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**China's Family Support System: Challenges and
Solutions under the Circumstances of Rural-Urban
Female labour migration**

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Abstract: Based on interviews with rural-urban migrants in Anhui and Sichuan provinces of China, this paper focuses on the coping strategies adopted by Chinese rural-urban migrant families to deal with the tensions caused by changes in generational care chains. By illustrating how and why the traditional family support system managed to survive and function in the circumstance of women's migration, a new pattern of generational contract has been identified. In response to the lack of support from the formal social security system, the migrating-mother households developed their own new coping strategies. The dependent children and the elderly were left in the countryside; the grandparents, who have maintained partially their capacity to work were in charge of the grandchildren. The young migrating couples reciprocated by giving their parents financial support, other material help and promises of better support in the future. The study demonstrates that this new informal generational support pattern renewed the badly weakened capability of family support. Moreover, the new pattern is not a simple replica of the old fashioned pre-industrial welfare nexus. At a more general level, the new generational contract can be seen as a model of interaction of traditional and modern society.

Keywords: China; Rural-urban female migrant workers; Traditional family support system; New informal generational support pattern

Introduction

Since the late 1970s, China has been undergoing a gradual transformation from a centrally planned command economy to a market-based system; this great transformation brings rapid economic growth and social changes. One significant aspect is that there has been an increasing number of rural-urban migrants, including massive numbers of rural women moving from their home villages to distant urban areas to find jobs. By 2003, the number of rural-urban migrant labourers was as high as 114 million, which accounted for over 20% of the total 500 million rural labourers (NBOS 2004)¹. At the beginning of the new millennium, about 50% of all migrant workers in China were estimated to be women (UNRISD 2005, 83). Rural-urban migrants shape the largest population movement during peacetime in China and perhaps the largest movement in the recent world history (Robert 2000).

The dual role of rural women as breadwinners and main caregivers within the family raises interesting questions about the impact of industrialization upon agrarian societies. Women's labour market participation is without exception linked to numerous issues of family responsibilities. In the case of China's rural-urban migration, both social science research and common sense tell us that there are conflicts between capitalist demands for the free movement of labour and traditional family care practices based on Confucian values. Under the current Chinese social security system, the family is supposed to be the main source of social support for rural residents and women play a vital role in this social security arrangement. When more and more rural women move to distant urban areas to get paid employment, the traditional chains of care responsibilities are challenged and changed. This study will show that this modern vs. traditional confrontation leads to a number of practical solutions where new circumstances are met with a mixture of reshaped traditional care arrangements and new kinds of generational care contracts. The practices offer some potential solutions for China's rural social security crisis. Therefore, exploring how rural women and their households deal with these conflicts, and what kinds of new social bonds are being created during this process are very important both theoretically and for policy purposes. The knowledge drawn from the study will hopefully contribute both to a better understanding of China's social security system, and to on-going discussions on the welfare state from a comparative perspective.

The family has been functioning as an overwhelming support system in many pre-industrial societies. If it is true that in most Western countries in addition to the family the church has traditionally also been a welfare provider (Kersbergen 1995), we could say that in China the family and kin system have for centuries acted as almost the only source of social support. Familism is characterized as the core of the Confucian ethic (Fei 1947, Liang 1990, Tu 1998) and a metaphor for Chinese social structure (Feng, Y. [1948]1985, Tu 1996, Jin, Y. 1986). Family has played a profound role in the formation of the Asian form of capitalism, in power politics, in creating social stability and in moral education in China (Tu 1996). Classical Confucian works have provided a strong normative basis for family relationships and inter-generational contracts prevailing in China. These relationships were described as the well-known *Wu Lun*, namely, the five basic relationships: ruler-subject, parent-child, husband-wife, siblings, and friends (Analects of Confucian 1990, 30/chapter 12.11). Since an individual was located in a well-structured network of human relationships, in *Wu Lun* systems, everybody was assigned duties and obligations, including mutual welfare responsibilities. With respect to narrow kin obligations and generational support patterns, the primary principle is the so-called *Fu Ci Zi Xiao* ethic, that is, father-goodness and children-filial piety. These values and normative principles concerning children's support for the elderly and intergenerational reciprocity have been sustained by Confucian ethics and legitimized by the

¹ Here the term 'rural-urban migrant' refers those who were migrated from their home villages more than one month during the year 2003. The number of the migrants was 90 million in 2001 (NBOS 2004).

