling her labor.

With ten people living under one roof, and after her elder brother separated from the extended family working only on his shared of land with his wife, the family was short of labor despite of seven grown ups in the family. Both parents were coming to the advanced age. The ill sister could not just help the family but needed personal care from others. Yusong spent all his time at the village committee and was only seen at meal and bed time, and could not and would not help with much work at home either. The youngest brother still attended the school. Even during the two years of dropping out of the school, staying at home, he refused to do anything in the field up the hills or around the house, only holding a book in his hands and tears on his face all the time. So among seven adults, there were actually only Xiaohua and Yunsong who were the accountable

full labor force working on the land for six people. Still after work endlessly in the field and around the house cooking, Xiaohua had to take care of everyone's feelings and emotions at home. She worried that her sister's illness was getting worse. She told me that her sister spit on her when she tried to take her clothes off to wash and cursed her with insane words that horrified the gentle and subservient Xiaohua. She worried for her two elder brothers who were having difficulties in finding marriage partners due to the poverty at home. She worried for her younger brother who did nothing but holding book at home in tears, and worried for her nephew who got sick constantly...There were always too much worries on her mind. When I asked her if she has left any room for herself, she shook her head with a bitter smile, said that she was fine, at least healthy.

In the summer of 2003, upon my arrival at the village, I was told by other villagers right away that Xiaohua was getting married. I went to visit Xiaohua and found her sewing her clothes in her house in such a low and dispirited mood that she did not seem to show a bit of delight in seeing me, which she always did before. I asked her if it was true that she was getting married, she looked at me and then continued with her work by the sewing machine. Other young women nearby were chatting while helping her to prepare for the dowry. Somehow I sensed that something was not quite right with Xiaohua but did not know what exactly. In the same evening, Fangzhi, Xiaohua's youngest brother came to our place to return our books, I asked him what he knew about Xiaohua's upcoming

marriage, the reserved Fangzhi muttered with the jargons like “half feudal (*ban fengjian sixiang*)’ and petty peasant economy (*xiao nong jingji*)” that I wondered with dismay how the formal education had messed up his mind and that he could not simply think straight and use the daily language, let alone to show care for the sister who had given so much for the family. When I asked Xiaohua, she would not tell me either. In stead she asked me to take part in her marriage ceremony as her bridesmaid. I was delighted with such an honor, however the questions still pondered in my mind.

Until two days before the ceremony, I ran into Xiaohua’s mother in the village. Holding my hands in hers, she thanked me with the usual genuine and gentle smile on her face. She said gratefully that if it were not for us, Xiaohua would not agree to marry as she arranged. I was shocked to hear this. She continued to explain that Xiaohua had a sweetheart from the village by the river and had been *dagonging* in Beijing for the past few years. Xiaohua wanted to marry him. But Xiaohua’s mother was against the marriage, reasoning that Xiaohua was too nice and gentle, and would not be able to stand for herself if she was bullied by her husband or his families. She would keep her close by so that she could protect her from any harm. So she and Hailian’s mother who was a distant cousin of hers arranged it that Xiaohua and her second son got married so that the two families could be closer in kinship (“*qin shang jia qin*”). Xiaohua’s mother continued to say that as relatives, Xiaohua would not be bullied and

besides, the son-in-law's father worked for the government, his family condition was quite well off. With all considered, it was a good arrangement for Xiaohua. I asked her mother if Xiaohua would accept her arrangement, she answered that she would not agree first. But after much persuasion, especially she mentioned to her that if she married to the migrant young man and left the village, she would not be able to see much of these teachers, (referring to us when we came to the village). Finally, Xiaohua gave in. That was why Xiaohua's mother who always appeared to us to be a good natured elderly woman of few words took initiatives to talk with me, held my hands and thanked me in the middle of the muddy village road. My heart sank upon hearing her and I felt ill-used. As everything was all set for the marriage ceremony, we went ahead with the plan. The marriage ceremony lasted for three days. For the first day, it took place at Xiaohua's home and I did not have any opportunities to talk with Xiaohua, she was always occupied with different people meanwhile working endlessly to prepare food to feed the whole village. Until the second day, she was escorted to the bridegroom's home and this was the only day that she did not have to do anything but staying in the new room prepared for the newly weds the whole day without coming out while the whole villagers were eating, drinking, singing their folksongs "*xiao diao*" among themselves. As her bridesmaid, I accompanied her in the room which was furnished with a double bed, a two-door closet and a fading pink mosquito net which color was hard to discern in the darkness of the room. Suddenly under the dim light of the room, and amidst the noise outside, I

noticed large tears rolling down from the thick eye lashes on Xiaohua's face. I was taken aback and asked Xiaohua what was wrong. In her slow and soft voice, she told us how much she did not want to have this marriage. Holding a piece of wooden necklace she hanged around her neck, she said that she needed to return that to her boyfriend who was *dagong* in Beijing. They met in *Luohu* when going to the Sunday market and had been seeing each other for the past two years. They were planning to get married next time he came back from *dagong*. She said that he was doing well in Beijing making 2000 *yuan* a month. She said that she felt sorry for him, but she had no choice. Her family needed her to be here and she could not be selfish and think of herself only... I did not interrupt her and let her talk on and on and her words buried in her sobbing in the noise of celebrations from the outside. The room for the newly weds was so strangely quiet and dark in sharp contrast with the dazzling bright sun light and noise outside. A silver lining of light managed through the thick and dark curtain made of *Zhuang* fabric, and through the tears, gazing the light of the dark room, I felt chilly and I shivered under the strange coldness.

Since the day of Xiaohua's marriage, I was not able to sit down for a minute with her at all. She had been busy running between two families in the village. Her work seemed to have increased twofold. Meanwhile, I kept on seeing her husband hanging by the gambling crowd in front of the small store or the primary school. Last time in the summer of 2004, when I went into the village, I was told

that Xiaohua was pregnant and when I tried to confirm this with her young husband, he said that she had not been feeling well with her chest, that she had been sick. But I never had a chance to meet her in person having kept on missing her in one family or another. I heard from the project worker that she came to ask if the teachers could help to pay for her youngest brother's tuition for the summer course, and got 500 *yuan*. I remembered when she got married, we collected 600 *yuan* among ourselves for her as our gifts to her. At first she refused to take it. Later, she told me that she had given half of the money to her brother for him to continue with his school. That was Xiaohua, always putting her family's need ahead of hers.

Xiaohua's story could made it a perfect case to disclose the evils of the arranged marriage and how that had sucked the blood and youth of the robust young women, and how young women were turned into a passive victim under the blood thirst patriarchy. However, looking closely at her story, the evil doer appeared to be her mother. If Xiaohua was around, she would continue to assist her with the care to the family and to the sick sister. Otherwise, all these would fall onto her alone despite her advancing age. So it was for the benefit of Xiaohua's mother that the arrangement was aimed for, therefore the old woman should be condemned for her selfishness and inconsideration of happiness of her own daughter. Our rage was easily directed towards the mother. However, the painful struggle between mother and daughter continued obviously for the benefit

of the family, with the men concerned either standing aloof keeping quiet or blaming the old woman with the high intellectual sounding terms as “half feudal” and “narrow minded petty peasant thinking”. Amidst the pains and tears these women shed and endured, the power of men in the family remain unshattered. However, paradoxically, the whole process of Xiaohua’s arranged marriage showed how hypocritical and powerless the men in the family were and how strong and resilient women were, to bravely taking up the burdens and failures of the men in their clinging to the myth of success through the formal education. Once divided in their individual expectation between mother and daughter got reunited again having found their own strength. That is why Xiaohua finally consented to the arranged marriage she was much against.

Xiaohua’s aspiration Xiaohua had many wishes and every single of them had been centering around her family. The same with other young women of her age, she had the desire to live a life that was beyond *Di’an* village, though she did not openly say that aloud like Hailian and Lifen. But when the much desired opportunity, migration and marriage, by most of the young women fell onto her, she could not accept it. The problems of and concerns for her own family constrained her from simply leaving her family and village and venturing into a strange world that was full of uncertainties. So as much as against her wish and her desire, she chose to accommodate everyone in her family and stayed.

Meiqing's life story: Aspiring for a modern life, through petty trade, not maigong

Meiqing was among the very few women in *Di'an* Village who was not aspired to leaving the village by participating in *dagong* or *maigong* in the city. As much as she enjoyed going to *Shizhong* city, she considered *maigong* “*xinku*” (bitter and spicy) in the city. She would rather do petty trade. But because of the poor transportation, the cost for room and board would be higher and no profit gained in the end. She hoped that the main road connectig *Luohu* and *Di'an* Village would be built soon, then she would be able to do the small business, going to the city and returning within one day.

Meiqing's life trajectories Meiqing, a twenty three year old young woman, was from a relatively well off family. She was also the youngest of the three other elder sisters and brothers. One of her sisters married a man working in the township government, and she had paternal uncles who settled down in *Shizhong* city through holding state jobs. Over the years, her father and brothers had been doing business through the official connection in *Luohu* and *Shizhong*, and her family had a stone house nicely built, with both inside and outside floors cemented. Inside the house, there was color TV set and other modern equipment. Growing up with powerful connections, Meiqing appeared quite different from other young women of her age, while most of them were shy, she was quite outspoken. She seldom wore the traditional costume “*da yishan*” and

wore modern clothes “small clothes, *xiao yishan*” in the village, quite unusual among women of all ages in *Di’an* Village. She said that she did not like to wear “*da yishan*”, because it was not as good looking as the modern clothes which were rich in styles. Besides, it was too much work to make “*da yishan*”.

Meiqing was much aspired to modern style of living, her eyes danced with excitement describing her visits to *Shizhong*. She told me that when she was in *Shizhong*, she liked to go to the park (“*gongyuan*”) watching others play bumper cars (“*wan pengpeng che*”), and watched movies, doing shopping mostly buying clothes and other accessories. She thought the wide and smooth roads brightly lit were especially romantic. But normally she would return after two day’s visit in the city, because in her words, she missed the home. Unlike her peers who tended to look to *maigong* as a chance to be exposed to the promising young man, Meiqing regarded *maigong* as hard. Most important of all, her marriage partner was arranged by her family to a young man who were from the same social standing like her family. She let her family arrange everything for her and believed that it was for all the best they did it for her.

Meiqing’s aspiration Meiqing considered doing small business such as selling trinkets, potteries and fruits and alike a more desirable way of making a living. She said “petty business (*xiao shengyi*)” could “make money”. When I asked her if she was engaged in it, she said:

“...no, because the main road is too far from us... When we return, there are no buses coming to our direction, and walking is too far, taking two hours, and the road is too difficult to walk on, when we get home, it is dark... but we leave early from *Shizhong* to come back, we would not be able to do any business!... if we rent a room to over night there in the city, we wouldn't be able to make any money”.

Meiqing said hopefully that when the road to *Di'an* Village was built, “... with convenient transportation, we would be able to do business”.

Meiqing would rather prefer doing light work such as tending cows and feeding pigs at home to engaging in *maigong* or *dagong*, neither doing petty business when the road to the village was not constructed yet.

Meiqing was aspired to urban way of life, but she would choose not to engage in *dagong* and *maigong* to earn that kind of urban living. Though it was true that she claimed that the work was too harsh, the humiliation involved in *maigong* was something she and her family would not be willing to have her to go through. As the long distance and long term *dagong* was highly stigmatized and strongly associated with “smuggled women”, and “women as idiots with bad virtues”, and “the family is disgraceful”, it is inconceivable for Meiqing from the powerful clan of Wu to run that risk of subjecting her family and her clan into that disgrace. As she and her family were so well positioned in the village, she did

not worry too much about how her life would be in future, as far as she kept a strong connection within the family, her future would be secured, and she did not need to fight on her own and suffer anything more from going outside the village. She was fully aware that the kind of privileged status that came along with her family and clan would be lost once she left the village. Hardly graduating from the primary school, she could not see creating a life that would be of similar privileged status outside the village. So she would choose to stay in the village and went to visit the city where her close kin were whenever she felt like to, and just had fun in the city, visiting the park, and watching movies. She would like to make a living on doing the petty trade as most of the women would like to do in *Di'an* Village for its relative autonomy and less hassles and abuses comparing with *maigong* hired by others. Despite poor road, young women like Lifen also engaged in the petty trade whenever she had money on her own either from selling produces from the home, or from *maigonging*, but Meiqing would consider that too hard work, and too little gain. Until the road was constructed, she chose to stay at home, doing light house work and working in the field and be free.

From the experiences of Meiqing, it was obvious that the family and clan status in the village played a major part in shaping the aspiration of the young women and her choices in whatever forms of work she would like to engage in. Meiqing family's elitist background was both constraining and enabling to her. It looked enabling to her in that she seemed to be free from worries and pains that

many young women of her age but poorer family background had to go through. She seemed to be able to choose her lifestyle as she desired. It was constraining to her in that she had consciously and unconsciously more burdens on her when coming to make her own individual choice. She could not afford to bring any stigmatization to tarnish the fame of the family and the clan. And her future was connected to the family clan. When Xiaohua found it hard to break free from the constraints of her family, it was very clear to her where the pressure lied and she made the choice to comply with her mother, which had already enabled her to take some degree of control over her life. Meiqing was totally conforming to her family and meeting their expectation while believing that she was making the good choice, and taking much pride in herself. That was why when Meiqing was showing off her family's privileged background and talking as if despising the *Zhuang* women's traditional reproductive activities, other young rural women were keeping distance from her, instead of admiring her.

Family's economic and social status in the village, the young women's space in marriage and migration: Xiaohua and Meiqing in comparison

Both of Xiaohua and Meiqing shared one thing in common, which was their little participation in *maigong*, and the active role of their mother in arranging their life for them, unlike most of the young single women nowadays in the village. However, other than this, they both differed in every possible way, and formed a sharp contrast. Xiaohua was quiet, considerate and tradition-abiding,

Meiqing was loud, proud and against *Zhuang* tradition. Xiaohua's family was among the most impoverished in the village, while Meiqing was among the wealthy ones. Xiaohua did not participate much in *maigong* mostly because the demand within the family constrained her, yet for Meiqing, it was the hardship and humility accompanied *maigong* that stopped her from taking part in. Through the arrangement of the family, Meiqing was dating a promising young man whose family was connected to hers, and Meiqing was happy with the arrangement as his family was also better off, she was relatively protected under the power of the family and she enjoyed the protection. Xiaohua was arranged to marry the young man whose family was also well connected with hers, also under the name of protecting her. However, to Xiaohua, she knew very well beneath the discursive protection lied her continuing responsibilities for her own family. Though same kind of gendered rational behind the young women's courtship and marriage, to Meiqing, it was a welcome arrangement putting her under protection of the power of the clans, but for Xiaohua, it became an arranged even forced choice, which she resisted but in vain.

For Xiaohua, all her desire was to help her family and to lighten up the burden of the family. However, deep down inside her, she has the same urge of escaping the depression state of the family in the village by leaving afar. Her deep attachment to the young man who was *dagonging* in Beijing, with whom she could not have spent much time with proved that. She was especially drawn by

his ability to make 2000 *yuan* a month in Beijing. However, when her plan was turned down by her mother, she silently protested. Her mother's reason was not enough to persuade her to give up upon the idea, but when in combination with the young man her mother arranged her, better living family condition, fewer siblings as compared with hers, she consented. After all, she was not all that sure what might be waiting for her outside and in the other village. Besides, could anyone she knew control their life? "This is my fate, and I have to accept it", Xiaohua was conforming to a life that she could make sense of, though against what she desired most. But all these were at the cost of Xiaohua's increasingly bad health, suffering from chest pain for a young woman of twenty-six years old may be her bodily resistance.

Having from the relatively better family who had powerful connection to the outside community, Meiqing knew that leaving will not guarantee a better life for her than she already had in the family and the community. It was about safety, security and comfort that the family could bring to her. For herself and her family, she did not need to suffer from the hardship and humiliation that *dagong*, or *maigong* might involve her. She would like to engage in petty trade, which was more respectable. But in her mind, as the road was not constructed yet, the profit margin was none, she would rather not to engage in it, but living at home and living an easy life, tending cows and feeding pigs, free from worries. When she wanted it, she could visit *Shizhong* city and had her cousins and others show

her around, visiting parks, watching movies, buying beautiful clothes. Eventually, her family would arrange a man for her to her family's liking, then she did not have to work as hard as other women in the village, continuing to enjoy the relatively leisure and freedom from all the worries. Just relying on her family, she did not have to fight too much.

Summary and analysis of the young single women's situated narratives on migration

From the narratives the young single women, I find that the young single *Zhuang* women in regards to migration encounter with myriad forms of control from family, the community and from within themselves in their aspiration and internalization of modern values and gender ideologies. However, they respond to these various forms of control in ways that are situated in their context, ranging from complying, accommodation, negotiating and resisting. In this summary section, I will first provide summaries of the young single women's narratives on their life's aspiration in relation to migration, and controls within themselves, from their families, and the community as well as the range of strategies they deploy in responding to the controls. Then I will analyze each level of narratives through engaging with the theoretical discussion.

The young single women's narratives on their aspiration regarding migration

Through the situated narratives of the young single *Zhuang* women on migration, the young single women are aspired to a creating a home or *Zaan* that

is free from poverty, and more “modern” life. While the meaning of modern shares with the dominating qualifications in that it is more urban bound, and better access to material comforts, very few *Zhuang* women describe the term of modern life in “*xiandai*”. In stead, they express their admiration for the life in the city of *Shizhong*, for being able to live in the city, to walk on the paved street under the bright light at night, in their words “so romantic”. They express their wish not to follow the footstep of their mothers, which is “after work in the field up on the hill, and cooking, feeding the pigs around the house, we still need to weave cloth at night, no rest at all, too bitter...”, a life that is typical of any *Zhuang* women. They are aspired to be free from the endless work in the family, and tight controls in the family and the community. The prototype of the modern life in the consumption is not in anyway near to be much of what they desire.

As they lack proper means to enter the much desired urban living, they look at migration, particularly *maigong* as a chance to meet someone from the city to marry. So marriage intention is more on their agenda than economic pursuit in their attempt to engage in *maigong*. As Lifen and other women said it out loud that “*maigong* is harsh, and humiliating, but it is fun...who knows, we might find the one we like”.

Equally aspired to the modernity, however, the *Zhuang* single young women are not as much as being transformed into a consumption subject as discussed by the literature on young women and migration. Rather, they are aspired to be free

from poverty and endless work in the field and in the house. In their words, “men do not need to be from a wealthy family, but at least, he should not let the family live on starvation”, and that “men in the village throughout the years only work on a few thing, but women work all the time, without stop, after a day’s work (*‘huoji’*) up on the hill, and weaving at night!”

The *Zhuang* single young women though share the same aspiration of achieving a modern life or better life through marriage, there are variations in terms of the kind of modern life or good life or good husband among the young women. Lifeng and Hailian regard marrying a man out of their village as a choice of the husband, as they think that the young men in the village are lazy, and irresponsible, and will not be able to provide for the family with the basic needs. While Hailian and Xiaohua are not particular about the ethnicity of the prospective partners, Lifeng and Fengling would rather choose a *Han* man in order to pursue a kind of modern life that they do not have to engage in the same kind of life as their mothers do. Xiaohua’s man of her desire is a *Zhuang* young man working in Beijing. She wished to follow him to live in Beijing, the capital city on migration. Though Xiaolei expressed her detest to marriage and migration in which she and her family have been associated with the trafficking in women and she suffered tremendously as the result, but in the end, she married and moved away from the village..

The young single women's narratives on the controls regarding migration

The young single women talk about the family's against their wish to migrate. When the mothers say that they do this out of the protection of the daughters, the young women protested, challenging their mothers that "you just wish me to do all the work for you in the family, to attend to the cow and collect fodders, but when I need just a little bit money to buy yarn to make a bag, you do not give me any. You do not treat me and my brother fairly".

Obviously, the young daughter's work in the family, both in production work and reproduction work is the real underlined reason for the parents, particularly mother's objection to their migration. When they are allowed to participate in *maigong*, it is because that *maigong*, being short term and short distance, and highly seasonal, will not affect the daughter's contribution in the family.

The communal trafficking discourse serves as a horror to deter young *Zhuang* women's action to leave the village. Young *Zhuang* women are very much aware of the communal discourse on women trafficking whenever there are occasions linking the young single women and migration together. When young women who were gossiped about in the village to be trafficked came back with their husbands, children and many gifts, young single women were full of admiration for them, they went to visit them in their house and bombarded them with all sorts of questions regarding their life in other provinces, far but supposedly better off than *Di'an* Village. Full of admiration and even jealousy, mixing with the

trafficking women discourse, the young women were torn in between what to believe and hesitate to emulate the daring move of the women marrying to the other provinces.

Though there are as few as five cases of the young women marrying far and out of the *Zhuang* community, the discourses on their being trafficked serves to instill fear in the young women who are aspired to leave behind a poverty-laden and endless work life and for a more modern life in the predominantly Han community. In this way, the community ethnic control over the young single Zhuang women's marriage, on their sexuality and body is largely exercised.

The young single women's narratives on their responses to the myriad forms of the control

Under these multiple forms of control, however, the young single women respond to these controls differently. The ones with strong agencies took the opportunity that *maigong* provides and leave the family and village at the risk of being labeled as a trafficked woman. To cope with the stress that come from a predominantly Han society, she carved space of her own by living with her *Han* boyfriend among the *Di'an* migrants in the near city. In this way, by living on the margin between the city and the village, between the *Han* and *Zhuang*, she openly challenged the control over her sexuality that are gender, ethnicity and class based.

However, most of the young single women are not equipped with such a strong agency as protesting against the multiple forms of the control. Most of them still choose *maigong* as an alternative in searching for the desired life without totally upsetting the powers over them. As years gone by, some women like Hailian found *maigong* unable to find a desirable partner that would take her out of the community. Under the pressure of getting married in time within herself, in the family and the community, she resumed the customary practice of dating the young men from the same tribe, and married. But the young women like Lifen was not willing to give up, and over the years, she insisted on participating in *maigong*, hoping to find the one of her desire. Failed in each attempt, she found herself caught up in the dilemma between village life and *maigong* life.

The diverse responses from the young women had to do with their family relations, especially the relationship between the father and mother, and particularly the relations with their mothers. In the family where the parental relations were bad, and the mother's agencies were strong and at times, even manipulative, the daughter tended to be more resisting. Such is the case with both Xiaolei and Fengling. Though they chose quite different even contrasting response to cope with the problems, for Fengling migrating against the parents and the community's objection, Xiaolei stayed but with vehement protest against the absent yet strong wished mother and the control over her from the community.

Though Xiaolei could not break away from the multiple and invisible control, she protested verbally, and developed critical understanding towards any forms of life, be it *dagong*, *maigong* and marriage.

Discussion

Young single rural women have been targeted as the principal subject of studies in the vast literature on rural women and migration. They have been mostly treated as women who have strong agency, transcending their environment and break away from the patriarchal control of the traditional families and villages. Or they are forced to take on the family responsibilities by migrating to the city engaging in the highly exploitative work in the export oriented manufacturing zones in order to support their younger brothers to continue with the school, sacrificing their own happiness and health for the family. Either way, migrating to the cities is a small and transitional stage of their lives. Eventually, dictated by the biological clock, they would return their home origins to raise the family, however, with a more modern attitude towards life and family. The modernity is reflected in their change of particularly in the expectation of number of children as well as the education for children. The narratives of the six young single women counter these universal constructions of knowledge on rural women and migration and unveil their problematic in that they undermine and neglect the situated context that these young single rural women are in, as well as the voices

that they gave to their specific situation, as the meanings they are able to derive are within the constraints and options both at the wider and local levels.

Through the narratives of the six young single women in *Di'an* Village, this chapter demonstrates the diversity of their experiences that fails to be captured within the two contrasting meta-narratives within the mainstream literature on rural women and migration. I argue that for the diversity and complexity of the webs of powers that work to constrain and enable the lives of these women on migration to be captured, women must be placed at the center and gender needs to be placed under scrutiny and tied into the daily life of the women in their aspiration, life trajectory, associated with migration, in their work both in production as well as reproduction, in their relations within the family, parental or siblings, in the village, so as to closely observe how the power of gender work with other forms of control such as ethnicity, class, and age in shaping each individual women's lives, and how each women deploy different strategies to create a life that they can make sense of. To do this, women are not simply applauded as the super hero that transcend any limitation, or sympathized as pure passive victims that subjected to the multiple powers of oppressions, but the life of women were made richer and fuller.

Putting women back to their life course, their environment in the family, in the village in the study of women and migration also allow us to go beyond the livelihood discourse that has dominated the literature. It is fully demonstrated

through these six young women's lived experiences that monetary gains are not the dominating reasons for them to choose in between leaving and staying, participating in *maigong* or not. It is more of searching for *Zaan*, or home that maybe of meaning to them that dictates their decision and action. Among the six young women, the reasons ranged from seeking for marriage suitors, escaping from the shame of the family due to poverty caused by the absence of male descendent, to the need to protect and care for the family in the village.

Also, the central issues that are salient in the young single Zhuang women's narratives on migration, issues such as the diversity of modern lives, good lives through migration, or the dilemma of staying and leaving presented to be discussed later in the chapter 8 on summary and theoretical discussion.

Chapter 5 Myriad Forms of Migration, Strained Gender Relations and Young Married *Zhuang* Women's Struggling to Build a "Zaan"

Introduction

“Men plowing and women weaving (*nangen nüzhi*)” has been regarded as an ideal and compatible partnership between man and wife in traditional Chinese rural subsistence culture. As the massive population movement breaks the barrier between rural and urban under rapid urbanization, a new type of partnership, i.e. “men migrating, women plowing (*nangong nügen*)”, has been praised as an ideal partnership in modern times. From the narratives of six young married *Zhuang* women in *Di'an* Village, I find this understanding of sexual division of labor inadequate to capture the rich and complex gender relations that shape the diverse lived experiences of rural married women living under similar social and cultural environment.

The married young women in *Di'an* Village talked about their struggle to build their homes, their much aspired “*Zaan*”, through deploying various means which they saw fit and acceptable. Largely contrary to the young single women who were caught in the dilemma between migration and non-migration, and tended to associate migration with the potential of securing a lifestyle different

from their mothers and sisters', the married women mostly did not look to migration as a way out, despite their desire for a different way of life. Migration played an important role in young single women's consideration of their future marriage. However, migration was more than a way of survival for the family to married women. The sexual division of labor in the village was not so clear cut as the typical "men migrate and women plow" pattern. When the land cannot provide basic needs for the family, men do migrate. However, this does not mean that migration can automatically alleviate poverty. In many cases, men could hardly make ends meet by seeking paid jobs, while leaving most of the work to their wives. To compete with the *Han* majority, *Zhuang* men are at a disadvantage, politically, economically and culturally, despite their hard work. No way for them to compete. They either get caught in between leaving and working in the field or develop negative attitudes and began to shun from familial responsibilities through engaging in gamblings. This caused further stress on the part of the women and they responded in ways diverse, ranging from open protest to compromise, accommodate to compliance. *Zhuang* women also participated actively in myriad forms of migration: as tied and independent migrants in *dagong* and in gendered relay migration, taking turns with their husbands to participate in *maigong*.

Through presenting six young married women's situated narratives of migration in *Di'an* Village, I unveiled their aspiration rooted in their life

trajectories, and showed how migration came to play a role in their lives. Their frustrations of being caught in between their aspirations and constraints from family, the community as well as the wider society, and the agency they demonstrated in coping with the frustrations could also be seen. In order to uncover how different mechanisms worked to control and enable young married women in regards to migration, I presented women in similar situation or those with similar response yet having their distinctive stories in dealing with constraints to show how they demonstrated their agency in pursuing and creating a life that makes sense to them. Indeed, changes in political and economic conditions set the stage, but they did not write the script for the actors. Married *Zhuang* women responded to constraints and opportunities created by macro forces, but they did so within the limits of specific family structure and community culture.

There are three parts in this chapter: the first part consists of the situated narratives of six young married women; the second is a summary and analysis; and the third is discussion.

The young married women's situated narratives of migration

Embodied protest against the "day-dreaming" migrating husband

Meicui's story: Internalized gender ideology, cost of the bodily pains

Meicui liked to laugh and she laughed with a ringing tone, clear and echoing, pleasant to hear. She seemed to be happy all the time. For a while, I always

liked to visit her in her small hut by the road, temporarily built to house the family. Like most of the young married women of her age, she gave birth to two children in her early thirties, one boy and one girl, both attending school. When I first met her in summer 2002, her husband had just returned from coal mining work. For the past few years, Meicui's husband had been working in the coal mines in *Shizhong* between the two busy seasons, leaving most of the work in the field and around the house as well as taking care of children to Meicui alone. I observed that even when her husband did not go out to *dagong* during the slack season, he did not help much at home, mostly hanging around with other men of his age, playing cards. Moreover, he always invited his “drinking and eating friends (*jiu rou pengyou*)” to the house, and Meicui had to cook for them and waited on them while they were drinking. This put more burden to Meicui. When I asked her if her husband was unfair to her, she shook her head and said: “Never mind. They are men. They are tired after working hard out there and need a rest”. She did not think that he was wrong for not helping her in the field and around the house, neither did she consider her work in the house and in the field as work of any worth, in her words “I am useless, only know to *zuohuo* in the field to feed the family... cannot earn money, I am of no use. It's shameful... (*zhi xiaode zai ditou zuohuo, nabuzhu qian, meiyou yong, shuo qi lai xiu ren luo...*)”.

Though Meicui tried to appear to be cheerful all the time, the endless work of *zuohuo* and around the house without any assistance wore her down. Worries and

the sense of helplessness were quietly replacing her cheerfulness. In summer 2003 when I returned to the village, I found her to be enwrapped in total weariness and worries. The laughs and cheerfulness that I remembered so vividly were gone. She wanted to squeeze a smile on her face but in vain. Endless sighs followed the initial greetings, and she said: “Life is so hard and it hurts (*rizi kunnan shang le*)”. That summer, Meicui’s husband did not go out to seek for a paid job.

Meicui’s longing Meicui managed to persuade herself to accept her husband’s irresponsibility on account of his masculinity, despite her longing to get his help in the house and the field instead of playing cards, eating and drinking with his friends. She also persuaded herself to believe in his capability of doing business. When an idea of business such as collecting melons in the village and carrying them to the market for sale struck him, she would be ready to help, though “worrying to the aching of her chest” as the business would put them into further debt if it failed, just as what had happened all these years. While she was helping with the scale to weigh melons, I noticed a sense of weariness and powerlessness on her face. She was worried how they could find money to support their children’s education, the shack in which they were living would collapse some day under heavy rain and strong wind, and her much longed house was not seen to be built in the foreseeable future. Meicui longed for her husband to be near to help her, but the internalized gender ideology dictated her that as a good wife she should support her husband invariably. Indeed, she followed the

good virtues of a woman. But life continued to be difficult, with or without her husband around. Meicui was perplexed, but more worried and helpless.

Meicui's longing and life trajectories Meicui was a little over thirty, and from the same village. Her mother died when she was only fourteen. Her sister-in-law brought her up. She described her childhood as “*zuohuo* everyday”. She attributed her life of engaging in worthless work around the house and in the field to her lack of education. At seventeen, she married her husband, a fellow villager, on her own choice. Two years later, she gave birth to a girl, then a boy. During the past eight years, her parents-in-law, both in their prime time, passed away after falling ill, and soon after that her brother-in-law died of electric shock. Meicui and other villagers thought that three people in one house died in a span of eight years was quite unusual and attributed this to the old house being haunted. With the assistance from villagers and relatives, Meicui and family built a simple shack within three days and moved out of the old house.

Meicui's longing and her husband's migration Having experienced the death of the loved ones since young and particularly in the past eight years, Meicui did not want her husband to work in the coal mines fearing something might happen to him. However, I observed that even if he stayed at home, he would not be able to help his wife out. He either hung out with other men playing cards, or invited them to eat and drink. While they were playing and drinking, she had to wait on them, doze off by the door after a day's work in the field and put the children to

bed. When her husband was caught up in his “daydream” of getting rich through doing business, she had to help him put the melons off and on to the scale while he was recording the weights. When the village center was being built, her husband organized a team of villagers to carry heavy wet sand mixture up onto the roof. While he was standing aside giving instructions, she carried heavy loads of cement onto the building. Towards the end of the day, I saw that his husband got paid for their work. She believed that it was right because he was the head of the house. However, as the new semester drew near, she was worried about the tuition fees for her children. She was frustrated, but still believed in her husband. She did not know what to do, only blamed herself for being clumsy and not knowing anything. If she could not support the family, she felt even more useless. She kept on apologizing for the bad living conditions of the family. In reality, no matter how hard she tried, it was impossible to feed the whole family through her own effort. She was torn between wishing her husband to go to work in the life risking coal mines and having him stay with her at home yet adding more burden to her. He was not able to help the family much in either way. She had made no complaints as in her mind men only did important and valuable work. Her worries and a sense of powerlessness to improve her family’s living conditions turned the once cheerful Meicui into a reticent person, subdued and withdrawn, aging faster than her actual age.

Dongqi's story: Outrageous at the absent husband and his failing to support the family

Dongqi was outrageous. I had been to her house many times during which she always appeared to me to be amiable, gentle and quiet. Even when her sister-in-law, Guifen, an outspoken and frank woman, said to me right in front of her that “Dongqi was not smart enough, and this was one of the reasons that the family was so poor”, Dongqi kept her gentle and friendly smile. All the time, I thought that she did not understand *Han* dialect. But after hearing so much from her husband, Guifen and her mother-in-law, I felt that I had to know what she was thinking and how she felt. So one day, knowing that most of the people in the house would not be around, I went to visit her. To my greatest surprise, she could speak and understand the dialect quite well. It might have to do with the fact that it was the first time she spoke out loudly or with the intense feelings that had been built up inside her over years. She had reached the point of explosion and just let it out. I knew that this young woman had kept a lot inside herself, but at that moment she was just pouring it out all on her husband, Xiaoming, who was by the side lowering his head, pretending to be occupied by smoking the water pipe. With fire in her eyes, she cried out loudly:

“Every time he left, he left for a long time, without any news...

when he returns, he brings nothing home... there is nothing around the

house... he even plays cards and gambles...I want to leave this house,
too... who would give it a damn!"

Dongqi's longing Dongqi longed for a "Zaan", a home where her husband could work along side with her and the family did not have to worry about food and clothing. Dongqi attributed her frustrations regarding her life and her family to her lack of education and her husband's irresponsibility for the family over years. Despite of shortage of food and rundown housing, she insisted in sending her two children to school. She desired her husband to quit gambling, stop "daydreaming" of getting rich overnight by doing business and take up the familial responsibilities. When her husband continued the way he was, she was desperate and angry. She threatened that: "I, too, would leave this family!"

Dongqi's longing and life trajectories Dongqi was from a family of six brothers and sisters living in a village close to town. She never attended school. She described her childhood as "working the whole day, and all the time, no rest at all" ("yitian dou zai zuohuo, yi hazi dou bude xian"). She regretted that her parents did not send her to school and only wanted her to *zuohuo* (work) on the family lots. "Otherwise, my life would not be as it is now". She stressed that "all the time, and every minute being at work, not a single minute of leisure. Too much work, chopping the woods, feeding the pigs... ". Now thinking back, she complained that they treated her with too strict. Even when her playmates came

to invite her out, her parents refused to let her go, afraid something bad might happen to her.

Dongqi married Xiaoming through the local practice of “exchanging marriages (*huanqin*)”⁵ in which Dongqi’s brother married Xiaoming’s sister. The parents of the two families claimed that this would make the two families even closer (“*qin shang jia qin*”). Dongqi regretted the marriage very much claiming that she did not know anything when she was young.

Dongqi’s longings and Xiaoming’s migration For the past five years, Dongqi said that she had pain every time she had her period. She did not know what the problems were but the pain had affected her work tremendously. She could not work fast and had to stop to take a rest. As she worked so slowly, no one in her village was willing to work collaboratively with her (“*huangong*”). She had to work on her land all by her alone and the work took more time to finish ending up in missing the time of harvest. She could not raise good pigs due to a lack of feeds, despite the fact that she worked without a pause. She was upset by her husband’s irresponsibility and failure to support the family over years. Though she worked endlessly around the house and in the field, the financial situation of the family had not been improved. It even grew worse as they incurred more debts from her husband’s attempt to open a store in their own house in the village.

⁵ *Huanqin* is a form of arranged marriage in which two families exchange their daughters to ensure that their respective son obtains a wife. This normally takes place among impoverished families which cannot afford to pay for the bride-price.

The family lived in the house that was nearly broken down partly because of a lack of maintenance, but mostly due to violent damage done by the angry villagers and her husband's second elder brother many years before. The anger of the villagers was caused by Xiaoming's eldest brother, who courted a woman who was already engaged to another man. In anger, they destroyed the wooden walls that supported the house. Dongqi and Xiaoming put up some plastic bags to cover the missing walls and the holes on the wall in order to protect themselves from wind and rain. Life became even more difficult when their two children started going to school, making their financial burden heavier.

Xiaoming despised hard physical labor in the field and always dreamed of doing business. He claimed that he was once successful in trading ginger and even made a trip to Singapore under the support and sponsorship of a "big boss from a foreign trade company". Over the years, he claimed that he had made at least 80,000 yuan but had gambled them all away. Before his children started going to school, he had never cared for their family much. Xiaoming told me that on one Chinese spring holiday, he cost 30 yuan and bought Dongqi a pair of leather shoes. Before he gave it to her, he had lost all he had in gambling and had to sell the shoes.

Two years ago, Xiaoming returned from *dagong* and set up a small grocery store in his dilapidated house with a loan selling wine, tobacco, cigarettes, papers, sugar, and etc. However, most of the villagers did not have cash and always paid

on credit. With limited cash flow, the goods were soon sold out but there was no cash to replenish the stock. In deeper debt, they had to close down the business. Dongqi wished that Xiaoming would stop daydreaming and to take up solid familial responsibility, find a job or work in the field. Very often, her health was poor and she could not work much in the field, so they had to rent out their rice fields to others in the village. After harvest, Dongqi and her family could only obtain half of the grains. With the corns she grew on the family dry land, she raised two small pigs.

Because of Xiaoming's reluctance to do farm work and Dongqi's slowness caused by her poor health, no one in the village was willing to exchange labor with them. In addition, after fighting over family assets in past years, even the siblings were not on good terms with him. Other brothers in the village were not willing to help them out either. Relying on the labor of Dongqi and Xiaoming, production of the rice field was limited, far from enough for the whole family. Dongqi was not happy with the situation, and fights broke out constantly between her and Xiaoming.

For a long time, Xiaoming left home *dagong* and doing business. Often, Dongqi did not know where he had gone and what he had done. She said: "He did not bring any money home... I did not know where he went either... and even worse, he has not come back for two or three years!" Dongqi did not think that going out could make any money: "... for a couple of years, he had not gone

outside any more... No money he could make by going out anyway.” She told me somewhat with a relief.

In summer 2004, I returned to the village. I went to visit the family as before. I found three women - Dongqi, Guifen and Guima - with children in the house. Guifen said that she had just returned for the weekend to bring some cooking oil for her mother. When I asked about Xiaoming, this was the answer I got from Guifen: “... He has gone to *dagong* in the city. He is gone for almost half a year. Nobody knows where he is and there is no news about him either...” Upon hearing this, I quickly looked at Dongqi and tried to find out anything unusual on her face. Dongqi behaved as usual, wearing an expression of quietness and humbleness as if nothing had affected her. Yet, I knew that deep down inside her something had happened.

Dongqi knew exactly why she was not happy with her life. She blamed all on her absent and gambling husband. She worked constantly around the house in spite of her poor health. In view of her two children who needed food and education and the house badly in need of repairing, she longed for her husband's return. From past experience, she was fully aware that her husband was not able to contribute anything to the family through *dagong*. But he continued to go away and to shun the familial responsibilities. Dongqi was very angry, she was not willing to let others to decide her fate. She fought bravely. For the past two years, she had managed to have her husband stay with her and work together in

the field and around the house. However, their income was insufficient to keep the family live at subsistence level and sustain Xiaoming's habit of gambling. Two years later, Xiaoming left again, same as before, no news, no money for the family. Dongqi alone took care of the family and the house.

Meicui and Dongqi compared: both are stayers with migrating husband who made little contribution to the family, yet having different embodied protests

Meicui and Dongqi had a lot in common. Both had never attended school and participated in *dagong* or *maigong*. Both lived in a raged house and had the same longing - a home in which their husband could be by their side going through difficult time together; a family that could support their children's study and free the family members from starvation and dangerous housing. They had similar kind of desire because their husbands shared many similarities: both engaged in migration, having lofty goals of getting rich by doing business despite little education; both detested farm work and loved to play cards and gamble.

Instead of blaming her husband for being unrealistic and detesting farm work, Meicui attributed her failure in reducing poverty to her own uselessness and unworthiness. Having internalized the gender ideology, she could not blame her husband who acted irresponsibly. As a subservient wife who worked endlessly to keep the family together, she grew to be weary and frustrated. As she could not understand, she simply attributed it to fate. "It was only fate. There is no way out," she sighed.

On the other hand, Dongqi would not let fate explain away the irresponsibility of her husband. She knew that it was not easy for him to make a living on migration, but wrong to leave the family for long without letting her know where he was and what he did, and making no contribution to the family. In her mind, he was wrong to gamble away the hard earned money while the family was on starvation. She also attributed her undesirable situation to her lack of education. Different from Meicui, Dongqi blamed her parents for treating her too strict on the pretext of protecting her. She could see that it was due to the huge amount of work after land redistribution that she was kept in the family to work endlessly and was not sent to school. It was also because of her parents' overprotection on her, which forbade her to go out with her playmates. In the end, she had to accept their arrangement of "*huanqin*". Dongqi had a lot of anger which led to the constant conflicts between her husband and her.

Meicui's conformity and Dongqi's protest could be traced back to their early life experiences. They worked day in and day out when they were young, but they did not have similar family relationship. Meicui's mother died at her young age and she grew up under the care of her sister-in-law. She had learned to conform in order to survive. That she got married at seventeen on her own choice "before she knew anything", is but a sign of escaping the family that seemed to be coercive. After she had moved into her husband's house, she experienced the deaths of the family members in a short span of eight years,

which caused her much fear for death and separation. And it was why she objected to her husband's engaging in the life risking coal mining. But, whatever he chose to do, she conformed.

As for Dongqi, she had always been restricted by her parents. She knew that she could go to school if there was not so much work in the house, and that she would have the chance to choose her own partner if she was allowed to go out with her playmates.

Gendered relay migration, engendered meanings

Yasao's story: From "stayer" to "tied migrant" to "gendered relay migrant"

Yasao was a woman of few words. She did not speak much of *Han* dialect. In the summer of 2003 when SARS broke out, I came to the village to continue with my fieldwork. Whenever I struck up conversation with the villagers on migration, people would immediately mention Yasao and her in-law siblings. People described in detail how the doctors from the town hospital on protective outfits climbed up to the village to examine her husband Banliang who had returned from *dagong* in Guangxi during the SARS epidemic. They continued to tell me that when Bangliang left for *dagong* in Guangxi in 2003 after the spring festival, Yasao, her baby boy, and their younger brother's family, which included the husband, the wife and a baby girl also followed them. Having the whole family left for so long a time and for such a long distance was rare among the

villagers in *Di'an* village and it causes gossips. Upon hearing so much about them, I decided to include Yasao and the whole family into my studies. With the assistance from other women, I visited them in their small house a few times and met them in *Shizhong* when they lived on *maigong*. Through their narratives in various contexts, I found out that Yasao's family could be called a migrant family. Everyone, old or young, male or female, engaged in and relied their livelihood heavily on migration.

Yasao's longing Yasao did not have high aspirations. For her, women's fate recurred across generations. As a woman, she devoted herself to her family without ever questioning and did whatever necessary for her husband and children, especially for her son. She was content with a family in which her husband and son lived healthily together. However, over the years after their marriage, they lived separately with Yasao staying behind in the village and her husband engaging in digging coals ("*wamei*"). This arrangement was made due to the shortage of land, which was insufficient to provide for the family. They had given birth to two daughters but they longed to have a son. So when the son was born, part of Yaosao's longing was fulfilled. The rest of her dream was to keep the family together. As the family could not survive on the family lots, they tried to go to Guangxi together to find jobs. They failed and ended up with further debt. To survive and to pay off the debt, they took turns to leave the village to seek for jobs. The husband went to the coal mines, and Yasao to

maigong against her shy and quiet nature. Yasao's simple wish for an ordinary family in which all members lived together was even far from realized. Under this arrangement of relay migration, she and her husband were even more separated.

Yasao's longing and her life trajectories Yasao lived in the same village and had five siblings. She had had no education either. Similar to the majority of young married women in the village, her youth was spent on endless work in and for the family. Upon reaching the marriageable age, under the arrangement of the elders, she married her husband and moved into her husband's house. Meanwhile, in her parents' family, except for the youngest brother who was still single living a life in between *dagong* and being aloof in the village, all other siblings had got married in the same village. Her eldest brother also had three children, among whom the first two were girls. In order to have a son, he and his wife left the two daughters to the care of their grandparents at home and migrated to the city living on *dagong* to escape the restriction of the family planning policy. In a few visits to Yasao's parents at the back of the hill, I did not meet the grandmother as she was always out in the field with her granddaughters who dropped out the school already. Once I met the old man climbing up on the roof standing on his shaking legs on a broken ladder to fix the leakage. What a terrifying scenario!

After marriage, to the couple's dismay, Yasao gave birth to two daughters. For years, Yasao had been taking care of the two daughters at home and working in the field while her husband went to work in the coal factories near Shizhong. One year ago, she gave birth to a son. As they were only allowed to have two children at maximum dictated by the family planning policy, they arranged that their ten-year-old eldest daughter Yanfen, upon reaching eighteen, would be given to a bachelor, a disabled middle-aged man in the village, so that their son could have legitimate status.

Yasao's longing and migration Yasao said that if they did not have to sell rice for cash, their food would last them for a year. But they needed cash for fertilizers, for going to relatives' funerals, etc., even if they did not send their daughters to school. For the past few years, her husband had been going to dig coal for five to six months a year, making three to four thousand *yuan* annually to help out at home. But the job was too dangerous.

For years, Yasao had stayed at home taking care of the children and working on the family lots, while her husband left for coal mining. After the birth of the son, they decided that they should go together to raise the much-treasured son. As the traditional way of life would not be able to sustain them both, and working in coal mines was life risking, they decided to leave together to find jobs that would satisfy their needs, leaving the two daughters to the care of the mother-in-law.

In spring 2003 when her husband heard from a friend in a nearby village that there were jobs in Guangxi and that he could even bring his family along, they decided to give it a try. The couple and their two-year-old son, accompanied by their young brother, his wife and son, set out after the Spring Festival. However, the trip turned out to be a disaster. When they arrived, the factory no longer needed workers. To make things worse, a fellow villager who worked there was reported to have had a fight with workers from other regions and had killed one of their workers. He ran away and the workers were threatening to nail him down. Having related to the runaway, Yasao and Bangliang were scared and fled to find their sister who was said to be trafficked, later got married and settled down there a few years ago. After leaving their baby son to the care of her sister-in-law Yaling, Yasao went to seek for a job. She was employed in a doll factory under supervision of stern and fierce-looking men who spoke only Cantonese *baihua*, Yasao, who left home for the first time, without anyone being able to help, was scared and fled the factory one month before the work was done. Besides, coming from a relatively cool area in Yunnan, they found Guangxi's summer unbearable. After deliberation, Yasao and Yaling would return home with their children first, leaving their husbands behind to seek for jobs. Because of SARS, Banliang could not have much work. He almost turned into a homeless and had to beg and sleep on the streets on his way home. Yasao described his terrible experience to us:

“... on his way back home, Bangliang borrowed fifty *yuan* from his sister for the travel expenses... he caught a cold with a light fever...because of SARS, he was stopped on the bus and was forced to go to the hospital... he was not scared, telling himself that if he was ill, he would be treated in the hospital and at least food and accommodation would be provided...But in the next morning, he was told that he could leave the hospital and was refused to return him his fifty *yuan* taken away from him upon entering the hospital. Being penniless and jobless, and no work available, he was in despair...He cried and could do nothing... that day, he slept on the streets, and then he begged along his way back to his younger sister who gave him another fifty *yuan*. That was how he made it back... “

That was how their brave deeds of migration ended. Yasao sighed with a mixed feeling: “... at least, everyone was back home safely...” But there was residual after the trip. They were confronted with the deep debt incurred by traveling and daily necessities. In order to survive, they decided that Bangliang continued to work in the coal mines in between the two peak seasons and came home to help planting and harvesting during the farming seasons. Right after the family farm work was done, Yasao would join other women in the village to *maigong* in *Shizhong* for a couple of weeks to one month so as to make extra money to help out. Upon Yasao’s return from *maigong*, Banliang would leave

again for the coal mines. Only through shifting of duty between husband and wife could they manage to support the family without starvation and pay off the debt. Relayed migration between Yasao and her husband was their last resort for survival.

Last spring when we went to Guangxi, my brother helped me to work in the rice field (“*pantian*”), I still owed him 200 *yuan* for doing that for us. After the harvest, I will go to Shizhong to *zhangong*... I will go to *zhangong* till all the *zhangong* work available is finished, I will come home and exchange for my husband “*lao guai*” to go to dig coals “*wamei*”...

When I asked her about *maigong*, Yasao said reluctantly:

...I may help others do their harvest... If I don't go, there will be no money for fertilizers. Last year, I borrowed money from Xiaoyu (the rural doctor). My husband was sick. The money for his injection was also borrowed from him... I'd better go first. If I am home, I need to plow the field “*lidi*” and plant the small spring crops (“*zhong xiaochun*”), but I do not know how to plow... Bangliang has to stay at home to do the plowing the field... When he has finished plowing, I would have finished the work in *zhangong* and come back. Then he can leave to dig coal... If both of us stay at home, when relatives

come to invite us to attend funerals and weddings, we will have to sell rice, which is not enough already. With three children, we do not dare to sell much rice, and we are still in debt. We still owe four to five hundred yuan incurred by our trip to *dagong*... Last year, we went out and did not bring home any money. No matter what, one of us has to stay at home to work on the field...”

Having had bad experience with *dagong* in Guangxi, Yasao was worried and sought support from Lifeng who had been to *maigong* a few times by then and appeared to be quite experienced. She said:

“... thinking about going to *zhangong*... I am a bit afraid, standing there. It is humiliating (“*xiu ren la*”)... Only those who are capable and not afraid can do that... Last time, I went to *zhangong*, but had no money for the bus. I borrowed fifteen *yuan* from my uncle. When I came to *Shizhong*, there were too many people...Sometimes, they offered ten or fifteen *yuan* a day, I could not compete with others... Sometimes, I was already up on the truck (for picking up people to work), but there were so many people. I was dragged down... thinking about going again, I am scared... Scared or not, I still have to go...(seeking for support, she asked Lifeng earnestly) Is it true that they only want those taller?”

Lifen, who was assisting me with my interviews with Yasao later explained more to me about what Yasao talked about their plan:

Yasao said that this year after harvest, Banliang would leave again, but not too far, only to *Shizhong* to dig coal, ... she would not allow him to go too far because going far won't bring any money back, and even the bus fee for coming back will not be left... In *Shizhong*, she is worried that her husband's health is not good, to go to dig coal, he needs to take shower every night...and weather in *Shizhong* is so colder, she is worried about his health, but still he has to go, he does not know how to write, he can only dig coal.

Lifen added that they did not have any other means to make money. And they did not have money to engage in business. I asked Yasao if the whole family would go this time, she said that "no, with three children... If we went together and could not find any money, we would all starve to death. No matter what, at least one will have to be left home taking care of kids and attending the fields".

Yasao's longing to have a son was satisfied at her eldest daughter's expense. However, her longing to stay with her husband was difficult to fulfill. After failing the attempt to follow her husband to seek for paid work, she and her husband resorted to relay migration but ended up even more in separation. In order to pay off the debt incurred by the attempt, her husband alone in *dagong* in digging coals would not be sufficient to support the family. To help, she went to

maigong during the farming seasons in Shizhong. Taking turns to *dagong* and *maigong*, the time they were able to stay together was even less. Apart from worrying about her husband's health and working conditions in the coal mines, she also had to cope with anxieties in job hunting.

Yagu's story: Partaking in the gendered relay migration, going to maigong, and squeezing a small space for herself

Yagu was tall and thin, so thin that she looked bony. When she was doing her needle work, I observed blue veins standing out on the back of her hands. Yagu always dressed in modern clothes. I seldom saw her wear *Zhuang* costumes. This was quite rare among fellow *Zhuang* women in *Di'an* village. She told me that she had pressure dressing like that. People would talk behind her back that she was a useless woman, not knowing how to make "*da yishan*" well. She comforted herself, "I cannot afford to have a sewing machine." She told me this in 2003. When I went back to the village again in 2004, I visited her finding her working away on her new sewing machine. She told me with a big smile on her face that after all she was able to buy a secondhand sewing machine at about 120 *yuan*, two weeks' pay from *maigong*. She was very happy with it and was making her own "*da yingshang*".

Yagu appeared to be quite unusual among her age cohort in *Di'an* village. Though she shared many similarities with them in that they all received little education, burdened with endless work in the family, and attending only to family

affairs without questioning their roles as daughter and wife, Yagu seemed to have more thoughts.

For the past couple of years, after her children had begun to attend school, Yagu and her husband had been taking turns to partake in different forms of migration. Her husband went to dig coals and she went to *maigong*. Yagu did not seem to mind too much about her separation with her husband. In fact, she welcomed the opportunities of leaving the drudgery of housework by participating in *maigong*. She aspired to the life of *Han* women who did not have to work so much, especially in making their own clothes. She told me that before she got married she wanted to leave the village and marry some young *Han* man. By doing this, she would not have to make so many clothes.

Yagu's desire and life trajectory Yagu was Yasao's sister-in-law. She was the second child of the family with two brothers and one sister. Her father passed away when she was thirteen. Her mother brought all the children up single-handedly. She had never attended school. She said there was always work in the house and she could have no leisure at all.

When she was young, she imagined that other women such as *Han* women would not have to work so much as their *Zhuang* counterparts, so she wanted to marry a *Han* man. But she had no choice. When I asked about that, she shook her head and said that she did not know any *Han* young man. Besides, the

elderly would not allow it. She added that “We *Zhuang* women’s life is too hard. But this is fate and we have no choice.” Her marriage was arranged by her elders at home. Together, they raised two children.

Yagu’s desire and migration Before the children attended school, the couple could manage to build the house with rocks they collected by the foothill and through exchanging labor with other villagers. Besides, in early 1990s when the ginger market was prosperous, they made some money with which they could buy cement. But in recent years, the price of ginger collapsed, and the children had begun to enter school. Solely relying on farm produces would not be able to cover all the expenses. Still, they had no money left for cementing the floor and separating rooms. The building of the house cost them some money and the couple was in debt. Since their children began to attend school, they needed money desperately. For the past couple of years, under the policy of reforestation (*tuigen huanlin*), they had to give up the land they developed for growing ginger. They did not have money to pay off the debt and their children’s education. To solve the problem, she and her husband took turn to go out seeking for paid jobs. During the two peak seasons of the year, after finishing the farm work at home, Yagu would go to *maigong*. In a fortnight, she could earn up to 200 *yuan* and bought fertilizers and other necessities for the family. After she had returned from *maigong*, her husband left for *wamei*. He went for two to three times a year, two to three months each time. From *wamei*,

he could bring home about 800 *yuan* a year. After paying for the children's school fees, they would be in debt of about 300 *yuan* each year and had to borrow from others.

I asked how the shift of duty was arranged, Yagu answered that they did not have to discuss as they were clear what was required to do. For the past couple of years, it had been worked out this way. By taking turns to engage in migration, they could make around 1200 *yuan* per year to pay for the children's school expenses, fertilizers and so on. Different from Yasao, instead of being indignant and feeling powerless about the whole arrangement, Yagu was positive about it. She did not object to *maigong*. To her,

“...to go outside to *maigong* was quite harsh. But with so many people together, it is also fun.... At home, I have to do so many things, but outside, I only need to do one thing from the morning to the evening... I like to go outside...”

Yagu was able to enjoy some positive aspects of *maigong*, such as relative freedom from the endless drudgery at home and a domain of her own that was not always related to family.

Gendered relay migration engendering different meanings: Yaosao and Yagu compared

From Yasao's and Yagu's narratives, I learn that both of them engaged in the gendered relay migration taking turn with their husbands to leave the village to seek for paid jobs. During farming seasons when physical labor was required at home, their husbands would return to do plowing ("li tian") and separating grains from the grass called ("da guzi"), which was considered to be men's work. The wife would then leave the village to *maigong* in *Shizhong* to work either in planting ("cha yang") or harvesting rice ("ge guzi") or corns ("ban baogu"), which are considered as women's work. Yagu and her husband had been working together like this for the past few years, but it was new for Yasao who was forced to do this after the failure of her and her husband's attempts to seek for long term and long distance *dagong* in Guangxi which put them further in debt. With a different life history and a different understanding of *Zhuang* women's work, Yasao, having internalized the *Zhuang* women's gender roles and ideology, felt repulsive and helpless about this arrangement. Yagu, who questioned the overwhelming amount of work a typical *Zhuang* woman had to do at home, welcomed the change brought about through *maigong* where she would only need to focus on one thing, reducing the drudgery and loneliness of work at home. With different experiences and perceptions of women's work, the two women felt differently towards the same kind of work *maigong*. Yasao felt under more strains when going to *maigong* while Yagu liked it better with the more space it

provided. So for Yagu, going to *maigong* was more than just for survival, while for the quiet and withdrawn Yasao, *maigong* was a challenge. If they did not want to have a son, the income from the crops, together with her husband's earnings from *wamei*, would be enough to support the family. To have another child further strained the family's scarce resources.

For Yagu who had been longing to live a life different from traditional *Zhuang* women but had no means of changing it, found that through *maigong* she was able to get away from the drudgery and endless work at home for a while. Engaging in *maigong*, she only had to concentrate on one thing and did not have to struggle so much among many other work. Besides, it was lonesome at home. In *maigong*, she was always involved in groups; to leave, to live, to work and to return, always in groups. So different from Yasao who was fearful of *maigong* but had no choice, Yasao welcomed the changes *maigong* brought to her.

From Yasao's and Yagu's different responses to the same kind of work *maigong*, I found that the gendered and ethnic perception of work and values of men and women played a crucial part in their responses.

Living a migrant life, troubled and strained gender and family relations

Yaling's story: as a tied migrant searching for a secured and less burdensome life

In summer 2003, I often noticed a young and good-looking woman dressed in "*xiao yishan*", modern clothes, carrying a small, cute and clean baby on her

back between two natural villages of *Lao* and *Bantai*. She made an unusual sight in the village for she appeared to be always at leisure and seemed to be engaging in nothing but taking care of the young baby. If my observation was true, it would be exceptional because all women in *Di'an* village were always busy outside or inside the house with multiple tasks at one time, and their clothes and their children were always dirty. Yaling appeared to be the only young woman who tended to her young baby without doing anything else. Later, through other villagers, I learned that Yaling had just returned from a long trip to Guangxi with her husband Xiaolin, the elder brother of Banliang. Together, they tried to find a job there but failed. They were back and in debt.

Yaling's aspiration Yaling aspired to live a comfortable life, especially away from doing “*huoji*” in the field up on the hills. In other words, she did not want to follow the kind of rural life as other *Zhuang* women did in *Di'an* village. As she did not have any other means to change her life, she wanted her husband who shared the same aspiration with her to be able to promise her a relatively freer and more comfortable life. Between rural and urban hard work, she would prefer working on a construction site in the city to cutting grass on the hills. But, if she could go by without working at all, she would rather stay in the village because it was difficult to survive in the city. In her words, “everything is money in the city.” The much desired “*Zaan*” for Yaling was one with no hard work, an

easier life, preferably in the city, and that the husband could provide all she needed.

Yaling's aspiration and life trajectory Yaling was from the sub-village of *Bantai* in *Di'an* village. Her father died of heart attack when she was very young, leaving behind three young daughters and his wife. Her mother, originally from the *Luohuo* town, told me that she was attracted to Yaling's father by his face and beautiful voice singing folksongs ("*xiao diao*") and followed him to *Di'an* village. Back then, in 1970s, there were not many differences between the town and the village. Now she regretted that she made a bad choice. She was a proud and tough woman and was known in the village for her aggressiveness. After her husband had passed away, she single-handedly raised the three children. Both Yaling and her elder sister had had only a few years of education for a lack of money and for their burden of work in the family. But Yaling said that she had no interest in study. As an attractive young woman, she started dating at her early age and got married at seventeen. She married Xiaolin who was also from *Di'an* village and same with her, who aspired to urban life. After they married, she followed her to *Shizhong*. They lived on alternating between *maigong* or small business. When I met them, they had already got married for three years and had had their first baby daughter for one year. After giving birth to the baby, they temporarily returned to the village to reduce the cost of living in the city.

Yaling's aspiration and migration Yaling did not like farm work. Before she was married and became a mother, she and her husband had been doing petty business like selling vegetables and fruits in *Shizhong*. After the child was born, the cost of living with a baby was too high, so they decided to return to the village. During the spring of 2003, when the news that there were jobs available in Guangxi reached the house, she and her husband, together with her brother-in-law's family, decided to give it a try. The migratory experience, however, turned out to be a disaster (“*kepa*”), as Yaling described to me. Especially for her with a baby of two months, Yaling shuddered recalling those days on the road. She said that they had to stand among the crowds on the train for more than ten hours from three o'clock in the afternoon till five o'clock early next morning, all the way standing while holding her two month old baby daughter-Xiao Tingting who, due to the bad air and crowdedness, cried without a stop. In Guangxi, they stayed quite a few days and spent a little money on food and lodging. They finally managed to find her sister-in-law who married there. They stayed with her sister's family in the village for a month.

Yaling shook her head when talking about their difficulties in searching for jobs. Many factors combined to hinder their way to earn a living. In Guangxi, most people, especially the bosses, spoke Cantonese (“*baihua*”) which they could not follow. This added to their anxiety. Also, they found the hot and humid weather in Guangxi unbearable. Finally, it was hard to stand the discrimination

and humiliation, especially for the hot tempered Xiaolin. They constantly changed their jobs due to various reasons. Yaling complained that if her husband were not so bad tempered, they might still be working in a factory, carrying sand earning 15 yuan per day. Yaling said that her husband was very willful and went wherever he desired, Yaling did not have much influence on him.

Anyway, after that trip to Guangxi, Yaling did not want to leave the house and the village any more. However, her husband did not think that they could have any life in the village. He liked city life more and said, "Life outside is better. There is some money outside. We can buy cooking oil. At home, there is nothing around. After we returned, we haven't been able to make a penny. If we were out there, we could make a little from some kind of work." Yaling reasoned that if they all stayed at home, they could not survive on the land. But Yaling was not willing to take another venture to Guangxi any more. She said, "If he (husband) insists on leaving and I cannot stop him, I will go with him and try our best to survive. If I am left at home working on the land, I would not be able to manage without him, especially that I have to take care of Xiao Tingting".

Fights broke out between them. Xiaolin threatened that if Yaling did not go along with him to the city, she and the baby could stay in the village. They could eat and sell whatever they had around the house. After that, they had to live on their own and he would not be bothered. Yaling was so upset that she

threatened to abandon the child and the family and look for someone else to marry. During one such fight, Yaling even attempted suicide with insecticide and had to be sent for the rural doctor for a rescue.

Xiaolin's long widowed mother was caught in the fight. Yaling proposed to leave their young baby to the care of the mother, and they both go out to find work. This proposal was met with fervent objection from their relatives and neighbors who felt that Yaling was not treating her mother-in-law right. They reasoned:

How could you say to have the old woman taking care of a young baby of only a few months at home? She is not old enough yet. If she leaves Xiao Tingting at home, the elderly mother still needs to gather fuel, cook, and tend to the cow. How could she do all these alone at home? The old woman would be so burdened! Last year when Yasao left her two elder daughters to the care of the old woman for *dagong*, the young daughter was burned by hot water...

Yaling's husband wanted to arrange it in a way that the whole family together including the elderly mother moved to the coal mines, where he and his wife could find jobs and the mother could take care of the grandchild. But the truth was that Yaling did not want her aging mother-in-law to be with them. She wanted her to work on the land for them and at the same time take care of the

baby so that she and her husband could be free to go to *dagong* in the city. Neither Yaling's nor her husband's plan happened. A few days after the Mid-autumn Festival when groups of *Di'an* village women went up to *Shizhong* to *maigong*, there was Yaling's mother-in-law, an old woman in her sixties, alone without Yaling and her husband, I observed. A couple of weeks later when I visited the "*Shizhong Di'an villag* " where most of the *Di'an* migrant workers lived together, I saw Yaling with her baby on her back. She told me that they rented a small room nearby and her husband was *maigong* everyday while she was taking care of the baby and doing the cooking at home, and that her mother-in-law had returned to the village.

One year later, I went back to visit the family, only to find their house locked. I was told that Yaling was still following her husband in *Shizhong* living on her husband's earnings from *maigong* and *wamei* and took care of the baby at home. Yaling's mother-in-law, after sixteen years' widowhood, remarried to an older *Han* man in a nearby village in *Luoping* county. When a relative and neighbor of Yaling's told me this, she shook her head and sighed. A few days later, I ran into the mother-in-law at the Yagus' with her new husband. Though she kept on repeating to me the shame on her for having to remarry after all these years and that she had no way out, she appeared to be more relaxed than before. When I asked her how her life was like in the *Han* village, she said it was much

better than in *Di'an* and that even the public road in the village was cemented. She appeared to be happy.

Yaling and her husband aspired to urban living. But Yaling found it difficult to live in the city when they had to purchase everything they needed. There was a tension between the couple regarding how and where they should make a living. While her husband proposed that the whole family including his mother moved to the city living on *dagong*, Yaling did not want her mother-in-law to go along with them. Yaling was fully aware that her husband's earnings through *maigong* would not sustain the family and they would need the land in the village to continue to provide them with food. Thus, her mother-in-law's piece of land was crucial for the family's survival in the city. Their relatives and neighbors suggested them live like other families with little land that the husband engaged in *dagong* and the wife worked on the land at home. But both Yaling and Xiaolin did not like the idea. For Yaling, she did not like working in the field. As for Xiaolin, he would rather have Yaling following him. Criticisms from other villagers did not help resolve the conflicts in the family. Finally, the mother solved the problem by marrying herself off leaving the land to the young couple. The land was rented to others in the village. With the rental and the income from *maigong*, the young couple managed to live an urban life at the city's fringe where Yaling took care of the child and did the cooking in a rented room while Xiaolin *maigong*.

Yaling's migration experience caused multiple tensions with the mother-in-law and her husband, with the villagers, and with the wider society. As living on *maigong* alone was impossible to support the family in the city, the elderly mother in the family made sacrifice for them.

The story of Guifen- Engaging in the cyclical migration, struggling between rural subsistence work, family care and urban paid work, and fighting for her own autonomy

I came to know Guifen when I participated in Xiaohua's marriage ceremony. Guifen was Xiaohua's elder cousin. The first time I met her, she struck me as someone different from other *Zhuang* women not only because of her relatively fashionable modern clothes and high-heel shoes, but also in her outspokenness and self-confidence. While most of the *Zhuang* women were soft-spoken, she had a loud voice and spoke with assertiveness. She invited me to visit her family. She was very warm-hearted. When she knew that the "*da yishan*", the *Zhuang* clothes which Xiaohua made for me was in need of a special kind of buttons before I could wear them, she went to find the peddler who happened to pass by the village and bought the buttons and brought them for me. We chatted about her life experience. She was very articulate and open. She shared with me about her family, her boyfriends, her being gang raped, and her declining relationship with her husband.

Young married women in *Di'an* village engaging in *dagong* normally followed their husbands as Yaling did. But Guifen's case was much more complicated. Guifen regarded herself as an independent migrant woman, though she lived with her *Han* husband in *Luoping* county. She claimed that she would be better off without her husband and that her husband was good for nothing. In summer 2003, she had her two children sent back to *Di'an* village to the care of her newly widowed mother. Starting from 2003, she reclaimed her rice field back from her two elder brothers and began to work on the land herself. During the two peak seasons, she would come back to work on it herself. In between, she would hire others to attend the field for her while she continued working in *Luoping* on various construction sites. Once or twice a month, she would return carrying food, cooking oil and so on for her mother and children. Despite her failing health, she was determined to support her children and mother on her own.

Guifen's aspiration Guifen aspired to live a self-supported life and a home that she and her husband could share with respect and dignity. In this home, she wanted to have respect and to be free from any humiliation. She regarded herself as quite intelligent and exceptional among the *Zhuang* women in *Di'an* village. She had a proud history of doing successful business. She longed to be successful again in business so that she could support herself, her children and her mother. Before her dream came true, she took up both the farm work in the village and *dagong* in the city to support the family without counting on her

husband. Traveling between the city and the village, she was like the men in other families, and her mother acted as the wife doing all the housework.

Guifen's aspiration and life trajectory Guifen was the youngest among four brothers and one sister. She recalled that when she was young her family was doing well raising pigs, horses and cows. According to her, it was all because of her eldest brother that her family fell apart. The brother in his early twenties was very handsome. But he was attracted to a woman who was already engaged to another man in the same village who impregnated her. In outrage, the other man's family and kins stormed their house and ransacked everything in the house. But at her mother's insistence, her brother did not get to marry the woman eventually. After a couple of years, the same thing repeated, the brother seduced another engaged woman. Their house was for a second time ransacked. Guifen recalled that in the twice of chaos she was hiding behind the bed in the room trembling and heard the screams and shouts of the pigs. Chickens and cows were chased and dragged in the yard. Her father who had been timid for his whole life could not stand the humiliation as well as the house being raided like this twice, took poison and killed himself. That year, Guifen was about nine years old. In the following year, Guifen's mother, to all her sons' objection, remarried a widower in a nearby village. Soon after that, her three brothers and sister married one by one leaving Guifen and her fourth brother Xiaoming in the old house. Her stepfather was a state employee and worked as a ranger in the

forest station. He continued to provide for her and she was able to complete her primary education in *Di'an* village. When she finished primary school, she was about sixteen and went to live with her mother and stepfather on the mountain. It was during that period of time she learned to do business by selling mushrooms picked from the mountain at the foothill by the roadside. Later, she learned to trade rice, ginger and other native produces.

Being successful in her business, she moved to *Luohu* town. Guifen recounted her past with much pride. She was young, beautiful and successful in trade and was chased by many prominent good-looking young men in the town. She admitted that being young and green, she was too arrogant. In the early 1990s, there was a group of hooligans engaging in all kinds of criminal activities in *Luohu*. As they were connected with some key officials in town, nobody dared to go against them. They raped many young women. They also gang raped Guifen and Guifen fought back bravely and brought them to court. Among the hooligans, one was sentenced to death, the rest received long term sentences in jail. After the event, she could no longer stay in *Luohu* to continue with her trade business, as the relatives of the hooligans threatened to take her life. In a haste, she chose to marry a man from the nearby province Guizhou who was *dagong* in the nearby county *Luoping*. After the marriage, they went to work in Shenzhen for a little while. At that time, rumor went around in the village that

she was trafficked and sold by her husband. When they had their first child, she and husband decided to move back to *Luoping* and stayed there till now.