Chinese authorities via both the formal laws and informal conventions (Xiao 2001, 174; Zheng 1997). Filial piety is considered by many people as one of the main moral and ethical principles guiding behaviour. The traditional notions of social welfare maintains their influence during the social transformation of the country after 1949 (Chan & Tsui 1997), the family currently play the crucial role in welfare provision in rural areas in particular. During the 1950s, the government introduced a Stalinist welfare model in urban society and ran generous social insurance programs for industrial employees (Chen 1996, 131-133; White 1998, 178; Hussain 2000). In contrast, the rural areas do not appear to exist the formal social security system. For the rural residents, the main source of protection come from the family.

In social policy research, the important role of the family and familism in the social security system in contemporary China has been emphasized by most, if not all, studies on this subject. This more or less established and accepted distinction has been captured in the notion , of the “East Asian welfare model” (Goodman & Peng 1996, 193; White and Goodman 1998), or the “Confucian welfare system” (Jones 1993, Lin, K. 1999), characterized by a strong reliance on the family as the locus of social welfare and service delivery. However, there are contested views as to trajectories of social change in this welfare model. Both classical ‘industrial functionalism’ and post-modernism predict changes in the model. In his statement on the convergence theory, Harold L. Wilensky (2002, 5) draws strong conclusions about the net effect of industrialization on the family itself and its support capacity in modern society: ‘... the massive structural changes associated with industrialization have brought major changes in family size, composition, functions, and lifestyles.’ At the same time he declares that, ‘... it also reduces the family motivation and resources to care for aging parents and to meet the risks of invalidism, sickness, job injuries, and other shocks.’ Against this background, fundamental changes in the traditional Chinese welfare arrangements are to be expected in the wake of industrialization. With this assumption in mind, I explore what has happened to the traditional family support systems in the process of de-agrarianization in rural China, in particular in the context of female migration.

Under the current circumstance in rural China, supporting elderly parents is considered to be the unquestioned duty of adult children, especially sons. It is expressed by the old saying ‘having sons for old age support’. Taking into consideration that rural women usually move to their husbands’ families when they get married, the sons and daughters-in-law have traditionally been given the duty of giving support to the elderly parents and parents-in-law in rural areas. Despite the fact that women were subordinated to men in the Confucian “ideal” family (Tu 2001), under the traditional welfare model women have played a key role in fulfilling welfare responsibilities within the family. However, the deepening and ever accelerating marketization in China over the past two decades has pushed more and more rural men to seek non-agricultural jobs in distant cities. This rural-urban migration is changing the profile of the family support system. The traditional family-based welfare arrangement is facing increasing challenges. On the one hand, from the women worker’s point of view, there are severe tensions between the desire for the free movement to cities and the demands of traditional family responsibilities. On the other hand, the dependent family members, both the children and the elderly who are left behind in the countryside, are excluded from the formal social protection system and are exposed to the risk of lack of care due to the departure of the main care provider. One link in the chain of care is missing and needless to say this causes problems and tensions that must be somehow solved.

This paper focuses on the coping strategies adopted by the migrant families to deal with the tensions caused by changes in generational care chains. To be more specific, I try to answer to the following questions: How are rural family support systems functioning under the circumstances of female labour migration? What has happened to the traditional generational contract in this process of rapid economic and social change? What kind of welfare arrangement have been developed among the households from which women are migrating in order to meet the care deficits caused by their

absence and the new demands brought forth by market forces? What is the role played by social policy in this complex set of forces?

In this paper, the concept of the ‘rural migrant worker’ refers to a group in the Chinese labour force who move between rural and urban areas, who seek and find temporary jobs in non-agricultural sectors in the urban areas, and who when out of work return to their home villages and engage in farming again. According to China’s *Hukou* household registration system, this group of labourers maintains permanent rural resident status whenever and wherever they work. In the Chinese literature, both in scientific analyses and in policy documents, a rural–urban migrant without a *Hukou* is considered to be a ‘floating rural labourer’ (*Nongcun liudong laodongli* or *Nongmin gong*) instead of a ‘migrant labourer’. In this paper, I use the term ‘migrants’ in line with the mainstream understanding of this term in migration studies.