For the past couple of years, Guifen confided in me that the relationship between her and her husband was not going well. They had fights constantly. When she had an accident and was knocked down from the bicycle with her younger child on her back by a van which continued its way, she decided to take the van driver to court. However, her husband did not want to have legal trouble and refused to support her. Meanwhile, he had not given her any money for family needs. She felt that she had enough of him and asked him to leave. She was at the stage of rearranging her life without her husband. She decided to support her family on her own. She sent the two children back to the village. The elder daughter had started schooling and the four-year-old boy who was constantly sick was left to the care of her newly widowed mother, she devoted herself to *dagong* and *maigong* in *Luoping* and brought food back to her family every other week. She strived to be independent to provide for her own children and her mother.

Guifen's aspiration and migration Guifen was increasingly puzzled at age of thirty-two. She asked me, "Xiang Laoshi, tell me why life becomes more and more difficult." Guifen impressed me with her strong sense of subjectivity, articulacy and proudness. She was a worldly woman and had been traveling so far as to Shenzhen, a feat rarely accomplished by other women of similar age.

Having only received primary education, she was still confident about herself, claiming that she was no ordinary *Di'an* village woman.

Now she regretted the marriage totally. She said, “The man’s mouth is really something (*‘tai lihai la’*), knowing how to sweet-talk me (*‘zui tian de hen’*)...I am cheated by him (*‘wo shangdang la’*).” When she wanted to sue the van driver, her husband wanted her to pay the medical expenses herself and discouraged her to bring the case to court.

Guifen was disappointed at her husband who did not give her any support, both material and emotional. With her aching back caused by the accident, she struggled working on construction sites and from her field, establishing a life that could sustain her and her family. She wanted a divorce, at least separation, she confided in me. “If my husband could not help me much, he might as well leave me alone”, she said with determination.

Later, she confided in me another dark secret of her family. Her husband raped her younger sister who was adopted by her mother and stepfather in her infancy. The adopted sister was meant to take care of her parents in their advance age. When she grew up into a pretty young woman and came to visit her and her husband in *Luoping*, her husband raped her while Guifen was away from home. In order to protect Guifen’s family, Guifen’s mother sold her adopted sister to “an

older and ugly man” (Guifen emphasized with anger), in a remote village at a high price. The old man held grudge against the adopted sister for having paid too much for her. He made her labor hard and abused her constantly. Guifen wept when she shared this with me. Then she cleared her throat and said that she would make enough money to buy her back some day.

Guifen reclaimed her rice field from her brothers. As she had been away from the village for long, her elder brothers had been taking turns farming her lots. In that year, when her second brother proposed to the others to divide her land, she returned to reclaim it back stating that she would labor it herself. Her plan was to return to farm the land during peak seasons and hire some hands to take care of it in between. She herself would continue her *dagong* life in *Luoping* and earn money to support her children and mother, who were now sharing the rundown mud-made old house with her fourth brother Xiaoming, his wife Dongqi and two children. She said that she had to make money quickly so as to separate her two children and mother from her brother’s family. She said that her brother was so poor that they did not even have cooking oil. “If my mother and children continue to eat like this, their health will be doomed to deteriorate. I have to do something quickly,” she muttered to herself more than to me. In face of all obstacles including a lack of support from her husband in providing for the children, indifference from her own brothers, bad health of her young son, educational expenses for her daughter, her failing health and the on-going car

accident trial, constant threat of unemployment, she was optimistic and confident that she could take care of her own children, her mother, and even her adopted sister in the future.

Living a migrant life, engendering different meanings: Yaling and Guifen compared

At first glance, Guifen's life was as same as Yaling's in that both lived with their husbands on migration in the city. However, when looking closely, they showed a sharp contrast. To Yaling, *maigong* serves as a means for her and her husband to get away from rural life. In their life of migration, Yaling was a dependent of her husband, and had no power to make decision. When she was unsatisfied with her husband's decision, she took passive aggressive method to protest.

To Guifen, migration had different meaning at different stage of her life. When she moved out of the village to the town at her early twenties, she established herself as a smart and capable young business woman. When she had to leave with her migrant husband to other cities, she was escaping from the threats of gang rape. When she came to settle down in *Luoping* with her husband, she was trying to build up a family that could live in the city while still accessible to fellow countrymen. As her relation with her husband went bad, she relied both work on migration and in the village to support her family on her own. All the time, Guifen exercised her strong agencies in searching for a life, and a

home in which she could gain dignity and respect, despite the physical and mental hardships it might involve.

Summary and analysis of the young married Zhuang women's narratives of migration

Through the narratives of the young married Zhuang women on migration, I find that the young women bear multiple burdens in the family and actively engage in myriad forms of migration. They may be a stayer, a tied migrant, an independent migrant, or playing a part in gendered relay migration, but they are all aspired to build a “Zaan”. However, the diverse life trajectories the six women mentioned in this chapter form a wide spectrum of conceptual understandings of a “Zaan”. In this section, centering on migration, I will summarize and analyze the *Zhuang* young married women's narratives with respect to aspirations, various levels of controls over their life and the agencies they deploy.

The Zhuang young married women's narratives of their aspiration on migration

Aspiring to a “Zaan”, or a home, is the theme that links up the young married women with diverse experiences of migration. However, the meaning of *Zaan* varies.

To Yasao, Meicui and Dongqi, *Zaan* is a home in which the husband and children, preferably the son (s), live together. Through the traditional gendered

division of labor in which “men plow and women weave”, the family is able to be free from poverty. In this *Zaan*, men are the family head, and the work they do commands more value than women’s. When this traditional pattern of division of labor is disrupted by migration-incurred separation of the couple, man and wife become maladjusted to the new arrangement. However, the new arrangement, which requires the husband’s constant absence for survival of the family does not necessarily improve their economic conditions. The women left behind become increasingly unhappy and weary, and have physical, emotional and psychological problems.

Yagu, on the other hand, is not happy with the old way of arrangement of women’s life. Equally aspired to a *Zaan*, Yagu however wants a home where husband and wife engage in their own work to sustain the family. She prefers women working less in terms of amount and type, and their working conditions not to be so isolated as traditional Zhuang women’s. She imagines that rural *Han* women’s life in the family would be more comfortable and she wants to marry a *Han* man.

However, Yaling carries Yagu’s rejection of traditional Zhuang women’s lifestyle in the family much further within her home. She does not just refuse to engage in traditional productive and reproductive work *Zhuang* women do in *Di’an* village, but also any work that concerns rurality. She does not mind hard physical labor in the city but she rejects farm work. The kind of *Zaan* she

aspires to is one in which her husband provides for her and her children while she stays at home taking care of children. The home is preferably situated in the city, despite that they would work without security and certainty.

In between traditional *Zhuang* women and modern women lies Guifen. Neither traditional *Zhuang* women's lifestyle nor urban lifestyle does she aspire to. What she wants is respect, love and autonomy in the family. She demands her right to these qualities even at the expense of her own livelihood and health.

The Zhuang young married women's narratives of multiple controls over them on migration

The six young married women's narratives reveal that they are encountering forces that arise from within themselves, family, community, and the wider society. These forces, based on differences in gender, ethnicity, age, class and region, interact in a complex way and shape women's experiences on migration.

Gendered ideology, gender roles and valuation of work affect women in very complex ways and at various levels. Internalization of gendered ideology can be seen in Meicui's belief that men are more capable and work they do on migration are more important. Nevertheless, it proves to be the opposite that women are responsible for supporting family. Unfortunately, Meicui disregards her contribution to the family. The belief that male is more valuable than female drives Yasao to bear a third child and give away her daughter to

avoid the sanction of the family planning policy. Beyond her expectation, Yasao was further burdened and even more separated from her husband due to gendered relay migration. When the interaction between the forces of gender and ethnicity put *Zhuang* women into more hard work, some women like Yagu and Yaling turned to reject.

In family, gendered division of labor put women into continuous productive and reproductive work that were isolated and endless. This was why Yagu took short term *maigong* to get away from drudgery and loneliness at home despite the humiliation *maigong* implied. Gendered perception of women paved the way to family violence against women. It was obvious that during a man's absence from family in the name of migration, his wife would be suffering physical, emotional and psychological hardships. Dongqi's case best illustrated this. Men posed a threat to their wives who objected to their urban desire by embarking on migration. Yaling who did not want to migrate to the city to live under uncertainties ended up following her husband to the city under his threat.

In community, while the forces of gender and ethnicity combined to reduce the mobility of women, they enabled women to engage in *maigong* in groups where Yagu obtained support that could not be found at home. *Maigong* had multiple and contrasting meanings for *Zhuang* women. It was originated in gender, ethnicity, rural-urban divide, and age as the work in *maigong* were normally available to *Zhuang* women who were believed to be strong and good at

doing two types of farm work, namely transplanting (“*cha yang*”) and harvesting (“*ge guzi*”). They were hired by urban peasants, who were mostly Han people. To find *maigong* work, one had to be equipped with the following traits: young, strong, preferably from *Di’an* village.

When the forces of gender and ethnicity interacted in the wider society, women could hardly obtain and keep their jobs. Yasao’s short-term experience in a factory in Guangxi illustrated this. Being unable to communicate with the *Han* men who controlled the factory floor in *Baihua*, Yasao ended up fleeing the job.

The young married Zhuang women’s narratives of their agencies on migration

Under multivariate forms of control in family, community and the wider society that are based on differences in gender, ethnicity, region, age and physical capacity, the young married *Zhuang* women’s responses vary with their life trajectory, the degree of internalization of gendered ideology and family relations within a changing context. Their responses range from compliance, conformity, accommodation, negotiation to direct protest.

Meicui’s narratives of her husband’s migration illustrated her conforming to the gender values that men’s participation in migration was more valuable and important than women’s subsistence work in the family. She accommodated him and his friends even if he did not make contribution to the family. However,

Dongqi refuses to accept her husband's negligence of his family responsibility by protesting directly. Engaging in the gendered relay migration, Yasao passively accepted the arrangement as there was no choice, while Yagu actively engaged in it and negotiated a space for herself in between family work and *maigong*.

Both Yaling and Guifen set their mind to create a better life for themselves in the family. They used various strategies to achieve their goals. However, Yaling and Guifen differed in their protests against their husbands. Yaling threatened to commit suicide to make her husband change his decision in regards to migration, while Guifen actively sought for ways to diversify the livelihood for her and her children through her own efforts.

Discussion

Mainstream discourse depicts young married women as either tied migrants following their husbands to the city, or stayers left behind by their migrating husbands in the village. Through the narratives of the Zhuang women in my study, I find that it is more complicated than what is captured in existing literature. In order to pursue their aspired *Zaan*, young married Zhuang women engage in myriad forms of migration that subject them under controls from within themselves, family and the community that are based on differences in gender, ethnicity, region and so on. The myriad forms of migration range from staying behind, following the husband as a tied migrant, engaging in gendered relay *maigong*, to traveling as an independent migrant between city and village.

Whatever form they choose, the process of which is highly dynamic and the decision they make changes according to the situation of their family and the community. The controls over and from within women themselves are multivariate and complex, but they are not passive recipients of these controls. They actively respond in various ways that they make sense of and best utilize available resources.

Through the narratives of the six women, we are able to see that there are rich and dynamic forms of migration, which are not captured by mainstream analyses. Being multiple burdens and conforming to gendered division of labor are characteristic of this cohort of women. As long as poverty and migration remain to be the salient features of their life, they manifest themselves and respond to them according to their own situation.

“Men migrating, women plowing” is the only form of migration among mainstream discourses on gendered division of labor that has drawn attention from academics. In *Di'an* village, the gendered division of labor has diverse forms with gendered relay migration in which men and wives take turns to partake in migration and engage in gendered paid work as predominant.

Though literature on migration pays scant attention to women's agencies in the process of migration decision making, especially to the women in the village, recent literature has begun to consider the active involvement of women (Murphy,

2004), as well as the changing gender relations in favor of women (Zhang, 2001).

In my study, I find that when the factors such as gender, ethnicity, region and age are taken into account, migration in its myriad forms has multiple meanings in the Zhuang women's life.

Chapter 6 Migrations and Tensions, Middle-aged *Zhuang* Women's Disillusion with "Zaan"

Introduction

In existing literature on gender and migration, only scant attention is paid to middle-aged women of forty to fifty-nine. Even if they are mentioned, they remain to be marginal and supplementary (Huang, 1997). This lack of attention on the parts of academics and policy-makers is not accidental, but is rooted in mainstream knowledge of gender and migration that tends to associate migration with young women. My study, among some others, reveals that family in a rural context remains to be the dominant form of organization centering on production and reproduction. A person who leaves the family and village affects others in the same family. Therefore, how migration affects middle-aged women in *Di'an* village, and more importantly, how these women understand and interpret the significance of migration in family, and in the community very recently, are what I am trying to find out in my studies of middle-aged *Zhuang* women's narratives on migration.

In this chapter, I will present six middle-aged *Zhuang* women's in regards to migration, with a focus on their longings, frustrations and their diverse responses in order to illustrate their differences in responses to life in general and migration

in particular. Through comparing with women in similar situation, I will uncover the mechanisms that work to control women and explain why their responses to the similar situation are so diverse. In the situated narratives of the middle-aged *Zhuang* women, the central issues that prevail middle-aged women's life, such as poverty and multiple family tensions are discernible.

The Middle-aged Women's Situated Narratives of Migration

Gender, migration and depression for "Zaan"

Yangma's story: a teenage son's dagong and the mother's depression

When I chatted with others on *dagong* in the village, Xiaoyang, a young teenage boy, constantly came up in our conversation. People would provide, with amusement, a detailed account about how Xiaoyang and another boy by name of Xiaoliang left without their parents' consent at midnight. Xiaoyang, to ensure that his mother Yangma would not be able to wake up and prevent him from leaving, locked his mother up. When I visited Yangma in her house in summer 2003, Xiaoyang had left for more than four months for Guangxi *dagong*. Yangma was very weary of her life and thought it was meaningless. "Life is always hard, I have never been a bit happy," she repeated this throughout our conversation. Sitting in her house, leaning against the door, early in a morning in July, she told us her experience in a low and weak voice. I got the feeling that she was very tired, indeed. Her family would be considered relatively well off in the village. She had a neatly built stone house, both inside and outside floors

cemented. As they lived a short distance from the community on the top of a small hill behind the major cluster of the community, her little yard surrounded by trees was quite tranquil and peaceful. But there was a touch of loneliness to it. Her husband was working out in the field, and her son and elder daughter were away *dagong* and *maigong* respectively. The youngest daughter stayed at home with her, so did her aging father-in-law who was bedridden.

Yangma's longing Yangma longed for a *Zaan*, in which the family lived together, even if they could only have a meager income. However, this simple wish seemed difficult to satisfy. Over the years, her husband had engaged in *dagong* nearby seeking for odd jobs to subsidize family needs, leaving her at home alone to take care of the three children, the field and the house. With their combined efforts, they were able to build a house and brought up the children. But Yangma was not satisfied at all. As their coming-of-age son began to join his peers in *dagong* far away, going against her will, she grew to be dreadful and fearful as she thought that the ever changing world outside would break up her family. Understanding that she was ignored by her son, she became depressed and complained about her harassing headache. She kept on repeating that life was meaningless.

Yangma's longing and her life trajectory Yangma was from *Shui* village, close to *Luohu* town. She said that at the time she got married she did not expect such a big difference between village and town developed. She did not know her

exact age, only remembered that she was born in the year of the tiger, which was supposed to be 1962. Thus, she was forty-one when we met in summer 2003.

The children had all grown up, her husband worked endlessly between the village and *dagong*, and their life looked easier than many other families'. Yangma should be contented with all these, but it was not the case. She said, "when I was little, I was rather pitiful... When I started going to school, my parents divorced. Since I was seven, I had been staying with my father. Life was really difficult. Just mentioning about it, I feel bad." When I asked why her parents divorced, she said that she was too young to know anything. Her mother had already given birth to three daughters when she was divorced. Her stepmother gave birth to six children, two boys and four girls. But the two boys died quite young. So she told me she had six sisters and no brothers. Her father said that as there was no son, the family would have to follow the customary practice of *zhaoqin* and took the son-in-law to marry into the house. Yangma's husband lived with the family for a couple of years before her first sister was old enough to marry and took her husband into the house to replace him. Yangma's husband insisted on moving back to *Di'an* village. By then, they already had their first child Xiaoyang.

Yangma recalled those years after they returned to *Di'an* village. There was no place for them to stay in their parent's old house. Only after years of exchanging hard labor with others, planting gingers and selling them in the

market, her husband's going to *dagong*, and her raising pigs at home they managed to build a new house away from the village on a small hill amidst rice fields. Their third child was born unexpectedly, which went against the one child policy and would be under penalty. "We were very difficult...those were the hardest years, and we had no money at all." Yangma sighed.

Yangma's longing and migration in her family Growing up in a broken family, Yangma longed to have a complete family in which members- husband, wife and children, particularly the son(s), could live together. However, Yangma's husband had been going out to *maigong* for years in between peak seasons and was able to bring a few hundred yuan to help with the family. No need to pay for the children's education, they managed to build a nice house. Yangma did not have much to say about her husband. Instead, she focused more on her migrating son. Throughout our conversation, she kept on repeating that Xiaoliang who sneaked out with her son Xiaoyang had returned from *dagong*, but Xiaoyang had not been back. She had no idea about what he was doing out there. In the four to five months of his absence, he had never called back once. She said, "Originally, I did not want him to go because I would be worried. He and Xiaoliang just took off without telling me that night." Yangma guessed that the money her husband gave him to buy shoes enabled him to leave. "We sold some grapefruit during those days and he asked his father for money to buy shoes. His father gave him some money. He might still have some by now. Otherwise

he would not be able to go.” Holding the head with her hands, she seemed to be worried:

“...During the first time, despite my objection, he told me not to worry, not to be afraid, and he would know how to return. After he had left for two months, he called back asking me to send him money for his return trip. I sent him money and they returned. That is why I asked him not to go for a second time. If he goes, he will not get any money. I asked him not to go and I won't let him go either. He always told me not to be afraid. That night, he left with Xiaoliang and has not returned yet.

...

However, Yangma was not so much concerned for her teenage daughter who was also outside *maigong*. “The daughter is just nearby and I am not quite worried. She only went to *Shizhong*”, and “she said she wanted to go outside to help others to do harvesting... I said okay and told her to go for two or three weeks, then come back to help me at home...”.

Yangma said that she was always supportive of their education. Xiaoyang only finished primary school and did not pass the middle school entrance examination, though he had actually repeated twice the sixth grade in primary school. As for her second daughter, she

dropped out of school during her third and fourth year of schooling because she was needed at home to attend the cows. Her youngest daughter left school during her third year claiming that her teacher beat her. I tried to comfort Yangma that all children had received education and were old enough to help out. Yangma responded with a sense of helplessness and powerlessness, “kids have grown up. But whether it is good or not... is the same, no way out (*‘mei fazhi’*).”

From Yangma’s family resources allocation, there was gender bias towards the son. He continued to go to school, despite his poor performance. The son could go far away with money provided by the family, but the daughter who was constantly reminded that her work was needed at home could not leave. The daughter’s work contributed to the well being of the family, but little was invested on her education and *maigong*. That was how unequal boys and girls were treated in one single family. Therefore, the practice that girls were not allowed to go far away served more the interest of the family than that of the daughters.

Yangma found life meaningless. And her depression was much gender based. Though she could not openly acknowledge it, her mother’s bearing three daughters had much to do with the divorce. Being the eldest daughter of the family, she worked hard to help out with the family. It could be imagined that Yangma had to constantly work to help out with the six children borne by her

stepmother, needless to say her work in the field. Despite hard working, her two long waited and much treasured younger brothers died young, which had drained much life out of the family. Yangma longed to leave the depressing environment of the family. She met her husband in the market and started dating him when she was only about sixteen. However, as she was the eldest daughter, she continued to help out with her natal family in bringing up other sisters. So following the *Zhuang* custom of “*zhaoqin*”, her husband joined her family and lived with them for a number of years before her siblings were old enough to stand on their own. Yangma and her husband returned to *Di'an* village after Yangma's next younger sister had got married and took in her husband. Yangma and her husband had to start the family from scratch when they were back, working endlessly around the house and in the field. Her husband was constantly looking for odd jobs outside, leaving her most of the time on her own with the children. Coming from a different village and living separately from the main cluster of the village, the quiet Yangma looked even more isolated and abandoned. As the early painful experience of a broken family caused by a lack of the male heir and the death of the younger brothers were so deeply ingrained in her, Yangma saw her husband's constant absence from the family as a breakdown. And whenever her son was not in, she feared that something might happen to him. When he proposed to go out for the first time, she let him go at his insistence. But he failed to return if she did not send him money. She did not want this to happen again, however, she has lost her influence on the young man. He

managed to escape from her control and even locked her in the house. Yangma was very distressed as she felt that she did not seem to have much control on her own life and it had more to do with or without the males. In Yangma's eyes, her son's migrations were a sign of her helplessness and powerlessness that had always accompanied her. As for her daughter, she did not expect too much as she was used to having her obedient to her. She knew she would not bring much trouble for her and took the daughter's support to her and the family, both physical and emotional, for granted. Yangma's depression had more to do with her weakening influence on her son who had held key to her happiness and the meaning of her life.

Guisao's story: anxiety over the son's migration

I came to know Guisao through Guifen (whose story has been told in Chapter 5). Guisao was Guifen's second elder sister-in-law. In our conversation, Guifen mentioned that her second elder brother managing to build a big house by the road but refused to take their own mother in after she became widowed for the second time. Her mother told me that both her son and Guisao did not address to her when they met her on the road. Guifen said that her brother and sister-in-law knew how to do business and that their eldest son was *dagong* in Kunming. Together with other women, we went to visit Guisao in a July morning in 2003.

We found the couple and their teenage daughter at home. While the husband was not as friendly sitting quietly and smoking a pipe, all women sat in a circle in

the cemented living room chatting with Guisao and her daughter. Guisao had two children, a boy and a girl. The boy was eighteen and the girl sixteen. Their house was quite nicely built with rocks and cemented floors inside and outside. She told us that the house was built during those years when they could still make some money out of collecting and selling gingers (“*shou jiang mai*”). She and her husband managed to build the house by gathering building materials from various sources. They accomplished it largely through labor exchanges. They spent their savings of 2,500 *yuan* and made a loan of about 2,600 *yuan*, which was paid back over the years by raising and selling pigs. They raised four to five pigs a year. And there were two cows in the house. Her son completed primary school and did not go further and her daughter attended school only for a couple of years. Bearing no burden of children’s education, the couple was able to improve their living conditions.

Guisao complained to us that the family owned only two *gong* of land, a bit more than one *mu*, which was too little for a family of four. As it was forbidden to cultivate more land under the policy of reforestation (“*tui gen huan lin*”), the son had nothing to do around the house. In this case, though she did not like him to leave for *dagong*, she let him go eventually.

Guisao’s longing Same as Yangma, Guisao’s greatest desire was to stay with her son. But different from Yangma, she did not stop her son from leaving the family. Guisao’s sister, who was also *dagong* in Kunming, helped her son out.

Urged constantly by her relatives in Kunming, she let him go while half doubting and half believing that he would be safe with their care and protection. She was fully aware that he would not be able to contribute much to the family but she finally let him go hoping that he would be able to make it some day in the city and benefit the family.

Guisao's longing and life trajectory Guisao told me that she was a “cow” in Chinese astrology, which made her forty-two years old in 2003. She was also from *Shui* village which was close to the town. She had never been to school. Coming from a big family with eight siblings, she had been helping to take care of her younger siblings since she was small. Most of them were married and some had migrated to Kunming. She got married at about twenty-two and had come to this village for nearly twenty years. She claimed that her marriage was arranged by her elderly at home. At first, she objected to the choice saying that this place was too far away from home and not convenient. The elderly urged them to visit each other and they gradually changed. “Confused, I came,” she said self-mockingly.

When Guisao first came to the village, she and her husband lived in the old house in which her late father-in-law poisoned and killed himself. There were conflicts among the brothers, so the couple moved out and built their own house on their plot. Since there was no elderly in the house attending to the children, she had to work in the field and cared for the children at the same time. Guisao

said that those years were very difficult. When the children had grown up, she was afraid that if something bad would happen to her son who was away from her protection. In her own words, the son was still too young to be on his own.

Guisao's nightmare and her son's migration Guisao had relatives in Kunming, with whose help, his son went to *dagong* in Kunming in a flower factory. Guisao expressed how much she missed her son:

...When he left, I asked him 'not to leave this far, I will miss you'. He said to me, 'Mom, do not miss me'. I told him, to go this far, not to fight with others. He said okay, he wouldn't fight with others. 'Mom, you put down your heart (*mama, ni fangxin la*)'. A few days ago, he called back and asked, 'Mom, are you sick? How is *Di'an* village?' I told him that 'I am in good health. I go up to the hills everyday. You put down your heart'. During the days of planting, I could not go to sleep. Maybe I was missing my son too much. Later, I found that my son was ill in the factory for twenty days and his friend took him to the hospital where he stayed for more than ten days and spent 300 *yuan*. Maybe he is fine now. He said, "I did not call you to tell you because I am afraid that you would be worried. Now I am fine. I asked him if his uncle came to see him when he was sick. He said yes, the 300 *yuan* paid to the hospital was borrowed from his uncle... He has gone this far and we won't be able to know when he is

sick. So I really do not want him to go.... But there is nothing for him to do around the house. If he is home, he would have asked for money. So, just let him be... After all, we can still manage for a few years...He called back and told me not to work too hard and do what I am able to. He asked us not to worry. He won't fight with others...

Guisao had tears in her eyes. I was touched by her deep emotion for her son. Her sixteen-year-old daughter protested and said, "Mom, you only think of brother, not me, and send me to attend the cows everyday." Guisao explained to me that the daughter also wanted to go to Kunming. The son told his sister that she was too young, unable to stand the bitterness (*"chi bu liao ku"*). She repeated to us what he had said: "We have breakfast at eight and work till twelve. Then we have lunch, and work till six. Then we have dinner. It is quite hard...." Guisao's younger sister and family migrated to Kunming and had asked her young daughter to join them and help them to take care of their young children. The daughter was attempted, but Guisao did not allow her to go. She explained, "... if she went, there would only be two of us (*"laoma laoguai"*) at home and no one to tend to the cows and feed the pigs. The daughter has to be at home. If my daughter was gone, we would quarrel day and night." Guisao told me that when her younger sister in Kunming offered her daughter 200 to 300 *yuan* per month for taking care of her children, Guisao said to her, "If my daughter does go, our family would be having quarrels more than ten times a day!" The daughter

was upset and complained to her mother: “It was all because of you. If you let me go, I will be able to make money... You ask me to tend to the cows everyday. Now I need only one *chi* of cloth to make a bag, but you do not give me any money!”

The daughter was kept at home, with very nice and kind-hearted words that it was all for the sake of her goodness and that she would not be able to stand the hardships. The daughter worked just as hard without any pay. The truth was that her unpaid work was essential for the family. Moreover, her emotional support for the couple kept the family together. However, she did not even have her own money to buy a piece of fabric. The daughter did not need to have in mind the terms of gender inequality, but from how differently she was treated from her brother, she was able to know that she was treated wrongly and so she protested verbally. She was protesting against the love that exploited her.

The son's migration is made possible by the unpaid work of the daughter and at the cost of the mother's mental health: Yangma and Guisao compared

Subsistence livelihood appeared to be the most salient feature of the life in *Di'an* village. Migration was marginal and even detrimental to the well-being of the family. Migration was considered as a family strategy by most literature, but it was a minor strategy for *Di'an* people. Moreover, it was gender biased.

Yangma and Guisao shared many similarities. Both of them were from other villages, close to *Luohu* town. Over the years, through doing ginger business, migration and exchanging labor, they managed to build a house with inside and outside floors cemented, a sign of wealth and comfort. Though they emphasized on the sons' education, the sons failed them after finishing primary school. Meanwhile, their daughters were kept at home. Both mothers were not enthusiastic towards their sons' participation in *dagong*, however they responded differently.

Yangma insisted her son to stay and ended up being locked up by him. Yangma was depressed. Guisao compromised when her son persuaded her to let him go, reasoning that he would not be able to find much to do around the house. This difference had largely to do with their family background particularly with their ability to provide support for the son. While Guisao's extended family with migrating siblings was able to support her son in the city, Yangma's was not able to do so. To the contrary, the early years of family separation strained Yangma's energy more for the integration of the family. Though both women were anxious about their son's safety, Yangma took it further and perceived it as another blow to her much desired wholeness of the family. Both women placed much hope on and paid more attention to their sons and took their daughters' work for granted.

Nevertheless, both women suffered from anxiety over their migrating son. Yangma thought life was always full of hardships and meaningless. This

affected her physical well-being. During our conversation, she constantly complained about the headache, which she did not know the causes and said that she felt dizzy especially under the blazing sun. Though Guisao was not reacting as strongly as Yangma, she described vividly how badly she missed her son that she had nightmares and troubles in going to sleep.

Lingxian's story: male violence and the daughter's migration

Lingxian was the mother of Fengling whose story was told in Chapter 4 and who carried Guisao's daughter's protest much further. Fengling broke multiple taboos by leaving the village alone and cohabitating with a *Han* man, I wondered how this quiet middle-aged woman coped with the whole ordeal. Though I had visited the family a few times, I had never had a chance to talk with the mother due to our inability to communicate in *Zhuang* language and she was not able to talk in the local dialect either. It was always Fengxian, her younger and "better educated" daughter, who dominated the conversation and seemed to be afraid that her mother would disgrace her. Fengxian would keep on scolding her mother for behaving so shamefully in front of us, wearing no shoes, exposing her muddy feet, rolling her trousers up and her messy look. I was very uncomfortable when Fengxian was like this and reflected on how formal education and our intrusion into their life had served to further alienate the women in the village from their own children. So I waited till Fengxian went to school. Accompanied by the assistants from the village, I went to visit Lingxian.

To my surprise, the small and thin, agreeable and quiet Lingxian expressed anger against her husband once she had a choice. Her daughter did not appear to be a problem for her, but her husband did. I wondered if her daughter was such a disgrace to her family that she did not want to mention about her in front of so many people. She considered her daughter living with a *Han* man less a problem compared with her husband “who had been lazy throughout his life leaving her alone to do everything, and worst of all, he abused her”. She kept on repeating the dispute happened the week before on whether to allow Fengxian to take a blanket to school. Her husband hit her head with a wooden stool. She fell onto the ground and lost consciousness for a while. Lingxian described this to us right in front of her husband. I wondered if the incident was still so fresh in her memory that all daunting problems such as having no male descendent, the poorest of the poor, daughter eloping and so on did not appear for her to be immediate. Maybe she was taking an opportunity to give vent to her sufferings in front of her husband. Later, I found that sexual discrimination, male violence, family dispute and the daughters’ participation in migration formed a vicious circle and brought Lingxian sufferings, regrets and remorse.

Lingxian’s longing Throughout our conversation, Lingxian seemed to be occupied with grievances against her husband who sat by the side. I thought she would have much to talk with us as the family seemed to be better off. Her eldest daughter was married through “*zhanqin*” and her son-in-law came to live in

the family and helped them rebuild the much-desired house. Her eldest daughter was pregnant, and her second daughter Fengling lived a controversial life in the city. As for the youngest daughter Fengxian, at that time she managed to attend middle school under our support, which was quite unusual among girls in the village. Instead, she was directing all her outrage at her husband. It seemed that all her unhappiness and disappointment in life had to do with this lazy, incompetent, yet abusive husband. All she wished was that she did not have to live with her husband. She repeated that her father could protect her and she expressed her longing for a home in which the husband could be a strong man so that she could be free from all forms of violence. In reality, her husband did not just fail to protect her, he even abused her. She could not tolerate his deeds as other women in the village did. As all the daughters had grown up, especially that Fengling insisted on leaving, she feared that she would be doomed to similar fate like theirs.

Lingxian's longing and her life trajectory I was not able to find out her exact age. Given that she was married at eighteen, her late son was a couple of years older than the elder daughter who was about twenty-two, she might probably be forty-four. But Lingxian looked much older, with wrinkles cutting deep on her thin and bony face. She came from a family of two brothers by the river, a village about half day travel on foot from *Di'an* village. She lost her mother when she was very young and never had a chance to go to school. She repeated

that her sister-in-law treated her badly in those days. Everyday before dawn, she would have to get up to bring water and find fodder. They worked to gain “*gongfen*” in the commune. “Everyday after meals, we would go up the hills to work for *gongfen*.” She described that they were “suffering everyday”. If she stopped briefly, her sister-in-law would scold her. But her father was always on her side telling her not to be afraid and to take a rest if she was tired. He constantly assured her that he was around and nobody would dare to bully her. She said that her sister-in-law did not do much work and always scolded her for being slow. Lingxian was firm and paid no heed to her. Otherwise, “we would quarrel everyday,” Lingxian recalled. During the commune period, she went up to the hill and did the part that was assigned to her. If she did not finish her assignment, she would have no *gongfen*. After finishing her work, she still needed to gather and bring back home a load of fodder for the pigs.

She remembered that the elderly went to her home to ask for her when she was eighteen. Her marriage was arranged by the elderly. She said that if she was allowed to find a husband on her own, she would choose another one. All the work at home and on the hill were done by her. Her husband never did anything. She said, “It was bitter at home, and bitter in *Di’an* village, too!”

She gave birth to four children. The elder boy whose name was Xiaochan died of illness at three and a half. Back then, they were living in the old house. She said that when the children were born, she had no elderly at home to help her

and she had to carry them along on her back up to the hill. Her husband was also orphaned at early age. He lost his father and his mother remarried. Carrying the babies on her back up to the hill to attend the cows was so hard, especially when thorns stung the babies. “We were like orphans with no elderly to care for us,” she repeated. “No one helps me. I was busy on my own.”

Lingxian repeated that there was no happiness in her life, only hardships. After giving birth to four children, she went to have sterilization without consulting her husband. Lingxian was proud of saying this to show how little influence her husband could have on her.

Food was always in shortage in her house. This year, they produced thirty *tiao*. If they did not have to sell rice, it would be enough. She expressed her thanks to us who had helped the family out with food for years as if we were representatives of the government. She recalled the last time when the social workers sent them food which included two kilograms of meat and some rice. It was always at the end of the year that the family would run short of food. They could always receive assistance from the government and sometimes from the project. Lingxian was annoyed by other people in the village, who were indignant at her for being the sole recipient of the project assistance, especially when they questioned her why the project helped only her family.

When I said that all the children had grown up, so life would be easier, she said that it was better in regard to the daughters, but not his man. “As for this man, he is always the same, not treating me better.” Qing, the assistant, observed that “she is upset with her man. She hates him.”

Lingxian complained that her man was very lazy, never went up to the hill, but often asked her to. At home, her father treated her well, despite her cruel sister-in-law. But after marriage and her coming to *Di'an* village, her husband controlled her. “This man is lazy and does not want to do anything,” she repeated. Everything was done by her and she was very busy all the time. She said that in the first month after her eldest daughter’s birth she had to go up to the hills to attend the cows.

She kept on repeating that her husband hit on her head with a stool. She lost consciousness and fell on to the ground. It was all because of a blanket she gave to the youngest daughter to take to school. She did not understand why her husband was not willing to give it to her. “She was his daughter!” She cried. If it were not her son-in-law who was by the side and helped her get up, she would be lying on the floor. She scolded her husband right in front of us: “You really are no good. You beat me just for a piece of blanket.” When we asked if he beat her often, she said, “...many times...he never treats me well and wants to beat me to death.” When Xiaoyu and other women asked if she had said something that he was not happy with so he beat her, she said no. She did not say anything

against him, he had always been like this. “She was very unhappy with her husband,” Xiaoyu and other women observed and commented.

Lingxian’s longing and Fengling’s migration: Reading Lingxian’s experience of male violence

Lingxian told me that Fengling was in Shizhong *dagong* and she stressed the fact that Fengling was properly courting the Han boy and they went back to his family during the Spring Festival. Though she did not want her to go, she could not lock her up. “I did not want her to go, but she insisted. I could do nothing. So just let her be.” When the other women asked if Fengling was engaged, she said no. Her boyfriend did not have a job and had left home for *dagong*. While talking about this, she repeated saying that “Any time, all the time, my life was no good.”

Fengxian told us that her mother was very upset with her second elder sister Fengling who left to live with a *Han* boy against her mother’s will. She described vividly how her sister hurt her and her mother who cared for her so much. When we talked with Lingxian, she did not seem to be bothered much by her daughter’s deeds. She mentioned that if her daughter wanted to leave, nobody could stop her. She disliked the *Han* boy, it was because the family did not know anything about him. She took all her anger out at her husband. Lingxian blamed her husband for his incompetence to protect her and the family. That Lingxian had so much anger towards her husband in a single incident was

perceived by women in the village as quite unusual. To these young women, her husband was wrong to hit her, but it is understandable and acceptable that any couples would have conflicts regarding family issues from time to time: “even the upper teeth bite the lower teeth in the same mouth!” But they could not understand why she would not just let it go and moved on with their life as other families in the village did. But these young women did not know what Lingxian had experienced regarding male violence, which was much hidden from them but known among older people. Though the incident that Lingxian was raped by a fellow villager, who was later put into prison for six years was not circulated any more in the village, it had caused much damage to those who were concerned. The rapist’s children claimed that their family was never the same since their father was imprisoned. In Lingxian’s family, nobody openly talked about it. The villagers tended to say that the family’s poverty had to do with the death of their only son and a lack of a male heir, which led to the husband’s laziness and hopelessness, and Lingxian’s lack of ability to do household planning for “she was slow and stupid”. Though the rape was no longer openly talked about, it did happen. Lingxian’s outrage at her husband, to me, was not just a family dispute. It was more an outrage directed towards male violence against women. Lingxian’s disapproval of her daughters’ departure appeared to be considered out of a concern for their safety from male violence. But she was obviously helpless and powerless in protecting her daughters. All she could do was to make use of the incident of her husband’s violence against her to give vent to her anger.

Pains and sufferings had followed Lingxian throughout her life: her mother's death at young age, her sister-in-law's bad treatment on her, her husband's laziness and incompetence, poverty, the death of the only son, being raped and the abuse of the husband, and Fengling's stigmatized *dagong*. Yet, bad experiences toughened her up and she learned to stand on her own. She openly protested against her husband's abuse against her. Only when there were no people around and or she was up on the hill, she cried out and let tears fall freely. The way she dealt with the problems in her life was beyond did not make sense to others. People commented on her having some kind of mental problems and that she could not talk and act straight. As I observed, beneath apparent babbling, lied her protests against unfairness and injustice.

Lingxian had experienced male violence and abuse. Poor housing, bad reputation, poverty, and lacking a son, what else could she lose? There was no future for her daughter in the village. She cried up on the hill, not so much for the loss of her daughters and their disobedience, but more for the pains caused by her husband.

Stayers, gendered expectation of children on migration, various degrees of sufferings: Guisao, Yangma and Lingxian compared

All three middle-aged women-Guisao, Yangma and Lingxian- stayed in the village, left behind by either their husband or their children. Never engaging in *dagong* or *maigong*, they had no idea what their husbands or children did outside.

In their narratives, the life outside was full of uncertainties and they worried about their children. However, their worries were felt contingent upon the context each woman was caught up in: in their life experiences, in the gendered expectation of the migrating children as well as in their kinship networks.

The early life experience of broken family affected their general outlook life. In this regard, Yangma and Lingxian shared similar experience: Yangma's broken family was resulted from her parents' divorce; Lingxian's from her mother's death. They carried a sense of helplessness into their life of marriage. When the husband was required to go away for *dagong*, Yangma's sense of helplessness in face of a separated and broken family was deepened. When Lingxian found that her husband was not able to fulfill his obligation to support the family, her anger towards her husband began to accumulate.

All three women put their hope on their son while taking their daughter's sacrifice for granted. When Lingxian's son died, her hope was almost gone. When Yangma's son insisted on venturing into the unknown world outside against her will, Yangma was further depressed. Though yielding to her son's appeal, Guisao was constantly haunted by nightmares.

Both Guisao and Yangma managed to keep their daughters from leaving, though there were overt and covert protests. Guisao's daughter accused her mother of being biased to her brother, while Yangma's daughter negotiated and

participated in *maigong* with other young women in the village so that she could have some exposure outside and make some money for herself without affecting her work at home. But for Lingxian, she failed in her influence over her daughter Fengling who openly challenged the control over the young woman by living with a *Han* boyfriend without getting married.

Migration and poverty, hopelessness of life

Gangmei's story-deploying maigong, fighting against disease and poverty

I first heard of Gangmei from the project worker who was concerned to help children to return to school, and later from other women who talked with us which families in the village had been worse off. For a few times I visited Gangmei, her house was locked and the neighbors told me that the whole family had gone up to the hills working on their family lots. I could not find her and her family until a hot afternoon in June 2003. I was walking in the quiet village, deserted by villagers who were all working up on the hill. When I passed by Gangmei's little hut, I was surprised to see their door open and hear voices come out from the room. There I found a middle-aged *Zhuang* woman in tattered clothes, sitting inside against the door doing needlework, and four children from four to eight were playing by her side. It turned out that the woman was Gangmei and two of the four children were hers. Her third child was ill, sleeping at the back of the room.

When Gangmei saw us, she was very hospitable and invited us in, wearing an expression of awkwardness. She apologized for being unable to serve me anything but drinking water in the house because she had practically nothing in the house: “*laoshi, buhao yisi, jiali yiyang ye biude!*” Since then, I often went to visit her and she managed to draw fresh produces such as fresh cucumbers and peanuts from under the foddors collected in the field to serve me. When I ate them, I noticed a sense of relief and comfort on her face instead of awkwardness. I was touched and felt uneasy. After all, if I had not intruded into her house, she did not have to be emotionally drained.

Her earth made run-down hut was really small and the ceiling was so low that I had to bend down to enter. The area was about ten square meters. It was partitioned into three parts by a patched plastic sheet: one used for storage; the middle part as a living area; the third part as a bedroom for two small beds. Next to the hut was a kitchen built on wooden pads with wide open holes on the wall. Gangmei told us if her ten-month old son was not having a fever, she would have gone up with her husband tilting grasses in the field, and then I would not be able to meet her. She explained to me that she was working up on the hills the day before when it was raining. She carried her baby boy on her back and both of them were soaked. That night, his son had a fever. That was why she stayed at home to take care of him.

Sitting in her little hut while she was busy attending her baby and doing needlework, she revealed to me a life plagued with illness, poverty, and discrimination and her unbending spirit to fight against them by engaging in seasonal migration, exercising her rights and utilizing the family and kinship network. Still, Gangmei could not understand why life went on like this, though she and her husband worked so hard without a pause everyday. She was puzzled.

... I have no capability, only know *zuohuo*. That is how people see me, always at *zuohuo*. You see that everyday is the same... Look at my husband, just look at him. You will know that he knows nothing. If he stays aloof at home, then it does not matter... but he works endlessly... for a whole life. We have no idea what it is all about... It is just troublesome. Everything is so difficult!...

Gangmei's longing "to have a life ('ba rizi guo qilai')"

Gangmei, in her early forties, regarded herself and her family to be the poorest of the poor in the village. She could speak very well the *Han* dialect and was very outspoken, which was very rare among *Zhuang* women of her age in the village. She impressed me of being a very capable woman and I was puzzled at her when she put forward the following question to me:

Me and my husband are not lazy. We work day and night, without a single day of leisure. We save to eat and wear simple ("*shengchi jianchuan*"). Look at what I am wearing. Don't laugh at me. Even

I feel ashamed of wearing like this to go out. Other people laugh at me. But life will not get better. Teacher Xiang, tell me why it is like this?

Gangmei longed to gain respect from other people. She thought she was looked down by others due to her absolute poverty. She was willing to accept the fate and bravely fight against poverty, but she seemed to lose the battle. Gangmei was able to articulate very clearly how the support of the government was minimum and the discrimination especially from the village officials drained her energy.

Gangmei had a mixed feeling towards her husband who worked hard and was reluctant to seek help from others, foregoing his rights to accept assistance from the government. Under constant threats of collapse of the run-down house and illness that might claim the lives of her children, Gangmei was always worried about the family. She had a pain in her chest that she had trouble in sleeping. She wished her husband to be more helpful, the government more supportive, the village head and other villagers more sympathetic, and she would have a life, in her words, “*ba rizi guo qilai*”!

Gangmei's longings and her life trajectory Gangmei was also from the same administrative village, yet from one of the natural villages *Weishe* located about a half an hour travel distance away from the main cluster of the villages. It

seemed that TB had always been haunting. Her father passed away when she was three. At fifteen, she lost her mother. Both of them died of TB. She wanted to go to school and had been able to go for about ten days. But her elder sister whom she depended on drew her out as her labor was needed at home and there was no money to buy her books. She dropped out of school. She did not marry until she was about thirty. It was a man who was ten years older than her. Her marriage was arranged by the elderly and her elder sister. Gangmei said that she regretted the marriage because she did not know that her husband's situation was also very bad and suffered from the same disease. This was her husband's second marriage and he was from a big family of six other siblings. By the time they got married, his parents had passed away. His first marriage left him a daughter. When Gangmei came, the siblings had already divided the land and the house, leaving them practically nothing. They had no place of their own. She recalled the early days of their marriage when they had to live outside the old house, with a bed piled up by dry grasses. "It is really bad fate, indeed! (*'zao nie a!'*)". She swept:

...it was fate. Back then, I did not know... they said that he lived closeby. When I came, it was really difficult. We are orphans. No one helps us...

During the first year of their marriage, she managed to raise two pigs. With the income from selling the pigs, she bought the small old hut where they were

living. Though it was not safe, especially in storms, they had a place of their own. Both husband and wife thought that if they continued to live a frugal life, they would be able to save up enough money to build a new house on the site.

However, the dark shadow of TB would not forsake them. Many years had gone by and, there was still no sign of the new house, while the small house was increasingly running down after years' of rain wash and wind blow. It was TB that had disrupted their plan and had destroyed all their hope. As she and her husband had TB, their children were likely to inherit the disease. Their first child, a girl, died ten days after her birth. Their second child, a boy, suffered from the disease since he was born. After many treatments, he finally died at about five, and the family was thus in debt. They had no son, no house and were further in debt. Gangmei was sobbing while recounting her sad story to me. However, she would not give in. Two years after the death of her son, she gave birth to another boy. Now the boy was about five, and she gave birth to another son named Yong. Apparently, the two boys were in good health. She was over forty and her husband was fifty. She said she did not feel so bad about her first girl. And if the first son was still alive, he would have been able to help out around the house already.

Deep in debt and having three children to feed, they had no way out. Every year, she had to go to her sister for help.

Gangmei and her husband owned a piece of paddy field. They produced twenty-six *tiao* rice, but last year they were in short of about one *tiao*. Food was always not enough for them. Every year they had to borrow food from neighbors. If it was urgent, she asked her sister for help. If people in need could receive some assistance from the civil affairs department under certain policy, they were able to get some food from the government. Her family tried every best to survive.

Child care remained a challenge to Gangmei. Most families of *Di'an* village had elders or younger sisters-in-law to take care of children so that the mothers could go to work in the field. But this was a luxury, which Gangmei did not have. As she said, when she got married, her parents-in-law had already passed away. She said that they were “orphans, very pitiful... and no one to help us”. So she always had to work in the field and at home and to take care of the babies at the same time. The babies were always on her back and even soiled over there. That was why her clothes were tattered. Life was hard. However, there was a medical history of her family that she always faced a fatal disease, which might claim the lives of her beloved ones. She complained that the children never grew up, that they seemed to be always on her back, and never grow up. Her elder son died when he was five. Now her second son was five and her

younger son ten months. She was worried and kept a close eye on them, fearing that something would happen to them. That was why when her baby son and herself got wet in the rain and the son had a fever, she stayed at home to look after him. During our visit, when there was a small sound from inside the bedroom, she would rise up immediately to check him up. Though her stepdaughter who was twelve and had dropped out of school could help her with the baby, Gangmei would rather take care of the baby by herself.

She said that when she could not manage to get money for fertilizers, she had to go *maigong*. However, the children were still so young. She was in a dilemma: to take care of the baby and to seek for a job to help the family out. She was worried about the health of her children, her inability to provide for them, the worn-down house... Her health was getting worse. She complained about her painful chest and that she was not able to sleep.

Gangmei questioned about life:

How come it is like this? These kids have grown up but I am still alone working and working so much, still earning so little. What is there to do? Damn it! The sun burns. Everyone says that I work so hard. Two children have grown up. So what? No one can help... so much sufferings. Too dark, all the time, whoever comes will go...

Gangmei's longings and migration Relying mostly on growing rice and raising pigs to generate income for family needs, Gangmei and her husband tried to diversify their means of income generation, ranging from doing handicrafts to seeking for paid work outside. However, they could not count on selling handicrafts as the channel for sale was rather limited and controlled. In fact, there was only once when Gangmei was able to earn some money through selling handicrafts to the government to promote ethnic tourism in the area. The village was then under the leadership of Wang who made it a point to have the families whose financial situation was difficult to be included in the transaction of handicrafts. Gangmei's family was among those in *Di'an* village. Since Wang had left, only people related to the village officials were able to sell their handicrafts. Gangmei no longer had the chance. Gangmei was very upset with the incumbent village administration that they did not only fail to care for the people in need, but they also discriminated against them.

Seeking for a paid job outside the village had been a more manageable form of labor and was adopted by Gangmei and her husband. Before she gave birth to her youngest son, which was a year before, she went near to *Shizhong* to help harvest ginger in a factory. As her grandmother and uncles' lived there, she stayed with them and was able to save money on room and board so that she managed to bring home about 300 *yuan* after a month's work. She was able to use the money to buy fertilizers for her field. After the birth of her youngest son,

she had not been able to *maigong* again. She said that the children were too young and to nobody she could trust them. She would not consider going to *maigong*. She did not think that her husband could go because the children were still young and he was needed at home. Once the baby was old enough to be left at home with the eldest daughter or her husband, she would go to *maigong* again. “I had to go. There was no choice.” She said firmly.

Gangmei was upset when her husband went to *dagong* that spring. He worked for more than two months in a brick factory and received no pay in the end. He did not dare to confront the factory owner. Instead, he had his nine-year-old daughter to go to the owner hoping that he would have mercy on a little girl and pay him. They did not get the pay and this was known in the village. Gangmei was very upset with her husband. Though she knew that he was so timid, she could do nothing.

In summer 2004, when I paid a visit to Gangmei, she was home alone taking care of the land and the children. She told me that her husband had left since the spring holiday to join a group of men to work for a road building project in Kaiyuan, another county of a different prefecture about three hundred kilometers away. She told me, or herself rather, that everything was fine. Only that she was sometimes so worried that she felt pain in her chest and could not go to sleep.

Despite Gangmei's capabilities and assertiveness, as well as diligence, she and her husband were fighting a losing battle against poverty caused by the fatal disease. However, throughout my interaction with Gangmei, I observed that she was not so passive to accept the fate. What she was most unhappy with was not the horrible disease, but the unfair treatment from the village officials and factory owner, as well as the timidity of her husband. By comparing the two different attitudes of the village officials, she demonstrated that she had her own rights as a citizen as well as a human being that needed to be respected. Though both she and her husband participated in migration seeking for paid jobs outside, she did not regard it as a means of freeing the family from poverty and regaining dignity and rights. If permitted, she could leave her young son to the care of her daughter or husband and go to seek for a job. She was worried about her timid husband who would surrender to exploitation and deprivation without knowing how to fight back. To her, migration could not help with the family, but might humiliate them in the end. That was why she was even more anxious and the pain in her chest worsened when her husband joined others to go afar to work for the road project. Without knowing if he could bring back any money, she was also anxious that he might face unfair and injustice treatments, and even get injured in the process. To some extent, migration played a mixed role in Gangmei's life. It subjected her and her family to an even more vulnerable situation, but it could serve as one of the important means for survival of the family.

The story of Xiongqi- legacy of the arranged marriage, absence of the husband, combining maigong and subsistence to sustain the family

... I came back to see how my kids got along in school, to spend the spring holiday... I was there (at my natal family) but was called back to spend the holiday, this Spring Holiday. The kids did some housework and came to ask for money...said that no matter what, I have to give him money... If I do not give him, he would beat me...(my husband) tell me, go wherever you want, go back to your family... but here is my home, (he said) why don't you go there to eat?... I do not have relatives here...they said so...

I managed to record the above amid Xiongqi's sobbing and fragmented words. But I was lost in what she tried to say. I did not know whether it was her children or her husband who beat her. But it turned out to be both.

I knew Xiongqi's husband first. He was a carpenter and had been always around the central gathering of the village where I stayed. Being a skilled labor and quite articulate, he was known in the village, though at times infamous of drinking too much at work. I observed that he was either unseen for a long time, said to be working elsewhere, or hang out with other men of power in the village and joined them to play *majeong* or cards when he was around. Once a while, I struck up some conversation with him, but mostly on his ideas about what the village was, nothing personal. Until I went up to visit *Huaga* village where he

was from and met his wife Xiongqi learning that he had gone to *maigong* to help out with the family. After a few unexpected encounters in the village with her, I decided to include her into my studies.

When we were in *Huaga* village coming to a house standing by the roadside, I noticed a woman who was on her way out. She invited us into the house and had a chat with her. It was relatively easy to talk to her because she spoke quite fluent local dialect. I realized that she was Xiongqi. She told us that she had just borrowed some money and was on her way to buy fertilizers. She complained that she did not have money for fertilizers because she was so poor, let alone sending her children to school. She said that, the year before her elder children were willing to share with her some house chores such as feeding the pigs so that she could go up to Shizhong to *maigong*, then to do some petty trade. After about two months, she was able to bring some money home for her kids' education. But this year, it became more difficult because two of her elder sons were enrolled in the middle school and the cost was much higher. Unable to support them, they were on the verge of dropping out. The children were mad at her and refused to help out in the house in summer. So she was not able to go to *Shizhong*. She had no income from *maigong* and had to borrow money for fertilizers.

I could not help questioning her that her husband had been working continuously for different families both in and outside *Di'an* village. He seemed

to be always occupied. He should be making some money being that busy. “Isn’t he able to help the family at all?” To my surprise, Xiongqi, looking quite defeated by my questions, told me that she did not know if he was making money because he never gave her any. She said that he was seldom in and had not given her anything to support the family and children’s education. She raised our attention to the house. Though the house was built with bricks and both the floors inside and outside were cemented, the second floor that served as a store room was still not finished, appeared to be quite shaky and dangerous. The main door was also half completed. The windows were covered by patched pieces of plastic bags. It should not be a problem for the carpenter, but “he does not care for us”, Xiongqi said bitterly.

A few days later, I saw her hanging around by Lao Wu’s door, looked embarrassing, yet assertive. I heard her talking to her husband who was inside playing *majeong* with other men. I greeted her. She asked me if I could help her to make a phone call to her brother in the town. I followed her to the primary school where the phone was and made a call for her. While I was waiting aside, I heard her talking to her brother and sobbing all the time. After she had finished the call, I invited her to come where we lived. We talked for more than two hours about her life.

Xiongqi’s longing Xiongqi longed to have her husband to take up the family responsibilities. For years, she had been on her own taking care of the

family while her husband was away from home. She knew that they would not be able to get along well. She did not expect that as both of them were well aware that they did not have much feeling for each other. In view of the family and the children, Xiongqi would persist in living with him together. She just wanted her husband to be more supportive and fulfill his obligations and responsibilities for the family.

Xiongqi's longing and her life trajectory Xiongqi was forty-four, from a village by the river, about twenty to thirty kilometers away from *Di'an* village. Xiongqi never went to school. Being the youngest child of the family with two elder brothers who knew how to do business, she was quite doted in the family when she was young. She described herself as a woman of few words. She let her elder brothers decide what the best was for her. Before she was married to the carpenter Xiong, she was at home attending cows and helping out around the house. The life before marriage was relatively easy. Misery started after she was married. During the first four years of the marriage, she stayed most of her time with her natal family. In the process, the carpenter Xiong, and even his parents, would like to call off the marriage. But under the urge of her second elder brother and her mother who were originally from Xiong's family and believed that their matrimony would strengthen kinship connection, Xiongqi gave in. Her misery had more to do with this arranged marriage which both she and her husband were against. After she gave birth to their first son, she finally settled

down in her husband's house. Since she had moved in, he was seldom at home. Even during the time she gave birth to children, he was not around. For the first child, he did not come back until two weeks later; for the second and third sons, he did not come back until four months later. After his return, he stayed only for a few days and left again, leaving everything to her. She had to take care of the children and work on the family lots.

Altogether she gave birth to three children, all of whom were boys aged thirteen, fifteen and seventeen. And they were all at school in 2003, one in primary school, and the other two in middle school. This was quite a remarkable achievement in the village given that few children were able to make it to junior high and her family had had two. However, from our conversation, we felt that Xiongqi did not seem to be happy with this "achievement". On the contrary, she was under much pressure. I would describe her situation to be "pressures from all directions".

First, her husband had been neglecting her and the family for many years and it grew worse during the past four years. She suspected that he was having an affair. Because of her husband's negligence of the family, she had been working all on her own inside and outside. She complained that, "He and others in the family would not help... I do things and attend things on my own."

As the children became older, they could help her out at home so that she could go to *maigong* and do petty business in *Shizhong* to help the family. But this year, her health got worse, she found it hard to support all of them for schooling. Feeling upset, all the boys refused to help her out around the house and were angry with her. When she became very frustrated, she beat them. They fought back. She sighed with an expression of sadness and helplessness: "...They do not listen to me..."

Xiongqi did not get along well with her mother-in-law either. She stated that even before she gave birth to her first child, her mother-in-law already disliked her and urged her husband to call off the marriage. When her husband gave her 50 *yuan*, which he obtained from her elder brother, the mother-in-law came to her to claim the money, which she firmly declined.

Being a woman of few words and from another village, Xiongqi said that her husband's relatives never liked her. When I was there, it happened that Xiongqi was accused by a neighbor, who was also a kin of hers, for having stolen the blankets from their house while they had gone to *Shizhong dagong*. They did not have any proof, but they were sure she did that because she was the only one neighbor "not getting along well with in the village". They took the case to the village committee without telling her. Villagers had been talking behind her all the time. After she had learned this, she bravely contacted the village head. As

there was no proof, the village committee had done nothing. But the woman accused her of bribing the village head.

All the while, her husband did not say anything about the false accusation. He either stayed away or remained silent when he came back. To show his disapproval of her, he threw her clean clothes and blankets that were hung out of the window of the second floor into the mud at midnight. She was so upset and picked on fights with him. “That was it!” She decided to call an extensive family meeting to pressurize her husband to make a choice between family responsibilities and divorce. The next day, she came down the hills from *Huaga* to call her second elder brother asking him to preside over the family meeting. She cried as she told all these to me.

Under all these pressures for so long, her health became worse. In fact, Xiongqi felt that her health started to decline during the first three years of her marriage.

Xiongqi's longing and migration Xiongqi viewed migration with a mixed feelings. Her husband deployed migration to escape the marriage that was not chosen by himself. However, Xiongqi, who was equally weary of the marriage, could not follow suit. Especially after bearing three children, she even stuck to it more. Without any support from her husband, she ended up taking full responsibility at home alone. She managed to have her field work done through

exchanging labor with others: "...For about four years already... now it is only me working in the field, and I exchange labor to have things done... He and others in the family would not help. I do things myself, and attend things myself... He does not bring any money home. I cannot manage it alone."

Xiongqi stressed that her husband did not care anything at all.

For some years, he would return to help out during the two busy seasons ("*nongmang jijie*"). At other time, she would exchange labor ("*huangong*") with others so that her work in the field can be done. If allowed, she would take every chance to earn some non-farming income such as making blanket for the township government and going to *maigong* in *Shizhong*. She would use the income from *maigong* to do some business.

She had to do all the work inside and outside the house, working on the lots, raising pigs, cooking, washing, cleaning, etc. Still, what she managed to obtain from selling the produce and pigs were far from being enough to support the family and the children's education. Last year, after finishing the work in the field, she asked her elder son to take care of the pigs and went to *Shizhong* to do petty business and *maigong*. Being inexperienced, she lost money in the business. She managed to gain some money from *maigong* and used it to buy fertilizers. But with no money left to pay for the children's education, the two younger children dropped from school this year. They were upset with her and

refused to help out around the house, so she could not go anywhere, even to *maigong*. Her burden around the house was even heavier without the children's help.

With everything she could manage, she was able to get by. However, since four years ago, even the little help during the busy seasons from Xiong was withdrawn. The educational expenses became higher as all the children had to go to school, and her health increasingly declined. Xiongqi decided to take action. She wanted her husband either to take up the responsibility or to have a divorce.

In fact, her husband always wanted to have a divorce from the very beginning of their marriage. For a long time, he had been threatening that if she would not divorce, he would leave for as long as seven to eight years and would never return. Xiongqi said that she put up with him for the children's sake.

Until then, she felt that she had enough of her husband. If he carried on like this, totally neglecting her and the children, she would have a divorce. As she had already had "a big operation" and could not bear children any more, which meant that no man would take her due to her sterility, she wanted to have all three children, the family plots and the house. She said that her husband was free to go anywhere he desired. Her husband turned down her proposal, saying that if she wanted to leave, she was free to do so. But children and everything else in

the family were his. The fights between them continued. She managed to solicit support from her elder brother to preside the process. Under the pressure of her elder brother and elders at home, her husband agreed to take up the family responsibility. But the fights between him and Xiongqi continued.

Her eldest son was in his third year in junior high. Before the summer, he came and asked his mother if she could prepare some food at home so that when his classmates came to visit him, he could treat them. Xiongqi said that she did not have any money and asked him to go to his father for help. He went and came back indignantly. His father did not give any money to him and sent him back to his mother. Xiongqi did not have anything on her. She had to borrow money to buy fertilizers, and she did not think that she had the money to support their education, let alone treating the classmates. Upon hearing this, his son was so upset and refused to help out in the house. Her second son modeled on his elder brother. Her relationships with her children were under much strain. She said that they did not listen to her any more.

Xiongqi told me she did not get along with others in the village and did not know why. She said that she did not speak much and seldom went to visit others. Maybe that was why she was disliked in the village. She told me that

...for that family, whose husband is not around, and she always holds bad opinions against us. I used to go *maigong* with them and

returned together. Who knows what happened, I came back from work one day and the house collapsed. She said that she had to blame on me, blame me for looting her house. Looking back, this is the first time I talked to her. She would quarrel. I do not know why. She reported me and blamed everything on me. I did not know what happened...

It was the country doctor, her relative, who told her in private about what was being talked about behind her. He asked her if she knew Li's wife her of stealing things from the house while she was away to *maigong*. They reported the case to the police, but they paid no attention. Xiongqi did not know why. She was at home, knowing nothing. But she was not going to admit to the crime. That night, the two women had a big fight. Li's wife said who else it could be except Xiongqi. When I asked Xiongqi why she suspected her, Xiongqi said that she had no idea. For the past few years, she had been quite nice to them. But this year she changed, and blamed us. She said that everybody thought that her house was in bad shape and needed repairing, but she faked the case and hoped the government ("*gong jia*") would fix the house for her. Xiongqi was reluctant to comment on this. When I asked how she got along with other people in the village, she said not very well. There was not nothing serious. She said that she is not a black-hearted person ("*hei xin ren*"). But the woman insisted on taking old blanket out of her house and washed them in her room.

That night, her husband came back and she told him what had happened. He did not say a word. At mid-night, he threw her stuff out of the window. She said that she did not know why he did that. For a long time, she had no money on her and had been ill. As the doctor was her relative, he said that she could give back the 10 *yuan* she owed him later. When the husband returned, she asked him for money, but he did not give her any.

That was why Xiongqi was really upset when they said that she bribed the village committee who refused to interfere in the case. She said that how she could bribe while she even had no money even to go to *dagong*, and to send her children to school.

Xiongqi's natal family ("houjia") Xiongqi's natal family had played a very important role in her life. It is a crucial support for her life. Since her marriage, the natal family, especially her second elder brother, had been playing a central role in her life. Xiongqi claimed that if it was not his brother's insistence, she would not agree to marry the carpenter Xiong. After they were married, she was not happy in the new family, so she constantly went back to seek for consolation and according to Xiongqi, they had been supporting her all along. When her child was born, and her husband kept on going away, it was her brother who urged him to return. When she was forced to have the sterilization operation, lying in the hospital feeling to be dying, it was her second elder brother who gave her husband money to buy "putao tang" for her to drink. And that was

how she was able to survive. Over the years, when she did not have food, she went back to ask for it. Whenever there were conflicts, her brother always came to act on her behalf. She said that when she was accused of theft, her husband would not allow her to go back to seek for help, until her own sisters-in-law came to Di'an village to attend a wedding ceremony (“*zuo ke*”) and learned about the matter. When she returned, she told her brother. Her brother asked her to go back. But her husband would not allow. When she went to the market on the market day, she tried to find her brother but in vain. Later she learned from her sister-in-law in the market that her mother was ill and that was why her brother did not come to the market. She was allowed to go home. In fact, she went back without her husband's permission. Once she was at home, his call followed her to the village. They all said that this should not be tolerated and all her brothers and sisters came to support her.

I asked her, in case that her children were willing to take up the family responsibility, would she go to *maigong* again. She said she would, but she dared not to stay away for long because her mother had been ill. And in case of emergency, she needed to be notified and be present right away. Her natal family was so important that even she was married and they still played a major part in her decision.

Xiongqi was caught in the web of power weaved by her absent husband, angry children and unfriendly neighbors, because she submitted her right to choose her

husband to her brothers and mother. She was an unhappy woman due to years' of dissatisfaction with her marriage. Her health suffered from unhappiness, overwork and stress. But she fought bravely by soliciting support from her natal family to build a "*Zaan*", even that might entail a dreadful divorce.

The story of Yangmei- Participating in maigong to send the son to high school

When I asked the women in the village if they could recommend me some women who were engaged in migration or whose family members were in migration, Yangmei's name was mentioned quite often in their conversation. We went to visit the women who were in our team of organizing women's craftwork a year before. Yangmei was one of them, from the village of Huaga, so I remembered her. In summer 2003 when we first went to visit her, her relatives told us that she was not at home, being "away to *maigong*". When I asked them when she would return, they said that maybe in a couple of weeks, or a couple of months. Two months later when I heard that Yangmei had returned, we, the project workers and other women, went to visit her.

On the way to her house on the top of the hill, we ran into her who was carrying a big load of fodders on her back. She smiled broadly at us as usual, but looked much paler. When we talked, she constantly coughed. She did not look very good. She said that her illness was due to her work of picking tobacco leaves for a family. She said that she did not know if it was because of the tobacco. After she had worked for this family for some twelve days, she got

really sick and had to return home earlier than scheduled. She did not want to go *maigong*, even she had no other means of living. But this year, as her son entered high school, more money is needed. Besides, children at home were able to help more around the house so that she was freed from the housework and participated in *maigong*. She was gone for over a month, having first joined the *zhangong* on the streets and was picked to tilt the corn field for a family. She tilted the corn field for about ten days, then was asked to join other people to pick tobacco leaves. While she was there, she got sick.

Yangmei's longings Yangmei did not want to fail her children. For all her life, she had been accompanied with illness, and it was illness that claimed the life of her father when she was young. She suffered when her mother left them to get married. What she wanted to do most was to provide with her children, to satisfy their wants despite any difficulties.

Yangmei's longings and life trajectory Yangmei was from the same village. She lost her father when she was only five. After her father's death, her mother left her and her younger brother to two elderly grandmothers, one of whom was blind. She remembered how she pleaded her mother not to abandon them, but she left and got remarried. The life was bitter after her mother left. Yangmei recounted the past with tears, and her voice trembled. The neighbors, often gave them food, so that they were able to survive. At fourteen, she was engaged to her husband who was from a big family of five brothers. "At fourteen, I was

engaged... Our family was too difficult. I got engaged early so that he could always come to help us... He said that we could not go up the hills to gather firewood, and could not do heavy work... I was allowed as I was only fourteen. Maybe there was no other women like me (being engaged so young).” At twenty, they married.

Yangmei gave birth to four children, but due to bad health she lost two of them a few days after their birth. She said that because there was no money, she could not go to the hospital to deliver the child. It was her blind grandmother who helped her to deliver all the children at home. To this day, Yangmei still remembered how well her grandmother could find her children even being blind.

Now she had three children. The eldest daughter, after attending school for two years, chose to quit to her own will. Her second son had passed the examination and entered high school. She was determined to do her best so that her son could continue with his education. Her youngest daughter was also in school. When I asked if her husband could help, she said no. Her husband had been ill and was not able to lift anything heavy. She would not allow her nineteen-year-old daughter to go out *dagong* either, claiming that her health was not good. Besides, she was needed at home to feed the small pigs. Moreover, she was very shy and did not know the local dialect. One could tell that Yangmei was very protective of her children.

Yangmei's family had land only enough for two people, which had to support a family of five. Without enough land, they both worked hard to explore more land on the hills. Each year, they could produce up to twenty *tiao* crops. This year, her father-in-law came to live with them at his will and brought along his share of land. Among the five sons, the father chose whoever he liked to live with. Yangmei said that the old man liked to stay with them. Since he came to live with them bringing along his land, their cropping this year increased from 20 *tiao* to 50. After her grandmother's death, her younger brother also let her have some of her land. With all these, their life became less difficult. In her words, "comparing with her childhood, life was easier. But comparing with others in the village, their life still lagged behind."

Their house appeared to be in good shape, rock outside and wood inside, and the floors were cemented. I commented on her prosperous life. She and her husband said that the house was built more than fifteen years ago when the children were young and had not started school. They were able to grow ginger and that was how they got money to build the house. If it were now, they would not be able to build a similar one.

Yangmei's longing and her participation in maigong If it were not for her son's high school education, Yangmei would never participate in maigong. Since the son had begun high school in Shizhong city, he needed 30 to 40 yuan per week. They could not sell more rice at home, otherwise they would go hungry.

With no choice, she went to *maigong*. We talked about her *maigong* experience:

Xiang: Last time when we came to visit you, you were not at home, they said that you went to *maigong*.

Yangmei: Yes, I went to *maigong*. There was no other ways (“*shizai mou fazi*”)! There was no money. The kid started high school this year. I did not have money and the school would start soon, so I went to *maigong*...

Xiang: How long have you been there?

Yangmei: I went to cut grass in the bean field for more than a month. It was a farm. Originally I planned to do this for half a year. I was there for a little more than one month. Later, I went to do tobacco for about eighteen days, and got sick, *Laohuo la!* (old misfortune !) I had to come back. After I returned, I could not do any *huoji*... This year, I went to help harvest for a few days... Now I am getting better, I have to go again... I am afraid that I cannot support the kids' education. One of them still attends school in the village. Thanks to your (project's) help and she got 45 *yuan* from you. I do not know if we could still have it later. They said that because our family has a kid going to high school in Shizhong so we got the money. Thank you,

all of you, teachers. But for this kid, in order to support him, I went to *maigong* in Shizhong. Now I am sick and have not got better...

Xiang: How did you get sick?

Yangmei: To *maigong*, the smell of tobacco... I could not smell it, not a bit.

Xiang: How about others?

Yangmei: Others of my age were afraid of the smell, and got sick too... *Laohuo!* Till now, they have not recovered...

Xiang: What's wrong?

Yangmei: ... I cannot tell... everywhere aches, tommy aches, my chest aches, my back aches, and the head too... I could not stand it any more. That is why I returned...

Xiang: How did you find the job?

Yangmei: They came to find us... We were at other people's house cutting grass and they came to ask us if we would go to help them pick tobacco leaves, so we went.

Yangmei and her friends were paid 10 *yuan* a day plus room and board for picking tobacco leaves. For cutting grass in the bean field, they were paid 12 *yuan* a day plus board. As for the room, they were provided with an empty room, but they would have to bring blankets and so on themselves. Talking about

how she found the job of cutting grass, Yangmei kept on repeating like others that she was feeling ashamed waiting for the others to approach them.

Yangmei said that “we only have stupid methods, no other ways of making money. In the other years, I did not go to *maigong*. But this year, the kids are older. During their holidays, they could come back to help *zuohuo* in the house, then I could go out to find something to do... But just for a few days, I got sick...”. Yangmei was afraid that she might not be able to send her kids to school. She said, “If we cannot support them to school, they would blame us, then it would be hard for us to think of that. The kid passed the examination and we could not support him!”

If the kid was not going to high school, she would not consider going to *maigong*:

Xiang: If your health continues to be like this, you would not consider leaving for a while. Right?

Yangmei: If there is nothing to do and if I could only stay at home, it would not be able to support the kid... The kid needs food. I am afraid that I cannot even have the money for his food... Staying at home I have to get well, if not well, where ever family I go, no one would hire me...

Xiang: How do you like to go to *maigong*?

Yangmei: It is not right to stay at home when the family is in such a difficulty. Not a penny can be earned. The kid needs food. It is so troublesome that I have to go. Otherwise, who would like to go? There is no other way, nothing to sell, no money for food...

Xiang: Did you go with others in the village?

Yangmei: Yes, many others from the village

Xiang: Was it funny being with so many people?

Yangmei: How could it be funny to *maigong*, no fun at all! To have others to control over you all the time. When you want to take a rest, they would shout at you. Who likes to go, no one! Even just mentioning this in front of you makes me feel ashamed.

For about one month's *maigong*, she made about 300 *yuan*, all went to her son. If she did not get sick, she would continue to work in the tobacco field. But now she was sick, she had to come back. She was worried about her health and she had to recover soon so that she could go back to *maigong* to earn for her son's education. She repeated, "He needs 30 to 40 *yuan* for his food every week, and this money has to be earned by going out. There is nothing to sell at home, even our harvest this year was sold a few *tiao*... to sell more on during market days. We have to save some for the family."

Partaking in maigong, meeting the family needs and acting as the head of the household: Gangmei, Xiongqi, and Yangmei compared

The three women have commonalities in their husband's inability cope with the family stresses. They are bold to overcome the obstacles, which require a special kind of resilience. However, the husbands' inabilities vary, ranging from physical illness, low self-esteem, chronic and infectious disease, to purposed absence from in the family as a protest against arranged marriage. In whatever way, these women became the practical head of the household and mobilized the resources available for them in order to survive. The origin of stress in each family differed. In Gangmei's family, their deep poverty was caused by TB, which have drained away all the resources the hard working couple could generate and their elder son's life. In Xiongqi's family, her lack of money to support her children and to buy fertilizers is related to the absence of her husband who was equipped with the skills of carpentry and worked away from home but refused to help out with the family ever since they were married. All these were the legacies of the arranged marriage. As for Yangmei, if her son did not do well in school and had not passed the entrance examination of high school, Yangmei would not have to worry too much about the survival of the family, as the paddy field and the dry land they had developed over the years were enough for the family. Since the son was gloriously admitted to high school, his daily expenses had become a problem. Yangmei would be sorry if she failed to send him to school. All the three women faced the problem of poverty, though the causes

differed. They tried various ways to meet the family needs. As the child was too young to be left at home, Gangmei mobilized all kinds of resources. She sought help from the government. She went to her sister for both material and labor supports. She also took loans to engage in *maigong*. Xiongqi had no one to turn to in the village, as her husband's kin was very powerful in the village. And the years of fight with her husband had strained her relations with the extended family and even the neighbors who were also part of the kinship network. Being quite isolated, she constantly sought her natal family for support. When she had to go to *maigong*, she asked all the three sons to help with the house chores and feed the pigs. But as the children entered middle school, educational expenses increased drastically. She had difficulty in supporting them on her own. And the children were old enough to bargain with her. Their help could not be obtained if their requests, mostly about money, were not delivered. This hampered her way to seek for a paid job even if it was only temporary and short term. In despair, Xiongqi resorted to the family kinship networks of her husband and her own to bring back the absent husband. If the husband continued to be shunning away from the family responsibility, she would ask for a divorce. In their own ways, these three women demonstrate their resilience to search out a life that is meaningful to them.

Summary and analysis of the middle-aged Zhunag women's narratives on migration

Middle-aged rural women on migration in China, particularly those from ethnic groups, received little, if any, attention from academics as well as policy-makers. This is due to the assumption that migration is mostly practiced by young people. This observation may be partly true when only long term and long distance migration *dagong* is being considered. But when we look at various forms of migration, especially those hidden away from scrutiny of the state, we may find that there is a large amount of middle-aged ethnic women participating in migration. The differences between the younger cohorts and the middle-aged appear that former are more aspired to a modern life while the latter desire more to fulfill the gendered expectation for the family and in the community. As the growing up children, especially the sons move out to partaking in the migration, they experience this as additional stress and separation due to the migrating husbands. In this section, through the narratives of the middle-aged Zhuang women, I will analyze their desires, their family, community as well as their agencies in coping with various forms of control.

The middle-aged Zhuang women's narratives on their desires and migration

Through the middle-aged Zhuang women's narratives on migration, I find that multiple tensions and stresses experienced both by women left behind and in migration is the most salient feature of their life.

Besides the multiple burdens that face the young married women, middle-aged women experience multiple stresses derived from continuous absence of the husbands and the grown-up children who left the family and the community in search of a life in the city. Different from the cohort of young women, the middle-aged women are less aspired to modern and urban life. They rather desire for a family in which the members stay together and closely connected to each other. Both Yangmei and Guisao dreaded to have a nightmare of their coming-of-age sons leaving afar. However, the desire for family reunion is deeply embedded in the gendered ideology in which the women place their desires and hopes onto the sons and exploit the daughters in the family. When it comes to resources allocation in the family, the middle-aged mothers tend to be male biased and become an agent to defend the patriarchal system. The sons are allowed to leave to explore the outside world even at the expense of the family's scarce resources, while the daughters have to stay at home helping the parents. The patriarchal system which exploits women is supported by women themselves.

The middle-aged Zhuang women's narratives on the controls on migration

From the narratives of the middle-aged *Zhuang* women, the issue of poverty is caused by the absence of state in social service delivery as well as the continuous absence of the husbands. In addition, the coming-of-age sons' migration is the salient feature of the families of this cohort of women.

From the narratives of the middle-aged *Zhuang* women, I find that poverty remains to be an on-going issue in their life. This is particularly true with these women whose children are attending junior or high school and those who suffer from chronic disease. If Yangmei had a choice, she would not participate in *maigong*. And she managed to stay away from it when children were young. But as the son entered high school, she had no other choice. She dreaded *maigong*, yet having no other way to make money.

The chronic disease has affected everyone in the family and even claimed the life of Gangmei's first son. Though both husband and wife worked endlessly, they had no way to pull the family out of deep poverty. With no money for fertilizers to ensure the harvest of the following year, the pregnant Gangmei, even at pregnant had to go *maigong* to make money.

The middle-aged *Zhuang* mothers are under multiple tensions caused by their husbands and grown-up children who are moving away. When the children have grown up, the stress of the middle-aged women becomes multi-layered. The husbands' little contribution to and their absence from the family due to the chronic disease continue to be the sources of sufferings of the middle-aged women. The grown-up children who moved away from the family caused them more suffering. Experiencing the weakening influence over the migrating sons, the middle-aged mothers expressed their worries and anxiety about their sons' safety and doubted their hope of having a complete and stable "*Zaan*". The

mother tends to take the daughters' contribution to the house for granted and neglected their needs. Their daughters began to protest against the bias, just like what Guisao's daughter had done to her mother.

The middle-aged Zhuang women's narratives on their agencies on migration

Facing so many stresses, the *Zhuang* women's responses are more resisting than complying, and more negotiating with the existing resources. Their diverse responses are situated in their life trajectory. Deploying discourses on poverty is a common form to negotiate with the officials and the project workers to seek for assistance. Bodily pain and suffering are recurrent themes in their narratives reflecting a bodily protest on their part against the dominations in their life experience which are rooted in gender, ethnicity, rurality and other overarching social structures.

Discussion

Rural middle-aged women are often portrayed in the literature and public discourses as people of low quality, lacking education, hiding in the kitchen and lacking skills required in the public arena. Through the stories of the six women, I find that this representation of rural middle-aged women is largely untrue. Both Yangmei's and Gangmei's husbands are ill and shy and are afraid to face the dominating forces. It is the wives who dare to openly challenge the system of domination and fight for the education of the children and the survival of the family.

The middle-aged has been known in the city for its being “sandwiched”, stressed both sides from the older and younger generation, under the multiple tensions of working and marriage life at the most vulnerable and critical point, coming-of-age children, declining health. Middle-aged women in the city have caught much attention. Interestingly, few researches have been done on middle-aged women in regard to migration.

In my study, I find that rural middle-aged women suffer from multiple tensions. Same as the case of the cohort of young married women, the husbands of the middle-aged women were absent from the family, which add more stress to their vulnerable and much strained gender relations. Placing their hope and aspiration to life on their children, normally on their sons, the women find that their hope is equally at risk as the son is drawn by the powerful forces outside and aspire to their own future. The middle-aged women with a migrating son confronted the declining influence over the son and suffered in anxiety and depression, particularly manifested in their complaints of chronic headache, the void of life, and “their crying up on the hills”.

In view of the husbands’ failing to be the major bearer of the family responsibility, the middle-aged women deployed various means to meet the needs of the family, including subsistence production, cure of disease and the increasing educational cost of the children. Partaking in *maigong* is one of the means they use. Younger women can find some space for themselves as *maigong* provides a

chance for them to get away from the drudgeries and loneliness at home. As for the middle-aged women, they simply find it intolerable. They engage in it largely on the account of meeting family needs. However, their perceptions of *maigong* are situated in their family and gender relations. When they count on *maigong* to generate some income to support their sons to find a possible bright future through formal education, the women would put the interest of their sons over herself despite her physical and medical sufferings from *maigong*. She would sacrifice for the much motivated son. The women would also plunge into *maigong* without hesitation when it serves as another source of income for fertilizers, without which the whole family would suffer from starvation. When the gender relation is strained, any kind of suffering on the part of women becomes not just intolerable for women but meaningless.

The middle-aged women's narratives on migration the young women's narratives on family and migration come together to form a challenge to the dominant theories of surplus labor and gender division of labor. I will come back with more elaborate discussions on this point in chapter 8.

Chapter 7 Migration and Obligations, and *Zhuang* Elderly Women's Despair in Achieving "Zaan"

Introduction

Rural elderly women in regards to migration in woman and migration literature remain to be invisible or at most paid scant attention to. Since the mid 1990s, Huang Ping and others have begun to call for more research to be conducted on the lives of the rural elderly women and migration (Huang Ping, 1997). A decade is passed, the understanding elderly rural women and migration still largely remains in the discourse that rural elderly women suffer from the over-burden and endless work due to the children's migration (Huang Ping, 1997). This kind of grand statement will not just fail to help us to understand how different mechanisms work to constrain and enable the lives of rural elderly women, but it serves to perpetuate the unequal power relations based on rural-urban, gender, class, ethnicity and age. My study on women and migration include rural elderly women is an endeavor to fill this gap and to disclose the various forms of domination in rural elderly women's lives by situating them into their life stage in the family and community.

All the eleven elder women with whom I conducted participant observation and interviews are above sixty years old in my study, among whom four are above

seventy, and seven are over sixty years old. Since my study focus on rural women's lives and their narratives on migration, all my participants have at least one member in their family who is engaged in migration. While the majority of their migrating family members and their sons, two elder women are their daughter and grandson respectively in migration.

What all these elder women have in common is that they should be withdrawing from both the productive and reproductive labor and enjoying the leisure and comforts that other family members provide for them. However, I found that the reality in *Di'an* Village for the elderly women is far from being so. Instead, most of them engage in if not increasing amount of work, at least equal amount of work at the declining health. They suffer from intensifying loneliness and isolation due to their children's continuing shunning away from family responsibilities via migration. One would assume that this is the group that would be least likely mobile where migration is concerned. However, there is one elderly woman in my study who also participates in seasonal *maigong*.

In this chapter, through comparing similarities and differences of six elderly women's lived experiences in regard to migration, I will uncover the underlining mechanisms that shape their life as well as the diverse responses different elderly women explore to cope with multiple stresses in their lives.

Zhuang elder women's situated narratives on migration

The mature son's unfruitful yet persistent migration, strained mother-son relations and depression of the elderly women

The Story of Mamei—endless suffering and her mature son's persistent migration

Mamei, who was about seventy years old, was a very unhappy elder woman. She kept on repeating that her whole life has been difficult and that she was no use, “better to die than to live”. She felt lonely and helpless. For a long time no one from her natal family in the nearby village came to visit them since her husband was ill, a sign Mamei took as despise from her relatives for their poverty. Her only son *dagong* in Kunming and was not willing to return. With her alone by her sick husband, she found herself helpless and powerless. She had much grievance.

Whenever people in the village talked about *dagong*, Maguang's name will appear in the conversation. In fact, Maguang was not his original name. He was named Ma Jingcai at birth. After dropping out of high school, he went to *dagong* in Guangdong. Since then, he changed his name to Maguang, the same “guang” with the “guang” in Guangzhou. Men in the villages commented that Maguang was the most successful among all who were in migration. Some said that he was in remodeling business, and mostly in sales, and that he had acquired many skills. Laowu, the former party secretary, one of the most powerful men in the village, was generally critical of other young men in migration “for their

laziness and unwillingness to engage in dirty and hard farm work” even held high regards for Maguang, told me that “Maugang was his own boss now, well respected and addressed as Master Ma by Kunming people, he even had his own car, a *Xiali* car”⁶. To Yusong, the “intellectual” of the village, who believed in education, had his own opinion regarding Maguang. He said that whatever people gossiped about Maguang was true or not was not important, what was important was that Maguang was out for seven and eight years and had equipped himself with skills from head to toe. During his spare time in his *dagong* life, Maguang continued with his studies and pursued his degree in the university, “he was a man of ambition”. “Even though he did not have much money, he would be surely successful later”, Yusong was very sure of that about Maguang. Still Laowu maintained that there was no way out for those in *dagong*. Even the exceptional ones like Maguang who was somewhat successful, during the spring festivals, he was still unable to bring any money home and had to sell rice from his family for his bus fare back to Kunming. Obviously, there was nothing positive about *dagong*. Amidst all these controversial discussions, I decided to visit Maguang’s family.

Under the hot sun, I came to where Maguang’s family was. Though it was hot and bright outside, in the small mud-made house, it was dark and wet inside.

⁶ Xiali car is a domestic made car, symbolizing a social status of entering into the “made it” class with a prospect of more advancement in class and status.

I stood in the middle of the room and it took me some time to adjust to the dark and cold in the room. Then I found that by the only old table in the room, there was an elder woman in her seventies having her late lunch (“*shanwu*”) alone by herself, a bowl of cold rice with pickled cabbage. She could hardly understand anything I said in Han local dialect, let alone speaking it. It was the friendly woman who showed us to her house translated for me. From her translation, I learned that Mamei’s husband was ill for sometime, and he stayed with his elder son who lived across the river so that he can be better taken care of. When I asked how come Mamei did not go with her husband, she shook her head without saying anything. Later, I found out that this elder son was not born by Mamei but by the first late wife of her husband’s. Mamei was his second wife, and they together gave birth to Maguang.

When I asked her when Maguang would come back, she said that she did not know. He did return for one night during March 3, and left the next day. She added that Maguang had been going out for seven and eight years, and had not helped out with the family at all. Only when his father was ill, he sent 200 *yuan* back and nothing else. The land was rented to others to work on and they could have half share of the harvest each year. Mamei complained that they could barely survive on that. If they needed money, they had to sell rice. Then even food became insufficient.

I suggested a visit to Maguang's father. Mamei offered to take us to him. For a woman in her seventies, she walked fast down and up the hills, I could hardly catch up on her. When crossing the river, the current was rapid, she walked with much steadiness and ease. Upon reaching the other bank, she stood there quietly waiting for me to cross over. I struggled with each step in the rapid current in fear and anxiety. A couple times, I almost fell into the river. I felt a deep respect and admiration growing inside me for this brave elder woman.

Arriving at her stepson's house, his son was not in, only her daughter-in-law and her husband were in. The sick elder man sat by the door looking very weak and breathing hard in each of his attempt to speak. Still, we managed to communicate. Mentioning about Maguang, he looked very displeased. When the daughter-in-law by side told me that Maguang did call and said that he would return on the 13th of the month, which was about a week later, the old man retorted that Maguang was just lying, and he knew that he would not return, "how many times he said that he would return, but never did!"

According to the daughter-in-law, they had enough land, but mostly "barren", meaning infertile, and could only produce twenty *tiao* of rice each year. The food was not enough for a family that consisted of two children, the old man and her own elderly mother. In order to survive, her husband joined *dagong* and went to mine coals. According to her, he could bring home about 1000 *yuan* each year. However, due to his father's illness, last year in 2003 he did not

leave. That was why she said the food was not enough and they would have to rely on Maguang to send money home to buy food. But she had no idea if he would do that.

When I was chatting with the daughter-in-law, Mamei was sitting by quietly and said nothing. When I rose to take leave, she did the same and walked ahead of me. As I was going back to where I lived, which was different direction from her, I said good-bye to her. When taking leave, I suddenly felt her eyes buried deep among the wrinkles on her face were looking eagerly at me, somewhat wet, and with such a sense of attachment and care, my heart tightened. How isolated and lonely this elderly woman was! Seeing her down the hill and crossing the river, and then up on the hill, every step was so steady and resolute, I could not help both admiring and heart-aching for her, and wishing to keep her company.

Mamei's desire Mamei's hope was all centered on her only son Maguang. How she wanted him to return to take up responsibilities at home and to settle down! After his seven years' migration, she was well aware that migration would not help to improve the living condition in the family. As Maguang persisted on migration, she was depressed seeing no hope ahead of her.

Mamei's desire and life trajectories Mamei was from the nearby village, *Luke*.

She was orphaned at early age and grew up with her two elder brothers. Same with her cohort of women in the village, Mamei never had chance to attend

school. She married her husband under the elders' arrangement. For all dissatisfaction and unhappiness in her life, she blamed them all these on her bad marriage. She regretted that she did not get anything from marriage. When she observed that the young women's pridal price reached more than 1000 *yuan*, as compared to 100 *yuna* during her time, she felt unfairly treated.

After marriage, Mamei born two children, one of whom died at two. With much regret, Mamei told me that if the child did not die, he should have been married and had his own children. Talking about this, Mamei expressed that she regretted to have married and moved to *Bengbang*, as there was nothing, and life was always difficult. She remembered those days that she had to carry baby up on the hills to work for *gongfen*: "...those were hard days, harder than now, everyday I had to go to work for *gongfen*, and still had to take care of the kids... and the whole family lived on *gongfen*, it was really spicy and bitter ... there were no elderly to help them to take care of children... I was sick... now he is sick... it is impossible to improve our life any more, all the time and any time, it is this difficult...". She repeated that since she came to *Di'an* Village, they had been having nothing, her husband's illness would not get better, she was alone suffering from this hardship, it was too much for her to bear. She kept on saying that her husband's illness was very serious and he could hardly breathe at times. She stressed that there was not a moment in her life that she lived well. Facing with us, she felt that she did not know what to say about her life. Because

nothing was good, that was why her elder stepson chose to marry via *shangmen*, to live with his wife's family, away from the family, leaving the family to two aging parents.

Mamei's desire and Maguang's dagong In Mamei's house, with three people, altogether they owned land totaling in six *gong*, which made about less than three *mu*. However, not all the land was arable for producing rice, some was barren due to lack of water and could only grow corns. Only three *gong* was arable for rice production. Since Maguang left, all the arable land was rented to others in the village and they obtained half share of their crops at the end of the year. On those barren lands, Mamei used some to grow corns. From planting seeds, weeding to harvesting, she did everything by herself. Still, Maguang was not satisfied with how the crops were divided and complained about. Mamei retorted him "you know it was not right, then why don't you come home to work on it yourself?".

This year, she only obtained twelve *tiao* (less than 600 kilograms) from land rental, which, Mamei calculated, would last them for a year, as her husband had been ill and could eat very little. Still, she planted some rice of her own on the land that was infertile, and for that work, she was able to add three *tiao* (less than 150 kilograms) of rice to their yearly consumption. Describing how she did this on her own, she repeated that "I was all soaked wet by the rain, all wet!". She also planted some corn but she had not gone to harvest them. Mamei sighed and muttered to herself "I am no use by myself, there is nothing, very difficult....."

no use... ”. Mamei was disappointed at her own natal family. She had a younger brother who had four children, but they never came to see her. She was both sad and feeling hurt that there was nobody from her natal family to come to see them since her husband had been ill for the past two years. As natal families served as an important source of support and strength to woman in *Zhuang* culture, Mamei regarded their failing to come to visit her as a form of abandonment. She interpreted this as her being poor. Her natal family’s neglect of her further intensified her sense of uselessness and worthlessness she had been feeling all along due to Maguang’s persistent migration.

Mamei attributed Maguang’s migration to her earlier failure in providing him with his high school education. She explained it that “Ma Cai wanted to continue with his school, but it was difficult to find money, we could not afford to send him to finish his high school. He came back from school, and then left for Guangzhou to *dagong*. It was all because we could not send him to school that he did not think of us and left us”. After Maguang dropped out of school, he taught in the village primary school nearby for a while. Then he left again to Guangdong to *dagong*, this time for a few years. Afterwards, he came back to work in the field. Mamei recalled that when Maguang worked at home, he could produce thirty *tiao* of rice. Mamei complained that Maguang was not able to help much at home. At most, he could send back about two hundred *yuan* each year, even that she was not sure, “it was his father and brother who knew, and the

money was under control of his brother”, she complained. As there was only two hundred *yuan* a year, Mamei expressed that she was not willing to let Maguang leave for that small amount of money. When I asked her if he had girlfriend outside, Mamei said that she did not know. When Maguang came back, he would not talk anything with her, not a single word to her, and only answered her with yes and no. When she asked him how much he could make or if he was able to make any money at all, he remained silent. Mamei was not happy with the situation, feeling that her life was worse than other families. When Xiaoyu and Lifeng, the two women who assisted me with interviews, encountered her saying if it could be the problem of her half deaf ears that she did not hear when Maguang said anything, especially they knew that Maguang spoke with a low and soft voice. Mamei’s husband by the side confirmed that Maguang said nothing and did not feel like saying anything to them when he returned. Both of the two elders expressed that they would like Maguang to be back, Mamei said: “...no matter how hard I want him to, there is no use, he won’t come back!”. Her husband said that they really wanted him to come back because there were only two elder people at home. Mamei added with indignation that “...for sure Maguang does not think of us... last time, he only returned for a couple of days, and left.... He just does not think of us!”. Xiaoyu attempted to persuade the old couple that Maguang was not the kind of irresponsible man and that it was because that he was not be able to make any money by sitting at home. If he did not go out to work, he would not be able to send so much money back to treat the

father's illness. Mamei said that she could not understand Maguang, because for her, the illness of his father could not be treated, it was only waste of money. She said that he had been sick for two years, and always sick, and he would not get better. She suspected that if the medicine he took everyday was any use, Xiaoyu, the rural doctor explained to her that it was not due to inappropriateness of the medicine, but more due to his inability to eat food that kept him sick.

About planting ginger, she said that this year, she stopped planting it as she was all herself, and her husband was sick, she could not manage, so she just left the land wasted. Most of her work at home now was going up to the hill to find fuels and cooked for both of them. In despair, she said that "I do not want to live, I want to die... I could do nothing just to live like this!". She added: "I hate myself... not a penny I got from marrying him..."

In eyes of the villagers, Maguang was the only person who made it via migration. But when we came to his family and met with the aging parents, they were not getting any comfort and support from him. On the contrary, what they are left with were disappointment and sadness, as Mamei said "to be in hardship for a whole life, to the end, nothing was good". What she could explain about her life was that she had married a wrong man. But it was too late to change. That was why she felt that she would rather die than to live. After all, her situation now was like just waiting to die. There was nothing to be hopeful in her life.

Obtaining Maguang's mobile phone number in Kunming, I contacted Maguang after returning from the village. We managed to meet for dinner after his work. At one night in Kunming, after some waiting in the restaurant, I met with Maguang coming on bicycle with his friend, also a migrant himself but from a different prefecture. Maguang told me that he was working as a sales attendant in the construction materials market in the northeast of the city, and he worked from early till late at night. He shared a rented room with his friend in the north. While his co-worker seemed to be more cheerful, he was a young man of few words. He said that he was earning a wage of 600 *yuan* and could barely to get by after his room and board was taken out. When I asked him if he still continued with his education in the university, he said that he dropped, because selling the construction materials was too tiring and he did not have money to pay for the school fee. At his work, he attended the shop and took orders, and was responsible to dispatch the order. He disclosed to me that he had a girlfriend who was also a migrant worker in Kunming. Talking about marriage, he said that it had to wait when he settled down more.

In spring of 2004, upon return *Di'an* Village, which I left for three months, I found that Mamei's sick husband already passed away. I went to visit Mamei, and found herself alone at home as usual. Seeing us, she burst into tears and said that she was scared to be alone at home. Later I talked with Maguang over the phone. He told me that he went back for his father's funeral, but he had to return

back to Kunming soon afterwards in order to keep his job. About his mother, he said that he had to make more money for her to live a better life... My heart sank hearing him saying that and I wondered to myself where her better life could possibly lie as far as the one who held the key to her hope of better life persisted to be absent in her life.

Dongmei' story Mature son's persistent migration, the elderly mother's endless work and hopelessness for life

Same with Maguang, I heard so much of Dongfei from other villagers when talking about the migrants in the village. He had been gong for the past seven and eight years. They were about the similar age, both in their early thirties, and both did very well in school but had to drop out of school because of parents' inability to provide them for their education. Zhang, his former classmate, now a village doctor, recalled that after he left school, his school teacher came on his motorcycle trying to persuade him to return school. He said that Dongfei was talented in his studies, if he could make it, he would be able to enter college in future. Dongfei also changed his original name Xiangyi given by his parents, to Fei, meaning flying, indicating his strong aspiration to be able to fly far and high. However, a striking difference between Maguan and Dongfei in the villagers' narratives was that while Maguang was a successful migrant, Dongfei was a total failure. Villagers knew that Dongfei had been working in the coal for the past few years. Because he was smart and had some knowledge comparing with

other manual laborer, he was entrusted with the responsibilities of supervising others and the safety of the coal mine underground. In this way, he earned more than other coal miners. At times, he could make more than 10,000 *yuan* a year, he told me. But he gambled them away. Fong, who assisted me with my study told me disapprovingly that one year, his father went to visit him in the coal mining area, he did not just fail to accommodate him and provide him with food, he let the elderly father to be totally on his own. His father returned with the money he borrowed from others. “He is not kind to his elderly parents”, Fong concluded.

I met Dongfei at Xiaohua’s wedding ceremony among many migrants who returned for the occasion. I had a chance to chat with most of them, talking about their aspirations and their perceptions of life. I talked even longer with Dongfei for almost three hours sitting in the dark at night outside the house.

Dongfei struck me as a young man with intelligence and pride. He shared with us his dreams, and how his dreams were crushed due to the cruelty of realities that had much to do with poverty, discrimination in school and in the wider world. He described his state as “dumping a broken pot, making no difference (*po guanzi po suai*)”.

That night, Dongfei took out a lot inside him, and he cried constantly, and in the end, he promised himself that he would try to begin a new life, not to gamble

away the hard earned money and pick up responsibilities at home. Since that meeting, Dongfei had left and returned the village for many times. However, when he returned, he seemed to avoid me, and I knew his whereabouts through others or occasionally gaining a glimpse of him standing by the crowd watching others play *majeong*. Finally, to his embarrassment and among the crowd of gambling men, I invited him to come to have a chat. He came, however, not without reluctance. Our second talk lasted for more than one hour, and he told me about his painful experiences of street life after leaving the village for the first time: joining gangs to mob and rob; and ending up in jail a few times; and his futile attempts to change his gambling behavior. Watching him, I felt so sad for him, even sadder for his mother, Dongmei.

I met with Dongmei four times, the first three times was at her rundown house, the last time was at her elder son's house which was just a few houses away from her own house, by then her husband already passed away.

Dongmei's desire Dongmei would like her son to return to the family and take up the responsibilities. She kept on urging him to get married, settle down, and raise his family. To facilitate with this process, she worked hard to raise two pigs. She hoped that with money gained from selling pigs, Dongfei would be either able to get married or if he still had not found the woman he would like to marry, he could use the money to fix the rundown house. She was upset with Dongfei continuing to engage in digging coals, her much dreaded work as it once

claimed her first husband's life . She was especially up against his gambling hobby, abusing his life-risking money.

Dongmei's desire and life trajectory Dongmei had a very tough childhood, “unusual to most of women in her generation”, in Dongmei's words. His father, a wealthy landlord, had five wives, her mother was his second wife. After Dongmei and her elder sister were born, her father did not want them any more and swore to kill them all. In despair, her mother sent both daughters at night to the nearby town *Wulong* and hid them there for three years. At that time, Lifeng's grandfather was working as a full time tenent (“*changgong*”) in his house, and he asked him to take her away because he no longer wanted her any more. When I asked why her father would do such a thing, Dongmei said that her father suspected that she was having affair with his seventh brother, which, she protested, was untrue, and that he was just using excuses to kill his own brother. Lifeng's grandfather already had two wives with three children. In order to save their life, he agreed to take three of them into his house. She described the ordeal when both her and her sister tried to escape their own brutal father:

“...when my mother sent us to our maternal grandmother in *Baolian*, another town, there was a man sent by my father after us... we ran to my grandmother and then back to my mother... it was so much hardship.. On the way, the man caught us, in panic, we both ran into

different directions and fell down from the hill. An old man happened to pass by and saw us. He talked the man not to do this to two little orphans. Afterwards, he set us free and that was how both of us were able to join our mother in the new home in *Di'an* village.

Dongmei repeated that “it was such a hardship. We suffered so much, more than any other people when we were young... you do not see anyone who went through that hardship as me and my sister did”.

Luckily, their stepfather, Lifeng's grandfather was especially kind to them and cared for them, even never scolded them once. She said that when her own father was going to kill her mother, it was her stepfather who saved her and said that he would take such a kind woman. Her stepfather already had three wives, one died leaving one daughter behind. His second wife bore him two daughters. In order to have a son, he took the third wife who eventually bore him a son who was Lifeng's father. So among three wives, they raised five girls and one boy together. When we asked if the wives went along well, she said that “they never quarreled... they cared for each other... when one went out to work and stayed out late, the other one would go to find her”. Talking about her stepfather, Dongmei shed even more tears that: “before he died, he summoned his wives to his death bed and asked them not to quarrel and ordered his son to treat his other mothers well, though he was not born by them”. When her father died, he was only fifty years old. In the eyes of Dongmei, “he was labored to death (*lei si*

de'), my father worked so hard, so hard... because we are all women, too many children and the son was still young. He died after he came back from field. When he died, his plow was still in the field... he came back from the field carrying a load of fuels with him. Since then, whenever I saw a load of fuels, it reminded me of him... ”

When Xiaoyu and others asked her how come her own father married so many women, she said that her father was very rich and did whatever he wanted. Among five of them, there was a *Han* woman who was the most beautiful and she, too, did not want to marry him, and pretended to be dumb, saying nothing and doing nothing around the house. Later she also left. After Liberation, all his wives were sent back to where they were from with their own children. Dongmei commented that “it was not easy to be the wife of a rich man, and come when he wants and leave when he does not”. When her father first went to ask for her mother, her maternal grandmother rejected his proposal. In outrage, he took her by force. But once his, he treated her and their daughters badly. Dongmei showed us one of her fingers on her left hand, half of which was chopped off. She said it was done by her own father using an axe, “my own father was a much hated man, and he died of a horrible death and was skinned by others who hated him”. Three years later after they came to *Di'an* Village with her mother, it was liberated, “but the childhood was full of suffering”.

When Dongmei was sixteen years old, she married a man in *Di'an* village under the elders' arrangement. Two years after marriage, her husband went to work on the coal mines and was choked to death by the coal dust. She said that his body was even not allowed to take back and buried there. Then on her own will she courted with her present husband and married him. Five years after their marriage, she gave birth to her first son, later to five other children, among who two died a few days after birth, leaving her with two sons and two daughters.

Since the elder son got married, the house was divided, she, her husband and Dongfei owned a piece of land for three people, close to three *mu*. She said that if they did not have to sell, the food produced would be enough, but her husband was always sick and had to eat pain killer ("*toutong fen*") everyday, costing them one *yuan* for one day. She had to go up to the hills to search for things to sell in order to come up with the money. She did all the work herself, including to find fuels for cooking. "Dongfei did nothing to help us!" Since her elder son had his own family to attend to, he could not help much.

Dongmei was raising two pigs, thinking that Dongmei could use them to get married and settle down. She said as there was no money to buy bigger pigs, the ones she raised were very small. After rice harvested in, she had only dried half of it, because the sun had not been good, she was waiting for the sun to come out so that she could dry the rest. She was getting worried about the weather. If it kept raining, the rice would grow mould and be wasted. Besides doing all these

work, she still needed to attend the cow for her elder son. Because her daughter-in-law had been ill from arthritis, she seemed to always prone to collapse, and could not sit long on the stool, otherwise, she would fall. Dongmei told us when she saw the daughter-in-law that day, the latter told her that she was almost dead, that when she went to the field to look for vegetables, she fell down and lost conscious. Now her teenage granddaughter had to drop out of school and went to search for food instead. Her daughter-in-law could only stay at home cooking, even that she constantly fainted. There was no money left at home now, last year, they sold one of the cows for 600 *yuan* and it was all spent it in the hospital, and still she was not recovered. Dongmei said that though she was thin, but she had been well, but her husband had been sick, constantly fainted, and they did not know why and did not have money to go to the hospital to find out.

Dongmei's desire and Dongfei's migration Dongmei said that "...now it was Dongfei who did not care for the family... Dongfei left home year after year, at most he brought home two hundred *yuan*, and he was out all the time. Sometimes, he brought home two hundred *yuan*, sometimes, one hundred *yuan*...I really do not want him to go, but I cannot stop him...".

When I asked her how long he had been gone, she said for ten years now, adding that "we are all old now, and he has left us for ten years...". When I asked if Dongfei ever came home to help out during the busy seasons, she said that sometimes he did. Dongmei really did not want him to go any more and

wanted him to settle down to have his own family. About Dongfei's continuing neglecting home, Dongmei interpreted that it had to do with their failing to support him to school:

“...for this youngest one (Dongfei), we could not afford to send him to school, that is why he does not care for us, because he always remembers, and blames us for not doing that...now that he is twenty eight years old, I had to do all the work myself, and collect all the fuels myself, he does not care a bit... every time, I go up the hills to cut woods, and can't return until it was dark”.

Dongmei said that last few words with much stress and in the local dialect so that we could understand her. Talking about this, she said that she hated him like this. Whenever he returned, he would go to play *majeong* and “waste money (*'zao qian'*). Lifeng nodded her head saying that “he returns but seldom at home, and left home right after his meals...”. Fong added that “he hates his parents failing to support him to school” and she continued to translate for Dongmei:

“ At school, he performed well. When he returned, his teacher even bought him a pair of shoes. He was an obedient child when he was young, but now as an adult, he was a beast '*chusheng*', never returning home. When he first left home, he did not tell us and left at

night. I was so upset that I did not eat for three days, fearful that he would die outside somewhere... Until two years and half later, he returned, and only bringing home 100 *yuan*. Last time, he left with his elder brother-in-law to *dagong*, and each made 600 *yuan* by digging coals. Dongfei's brother-in-law asked him to take money back to give it to his sister to pay for their children's school fee and books. But he did not do that, instead, spent not just all his earning but his brother-in-law's on gambling, and returned home empty-handed. When his brother-in-law found out this, Dongfei said to him without even blinking his eyes: "I have spent the money, beat me if you want to...". In despair, his brother-in-law had to sell seven *tiao* of rice to keep their children in school.

During the first time he left home, while he was out, he ran into his relatives who would urge him to return to spend the spring holidays with the family, which he did but just for night and left again. When he returned, he spoke to no one, not to his father, not to his mother, and advised his mother not to scold him, because he was already angry himself. At last, his elder brother asked his mother not to scold him, and let him be. In time, he would be good again and would think of her more. Right now, he was just depressed. When Dongmei said to Dongfei that he was already twenty nine this year, it was time for him to consider marriage ("*zuo jia*"). At this, Dongfei snapped back: "I myself am in no

hurry, why should you be so? ”, and left and did not return for another day. Dongmei raised two big pigs and said to Dongfei to get married, even if he did not feel getting married, he should think of fixing the house, Dongfei said to his mother: “what is there to fix? if the pigs get big enough, just kill them for the spring festival!”.

Despite the hard time Dongmei had with Dongfei, she thought life now was better than before:

“Now it is liberated, it is good...before liberation, women and girls, especially those beautiful ones did not dare to go out on the street, dare not to step out doors. If they did, once they were spotted by the hooligans (*'e ba'*), and they would send their soldiers (*'jiading'*) to take them by force... that was why my mother who was beautiful was taken by force... now you young people are much better off, before, you would not dare to go on the street”.

Though the house Dongmei lived in was mud made, it looked solidly built, only worn out due to neglect. A few places were falling down and supported by some wooden sticks. When I asked her if the house was built by her and her husband, she told us that the house was originally used for the storage room during the commune by the village. It was later given to them by “Chairman Mao, not a penny we paid”, for

this her good natured husband by the side confirmed with her and repeated that “yes, it was given to us by Chairman Mao, we did not pay anything for it”.

Three months later, I returned the village and found that her good natured husband was gone. It was a disheartening scene I came into during my visit, by then she was living with her eldest son. They had food, just simple cabbages on the table, and were sitting there waiting for the elder son who was out working in the field to return. Dongmei was washing her feet with a worn out towel that was hard to discern its original color and shape. Her daughter-in-law was sitting, leaning against the wall moaning. I was told that she suffered from an unnamed tumma in her head, and because of that she constantly fainted. Of course, there was no way that she could be sent to the doctor to be treated... they would just hope that she would recover somehow by magic. Her granddaughter in her early teens was working away on the sewing machine inside the room. It was getting dark, I sat there waiting with them for the man of the family to return in worn out a house. Against the fading sky in dusk, I sat with them, watching them and feeling a mixed sense of sadness and strange tranquility. It would be very sad, with the husband just gone and the daughter-in-law so sick, a grown up son who insisted on continuing his irresponsible and risky life. However, Dongfei did not grieve and did not shed tears. At least, Dongmei was sure that her other son was on his way back. Dongmei smiled her gentle smile at me, then kept on staring

into the growing darkness outside the door, with much anticipation and hope. At that moment, all her energy was devoted on one thing, that his elder son would return soon, for that she was hopeful.... We waited, all staring outside in silence. Finally, his son arrived totally wrapped in darkness from outside. Upon seeing him, I observed that Dongmei broke into broad smile, and everyone gathered around the table ready for dinner. I noticed that the steam rising from the simple food on the worn out table, food was warm! I took leave and on the way back, sad as it was, but somehow there was a sense of hope lingering in that rundown shack, and it had to do with the deep connection and love in that family,

Despair Mamei, and hopeful Dongmei

Mamei and Dongmei shared many similarities: they were about the same age; with husband sick for quite some time and died within a span of two months; still working hard to keep the house for their grown-up sons who persisted on migration and refused to return and even to communicate with them. While hoping that their son would return soon to settle down and take up responsibility at home, they blamed themselves for being responsible for their sons' irresponsible behavior, for their failure to provide them with more education when they were young, and that they were useless.

However, Mamei and Dongmei responded to the situations differently. Mamei tended to be more cynical and negative in seeing and feeling things around her. She felt abandoned by her own son who was not willing to return, by her

elder stepson who chose to *zhaoqin* and married off, by her husband whom she made a mistake to marry, by her natal family who did not even drop by once to show their concerns for her when her husband was sick for over two years. Living all alone by herself, she was feeling lonely. With her husband gone, a despairing sense of fear added to her lonely state. In her words, she was useless, and worthless, only waiting to die.

Dongmei had every reason to feel the same with Mamei. In fact, her son Dongfei was even worse than Mamei's son. Maguang, after all, was engaged in a decent job and learning skills. He just could not make enough to send home, but he was trying with a purpose in his life. But Dongfei was putting his life under risks with his work in the coal mining. To make it worse, he gambled away his hard earned money, and wasting his life as "dumping the broken pot", without giving any attention to himself, let alone the aging mother who was still holding on the house and the land for him. Dongmei kept on hoping that some day, his son would return to her. After the kind of hardship she has been through earlier in her life- brutality of her own father, death of her first husband, deaths of two children, she came also to appreciate what she had in her life, the house was given by the commune, in her words, by Chairman Mao, and the young women nowadays was able to move about as they liked without having to worry about the hooligans, life is already so much better. For that, with another son around, she was hopeful.

Life has not been easy for both Dongmei and Mamei. Feeling lack of control over their life has been accompanied them throughout their whole life. Their mature son's persistent absence from their life is just the continuation of the powerlessness. However, due to their different life experiences, they felt life differently. Dongmei has been fighting against the life, and to some extent, was able to have degree of control over her life.

Children in circular migration, the depressing sense of homelessness

Guimei's story- with migrating sons, home is not like a home

I came to know Guimei through her daughter Guihua who was able to continue with her middle school education under our support. Due to this connection, every time I went to visit the village, I would always go to see Guihua and her family. For the first few times, I found that the young people in Guihua's family were always absent. I was told that the three brothers were all married and were all out *dagong*. Within a family, that all grown up children all engaged in migration was quite unusual in the village. I seemed to always see Guihua cooking by the stove, her aging father, weak and back bending smoking the water pipe ("*shui yan tong*") by the fire place, and her mother was no where to be seen. Upon enquiry, Guihua told us that she was up on the hills ("*shangshan*") to attend cows.

In the summer of 2002, I went to visit Guihua's family and found Guimei's eldest son and her daughter-in-law who just returned from *dagong*. So did the second elder son and his wife. Because the main house was so out of shape from years' neglect, and it was also quite crowded for so many families, the second elder son and his wife built a small hut under the tree in the courtyard, and the whole family together with their son lived in it. By the fire place of the main house, I chatted with the men of the family and they shared with me their stories of the family and their migrating experiences, meanwhile, Guimei was always busy inside and out. She was very friendly to us and when I approached her and tried to talk to her, she looked very confused and did not know what to do and how to act. She did not speak any local dialect. Our communication was impossible.

Until the summer of 2003 when we went again with Fong and Xiaoyu in the village, I was able to hear her voice. But what a suppressed voice that was! After we made clear to the men of the family that this time, we would only like to talk with Guimei, the wife and the mother, they were by the side, though still occupying the center of the house- the fire stove. We invited Guimei to sit down with us on the stools in the courtyard. After we sat down, five minutes passed... ten minutes...twenty minutes, she could not speak a word while her tears streaming down on her face, I did not know what was going through her mind to have that much tears falling down endlessly on her face, but whatever they were,

it must be so painful, so much suffering... I could not hold my tears either, neither were other women around. Half an hour passed, at the constant encouragement of Fong and Xiaoyu, she managed to tell us what she had experienced, highly fragmented and repetitive but all in tears.

Guimei's desire Throughout her entire life, Guimei has desired for a whole and complete family, but it seemed that was the hardest for her to get. Amidst tears and fragmented sentences, she repeated: "home is not like a home". She felt bad for shedding tears in front of us, and constantly reassured us that she seldom cried in front of other people. Only when she was alone up on the hills working in the fields, tending cows and collecting fuels, reflecting on her whole life, she could not help crying. After I learned about her story, I realized that she cried for the cruelty of the fate which deprived her every single hope for a sense of home, a complete family throughout every stage of her life.

Guimei's desire and her life trajectories Guimei did not know how old she was, and she never went to school, and she attributed her lack of education for her "not being smart and not able to speak *Han* language". She was born, raised and married in the same *Di'an Village*. When she was five years old, her father died of an accident in the river by the village. As the only child, she and her mother

lived together till she was fifteen years old, then her mother died of illness leaving her as an orphan. Recalling this part was very painful to her:

“My father died on the job ... He carried the wooden container (“*guan zi*”) (which *Di'an* villagers use to collect crops), crossing the river and fell down in the river, drown. He was found the next day. When they found that he was not anywhere to be seen, they searched the bottom of the river, but in vain... it was three days later they drew him up. They always worked during the commune time, but it happened that current in the river was big on that day... he died in that river... my father was very honest, the water of the river was big, he still went, water was more fierce than before, the pond was deep, that was how he was drowned...”

When Xiaoyu asked her how she met her husband, she could not speak anything for a while, weeping quietly. It was under the arrangement of her aunt, she married to her husband from the same village who was himself an orphan. His father died when he was five years old, leaving with him and other five other siblings under cares of his uncles, his mother remarried. She said that when her husband was young, he had to take care of horses and cows for the commune, and received only one *gongfen* for one day.

Altogether she gave births to seven children, among whom two died respectively at twenty seven days old and at seven years old. She said that she did not have much regret for the young baby, but for the seven-year old boy, she had difficulty to accept. When her children were all small, her husband was put in prison for seven years under the charge that he raped another woman in the same village. For this, her elder son claimed that the charge was based on false testimony and that his father was set trap. During those years when her husband was not around, she and her eldest daughter managed to support the whole family and raised the other younger children. Due to poverty, all her children except for the youngest one Guihua were not able to go to school. Guimei said that her third son went to *dagong* because she could not afford to send him to school. Talking about this, she cried again saying that the more thinking about this, the more regret and sorry she felt for her children.

Among married children, except for the eldest son who could not conceive, the other two sons and the eldest daughter all had their own children. Three sons had divided the family last year, the old couple with Guihua stayed in the old house with the eldest son. She used “dangerous” to describe the old house, in her words: “life is so hard, now the home is not like a home, only a couple of bricks remain on the roof”. She said that she felt ashamed to have to receive us in such a bad house.

In this extended family of fourteen people, they owned land for six people. Under normal circumstances, they were able to produce sixty *tiao* a year. Last year, they divided the house and each family had a share of twenty *tiao*. If they did not have to sell rice, Guimei said that what they had could last them for a year. But there was no other means for getting money, that “won’t be ok”, she said. For the past few years, she borrowed up to 1500 *yuan* for her sons to go to *dagong*. Now the loan was divided among three sons. Talking about these loans, she looked anxious and worried.

Guimei’s desire and her sons’ migration Guimei said that she did not want her son to *dagong* and would like them to be back, “left, a home is not like a home, as if there was no one, but returned, the land was little, one person’s land supporting three people, cropping was no good, all rotten, not harvest”. When Xiaoyu asked her if she knew what her son did outside, she said that before they went to work in the brick factory. This year, they were in Shizhong. But she was not hopeful with their *dagong* and that: “they can only manage their own mouth”.

Her eldest son married his wife who was from her natal mother’s natal family in *Luke*. But they could not conceive. They told us that they have consecutively picked up four abandoned baby girls by roadside and brought them home to raise and the first three all died. When Xiaoyu asked if it was because when the babies were brought home, they were too young to raise, Guimei said that it maybe the case for the first two babies, but the third was already three

months when they brought her home. Xiaoyu, as the medical assistant in the village wondered if it was because the babies were in bad health. Guimei answered that when they were brought home, all of them appeared healthy. Previously when I and Guimen's eldest son and her husband were chatting over the fire stove, we also talked about this at length. In order not to misguide me into suspecting that they did not want to treat the babies, the husband specifically stressed that all the babies cost much of their money in medical treatment, especially the last one, they had to sell the cow of the family for about 1000 *yuan* to treat the child. Still, the child died, leaving them with nothing. Anyway, they all, including both her son and daughter-in-law thought that it was their fate that was not good ("*bazi buhao*"). In attempts to change the ill fate, they decided to go out to have a try. They went to Shizhong city and found a brick factory and made bricks. According to the elder brother, they fell ill constantly and the money they earned was not even enough to cover their room and board, let alone the medical cost. But money earned from labor all went to treating illness. Finally, after a few years' struggle, they decided to give up the try and returned penniless. At home, as there were only two elders left behind, they could not work on the land of six people at one time, some land was left wasted or going wild ("*fang huang le*"). Upon return, they found they did not have anything to eat. Now they decided to stay and work on the field. Her son said that "there was no money to use at home, but at least, you would not starve. But this would not work being outside". After they returned, they brought home the fourth baby, which he

claimed to have found by roadside. Now she was eight months old and looking healthy. Xiaoyu asked if the baby was eating rice now, Guimei answered that “yes, she is taking congee”. Guimei’s second son and her family also went to *dagong*. After a year, they quickly returned, saying that they could not find work, and had to return to work on the field.

Guimen’s third son was the only one who left for the longest time and so far he had not returned. Guimei told us that he even found himself a *Han* wife. This seemed to be what Guimei’s husband was most amazed about. All the time, we visited the family, he seemed to be always by the fire stove smoking, but without saying much. With his sons around, he was besides listening to us and once a while, he would cut in with a few words. He told me that after his third son was gone for some time, one day he suddenly appeared at the door with his wife. He said that this was what he had achieved from *dagong*, implying that at least he got something. When I asked how he met his wife, the eldest son seemed to know about all the details, and he said that the third son was quite successful and his bosses liked him, so he made some money and opened a restaurant selling roast mutton. His wife came to *dagong* from a nearby village and worked as a waitress in his restaurant, and that was how they met and they got married later. But their business was not good, a year later, they closed down the restaurant, in debt. He found work on the construction sites, learning to master the skill of laying the roof of the building. When the eldest son described to us

about his younger brother, he showed both a sense of pride and admiration that once he mastered the skill, he would have no problem finding jobs, their life would be good. Meanwhile, he had to send back his seven-year old elder boy Xiaofei to be cared for by Guimei while his wife took care of the baby daughter. When I asked him how they went by with their life, the elder brother said that they could barely manage with their own life in the city, leaving nothing for the elders at home. His son began to enter school this year, they had to borrow the school fee from elsewhere. Talking about her grandson, Guimei the first time showed her smile, and talked about him with a sense of pride: “Xiaofei is a smart boy, very brave! He went to buy a small knife, and he had only one *mao* (ten cents) of money in his hand, he stared at the knife and then left the money there and took the knife and left immediately. People normally cannot find others to take the much wrinkled money, but Xiaofei can. Very boastful of him!... In Shizhong, his mother gives him money, he knows how to buy food”.

Later, when I went with Lifan and others to visit the migrants from *Di'an* in Shizhong, among the shambles of rundown houses on the city's fringe, which I described in the chapter on the young women, I ran into Guimei's third son and his wife with their young baby still in her arms, they were having dinner with a guest, as the third claimed. They appeared to be in a high spirit. We could not talk much in details as there were so many people around, and their rented single room was too small to contain that many people. In the winter of 2004 when I

returned to the place, the family were not in, and I was told that the third son after all failed to master the skill and he returned to standing on the street *maigong*.

Interacting with the family members, I got the feeling that this was an unhappy family with many tensions but no trust among themselves. The men of the family especially looked suspicious of others. Guimen's husband had always withdrawn from us. When we chatted with the eldest son by the fire place, his second son did not join us, but neither engaging in other work. Instead, he constantly walked by us to eavesdropping what we talked about with his mother. He even chose to work in the room that that was closest to us, and made an obvious point that he, too, was listening to us. Then her eldest son dropped the water pipe that he has been holding since we met him, and came to the yard chopping woods, making such a noise that we could hardly hear her mother. Meanwhile, when Guimei was sitting quietly sobbing, he kept on urging her to talk to us by reminding her in *Zhuang* language that "tell them your father, mother died when you were young...". Finally, I had to leave the interview to Xiaoyu and Fong and went inside the house to keep the men of the family occupied, instead of focusing on us. The elder son complained to me that his family used to be prosperous and strong in the village, it was due to his father's imprisonment that their fate changed drastically. And the family had not improved since. Everyone seemed to mention about this fatal incident of the family, but when I asked further, they did not seem to want to go further in detail, just staying at the

point that it was a trap for the father. There was a sense of anger in their narration. This tension was later confirmed by Guihua.

Guihua was like her mother, a girl of few words. I could not imagine for such a quiet and introvert girl the immense courage and motivation she needed to have to approach us in one early morning and sat down stairs waiting for us to get up. Three years before, when we just entered the village, one morning, when I went down stairs, Lao Wu told me that this girl had been waiting for us before the day broke. In tears, she managed to express that she wanted to go back to school. Then it was October 2001, and the school had started for over one month already. Anyway, the social worker managed to send her back to school. When we went to visit her in the town school, she was very pleased to see us. She told us that she liked the school very much and her teacher also expressed that she should have no problem entering the high school. Again in tears, she told us that she must enter high school. She said that everyone except for her mother in the family treated her badly, and her father asked her to give him the money she received for going to school. Her elder sister-in-laws commented that there was no use for a girl to go to school. She was under a lot of pressure and expressed that she did not want to return her family. In the summer of 2004, she failed the exam to high school. When we met her in the village, she was in a terrible mood. She asked us if we would support her to study for another year, because the atmosphere at home was killing her. She went to stay with her third elder brother in Shizhong

for the summer, and worked in the brick factory, but as she was still young and small, and could not carry much weight, they dismissed her. Her brother sent her back home. She wanted to go far to find work, but afraid that she might run into bad people and be trafficked. Back home, her father, brothers and sister-in-law treated her badly. Everyday she went up to the hill to attend cow, when she came home late after dark, while everyone in the family had their own dinner ignoring her presence. Her father would say bad things to her and even kick her on her back. At one point, she threatened to kill herself if he treated him like this, her father just said: “go, go to kill yourself”. When I asked her if her mother could protect her, she said at first she would also yell at them for treating her like this, later, she gave up and remained silent by the side. Later, as I was chatting with Laowu, he appeared to be accidentally dropping a line or two that Guihua was born during the seven years when her father was in prison. I was shocked upon hearing this and my heart further aching for both Guimei and Guihua. This family secret within a community that there could be virtually no room for privacy at all would definitely kill these two women, young and old, alive. Guimei’s life seemed to be full of nothing but struggles. Home was what she most looked forward to and where her desires were. However, it was also where she was most deprived throughout her life. When young, she lost her father. Upon marriage, she lost two of her children. Then her husband was away from the family for seven years while she had to be on her own with her children. Now her husband was back, but her sons all had to leave to seek for their

livelihoods or change of their fate. Even when they were present, the tensions for lack of trust and resources have served to separate the family. The home to her always remained broken. The livelihood was not found and the destiny remains unchanged, meanwhile, the home was already divided. Just a simple desire of having a complete home was so unattainable for Guimei and the pains that had accompanied with the struggles were so immense that she had no words to describe. All she left was tears. She said that when she was alone up on the hill to do work (“*huoji*”) and to attend cows, she cried, and cried for a whole day. Now when she faced us, she could not help crying. To her, life was full of death and tears, “home is not like a home”.

Story of Fengmei- left behind, landlessness at the old age and lack of social security

When I first met Fengmei, it was during Xiaohua’s marriage ceremony, at Xiaohua’s own house. There were a lot women, old and young, busy preparing for the huge banquet, there I spotted a few elderly women and offered to take a picture of them. I was struck by Fengmei’s tidiness and cleanliness, quite rare among elderly *Zhuang* women of her age, or any age for this matter. She did not look to me to be the one who had to engage in all sorts of productive and reproductive activities. As I developed more close friendship with her daughter Guifen, Guifen invited me to visit her family in the old house built by Fengmei, lived by Guimei, her fourth son and his family. Guifen told me that her

stepfather just recently passed away in another village, and her mother returned the old house in the village. All her brothers were not willing to take her mother into their family after the death of their stepfather. Guifen, the young daughter of hers, who was going through separation with her migrant *Han* husband and had been living in Luoping city sent her two young children back to be under Fengmei's care, while she commuted between the city and the village to bring food back for her mother and her children to live on. Though living under the same roof, Guifen insisted on separating Fengmei and her children's cooking from her fourth brothers', claiming that the latter had nothing "even cooking oil" in their food. "If they continued to eat like this, their health would suffer", Guifen said disapprovingly. While these and many other things were exchanged between me and Guifen, Fengmei was around. She sat together with us in their bare walled rundown house and listened with good nature and a sad smile on her face, at the same time, holding the four-year old boy of Guifen's on her lap. When I asked Fengmei about her life, the smile on her face disappeared and her face appeared blank, and she repeated in a low and almost inaudible voice: "... (I) do not know why, the more one lives, the more difficult life gets".

Fengmei's desire Fengmei in her whole life had desired to live a life of her own wish, and to be in control of her life. She took every initiative possible to make changes within her restrictive environment. At one point, she almost succeeded but most of the time, she failed. Into the advanced age, she was like

homeless. Though with three grown-up sons all with their families, she could only count on her youngest migrating daughter to provide for her. Even for that, she had to carry her younger grandchild on her back to attend to the cows up on the hills.

Fengmei's desire and her life trajectories Fengmei had a rough childhood. She was born in Guangxi and her mother died when she was only two years old. She followed her father and her sister to *Di'an* Village when her sister married to her brother-in-law. She said that it was a good thing they moved, because the bandits then in the early 50s were active everywhere, and *Di'an* Village was relatively a safe place. When it was just liberated, the new government under the Communist Party advocated free education to all children, she was at an age that could go to school, and she obtained books for study from the teachers in the primary school. But her elder sister withdrew her from school and ordered her to return the books to the teacher. Fengmei remembered those days with a note of regret, and signed and said that otherwise, she would be an educated woman. Unable to attend the school, she stayed at home helping her sister and father at home for a couple of years. Then she heard from a distant relative that the town hospital was recruiting cleaning workers, she went to apply and got the cleaning job of sweeping the floor in the hospital at the age of fifteen years old. Fengmei was amazed by herself when she recounted this early experiences that “Imagine that! I was making about sixteen *kuai*, plus room and board, already for such a

young age!” Fengmei liked her job, but in a few months, again, her sister ordered her to return the village to take care of her father who was ill at that time. She protested, but in vain. Fengmei said that her distant cousin stayed on and now she was retired on a good pension in the city. Comparing with her, she was not even sure of her next meals. She signed and lowered her eyes, and tried to hide the tears that were swelling in her eyes.

After she returned from the cleaning work in the hospital, she was soon arranged by her elder sister and father to be engaged to her first husband. Again, she protested, but her family already took the bridal gifts (“*pinli*”) from his family. After she spent some more time with him, she increasingly realized that he was not the type she was interested in, in her words: “he is not smart”. So she asked to terminate the engagement. Much hurt, the young man left the village and went to Kaiyuan, a city in a different prefecture, to work on the construction and did not return for almost two years. During his absence, she was under more pressure from both her family and his family. Fengmei’s brother-in-law threatened that if she did not agree to marry him, the family would have to repay his family for over two thousand *yuan*. She was shocked at hearing this huge debt and consented. He came back and they got married. Among all the dissatisfaction, they managed to bring up six children, four boys and two girls, and built a house of their own. With Fengmei’s intelligence especially at planning, their life would continue no better and no worse if it were not for the incidents of

her elder son who brought twice the disasters to the family. The disasters were due to the eldest son's infidelity and having affairs with the engaged women. In outrage, the families and relatives of the engaged women's fiancés stormed their house and took away all the animals including horses, cows and pigs, leaving the house badly damaged and empty. In despair, Fengmei's husband took poison and killed himself. When this happened, Fengmei was about forty five years old. To her sons' objections, Fengmei married the widower in a nearby village, who she chose by herself. For the past nineteen years, she had a peaceful and content life, working on their piece of land and enjoying her second husband's pension after years of working for the forestry department before retirement. With the help of their adopted daughter, and free from the family burdens and constant worries, she was able to keep herself always clean and tidy. However, the good days had its ending. When her husband passed away in the spring of 2003, her world changed again, even worse than before. The children of her late husband's drove her out of the house which she used to share with him, claiming that it belonged to them, and taking back the land they had been working on. As it was the first year, she was still able to have the half share of the crops from the land her husband used to work on. But she had to find people to carry them to her elder daughter in the town to have them dried before having them brought back to *Di'an* village. Upon returning *Di'an* Village, all her sons refused to take her in, even refused to talk to her when they met in the village. Fengmei was sad. When I asked her what she would do to survive, she said in a resolute voice that

“the Communist Party and people would stand on my behalf, and return me the land that belongs to me (*“gongchandang he renmin hui wei wo zuozhu, ba tian huan gei wo de”*). She repeated that more to herself. I could sense that deep down, she was in despair about her future. Though her daughter Guifen said that she would take care of her mother as no brother of hers would do that, Fengmei did not appear relieved or even show a sense of happiness on her face. I do not know if this had to do with disappointment she felt for her sons, or in reality, the way I observed that she ended up working much more and under more burdens taking care of Guifen’s young children when Guifen had to be mostly away *dagong* in the city. I am especially sensitive to the relationship between Fengmei and Guifeng was because in my own life I was in the similar situation. After I divorced, my mother has been helping me to take care of my son at home. Everyday, she would take my son to and back from school, while cleaning and cooking meals for us so that I could be free to pursue with my studies and career. I often feel guilty for shifting my home burdens onto her, yet doing nothing to change the situation. When I observed that Guifen talked as if she was her mother’s savior, I seemed to have seen myself in her, somehow taking advantage of our relationship with our mothers, and exploiting them making believe that they benefitted from us.

Fengmei’s desire and migration Fengmei had aspired to change her life destiny as a peasant woman through seeking for the paid job as young as she was only

fifteen years old. That aspiration of hers was replicated in her younger daughter Guifen. To support her daughter to gain autonomy from her abusive and neglecting husband, she acted like a “stayer” at home, taking care of Guifen’s children and doing the field and house work, while Guifen worked like a “migrating husband”, communing between the city and the village, combining both subsistence work and *dagong* to keep the family survived. As Guifen’s younger son was bore with a chronic asthma, Fengmei was caught in fright when he had difficulty breathing, Fengmei was growing even more under stress. When Guifen offered her to live with her in the city so that she could be around, Fengmei had other worries on her mind. Other elderly villagers discouraged her from doing that, reasoning with her that if she died in the city, nobody from the village would come to see her off, appear at her funeral, and even she was brought back to the village after death, nobody would attend her tomb. That would be a disgrace and a huge blow to the integrity of their life, as there was a saying in the village that “if not aspired to have a good life, but at least aspired to have a good death”. A good death entailed a grandiose funeral in which all the villagers throughout the *Zhuang* community came to attend with many funeral gifts (“*jipin*”). The villagers in *Di’an* maybe frugal in their entire life, but when it came to the funerals, they were almost extravagant. Nowadays, the family with funeral spent over 10,000 *yuan* on a funeral of an elderly and it took the family years to recover from the debt it incurred. For each family in *Di’an* village, it cost about 1000 to 3000 *yuan* to be used for attending others’ funerals. The

elderly people were able to suffer any kind hardship in life as far as they were sure that they were properly and grandiosely put to rest upon death. So, Fengmei would not imagine joining her daughter in the city for that reason. This was where I find the difference between my own mother and Fengmei, or the *Han* elderly urban women and *Zhuang* elderly rural woman. Though torn between having to take care of me and my son in Kunming, and to leave my father and sister at home, my mother expressed that she would like better to live with me, away from the complicated relations with the kins and constant quarrells between my father and my sister. After all, with all influence from modern values, even *Han* elderly woman are becoming individualized. To the elderly in *Di'an* village, participating or having many people to participate in the funerals remained the major event in their life.

Children migrating or not, dreadful sense of homelessness: Guimei and Fengmei compared

Comparing the life of Guimei and Fengmei, I found that they both shared a dreadful sense of homelessness. They both had brought up many children, and the children all had their own families already. On the surface, their house, though in bad shape, were filled with children and grandchildren. But taking a closer look at and listening to what they said about their life, I could not help joining in them to question the concept of home, as embedded in Guimei's anguish "home is not like a home", and Fengmei's outcry "where is my home?".

The influence over the migrating son depending on the elderly women's status in the family and in the community

Huang's story

Huang is another elderly woman I was impressed with her gentleness and good nature. She always carried a nice smile on her face, showing peace and content, forming a contrast with other women of her age, who appeared to have more worries and stress of life on their face. To my amazement, when I had chance to talk with her, I found that she was able to speak in quite fluent “*putonghua*”. Later, through many times of chatting with her, and collecting her life story, I knew that she once was an acting teacher (“*daike laoshi*”) in the primary school where her husband had been a principal for over twenty years before retirement. I was interested in her not just in her interest and ability to organize elderly women to form their cultural dancing and singing group in the village, but the way she handled the family business.

Huang was equipped with a strong agency, which was deeply rooted in her five year education and later her holding a teaching position in the primary school through her husband. That agency of hers and social position she acquired by herself and her connection mad her a powerful woman within her family and allowed her to take control over her life as well as her children's, more than any other women of her age in the village could come to grasp. In order to pull her only son back from *dagong* in Qujing city, and keep him from leaving the family,

she made arrangement for her high school education son to marry a woman of ten years his junior and without any education. Her son Shufang obeyed her, not without resistance, but finally compromised on that the family raised fund to buy him a truck to engage in transportation business so that he could be freer and more independent from the family. Meanwhile, he rented a room in town and always stayed overnight there, instead of returning home. Over the years, his young wife bore him a son, raised him with the help of Huang and her retired husband, and worked endless on the land for four people, all by herself. Her young wife, though marrying into a respectable and well-to-do family, lived and worked like a slave, no different from other young women of lower family standing in the village. During my visit to *Di'an* Village, and in the town, I had chance to chat more with Shufang, and he expressed his unhappiness in his marriage. Finally, in the summer of 2004, when I returned, Shufang called me from Qujing. He told me that he had sold the truck and moved to Qujing, and he was calling me from a construction site where he worked as a superintendent. I felt sad hearing him, for everyone in his family, for Huang who, after all, did not succeed in getting her son stay after all these efforts, and for his wife, who have been very much abandoned right from the day of their marriage, and who had worked endlessly almost as a reproductive machine for the family.

Huangmei's Desire Huangmei has aspired to a life that she herself had the control. Comparing with other women in her generation, she was quite

successful. As her life was deeply connected with the children, same with other women, she was aspired to create chances that would advance their social positions, particularly in working for the government and in the family. She was able to send all her three children above the level of the junior high and her son even to the occupational school after the high school. In securing a position for them in the school or in the government, she had done all she could. She was most opposed to her son's partaking in *dagong* for its low status and insecurity. While most of the elderly women were powerless in influencing their children's decision over migration, Huang insisted on hers to be heard and acted upon.

Huang's desire and life trajectories Huang was the only woman in my study who had both of her parents living for much longer time. But this did not mean that they were always around her. She remembered that before liberation, her father had to *maigong* in order to make a living, she said:

When we were young, the family was really difficult, there was nothing... I remembered when I was little, my daddy went to *maigong* burning the stone by the river, then he brought some rice home. Once it was very dark already and my parents did not return, my dad went to sell labor for us to make a living. Back then, it was before liberation, he went to build house for other people... yes, my daddy knew how..."

Huang had only one elder brother and Huang's mother had desired to have more children, but in vain. Few children have been considered as bad fortune in the village. During the early years of their life, the wars were everywhere and there was no safety. Huang's parents were especially afraid for the only son. So when it happened that one day, his father caught a special kind of bird by the river and obtained 30 "*dayang*" from selling it on market, Huang's father decided to use money to send the only son to the private school ("*sishu*"). With the amount of money, Huang's brother studied in the private school in the town for about one month. Then the Communist Party liberated the region. When the new government recruited people who knew how to read and write to work in government, Huang's brother who knew some despite little was accepted to work in the town judicial office. This showed to Huang that education was able to change one's destiny. So when the school was open to all at the beginning of new government, Huang, under encouragement and support from the family, attended the school without any hesitation. Besides, she had no other younger siblings that required her to be at home anyway. She happily went to school at the age of twelve years old. Before she graduated, she had already started courting the young man from the same village. She could continue to go to school upon graduation from primary school, but instead, she married the man of her choice two years after graduation. During the first few years of her marriage, she stayed at home taking care of the children and working on the commune while her husband taught in school in another village. Her second child died due to

illness. She once had an elder son but died at very young age. She said that “I do not know if this is to do with bad luck or not, either it was hard to conceive, or children just could not survive. Back then, we had nothing, once children got sick, and there was no medicine, then they died”. Huang expressed her fear when she was alone having the second child. But still despite her great care given to the child, he died when he was eight months old. Huang was fearful that her mother’s fate of few children would repeat on her. So when she heard that a baby girl born in *Yangma* village, a nearby village, on May 5, lunar calendar, she went to ask for her before the girl was thrown away. According to *Zhuang* tradition, girls born on May 5 had very strong fate, and may bring harm to their family. Huang said that she would not believe such a superstition, but she did hope that her strong fate would bring more children to her. After she brought in the girl, she gave birth to her third daughter.

No longer able to put up with hard work in both family care and work in the field, she went to her husband’s superior and requested him to be transferred to work in the primary school in *Di’an* village so that he could be nearby to help with the family. When he became the headmaster of the school, she came to teach the pre-schoolers. It was also the time her youngest daughter just entered the school and her eldest son already in the junior high school. Huang was quite nervous, she remembered, to teach in the classroom since what she has learned many years ago was forgotten from years of taking care of children and working

in the field. But her husband and her son were all very encouraging. Her son even offered to help her to remember words she had forgotten. The years in the primary school were the most memorable time in Huang's entire life. She remembered vividly how she managed to have herself and the school to become popular in the whole town through her wit, talents and courage, and won fame for the school by winning in the singing and dancing contests organized by the town government, and she received high award for it. She would continue to work in the primary school but for her youngest daughter to have a job after graduating from the junior high school, she let her have her teaching post and took the job as a cook in a school in another village. After working as a school cook for a few years, her son got married and had their first baby, she quit the job and came back to the village to take care of the grandson.

Huang's desire and her son's migration Huang was aspired to create a good life, and she took every opportunity and developed along with it. She placed the utmost value of the family above anything else and made sacrifice accordingly. Because of that, she also wanted everyone in the family to act to the best interest of the family. When Shufang, her eldest son, continued to be away *dagong* in Qujing, she was worried. She did not want him to marry a woman outside the village for fear that Shufang would settle in the city and live a low status migrant life. Besides, Shufang was her only son, if he would not be around, the old age of Huang and her husband would be miserable without son and grandchildren

around. So under her insistence, Shufang was forced to leave his *Han* girl friend in the city and came back to marry the young girl whom Huang chose for him. The young girl, though from a family of comfortable living, and her father also working in government, only attended school up to the primary school. As she had no interest in school, she spent most of her time working in the field or at home. As a typical *Zhuang* young woman, she was of few words and hard working. Since she married and came to the family, she worked mostly on her own on the land for four people. Like most of the married women in the village, she worked endlessly, and Huang and her family benefitted greatly from her work. But Shufang was not happy with the marriage, and he kept on being away from home as much as possible. Finally, after a few years of putting up with it, he left and went back again to the city, leaving his wife, her son, of course, Huang behind. For a while, Huang could control her son with her years of sacrifice she had for the family and public status she gained from years of teaching and working in the school. But her control over her son was only valid to some point. But then after her son left, she was not too worried because she already had her daughter-in-law in the family working and supporting the family and her grandson to continue with the family lineage. She was among the few elderly women in the village who could be said to live a secured and comfortable old age life.

Lipo- exhausting all possible means, including maigong and later through marriage to help her children

Lifen and Xiaoyu kept on urging me to talk with Lipo when they learned that I was interested in knowing anything about woman on migration in *Di'an* village. Lifen told me that Lipo, though in her sixties, also went to *maigong* with them. Lifen said with much sympathy that when Lipo went to stand with them by the street and to be picked up by the hirers, the hirers always overlooked her and chose the ones younger and stronger. Once she observed that she tripped and fell down on the ground when rushing to a perspective hirer in competition with others. Lifen said that she felt so bad for her and was fearful of her old age to be like this. I sensed a chill running through Lifen's face and body when she described the scene to me.

The reason for Xiaoyu's urging me to talk with Lipo was from our interviews with Yaling. In our interviews with Yaling, Yaling kept on saying that she would prefer to have her mother-in-law to take care of her one year old daughter at home so that she and her husband could be free to go outside to *dagong*. Everyone at the scene was opposed to her proposal, commenting that she was not nice to her elderly mother-in-law. Later, Xiaoyu told me that Yaling often had fights with Lipo, and even more fights with her husband over the matters concerning Lipo. Yaling would like to have Lipo's land, but not Lipo to live with them. Lipo was very sad. A few times she came back from working up

on the hills after dark, she found no food or anything left for her. Yaling who only took care the baby daughter was by the side saying nasty words. Unable to put up with it, Lipo came to Xiaoyu's mother-in-law's house to seek refuge. In the eyes of both Lifen and Xiaoyu, Lipo was really an unfortunate elderly woman.

At their constant urging, I went to see Lipo but always missed her. Until one late afternoon, after dinner, I was standing by the river admiring the beautiful sunset against the clear blue sky, an elderly woman, small and thin, slowly approached me. She said in a thick accent that she wanted to talk with me. But it was not easy to carry a smooth conversation with her. Still, I could manage to understand her that she was, after all, Lipo, the elderly woman I had been meaning to meet. She repeated to me that her family was really difficult.

Lipo's desire Lipo kept on repeating that she worked all the time, still the life was not better and she questioned after all what all these effort were meant for. All her life focused on her children. But at an advanced age, the children, particularly the sons did not want her to be in the family. Lipo said that she was lucky that all her children lived, but she raised them with much difficulty. Lipo told me that she worked from morning till evening, still, food was not enough, and whatever animals she raised in the family died, she was very bewildered

Lipo's desire and life trajectory Lipo was from a nearby administrative village *Luke*. Her mother died when she was young, leaving her father and her elder

brothers. After liberation, she was also able to attend the school and finished the primary school. Again, this had to do with not having younger siblings at home and by then the commune already started and she did not have to care for the family much either. She said that during those years, going to school did not cost anything. But both of her elder brothers did not get to study because, according to their father, they were old enough to work for *gongfen*. However, the five year's education, quite unusual for women of her generation, did not help much with her life later. Right after the school, under the arrangement of the elders, she married her husband and came to live in *Di'an* village. Together, they bore six children. Her husband died of illness fifteen years ago. Single-handedly, she raised all the children and saw to it that they married and had their own family. When I asked her how come she did not choose to remarry, she said that her children were against it. So she remained single. She said that everyone in her family was difficult. Her own natal family, both her eldest brother and sister-in-law were all gone, only the second elder brother left and she often went to visit him to help out. They decided not to raise the cows any more, because the eldest son would leave to *dagong*. She stressed that to work on the field alone at home was not enough to support the family. She did not understand why in her family, whatever husbandry they raised died pre-naturally.

Lipo's desire and migration Just about everyone in the family including Lipo was engaged in *dagong*, *maigong* or other forms of migration. Among three sons,

two were *dagong* outside: one was with his wife Yaling *maigong* in Shizhong; and another was to work on digging coals, that was Yasao's husband. Among three daughters, one married far to Guangxi through much stigmatized trafficking in women and another was Yagu who was engaged in relayed *maigong* with her husband. Almost everyone in the family went out to look for work, a sign of impoverishment and despair, in the eyes of Lipo. She said that they went to *dagong* because there was no other means. But because they went to *dagong*, their life could not be good. Despite her effort of working endlessly, every family of her children was still very difficult. To help out, she went to *maigong* and made about ten to fifteen *yuan* a day, but still it would not help much.

Lipo devoted all her life to her children. But coming to the advanced age, she found that none of her children were able and willing to do anything for her. They were spread out all over the place, coming and going, ignoring her. For her own survival, she even had to “hide her own old skin” (“*laolian laopi*”) and went to *maigong* with other young women. Still, life was not better and she continued to be treated as an extra to the family. Finally, in the summer of 2004 when I returned the village, I found that Lipo married through her daughter Yagu. After all these years of widowhood, she finally remarried, and chose a *Han* widower living in the nearby county Luoping. This time, her children, particularly her sons did not object to her remarriage. They knew that they could not provide security to their mother. As for the youngest son whom Lipo lived with, he

would welcome the change as it meant that her share of land would be all his. When he leased out to others, the share of the crops would be enough for his family in the city to consume. Then their life burdens would be much relieved. So over the age of sixty, Lipo married herself after fifteen years' widowhood. I asked her how she liked her remarried life, she blushed, saying that it was such a disgrace to marry at such an old age. But she had exhausted all her strength and means to help with her children. Her husband also had his children all married. She said that their life was much better than in *Di'an*, and she described with some excitement and pride that the road in that village was even paved with cement. Imagine that in *Di'an* Village only the well-to-do families could afford to have their inside house and outside courtyard paved, and in her present husband's village, everywhere was paved. She looked happy and content. Her husband who accompanied her back was a good-natured man himself, listening to us with a smile on his face and confirmed what she said in a very thick local accent that "in our *Han* village in Luoping, life is better than here".

Gender, Power, and the State: Huang and Lipo compared

In terms of childhood experiences, Huang and Lipo had a lot in common that was quite unique in their age group, particularly in their educational attainment, despite little. Their later contrasting life experiences demonstrated that if the seemingly cultural capital, e.g. education was not able to work with the social capital, e.g. social network, it meant nothing. In the case of Lipo, even if she had

some education, but her life focusing on raising families and doing the field work did not provide her opportunity to use the resources, it became obsolete. Lipo's life was just like any other *Zhuang* women, and the primary education she acquired made no difference in her life. If Huang did not marry the headmaster of the school, she would end up the same fate with Lipo, with little control over her life. However, because of Huang's powerful connection to the community, she was able to utilize the education and gain the access to more resources, which eventually benefitted her family and herself. Coming to the advanced age, in face with the son(s)' persistent neglecting the family responsibilities by participating in migration, Lipo had little influence over her son(s). She even had to partake in the much humiliating and physically exhausting *maigong*, and finally to remarry herself after fifteen years' widowhood in order to avoid the family tensions particularly between mother and daughter-in-law. Throughout Lipo's life, she was accustomed to yielding to her sons' request of her, even at her own cost, in order to keep the family. However, Huang, largely having to do with her role as a teacher in the community, and more exposure to the state power within and outside the community, was able to own and exercise that power to influence and even change the life path of her children. However, comparing the differences in terms of both elderly women's power of influence over their sons, they also share a striking similarity, which was the strong agency in defending the whole system of the family, and situating their utmost value of life in connection with the family, the family that served the interest of men, husband and son(s). In the

process of defending the system, they negotiated to bargain for their own best interest. In the case of Lipo, after years of yielding to her sons' request not to get remarried, in order to gain peace for her son from the daughter-in-law, she remarried at sixty years old. By then, situating in the family context, her "abnormal behavior" was understood and accepted. Though she said that she was feeling embarrassed to have to remarry at such an old age, she was, after all, giving herself another chance to live a life that would be much free from poverty. And she had someone to be close to her and provided her with the old age security. As for Huang, she forced her son to marry someone he did like, an act would be perceived as a "feudal act" and much condemned in the public discourse, obviously it went against her being a woman with public image, a woman teacher. However, throughout the process, she was able to enjoy work of the daughter-in-law's unpaid productive and reproductive work, but then with much strained relation between her and her much cherished son.

Summary and analysis of the Zhuang elderly women's situated narratives on migration

From the narratives of the elderly women above, what are shared among the elderly women are the on-going issue of the poverty, and endless work, and sense of despair over the much desire home and lack of security due to the mature son(s)' s migration.

Poverty and the death of the beloved ones have accompanied the elderly *Zhuang* women throughout their life. While poverty has become a norm in their life, the breaking up of the family is not. They long to have the sense of the home from their grown up son. However, the persistent migration of the son is seen as another fatal blow to their only hope for the much-desired *Zaan*. Still, not all elderly women experience their sons' migration in the same way. Their influence over their son is contingent on the gender, poverty as well as power in the family situated within a changing community context, in which the support for the elderly as well as the state's role in providing the social service are becoming weakened or even absent. Elderly women responded to the son's migration ranging from accommodating to protesting. They are able to deploy various discourses to defend their much-desired *Zaan*.

The Zhuang elderly women's situated narratives on their desire and on migration

Desiring for the *Zaan*, in which there is connection among the family members and that they construct their life together is what *Zhuang* elderly women have been struggling for in their whole life. But it seems that they are fighting a losing battle. With the son's persistence in migration, and even upon their return, the lack of connection among them makes *Zhuang* elderly women suffer, leaving them with only tears or bitterness, "to die is better than to live".

Zhuang elderly women's situated narratives on controls

Poverty has been always an on-going issue in the elderly rural women's life. This is not just to do with the level of economic development in the region, but that within the family the elderly women are in, they have little command over the scarce resources. It is first and foremost remaining in the husbands', and then sons' when their husbands are sick or dead. Between women across generations in the family, age and generation usually are factors affecting allocation of resources. Traditionally, it is believed that elderly mothers command more resources over their daughters-in-law. In my study, except for the case of Huang who is able to derive power from the community and the state, this assumption of the elderly women's power of commanding the resources in the family is not necessarily true. As the young women increasingly gain control over their life due to influence of the individualization in the modern society, the power of the elderly women, which is taken for granted before, gets weakened. In the case of Lipo, for example, after experiencing death of the mother at childhood, and the death of husband when six children were young, she was at risk of homelessness and starvation when her daughter in-law would want her land but not the elderly woman to live with them. After the age of sixty, she joined *maigong* to survive and experience all sorts of humiliation in the process.

Elderly Zhuang women's narratives on their agencies on migration

However, *Zhuang* elderly women resist domination in the family and in the community and deploy diverse strategies. For example, when Fengmei's son took away her land after she remarried and refused to give her back when she was again widowed, she employed the political rhetoric that "the Communist Party and the people would watch over me" in gaining back the land from her son. In this way, she deployed state and communal power to negotiate with the son and the community in having her land back. Mamei kept on complaining about her son's migration, declaring that he just never thought of the family. In face with the sons' circular migration that breaks up the bonds within the family, Guimei was powerless, and she could only quietly let tears fall down on her face. The persistent migration of children, particularly sons, married or not, has served to deprive *Zhuang* elderly women's aspiration for building a home, despite the fact that their sense of home differs among them and is situated differently within their own life trajectories, family and community. Their response to the migration is also situated in the particular context, ranging from "preferring death to living", to "home is not a home", to question "where is my home". Adult son's persistent migration is perceived as revenge on elder women's inability to provide with them, and intensifying elderly women's sense of uselessness and worthlessness that have accompanied them throughout their whole life. All in all, from the narratives of the elderly women, the migration fails to uplift the family out of the

poverty as claimed by the mainstream discourse on migration. Rather, elderly women tend to perceive migration of their children, particularly the mature son who use migration to continue to shun away from the family responsibility as detrimental to the well being of family and elderly women as well. For few elderly women like Lipo who has to engage in *maigong*, the other women in the village see her with much sympathy for having to go through such humiliation at an advanced age. *Maigong* is not able to help her in any way, in the end, she has to remarry after sixteen years' widowhood.

Discussion

Though uniformly opposed to their children's migration for reasons such as little contribution migration can make to the family and worries that it incurs to them, not all the elderly women experience and feel the same towards their children's migration. Age and marital status and gender of children as well as poverty level of family in community affect how elderly mothers feel and interpret their children's migrating behavior. Above all, I find that through their narratives, what elderly women have experienced in their earlier and current life plays a crucial role in affecting how they experience and interpret their children's migration. Most of the elderly women have had traumatic experiences in most stages of their life- childhood, youth, marriage, child rearing, productive work, etc. To keep the family together appears more important to them than the income

children may bring back. So when children persist in migration and delaying in assuming family responsibilities, the elderly women suffer more not just from having to continue with work at declining health but more from insecurity as well as loneliness and anxieties that migration incurs. They tend to view this as a sigh of protest on the part of children and the revenge for their failure in life. Desiring death and waiting for its coming is the discursive state of most of the *Zhuang* elderly women in *Di'an* Village.

Against the prior experiences of prevalent family disintegration, poverty and hardship, holding on to what they have at present, even little, is what they desire most. That is why they are up against their sons who venture out into uncertainty seeking for paid work. They understand that what they are able to obtain from working in the family lots is of little to meet both ends, but what the sons can obtain from working outside is also very little, unable to bring about the significant improvement within the family. Moreover, their old age security is at risk if the sons continue to shun away from family responsibilities, as at advanced age, they still have to engage in heavy physical labor in the field and at home.

Though uniformly facing with the same issues discussed above, different elderly woman have different responses, some more conformist oriented while others protesting, still some are searching for a better livelihood.

In summary, the narratives of the elderly *Zhuang* women on migration are highly situated in their family and community context that are gender, ethnicity, class, and age specific. In claiming that the much-applauded migration in their daily life actually serves to destroy the family and the community that have limited and scarce resources to compete with the Han dominated society. When gender and age are taken into the account, *Zhuang* elderly women are the ones suffering the most from this modern development destruction and take away their hope for *Zaan*, which has been deprived throughout their whole life.

Chapter 8 Women, Migration, Culture and Development:

Towards an indigenous conceptualization of “Zaan”, or “home”

Introduction

In the previous four chapters, I have presented the narratives of different age cohort's *Zhuang* women on migration in terms of their aspirations in life, and the various controls they encounter in themselves, from the family and the community and from the wider world. In this chapter, through comparing these narratives, I will summarize the similarities and variations within and across the different cohorts of *Zhuang* women in regards to migration. Through the narratives of various cohorts of *Zhuang* women related to migration, I will attempt to unfold the voices of yearnings of various cohorts of *Zhuang* women particularly in the ways they define their well-being and sufferings. I will uncover the ways they perceive various forms of migration have brought to their lives. Whether migration mitigated or intensified the existing tensions, as well as bringing new tensions to the women in various cohorts in confronting their families and community in their pursuit of aspirations. Through these analyses, I will reflect on the conventional modernization theory and GAD approaches which either emphasize positive or negative consequences that migration brings to women in the village and ethnic communities. These approaches to rural women and

migration have simplified the understanding of migration to rural women's lives; my study emphasizes the understanding of migration to women's voices through contextualization women in various age cohorts, their life trajectories, their aspirations and controls from themselves and the family and the community. In short, my approach is in line with the recent cultural turn towards the understanding of rural women and migration in China (Beynon, 2004:131-150; Bown, 2004: 243-278; Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Jacka, 2006). In this conclusion chapter, I will also attempt to develop an indigenous concept of *Zaan* to understand the ways that the *Zhuang* women of different age cohorts relate migration to their self defined well beings or hardship via their lived experiences and situated narratives in their family and community.

Zhuang women's situated narratives on migration

In this part, I will first provide a summary on each cohort of *Zhuang* women's narratives on migration, then I will compare them under the concepts of the aspirations/longings/desires, controls and their agencies in coping with these controls in capturing the gendered well-beings of the *Zhuang* women of varying age cohorts.

Zhuang young single women

Getting out of *Di'an* Village was the popular thinking of the *Zhuang* young single women. Most of them tried to avoid the endless and unequal amount of work in the field and around the house between men and women, particularly to avoid the lazy and irresponsible men who would be their marriage partners. Some were attracted by modern city life, specifically the *Han* way of life. But mostly, they were tempted by the chances of meeting someone not like those in their home village.

The idea of getting out the village, however, was not without their own hesitation and social pressure. The young women were really scared by the terrible stories of young migrant women abducted and sold, which their parents and relatives continuously repeated to them to warn them against migration. However, they were also tempted by seemingly better living, which those sisters working in faraway places and even those supposedly trafficked sisters brought to their eyes. They also developed mixed feelings towards their parents' concerns. They were confused whether the concerns were out of pure love or a fear of losing the young women as a labor power or material and emotional support.

The practice of *maigong*, or short-term seasonal employment, emerged as a compromise solution for those young women who wanted to go outside under the watch of their worrying parents. The young women could relieve their parents'

concerns through short-term employment in a short distance such as a nearby city. Through *maigong*, some could taste a bit of the desirable “modern and city living”, some could make some extra-cash to subsidize petty farm income, others tried to “catch a breath” among loads and myriad work in the family and in the village; or the most important of all, to meet the one they love.

The *maigong* was not as promising as it turned out. Many young women could not bear the burdensome workload and the petty cash they made, and worse, the humiliating moments of being examined and selected like animals. They disliked the the people in town, not just *Han* but also other *Zhuang*, because they looked down on them as poor and uncivilized rural girls. They treasured the moments when they got out from work and stayed together with other young sisters roaming through the streets, singing songs and chatting together in the small cubicles in the city. They dreamed about the wonderful moments when they could develop something special with the boys they ran into.

After *maigong*, each of them had some of their goals fulfilled, partly met, or even got into new tensions. Even with the petty sum of money, most of them could bring some money back home, bought some small gifts for their parents or siblings, and most importantly, to buy themselves some new clothes or decorations. For many, getting into real romances was a mere fantasy. They felt being taken as poor and uncivilized ethnic girls and the *Han* boys just flirted with them without seriousness. For some, when they returned to the village, they just

could not escape the marriage arrangements of their parents, and to subject to the decision of their parent's choices.

For those 'lucky' ones in *maigong*, getting into relationship with the *Han* man brought not only romance, but bitter struggles with their families in the community. Even the young girl was not sure whether the parents were actually afraid of her being cheated by the distrustful *Han*, or losing her emotionally and materialistically. She was not uncertain whether the community really cared for her, or just a reaction of jealousy or tension with the *Han*.

While few girls could get into marriage with young men they met during *maigong*, most women resorted to their destiny of marriage in the village.

The young married women

For the young married women, unlike their younger days of dreaming about meeting someone in better places and better living, they need to manage family under the harsh natural and economic environment. Many young married women reflected on their own lives that were full of multiple chores and endless work. Different from the young single women, the young married ones were more confronted by anxiety and even fears for failing to meet the needs of the family. They were also confronted by tensions with their husband for the unequal share of

burdens and work in the family due to migration. Some tried to avoid the harsh and tedious work in the field through following the husband to *maigong* in the city, some tried to gain temporary break from the drudgeries in the family, some chose to stay behind in the village, believing that it was women's work in the family, despite its harshness and endlessness, some combined both *dagong* in the city and the seasonal subsistence work in the village to ensure in their own as well as their children's livelihood, meanwhile to gain autonomy and dignity from their abusive and negligent husband. In this sense, seeking work outside the village had become an other means for them to escaping the family pressure.

Their migration took on myriad forms among this cohort. If non-migrating to total migrating such as long distance and long term *dagong* were respectively situated at the both ends of the spectrum, and were practiced only by a small number of the young married women, I found that majority of them constantly shifted between staying behind their husband in the village and engaging in seasonal *maigong* and occasional petty trading. They took turns with their husband to engage in seasonal migration. In this way, both worked on the family lots and earned some petty cash to meet the family needs, in addition to attending to the daily household chores and care provisions for the young and the old in the family.

In general, the young married women viewed migration with skepticism or, rather, mixed feelings. They expressed varying degree of dissatisfaction and

anxiety about their husband for being unable to make enough to meet the needs of the family while leaving the whole burden of the family work both in the house and in the field to them. To the ones who lived a migrant life either as tied or independent, they expressed that they liked the city life with better living environment but hated it as the pressure of survival was even more acute than in the village. For the ones who relayed with their husband engaging in *maigong*, some was highly stressed out, feeling humiliated in the process of being selected, while some welcomed it and regarded it as a temporary break from the lonely drudgeries in the family.

With absence of their husbands, as well as their own participation in *maigong* while continuing with the same amount of work and responsibilities in the family, the young married women's work both inside and outside the house were much multiplied. After *maigong*, each of the young women had some of their goals met. However little, most of them could manage to bring some money back home, for buying fertilizers and yarns for weaving their clothes and beddings, or paying children's school fee. Some could even seek for temporary escape from the multiple drudgeries in the family. How *maigong* could satisfy their need may be quite varied, what stayed the same was the increasing tensions with their husband migration brought to the families. This was particularly reflected on division of labor and contributions to the family survival, as well as the decision making process in term of who and when and how or if at all to

engage in *maigong*. Young married women encountered migration not without conflict. Some even fought and became family violence.

The middle-aged Zhuang women

Middle aged women had different perception of migration. For most of them, migration was an assault to the family integrity. They tended to link the city and *Han* life with anxiety and fear, and tried their best to avoid. They had their dream of life that they desired for a life that family members could be together in the village, even they endured hardship together. Many expressed that they did not wish their husband and children to engage in migration and tried to avoid participating in *maigong* themselves when they could manage because there was little economic returns with the anxiety and fear for the uncertainty, and were often discriminated by the urban citizens. However, often they did not have choices when the children's educational fees and fertilizers in the field were in demand for cash, especially when their husbands were not able to help much due to various reasons such as sickness, incompetence or lack of confidence, and simply, irresponsibility for the family. Their antagonism towards *maigong* intensified as they encountered even more problems in the process of *maigong* such as developing sickness on the job, and discrimination they experienced not just from the *Han* people but from their *Zhuang* counterparts in the town who used their *maigong* behavior as another reason in addition to poverty to look down

upon the *Di'an* women. In the eyes of those women whose husbands participated in migration but contributed little to the family over the years, migration served as an excuse for the husbands to shun away the family responsibilities at home, and in some cases, to escape the arranged marriage that both husband and wife did not want to have in the first place. Thus, migration intensified the tensions already existed between the husbands and wives.

The negative feeling towards migration was at its height with the middle-aged women whose coming-of-age children were drawn into migration despite their objection. They treated it as a further loss of control in their life and a blow to their hope for a “wholeness of the family”. The middle-aged women expressed the sense of loss and distress when they could not control their children’s leaving, though they tried to stop. They expressed the sense of disappointment because it caused the disillusionment for the “*Zaan*”, or “home”, which they had struggled to attain throughout their life, and expressed them with recurrent nightmares and declining health, and some, in fragmented and repetitive words.

The Zhuang elderly women

This disappointment and disillusionment for the “wholeness of the family” were even felt more sharply among the elderly women whose children, married or single, engaged in migration. The majority of them reflected on their life for being

always difficult, and worse, for the terrible deprivation of a “complete family” which was free of death and separation. They tried to ensure that their children especially grown up sons were properly settled through marriage and raising the family. Their desire for a family that everyone living together even in hardship was even stronger among the elderly women, and the lack of it due to the sons’ migration drove them into a state of despair, especially when they had to continue to shoulder the major burdens at home at declining health.

To some elderly women, they expressed their understanding towards their married sons participating in migration for survival needs or for “changing bad destiny” of the family. But for the elderly women whose mature sons continued to be away from the family and the village, and refused to get married and settle down, they found it hard to accept, and viewed their behavior as not simply irresponsibility but more as their own failure for their sons in providing for their much desired education, and experience it with a dreadful sense of guilt. Facing the multiple and endless work in the family at declining health, the elderly women experienced their sons’ migration in loneliness, powerlessness and hopelessness. In despair, some elderly women attributed this to the bad destiny and some described their state of being as “waiting to die”, or “better to die than to live on”. In face to the helpless situation, some elderly women were unable to find words to express themselves but simply letting tears streaming down on their face and in silence.

Aspirations/desires/longings, Controls and Agency

Aspirations and migration

Zhuang women at different age cohorts share the common aspirations for a home free from poverty and conflicts. However, those aspirations for their home have rich connotations with each cohort of women. Generally speaking, for the young cohort, less work and more economic security are what they aspire to in their home making. In the home, they hope that their husband can fulfill the family obligations and help lessen their burdens and work. As for the middle-aged women, most of whom have had prior negatives experiences with families breaking up due to death or separation, they are more earnest to have family members together, free from any possible external harm. Multiple burdens and endless work in the family, in comparison, do not appear to be what concern them the most. The kind of modern city life aspired by the young cohorts is even further removed from the elderly *Zhuang* women as they have struggled to attain the wholeness of their family throughout their life. Feeling even more sharply the need to own a complete family than the middle-aged women, the elderly women are in even more pain and despair when their migrating sons continue to stay away from the family and shun away from the

family responsibilities. Moreover, they place much of their hope on their sons for their old age security and family lineage continuation, which makes their whole life struggles and pains meaningful. But if the mature sons continue to engaging in migration and refuse to settle down and raise their family, the elderly mothers experience their migration as a total assault to their hope and meaning of life, and feel despair. However, the perception of the ways in which migration serves their aspirations/longings/desires is drastically different not just across but within the age cohorts. The diverse responses to migration are contingent on their life trajectory, the family and village contexts of the women, and also on the particular forms of migration: petty trade, *dagong*, *maigong*, and coal mining which they or their family members engage in. Within each cohort, there is a wide spectrum of perceptions in regards to how migration can satisfy or disrupt their life goals.

Controls and migration

Zhuang women encounter various forms of controls in their life that would keep them from fulfilling their hopes and aspirations. These controls are from both within and without. When it comes to within, it has to do with their internalization of various values and ideologies that are specific to developmentalism, gender, and ethnicity. Beyond the individual women, it is the controls from the family, from the community and from the wider world in which

they are marginal and vulnerable. However, these controls are manifested differently within and across age cohorts.

Internalization of values. Gender ideology subjects women of varying age cohort to place their own life goals in making a home in which they place the well-beings of their husbands and their sons ahead of theirs. To achieve that home, the young single women look for a husband who can take them away from their family and the village; and the young married women hope that their husbands are able to lift the family out of poverty, and they disregard their own contributions (both in reproduction and subsistence work) to the family as valuable. The middle-aged women suffer when separated from their migrating husbands and sons, yet barely acknowledging their daughters' unpaid work in the family as of any value. That sense of suffering is even more strongly felt by elderly women when they realize their sense of home and security in their migrating sons is misplaced.

External factors. Family exerted controls on *Zhuang* women vary within and across different cohorts. The family's poverty is the most frequently cited reason for engaging or disengaging in migration, and this poverty is rooted in the ethnic community and in its interactions with the larger *Han* dominated society. For the married women, both young and old, their needs for cash to buy fertilizers, to pay for children's educational expenses, and to pay for the medical expenses are due to economic restructuring development policies and programs

and the lack of the basic social services in rural, and mostly ethnic, regions. Due to language barriers, lack of kinship support networks and discrimination in the larger and predominantly *Han* society, *Zhuang* migrants bear high risks, rendering their dream to succeed through migration almost impossible.

For the youngest cohort, within the family, they are discouraged by their parents, particularly by their mothers, from leaving for migration. This occurs largely under the name of protection. While the discourse on young women's protection to certain extent is true since violence against women is prevalent. If they can keep their daughters, then they can benefit from the daughters' unpaid productive and emotional work, and young women come under different levels of controls.

As for the young married ones, their experiences with migration are highly contingent on their relationships with their husbands. When their husbands aim to improve life through migration or other non-farming strategies, the women are the major bearers of this risk-taking behavior. For those whose husbands aspire to urban living, the young wives have to follow them to the city against their own wishes. For those whose husbands dream of becoming rich through engaging in business or gambling, the women end up staying home as the major bearers of family responsibilities. For those women whose husbands utilize seasonal migration as way to diversify the livelihood, the women take turns with them participating in migration. While the young married women struggle in the

family to build their desired home, the middle-aged *Zhuang* women have more stress to cope with. In addition to stress from their husbands, they have their coming-of-age children, especially the sons on whom the mothers place their life hopes and sense of well-being. When their sons insist on leaving for a life unknown to these women, these women suffer from immense fear, the fear of losing them. That fear of loss, to some extent, is confirmed by the experiences of some elderly women whose mature sons participating in migration, refusing to settle down and taking up family obligations. Simply put, the controls within the family over the women are gender-based, and women themselves, to varying degrees, also participate in exercising controls over the other women (and men) that are located differently within the family in terms of age, in-laws relationships, etc.

When it comes to community controls regarding women and migration, the controls over young single women are most obvious. The communal discourse on trafficking in women is an example in that it serves to instill fear into the out-going young women and immobilize them, and this is similar to the discourse on the protection of the young women. While there are some cases in the village in which young single women participating in *dagong* are sold to be wives' in far places, the fear is amplified a great deal. Male elites in the community employ the discourse of civilized behavior vs animal behavior to attack those *Han* men who

are the buyers of wives. In this way, *Zhuang* single women's body and sexuality becomes battlefield between *Zhuang* male elites and *Han* poor man.

Agency and migration

The controls over *Zhuang* women are multilayered. However, *Zhuang* women are not passive recipients. They actively pursue ways to deal with the multiple controls, ranging from resisting, negotiating, compromising, accommodating, and complying.

Resistance. Across all ages, there are women who resist the controls from the family, the community and the larger society that are specific to their particular context. When *Zhuang* single women are discouraged to leave the village alone, some courageous ones leave, nevertheless, through participating in group *maigong*. When the husbands continue to shirk family responsibilities, some women, both young and middle-aged, speak out against their nature and threaten to abandon the family or to get a divorce, and some even take action to plan an independent life disengaging the abusive husband. Even to those who appear complacent, their body betrays them and protest in ways that are fathomable, such as bodily pains and emotional distress.

Negotiation. While the ones who resist openly are few, most women negotiate with power of controls in the family and in the community. To a large extent, it is in active engagement with migration that women of various age cohorts demonstrate their agency. *Maigong* itself best illustrates the point. When long distance and long term migration is discouraged by lack of social networks in Han society, and by bodily and sexual control in the *Zhuang* community, the young women deploy *maigong* to carve a space that shifts in between *Han* and *Zhuang*, between rural and urban. *Maigong* can be said to serve as both compromise and negotiation employed by the *Zhuang* women of different age cohorts who attempt to take control over their lives, despite the humiliation and suffering it entails in the process. It is deployed by women of various ages and life stage in diverse family situations in searching for a space to improve their lives, and to contest the dominant forces in their family and the community. For the young single women, *maigong* provides a space for them to leave the family and the community without much conflict and even with support. For some married women, *maigong* provides an outlet, though temporary, for them to have a break from the lonely and multiple drudgeries in the family. For some middle-aged women, *maigong*, as much as they are against it, serves as an alternative to generate quick cash to help pay for children's education and for fertilizers, and to cope with urgent needs due to material scarcity. In some exceptional cases, some elderly women's participation in *maigong* discloses to the community the much hidden abusive behavior from her son and daughter-in-laws

in the family. Communal pressures serve to check their abusive behavior without having the elderly woman directly confronting them.

Accommodation. Besides negotiating, accommodating the needs of others in power is also a principal form of agency commonly exercised by women of varying age cohorts. While arranged marriage is becoming obsolete in the village, some young women still marry at this arrangement against their own desires and choices. This is done to accommodate the needs of the elders in the family. Some young married women, against their own wish, follow their husbands to participate in migration in order to keep the family together. Some middle-aged women engage in *maigong* despite their dislikes to it in order to accommodate the needs of the family, particularly the educational needs of sons in school. Some elderly women have been accommodating throughout their entire lives, marrying at their parents' arrangement, following the husbands to his village, staying widowed at the children's insistence, participating in *maigong* in order to make peace with the son and daughter-in-law, and finally getting married after years' of widowhood at an advanced age so as to leave her land to her demanding children.

Complying. Complying with the forms of dominance is another form of agency practiced by *Zhuang* women across age cohorts. The arranged marriage, despite its negative notoriety, is still widely practiced in the village and this has largely to do with compliance on the part of the young women. Some young

women are willing to have their marriage arranged because they are sure that they could ensure the support from the natal family later on, especially when the natal family is quite well off in the community. Some young women, who have seen prior bad experiences with migration and marriage in their families and in the community, purposefully let others arrange their marriages in order to protect the family's name. In regards to the married young women, some comply with their dominant husbands, and believe that the husbands' non-farm work to be more valuable than hers in the family and in the family fields. Some middle-aged women exercise gender biased controls over their daughters despite their protest against their unfair treatment. Some elderly women actively comply with the rules of male dominance through arranging their own son's marriage in order to benefit from the daughter-in-law's productive as well as reproductive work.

In addition to behavior, employing rhetoric is what the women within and across age cohorts do to cope with the stresses in their lives that are related to migration. Examples of this include Xiaolei's quote, "selling the brute labor is no use, without culture and without money", in which she pretends disinterest in migration to hide away her anxiety over the discourse on trafficking in the women which her mother and sister are said to be involved in; Fengmei's "the Communist Party and people (*renmin*) are good to me and they will help me to get back my land...", repeated to put pressures on her migrating sons who control her land after she remarried and then re-widowed; and Guifen's "my brothers are not good

to my mother, I have to work by migration and on the family lot to sustain my mother and my family”, which she used to persuade her mother to care for her two young children in the village so that she could work in the city and break away from her abusive husband’s control.

It should be pointed out that the various forms of agency employed by *Zhuang* women are not neatly delineated neither even as static as the above description implies. To the contrary, they are highly dynamic. Here I share with Thapan’s observation on rural women’s agency that “women engage in a twin-track process of compliance and resistance, submission and rebellion, silence and speech, to question their oppression in the family, in the community, and society. Resistance can be overt and vocal, or muted, expressed in everyday life, in gestures, habits, desires- that are grounded in the body...as the source of resistance and protests” (Thapan, 2003: 77)

All in all, all women actively engage in exercising their agency and pursue a life that makes sense to them within the circumstances they are caught in. Among the various forms of agency, some of them serve to unbalance unequal power relations, and some serve to further marginalize them, and some even serve to jeopardize the interest of other women and reinforce the existing gender power relations.

Contesting the existing discourses on rural women and migration

Through comparing the similarities and discrepancies of situated narratives within and across these *Zhuang* women, I contest the dominating discourses for its dualistic representations of rural women and migration. In Chapter 2, I discuss the existing literature on rural women and migration in China. From the narratives of *Zhuang* women, it is clear that their experiences are highly contingent on the specific situation they are in. In this section, I will contest how the dualistic knowledge construction of rural women is problematic in modernization and GAD discourses that rural women engaged in migration are either regarded as “hero” or “victims.” My analysis contested these problematic representations by soliciting women’s voices, and putting their voices into the framework of their lives, families and ethnic community. When women’s voices are understood in the interlocking and intertwining forces of life course, gender and ethnicity, the meanings of migrations becomes more dynamic. Here specifically, the meaning of “migration” becomes something that constantly shifts. It means different things to different women, young and old, single and married, in different situations, including those engaged in migration or not .

“Heroine” portrait of rural women on migration and development

First, I will pay a closer look to the “heroine” representation of rural women who engage in migration. The modernization and liberal feminism applauded the young rural women leaving their communities through migration are courageous

acts to “break away from the patriarchal controls in their family and the community,” in a similar vein, those women stay behind also survive their husbands’ absence by developing a wide range of skills, knowledge, as well as confidence to cope with production and reproduction in the families and the community.

For those young single women participating in migration, or *maigong*, or engaging in small business, to a certain extent they have got away from the controls of the family and the village their choices are not without cost and uncertainties. In the urban areas dominated by *Han*, the lack of supporting social networks and capitals render *Zhuang* young women’s survival and accommodation difficult. In job searching or *maigong*, the humiliations and discrimination they experience from the institutional discrimination against rurality and ethnicity significantly hold them back from a full participation in migration. Not all women are so envious of migration. *Zhuang* women returned from migration experienced a lot from the vulnerability of wage employment and the difficulties of settling in towns.

Contrary to the appreciation of opportunity to develop skills and knowledge, the narratives of the women stayed behind in the community express how they suffer from the increasing burden at home because of their husbands’ absence. The “skills and knowledge development” touted in the mainstream discourse do not seem to be these *Zhuang* women’s concerns. The majority of women could

acquire the practical skills and knowledge in production and petty marketing not necessarily through their husband's absence. For some, it does have to do with the husband's incompetence and illness at home. Migration does not necessarily bring women to acquire skills and knowledge in dealing with modern institutions, i.e. the bank. In my study, the *Di'an* women and their husbands usually do not have any the amount of money got from off-farm jobs large enough go through the banks. They usually send money home in person or through close relatives returning to the village.

Zhuang women from *Di'an* are known in the region among the *Han* and the *Zhuang* communities for being strong and independent. As their narratives demonstrate, their strength and independence do not come from the learning opportunities facilitated by engagement with migration, those are more to do with the ever present harsh physical, social and culture environments that force them to be strong in order to survive. In this regard, the *Zhuang* women are not heroine facilitated by migration as portrayed by the modernization and liberal feminism discourses, yet they are heroine for being able to manage a life through adversities. Among the many adversities with which they must deal, migration only plays a small part. Yet in rather complicated ways, migration sometimes brings more negative than positive experiences to the *Di'an* women.

While the female migrants are considered by mainstream literature as heroine who are brave and adventurous enough to break away from the patriarchy

embedded in their families and communities, the heroines in my study, who stay behind and have the courage and resiliency to bear the responsibility of managing their lives to negotiate with the traditional patriarchy, to withstand such adversities, should be of equal theoretical concern.

“Victims” or “exploitation” portrait of passive and subjugated rural women regarding gender, development and migration

While those discourses informed by liberal feminism celebrate migration as one means to lift rural women out of poverty and away from patriarchal control, socialist feminists view migration in an almost opposing way. They argue that the market, state, and patriarchy interlock to draw women from their rural origins and subject them to multiple oppressions (Pun Ngai, 1998). When rural migrant women abandon their patriarchal families and communities they fall prey to even more powerful forces, and there are only exploitation, discrimination and humiliation awaiting them. Much of this discussion is true from the migration experiences of the *Zhuang* women I interviewed. The source of their exploitation and humiliation, however, is not transnational corporations, but the petty peasant bosses, most of whom just recently shift their rural livelihood to more urban living. Moreover, the work the migrant women do is not just low skill but no skill, and equally high intensity, and the pay is even less. So to add ethnicity into the analysis of *Zhuang* women in migration, I find that *Zhuang* women are even most vulnerable to exploitations under the overwhelming and powerful structures that are gender, class, rural and ethnicity specific.

While the humiliating experiences and heavy work with meager wage of the *Zhuang* women in *maigong* somewhat conform to the oppressive images, some of the *maigong* narratives also convey experiences of freedom and autonomy, the experiences that *Di'an* women enjoy with their village sisters in the outside world. Many young single women excitedly wait for the *maigong* seasons to come, and the topic of *maigong* frequents their daily talks in the village. They seem to welcome more the opportunity of change from the monotonous rural life. However, they are not naïve wage laborers and urban admirers, they understand the vulnerabilities of total dependency on selling labor power and the discriminations towards their ethnic group and rurality they face in cities. They deploy *maigong* to regulate the monotonous, burdensome yet subsistent rural life with the exotic yet vulnerable urban employment. Via short-term migration, the rural *Zhuang* women in my study demonstrate their agency in negotiating a space in which they are not just passive recipients of the powerful macro forces.

“Modernization” discourses on rural women and migration

While the modernization discourses argue that migration implies a rite of passage to facilitate young women to accommodate to the urban living and to become mature and respectable women back in their rural communities. On the contrary, the narratives of the young *Zhuang* women in my study argues that *maigong* would not provide them with the space of changing their lifestyle and values towards life. They do not possess naïve ideas about urbanity, and they

reflect upon their temporary and marginal urban living. Some of them are even antagonistic towards the urban way of living when they denounce it for being money oriented and commercialized

Most of the *Zhuang* young single women do not construct themselves as “modern consumers” that attend particularly to vogue living and the material aspects of life. Rather, they are more realistic in hoping for a life which they imagine to be like that of *Han* rural woman, one with less work, more leisure and more support from men.

Nevertheless, *Zhuang* single women are caught in the dilemma of leaving or staying, in between rural and urban, between *Zhuang* and *Han*. Marriage is an issue in migration for all young single rural women, and it is posed as a dilemma for them. Yet, for *Han* women as reflected in the mainstream literature, it seems that the dilemma is more on the choice between either being single in migration or married upon returning village. This similar dilemma is also posed to some of the *Zhuang* young single women in my study. For most of them the consideration lies in searching for the home through marriage and migration and the sense of security attached to the home. This difference of dilemma between the mainstream literature and the narratives of *Zhuang* single young women reflect the different assumptions and conceptualizations of economics, culture, and the well being of the young women. The mainstream literature portrays rural young women engaging in migration struggle for individual identity and autonomy that

are taking on a modern face, western and urban based feminist lens homogenize the diversity of rural women's aspiration of diverse ethnic groups and even those within the dominant Han group. Through the narratives of *Zhuang* women in my study, they place much of their happiness in the family and in the community, which is critical for my study to reflect on their definitions of their well being situated in their social, economic, ethnic, and cultural context.

A cultural turn to women and migration

To move beyond the dualistic representation of heroine or victims as a way of understanding rural women and migration, and the reflection of the western feminist lens, more recent literature focuses on migrant women from a cultural approach centering on the themes of negotiating identities (Gaetano, 2004: 41-79; Zheng Tiantian, 2004: 80-108), and seeking a future (Beynon, 2004: 131-151; Tan and Short, 2004: 151-177) and on the dilemmas women face in encountering migration (Beynon, 2004: 131-150). As Beynon cited the definition provided by Frank Pieke in her work:

A cultural approach to migration does not ask what migration does, how it comes about, or how it is structured, but is concerned with how migration experiences are tied into the web of ongoing discourses of belonging, separation and achievement. (Pieke, 1999 in Beynon, 2004: 131)

To me, to move the discussions on migration from either neoclassic economic perspective or structural perspectives to a cultural approach is a major breakthrough as it can serve to transcend the polarized and dualistic representations in the dominant discourses. However, the focus of most studies remains largely on young women or middle-aged women in migration remains problematic. My detailed analysis of the narratives of *Zhuang* women points to the differences among women in the family and in the community, more dynamic and intricate interplay of relationships and power is unveiled in the process.

For the young single women, they hope to achieve through migration is more finding prospective marriage partners than autonomy vis-à-vis economic pursuit as western feminists portrayed. However, their freedom of movement is closely tied to gender role expectation in the family and their rights to sexuality in the ethnic community. Though equally aspiring for a life that is more urban bound and with less work, young married women look to *maigong* more as a temporary break from the drudgeries at home than for marriage intentions. As for the middle-aged women, family survival is more of their immediate concerns. The elderly groups are the ones most likely to escape from the attention of mainstream literature on migration and development. Given the amount of unconditional support and sacrifice they make for their migrating sons, they perceive migration as an assault to their much desired home that they have paid so much to build. When these women's stories are analyzed from a life course perspective, our

knowledge of women, migration and development changes significantly. To this, regarding the differences among rural women, my study shows that gender and ethnicity are not sufficient to capture the meaning of migration in *Zhuang* women's lives. When age cohorts are taken into consideration, *Zhuang* women's responses to migration become more diverse and our understanding of their relationship to migration is much enriched.

In the dominant discourses on rural women and development, migration is portrayed as a way either to liberate women from tradition or to further subject women into multiple jeopardies. In such accounts, migration is nothing or everything. My study argues that migration itself is meaningless if it is not tied to the integrated lived experiences of women in their specific families and communities. Migration serves as an entry into the lives of rural women situated in contexts that are specific to their age, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location and reveals to me their longings that are beyond the grasp of an urban based knowledge.

“Zaan”, the self defined well-being of Zhuang women

As demonstrated from the above analysis, when culture is put in the center of analysis regarding gender and migration, the universal claims that migration either serves to liberate rural women or subjugating them into multiple oppressions become problematic. It is here that the on-going discussions of gender, marriage and development, as well as women, culture and development inspire me to

formulate my conceptual tool, a *Zhuang* indigenous concept *Zaan*, or “home” to capture the *Zhuang* women’s well being and suffering in their narratives on migration. I use *Zaan* to capture the interactive and dynamic relations between gender, ethnicity, development and migration from my studies on the situated narratives of women in their family and in the community. To this end, I will bring in the discussion of the three inter-related concepts in the discussion of the desires of rural ethnic women: the yearning of *Zhuang* women; culture in GAD; and Gender, Development and Home, along the argument of Gender, Development and Marriage in Sweetman (Sweetman, 2003).

The yearning of Zhuang women

Contrary to the dominant discourses on the ethnic groups regarding migration, my study reveals that migration takes on myriad forms encompassing petty trading, *dagong*, *maigong*, or *zhangong*, and coal mining, and it is highly gendered. Ethnic women of diverse age cohorts choose to engage or disengage in any of these forms in a dynamic ways that are specific to their life trajectory, the controls in their life and their aspiration for their life. I find that beneath the significant differences within and across the age cohorts of *Zhuang* women in their narratives on migration, what connects them is their strong aspiration to create a “*Zaan*” in *Zhuang* language, a home. However, the same notion of “*Zaan*” has different connotations to different women. Still, whatever the cohort of women she is born into and in whatever specific context each woman gets

caught, the desire to establish *Zaan* plays a central role in a *Zhuang* woman's life. *Zaan* is where *Zhuang* women's well being or hardship rests. Migration is meaningless if it is not closely linked to their aspiration and desire for *Zaan*. This "Zaan", in *Zhuang* women's conception, does not have to be built on material wealth, but at least, to the young *Zhuang* women, its members through mutual support do not starve. For middle-aged and elderly women, even if family members cannot be spared hardship, they should endure the hardship together. It is the connection to the beloved ones within the "Zaan" that constitutes the meaning of life for *Zhuang* women.

However, under the rapid developmental changes, gendered migration patterns have divided the community and shattered the dream of women of various age cohorts for the "Zaan". For this aspiration for the "Zaan", *Zhuang* women of different cohorts struggle differently within their situated context. Disappointed in the returned young men from migration for their inability to provide for the "Zaan", the young single *Zhuang* women negotiate with the power of control in the family and in the village, and actively engaged in the short distance and highly seasonal *maigong*, hoping to gain different exposure to promising young men with whom to build the much aspired "Zaan". For married young women, they partake in multiple forms of labor; the endless doubled work load at home, and the gendered relayed *maigong*, and *dagong* to meet the various needs in the family to construct the "Zaan".

Due to the political, economic as well as cultural and social constraints in the larger society, the short term *maigong* is turning out to be a false hope for the young single women and they end up being lost in between their natal family in the village and the city. While the continuing absence of the migrating husband in addition to the coming-of-age son's participation in migration causes much stress on middle-aged women and they begin to question the meaning of the quest for the home. Married women deploy various forms of migration to struggle to build their *Zaan*. Young married women experience tensions with their husbands. Middle-aged women experience more anxiety, not just with their husbands, but also their coming-of-age children's especially sons who are drawn by the outside, and on whom the middle-aged women place much of their hope for the *Zaan*. Elderly women had been struggling their whole lives to attain "*Zaan*", the persistent migration of the mature son is perceived as an assault on the "*Zaan*". These women experience migration as a separation of the family and lack of support. They feel that "home is not like a home", or "death is more preferred to living". Under the apparent physical entity of the home, there is an acute lack of the sense of the *Zaan*.

The *Zhuang* women's situated narratives on migration unveil that *Zhuang* women yearning for the home. *Zhuang* women's yearning for the home largely departs from Lisa Rofel's ground-breaking work on Chinese factory women, *Other Modernities* (Rofel, 1994). When ethnicity is taken into analysis in the

lived experiences of ethnic rural women on migration in the family and in the village community, I find women within and across age cohorts and life stage place much value on constructing home, and derive their satisfaction and disillusionment in life from home. Indeed, *Zhuang* young women more or less aspire to urban life, but they view it as something external to their life if it does not involve home making. As for married *Zhuang* women, safety and the well being of their children are more their concerns than urban life. Therefore, when they do participate in the seasonal migration available to them, they do it to meet the basic needs of the family. Elderly *Zhuang* women have little regards for migration. In many ways, it serves to render their life into a state of “homelessness”, and damages their sense of well being.

Culture in migration and GAD

A cultural approach to migration asks the questions on how migration experiences of *Zhuang* women are tied into the web of ongoing discourses of belonging, separation and achievement.

As elaborated in the previous chapters, *Zhuang* women’s migration experiences are tied into their sense of home or home making. The elderly women having gone through much hardship throughout their life, particularly with family breaking up, experience migration as direct assault to their much desired completeness of the home. This anxiety of the elderly women in some way is echoed by the middle-aged women whose sons are coming to the age to be

moving away from the home. Both young and middle-aged women deploy migration to sustain the family, while the former could find some space of their own to break away from the rural home, the latter just engage in it out of economic consideration for the family. The young single ones view migration with both excitement and fear. It is exciting as it signifies a chance to change the life style of a *Zhuang* woman in which work and hardship are the only theme. Migration can be fearful as it signifies something uncertain and a kind of life that can be beyond their grasp and control.

The cultural conception of the home drawn from the situated narratives of the *Zhuang* women on migration have demonstrated that the GAD initiatives are problematic in that they aim to transform unequal social and gender relations and yet do not take into account placing women in their situated cultural contexts. GAD tends to overemphasize the structures and institutions at the expense of seeing the agency of women, and agency that may not just perpetuate inequalities but also challenge them. Through my observation, and even more so through the narratives of *Zhuang* women in relation to migration, it is evident that failing to situate the analysis within their lived experiences would fail to lead us out of the dualistic understanding of them either as beneficiaries of migration or as victims. In their struggle for a life that makes sense in their world view, migration is closely tied to their hopes and despair.

Gender, development and home

Sweetman and others emphasize the role of marriage in the daily lives of women in gender and development (Sweetman, 2003). Sweetman points out that in rural contexts, marriage is perceived as a destiny from the cradle to the grave, and the rewards women receive from marriage and child-bearing are not just emotional satisfaction but also livelihood. I find that *Zhuang* women are equally true with their much aspired “*Zaan*”, or home. In regards to home, gender and development, *Zhuang* women’s well being is intricately interrelated with both emotional satisfaction and livelihood. In their aspirations for a home, different *Zhuang* encounter various forms of controls, however, they are able to deploy various strategies in coping with these controls. In all the struggles, the multilayered meanings of the home are enriched and unfold.

Home, well-being and agency among Zhuang women Just as some researchers advocate that marriage should be given sufficient attention in gender and development, I believe home should be placed at the center of research on development. Home signifies not only a geographical sense of a physical location but also a psychological sense of belonging, of feeling comfortable in or being part of the family, and also ones’ livelihood. This view is based on the understanding that home is an integral part of a woman’s life. Women yearn for a home not just for emotional satisfaction but also for survival needs. Women’s emotional and survival needs when combined with an embedded sexual division

of labour, result in women's work having less value both in the family and out in society. Until we give sufficient attention to the home, the negative experiences women experience in separation anxiety, in poverty, and in domestic violence will continue to persist, though I am not suggesting that attention to the family alone will end these problems. In *Zhuang* women's experiences, when their desires for a home are taken into consideration, migration, much applauded in mainstream discourses, seems to have done more to shatter the dream of home to which *Zhuang* women of various age cohorts aspired and to have caused more sufferings in their lives.

Home is essential to these women's sense of well being, particularly as it reflects both in economic necessity as well as the sense of belonging and self worth. However, gender inequality makes their home desires for a home hard to achieve, and, in most cases, causes sufferings in their lives.

Recognizing the multiple meanings of Zaan to Zhuang women. Through *Zhuang* women's narratives on migration, the rich connotations of "Zaan" unfold in women of different age cohorts' narratives on migration. First, "Zaan" means the "integrity of the family" through togetherness, particularly through a mature son(s)'s fulfillment of his connection to and responsibility for the family through his marriage at proper age "zuojiā". Under this understanding of home, migration is perceived as an assault to the much desired "home" and experienced with much despair in life. Secondly, "Zaan" means the "integrity of the family" via the

coming-of-age son's connection and presence in the family. Under this understanding of *Zaan*, migration is experienced with great anxiety and viewed with skepticism. Thirdly, "*Zaan*" means support for each other, mentally and economically and at all cost. Under this understanding, migration is viewed as an alternative livelihood and a means of development, but experienced with much suffering due to separation, discrimination, and exploitation in migration. Fourthly, "*Zaan*" means living life with the one who would help her create a home free from the endless work and drudgeries in the *Zhuang* family; Lastly, *Zaan* means to aspire for more modern living, such as living close to the city, free from the control from the family.

In contemplating how to conceptualize *Zaan*, Wang Mingming (1998)'s approach to a Chinese indigenous concept *Fu*, or happiness in denoting the well being of the Chinese is inspiring. In his analysis of happiness, he links *Fu* to false consciousness in Marxism, and to body politics specifically in Foucault's concept of technologies of the self. In his study of *Fu*, he finds that the multiple meanings of *Fu* are built on wealth, longevity and male offspring, rather than on emotive dimensions (Wang Mingming, 1998). The concept of technologies of the self is also employed by Pun Ngai in her analysis of the subjectivities of *Dagongmei* (Pun Ngai, 1998). It appears to me that when gender is put into the center of analysis, the happiness of *Zhuang* rural women becomes connected to home. Rather than resting its meanings on wealth, longevity and offspring,

home rests on both an emotional aspect in a woman's connection to her husband and sons as well as the materials aspects of survival. Wealth, longevity and offspring are equally important elements in women's lives, however, *Zhuang* village women derive a sense of happiness more from home, the sense of being together with the family, the satisfaction drawn from being able to provide for the family members and the support they can count on from them as well. As demonstrated in the narratives, women are not necessarily happy with wealth, as searching for wealth may keep their beloved offspring away from them, even if they have long life. In some cases, the elderly women even express that they would prefer death to living when the sons persist in being away in migration searching for fortune.

In summary, *Zaan*, or home has the following connotations in my study on *Di'an* women: first, the meaning of *Zaan* varies with different cohorts of women; second, the home is not just related to material comfort and fulfilling the function of procreation (especially of producing male descendents), it is also emotive; thirdly, the dual aspects of the concept serve both to enable and also constrain women who aspire for home, or home-making; and lastly, home does not just include the individual's well being, aspiration and hopes, but includes specific rules and cultural concept- home serves as a field of interaction and reconfiguration among society, individual, ideology and self perception. Home is very much a sort of social ontology.

Implications for future studies

By adopting a post-structural feminist perspective in the study on gender and migration in *Di'an* village, it enables me to understand how *Zhuang* women in various situations related migration to their yearnings for *Zaan*. However, my conceptualization for *Zhuang* women's yearnings still has not resolved two tensions, and they are in need further study. The first issue is the suspicion of internal orientalism, whether the notion of *Zaan* would homogenize the yearnings of *Zhuang* women to an essentialistic notion of home and family (Schein, 2000). To delineate a post-colonialial notion of *Zaan*, more studies should be made of the changing yearnings of *Zaan* in a more dynamic way and among the diverse situations of *Zhuang* women embedded in the spectrum of urban-rural continuum. More narratives should be collected about their desires, frustration, and disillusion towards the traditional forms of *Zaan* and how the notion of *Zaan* is negotiated and re-negotiated through engaging or disengaging in migration.

Some may argue that my indigenious notion of *Zaan* would have romanticized *Zaan* as a return to the ideal values of forms of traditional *Zhuang* home family. Post-structural approaches are easily accused for being value relativism, and therefore, nihilistic in nature. I argue that, however, my notion of *Zaan* does not necessarily take an assumption to idealize the *Zhuang* culture. Rather, as narratives in this study reveal that *Zhuang* women not only yearn for *Zaan*, they also voice their frustrations in *Zaan*. Therefore, in order to conduct a

critical study of *Zaan*, it is necessary to study how the yearnings and frustrations of *Zhuang* women towards *Zaan* are embedded in the changing structures of gender, rural-urban divide, age and other forces amid the rapid economic and social changes confronting *Di'an* Village and the other village communities as well.

Conclusion

The narratives I collected from the *Di'an* women did not celebrate migration as the liberal feminists nor denounce migration as subsumed them to be “pitiful, and powerless” victims as the critical feminists portray. The contextualization of *Di'an* women’s narratives into their life course, families and their ethnic community unfolds a wide diversity of migration patterns and the ways that these *Di'an* women are directly or indirectly by them.

In China, the Women Movement has been going on for decades, and Chinese women are supposed to enjoy the highest status in constitution when compared worldwide. To what extent that these constitutional achievements are realized, and to what extent that these benefit their sisters living on the margin remains a question. We, as urban based educated *Han* women, have been diligently acquiring knowledge from western societies, predominantly US, and apply them to understand and improve the status of ethnic rural women. We usually take it for

granted and do not question the underlying assumptions of these imported western concepts. The inquiries would easily run into the danger of selecting evidences and stories that fit the underlying assumption, and turning deaf ears to the different voices of the rural women. This kind of inquiry reproduces the unequal power relations between the researcher and the narrators based on rural-urban divide, class, ethnicity, educational status. In the process, we move farther away from the claim to liberate humanity and our sisters from multiple bondages when we have made ourselves or been made experts on gender, development or social work, by imposing concepts that are developed outside China without careful scrutiny.

My re-conceptualization of gender and migration argues that migration is not simply either good or bad to women. There are various forms of migration and a number of ways that women are related to migration. The meaning of migration to women is contingent to the context of life course, class, ethnicity, geographical location specific. They perceive the kind of life they aspire, where their yearning lies. While it can be a means of escaping dull rustic life in the ethnic rural community for some young women through potential home-making, it means the family survival to the married ones with young children in the family, and it means family disruption for the middle-aged women with out-going sons and the elderly women.

While family remains a primary site for Chinese rural women, the indigenous concept *Zaan* denotes more than home in a traditional sense. It is the yearning of *Di'an* women for a place that is free from anxieties which are created by life course, class, rural-urban divide and ethnicity.

I hope that the re-conceptualization will shed lights on gender development planning in China and in particular, the ethnic regions. The gender aspects of our poverty reduction programs are overshadowed by the universal claim to raising women status through participation in paid employment and urbanization. There is not careful and adequate conceptualization of gendered well-being from a cultural perspective, not to mention from the diverse ethnic perspectives. The conceptualization of gender work in poverty reduction project should incorporate the cultural framing of the well-being of ethnic women, Development work or rural social work needs to go through indigenization, the varied lived experiences and cultural aspirations embedded in the changes of contemporary Chinese society should be vigorously scrutinized and conceptualized.

As Chinese feminists, we need to restructure feminist perspectives in a way that the knowledge we develop should be critical and self-reflexive. By doing so, we can reflect on our urban based elite status and connect our knowledge work with daily life struggles. Treating knowledge as praxis, we should try to dialogue with the western feminisms based on equal footing, and at the same time, we can

unite with the third world women to subvert the oppressive powers from all directions in constructing another possible world!

Epilogue: Reconstructing Research Narratives

Academia has been debating how much we researchers and professionals are able to hear from the subaltern for decades. We are continually to be caught in a dilemma between the voices of the subjects and the analysis of researchers, private lives and public knowledge, the issues of knowledge politics as raised by feminist academics (Ribben & Edwards, 1998). I share the central concern that the subjectivity of the researcher is significant in shaping the research process and especially the analysis of ethnographies and oral histories, and therefore it is vital to keep respondents' voices and perspective alive (Birch, 1998: 171). When I listen to the narratives of each *Zhuang* woman in their various cohorts, I am actually situating my own life experiences, as well as my mother's and sister's in such a process of reflection. The research is a series of dialectical processes in which my life interacts with their lives; our lives are intertwined together, with the voices of the *Zhuang* women being represented and my own self being re-discovered.

From objects to subjects, reclaiming self

I choose to study rural women and migration after my prior studies on street children and female sex workers in Yunnan. Both street children and female sex workers, though found mostly in the urban areas, actually come from the

countryside. They still maintain close connections with their home village, and their plights reflect part of the migration process. By working on the dissertation, I take the opportunity to see how migration is experienced by rural women.

To a large extent, I have been a migrant myself since the age of seventeen when I left my hometown in Yunnan in the early 80's. For the past twenty-some years, I have been constantly on the road, moving around from my hometown Mengzi, to Shanghai, Kunming, Oberlin and San Francisco in the United States, and Hong Kong. And for the past three years specifically I have been living like a migrant, moving between Hong Kong, Kunming, *Di'an* Village and my hometown. While I consider myself fortunate to be able to pursue my aspiration, I am also torn among multiple roles as a professional woman, a mature student, a single mother, a girlfriend, and the aspirations of a to-be-feminist. How I struggle among these roles and feel constantly inadequate and incompetent to be good at each one, not to mention feeling uncomfortable with the traditional gender expectations imposed upon me!

So when I chose to study the rural *Zhuang* women under migration, I did not intend to subject them under my scrutiny as objects of research, but I urged myself to reflect upon my life experiences through interactions and exchanges with them. When the *Di'an* Village was selected by my department as the site on which a rural social work model was to be explored and developed, I decided to use the same site as a base to conduct my study on rural women, development

and migration. I had hoped that the narratives and research findings of rural women would inform the theories and practices of gender and development, which could in turn influence development work and social work. At the same time, I hoped the research process would facilitate my own process of self-discovery.

Interwoven Selves

Observing and hearing Lifan and other young women narrating their pain and struggles in life, especially the mixed views and feelings that migration has brought to their lives, I keep on asking them what they want for their life, a fundamental question that is beyond their grasp, and also mine. When Lifan swore under her breath with determination, "... someday, I will leave here," I was struck by a vague familiarity somewhere inside me. When the quiet and subdued Dongqi cried out aloud in front of her husband, "I, too, someday, will leave this family!" the cry seemed to reach somewhere deep inside me and shook me inside with such a force that I could hardly suppress my urge to cry out with her. When Mamei repeated, talking more to herself than to me or the other women in the dark in her house against the blazing sun outside, that "He (the migrating son) simply does not care for us... and he does not want to return home... Home is not a home - to live on is worse than to die!" I felt that my body trembled with cold.

Returning from the field to my comfortable, air-conditioned room in Hong Kong and going through my field diary and tape transcription, I found myself

struggling hard to conceptualize the voices which emerged from the narratives of each cohort of women. I was either lost in the life-worlds of the women or lost in an abstract theoretical discussion, and I could not find the way to link these two separate worlds together. In frustration and despair, I doubted myself if I am made a scholarly material. The question that kept popping up in my head was “What do these women want?” Amidst the pain and struggle to carve a researcher out of me, I finally asked myself, then, “What do I want?”

Until then, I began to situate the life path I had gone through in the past and that I am still muddling through in the present. Only when I connect mine with the narratives from the *Zhuang* women in their various life courses can I begin to understand them, to bridge the missing link between theoretical discussions of the abstract with the actual life stories these women narrated through my agency as a woman struggling to establish my own subjectivities.

Since I was a young girl, I had made up my mind to leave my hometown. My determination was to break away from the suffocating environment in which I was crushed between two separate worlds united into one: a girl with a rural household registration living in the county seat, discriminated against by relatives enjoying privileges associated with the urban household registration under the strict urban-rural hierarchy of China. That urge inside of me finally, at the age of 17, led me to flee from my warm family, which belonged to the lower strata of society, a peasant family in a small town in the bordering and ethnic areas, to Shanghai, the

largest cosmopolitan city in China. Later, it was the same urge that led me to stay away from home, and to break away from the prescribed destiny after graduation – to get married, set up my own home, get a mediocre teaching post in the university, bear and raise children, and get old slowly and with security. Instead, I pursued graduate study abroad, against the wishes of everyone in the family. Even the cosmopolitan aunty questioned my wish asking, “What use is so much education for a woman?” (*yige nv haizi jia, du name duo shu gan shenme?*). My elder sister was puzzled, and demanded, “As a university teacher, you are already well above thousands of people - what else do you want?” Unable to grasp the meaning of my leaving, in frustration and tears, my mother gave up her attempt to understand and cried, “You just do not care for us - that is why you want to go so far away!” In tears and on my knees in front of her, I made my mother take back her words. Indeed, back then, I did not know what I wanted; I only knew that I had to go far away to search for the meaning of my life.

Throughout the years of studying abroad, I could never stop the question that always recurred in my mind: should I return home to China or stay there in the United States? When I was once in a car accident, a nurse in the emergency room asked me to provide her with names of my family so that she could contact them. I suddenly realized that I could not provide her with any name, despite having some close friends in the States. Then I realized that it was home that I wanted to return to. I told myself that I did not care where that home was and how

bad the conditions and environment were, as long as I could build a family with someone I could count on in an emergency. I began to embark on the journey back home.

I soon found out, however, that home was not something that was there excitedly awaiting my return. After struggling to take up my role as a good daughter, a good wife, and finally a mother in a family amid the social changes toward materialistic goals, I finally had to give up the family I had returned to, with the same questions my close woman friends demanded of me: “What do you want? How much are self-respect and self-esteem worth for a woman in the family? ” In hurt, pain and in fragmented self, I left the home to which I had thought I returned, and got back on the long and lonely journey again, searching for something that I was not sure even existed.

Observing the struggles and hearing the narratives that carried so much hope and frustration and pain among the *Di'an* women towards migration, I seemed to go through the same ordeal myself, only I was in a set of social institutions seemingly different as I am a female professor, but these institutions share many common features that both confront us as women. However, I derived so much from their strength in coping with life when I looked back on the past and reflected on the present.

When I expressed questions such as “What do they want?”, these questions actually boomeranged on me - “What do I want?”. At the moment I was struggling hard to construct my identity as a researcher, and at the same time I found a new relationship that brought me so much support and satisfaction like I had never had before in my life. For the first time in my life, I felt so connected and so free from anxiety and worries. I began to gain a glimpse of what my longings and their yearnings had been. Tears washed away the usual scars and healed the wounds in ways that are significant; through the research I was able to renew my strength and develop resiliency in life that would sustain me to reach home. Research has become a healing process for me, and I have been able to come to appreciate and embrace a life that is full of struggles and pain, yet is so rich and meaningful.

Reflecting upon my own journey, I have been going through an upward cycle from leaving home to search for something unknown, to returning home to escape pressures from the outside world, to losing home for lack of connection, and finally, home regained through searching for myself through my study. I realized that it is the yearning for a home that connects us, rural or urban, peasant or intellectuals, marginal or mainstream, vulnerable or powerful, despite the varied and even conflicting meanings interpreted by women with diverse backgrounds. Whatever situations we are caught in, we have our moments of ups and downs; however, it is a longing for home that generates the desire for life.

After coming very far to finally come to embrace the sense of home, I am very aware that the struggles engaged in by the rural women continue as the resources they have access to in their immediate world and from the larger society are so limited. They will keep on searching for a home according to their understanding, and I will embark on an arduous journey to construct a larger public home that will be able to provide conditions for women to build their own private home free from oppression, abuse and suffering.

To end, I employ the song sung by Pan Meicheng, which is dedicated to those who are floating outside homeless. The song is entitled “I Wanna to Have a Home” and it goes as follows:

I wanna to have a home

Wanna to have a home, a place that does not have to be extravagant,

but when I am tired, I can think of it,

Wanna to have a home, a place that does not have to be big,

but when I am frightened, I will not be afraid,

Nobody does not wanna to have a home, but there are people who do not

have it,

when tears stream down my face, I can only slightly wipe them away.

How I envy her, after being hurt, she could return home,

but I can only be lonely, alone keep on searching for home.

.....

Appendix Glossary

- Anjia 安家 settle down raising families
- Ban fenjian 半封建 half feudal
- Bazi 八字 fate
- Benqian 本钱 investment
- Can 惨 pitiful
- Cao 操 swear
- Chaosheng 超生 the number of births exceeding the allowance of the one child policy
- Chayang 插秧 planting croppings
- Dadie 大爹 the elder brother of the father's
- Dagong 打工 labor migration
- Danguande 当官的 officials
- Dama 大妈 wife of paternal uncle
- Da shoushu 大手术 sterilization
- Da yishan 大衣裳 big clothes, the *Han* or modern clothes in distinguishing the traditional *Zhuang* costumes
- Diandan 垫单 blanket
- Dizhu 地主 landlord
- Dui hunyin 对婚姻 matching
- Chuke 出去 to go outside
- Er ba 恶霸 hooligans
- Fanghuang 放荒 for the land to go wasted
- Fangniu 放牛 attend cows
- Fu buqi 扶不起 cannot support child to school
- Gan gaizi 赶街子 going to the market on the market day
- Gongjia 公家 government
- Gongfen 工分 payment under the People's Commune
- Gua yanshui 挂盐水 to hang salt water

Guanzi 罐子 the wooden box *Zhuang* use for harvesting cropping
 Guonian 过年 the spring holiday
 Guzi 谷子 rice
 Haha, 下下 all the time
 Hanbao 憨包 stupid
 Hanhua 汉语 *Han* language, distinctive from ethnic languages
 Heiqiaiqia 黑恰恰 very dark
 Houjia 后家 mother's natal family
 Huangong 换工 exchanging labor
 Huanqing 换亲 selecting marriage partner through exchanging between siblings
 between two families
 Huasuan 划算 worthy
 Huoji 活计 work
 Huolu 活路 livelihood
 Huotang 火塘 fire place
 Jihua shengyu 计划生育 family planning
 Jiurou pengyou 酒肉朋友, eating and drinking friends
 Kaihuang 开荒
 Kang 糠 shells of cropping
 Kujiangjiang 苦将将 very bitter
 Kumen 苦闷 depressed
 Laoguai 老信 husband
 Laohuo 老火 or 老祸 old fire or old misfortune
 Lengzi 楞子 dumb
 Maigong 卖工 to sell one's labor
 Manyue 满月 for a child to be one month old
 Nainai 奶奶 breast
 Niang niang 娘娘 aunts(colloquial)
 Nongmang jijie 农忙季节 farming seasons
 Po guanzi po shuai 破罐子破摔 dumping a broken pot makes no difference

Putonghua 普通话 Mandarin, official language in mainland China

Rizi song xie 日子松些 life is a bit easier

Sai guzi 晒谷子 dry crops just freshly collected from the rice paddy

Shui yantong 水烟筒 water pipes

Shuo 说 scold (colloquial)

Songli 送礼 giving gifts

Tiao 挑 measurement for harvesting rice. About fifty kilograms for one tiao

Tou tong fen 头痛粉 pain killer

Wawa 娃娃 kids

Waipo 外婆 grandmother

Xiaodiao 小调 folksongs that are typical of *Zhuang* groups

Xiaonong jingji 小农经济 petty peasant economy, subsistence economy

Xiao shengyi 小生意 small business, meaning peddling selling miscellaneous stuff on the street

Xiao shoushu 小手术 euphemism for virginal operation for preventing conception

Xiao yishan 小衣裳 small clothes, the *Zhuang* traditional women's costume, the term used to distinguish it from the modern clothes

Xingzheng cun 行政村 administrative village

Zao 糟 waste, specifically referring to use the money in a wrong and wasted way

Zhangong 站工 standing there to wait for work

Zhaoqing 招亲 inviting the man to live with his wife's family

Zheha 这下 right now

Zheng 整 do (colloquial.)

Zhong zhuangjia 种庄稼 growing rice

Zhuangjing 壮锦 special weaving typical of *Zhuang* culture

Zirancun 自然村 natural village

Zuo huo 做活 manual labor

Zuojia 坐家 to get married (colloquial.)

Zuoke 做客 to be the guest, to be invited to attend various functions, be it funeral or wedding ceremonies.

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