The data used in the paper were collected during 1999 and 2000 in Anhui and Sichuan provinces² of China as part of a research project on rural-urban migrant workers in China – ‘Study on Out-Migrants and Return Migrants’ (SOMRM). The project was conducted by the Research Center for Rural Economy, Ministry of Agriculture, from 1997 to 2001. The author of the paper was a member of the research team³. The data for the project was collected using case interviews and sample surveys. The analysis of this paper relies primarily on the case interview material.

The interviewing strategy was designed to collect distinct information about out-migration and return-migration experiences at the individual and village level (Bai, N. and He, Y. 2002). 344 individual informants and twelve village focus groups were selected from four counties located in Anhui and Sichuan. All in all, among the 344 individual interviewees, there were 129 female respondents. In terms of counties, villages and individuals the cases were selected non-randomly⁴. Interviews were conducted in 1999 and they were organized on three levels: individual rural workers, village leaders, and county government officials. A semi-standardized interview technique was applied in the all interviews: questions were typically asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order; however the interviewers were expected and allowed to probe far beyond the

² Province Profile (as of 2001):

Sichuan province is located in the southwest of China; population of 86 million; it has the fourth largest population of the 31 provincial regions in China; 9000 thousand hectares cultivated land which accounts for approx. 7% of total national area; 5250 Yuan/person (about 530 Euro/person) per capital GDP—the highest is 37400 Yuan/person (about 3740 Euro/person) in Shanghai and the lowest is 4200 Yuan/person (about 420 Euro/person) in Gansu province; composition of gross domestic product: primary industry 22%, secondary industry 40%, tertiary industry 38% (national average of composition of gross domestic product: primary industry 15%, secondary industry 51%, tertiary industry 34%).

Anhui province: located in the south-east of China; population of 63 million; it has the eighth largest population of the 31 provincial regions in China; 6000 thousand hectares of cultivated land, which account for about 5% of total national area; 5200 Yuan/person (520 Euro/person) per capital GDP; composition of gross domestic product: primary industry 23%, secondary industry 43%, tertiary industry 34%.

Source: NBS (National Bureau of Statistics of China) (2002), China Statistical Yearbook 2002.

<http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/statisticaldata/yearlydata/>

³ the author of the paper, as a member of the research team was responsible for the study of the female workers of the project, and with other members of the research team conducted interviews in Anhui province. Preliminary results were published in China in 2001 and 2002, in Finland in 2005.

⁴ According to Stanley Lieberman (1992, 115), the choice of cases for study is itself critical and requires great thought about the appropriate procedure for choosing them. A case study approach was applied in an attempt to follow Lieberman’s advice. In order to guarantee the representativeness of the data, the scheme of case selection designed by the project team abides by the following rules (He & Bai 2002): A case study approach was applied in an attempt to follow Lieberman’s advice. In order to guarantee the representativeness of the data, the scheme of case selection designed by the project team abides by the following rules (He & Bai 2002):

- (1) Cases apportionment: first we selected two representative counties separately from Anhui and Sichuan province, and then we selected three representative villages in each given county.
- (2) The criteria of selection for case counties: one requirement was that the number of out-migrant workers accounted for at least 20 % of county’s total labour force in 1998. There should be a long history of out-migration records compared with other counties and the county should be a typical agricultural county (indicated by gross value of agricultural output) and at the median or average level in terms of economic development (indicated by per capita disposable income) and natural resources (situation about farm land, irrigation etc.) within the province.
- (3) The criteria of selection for case villages: the proportion of out-migrant workers in a village should exceed the average proportion in the given county. The village should also display a relatively long out-migration record. The three villages selected represent different stages of economic development measured as per capita disposable income, and the villages are poor, rich and middle-income localities. There were twelve sample villages in total.
- (4) Within the village, individual interviewees were selected on the basis of a quota sampling procedure according to their migration experiences. Twenty-five interviewees in each village including at least fifteen with returnees were conducted. Among the interviewees there were five female returnees. In addition there were five who had never migrated and five relatives to those who were current migrants were interviewed. There were at least seven female respondents in total in each village. In principle, the interviewees belonged to the ‘labour force’, i.e. the villagers were between 16 and 60 years of age for male, and 16 and 55 years of age for female.

answers to the standardized questions (Berg 1995, 33). At the individual level, the predetermined questions concentrated on interviewee individual and family experiences in the out-migration and return-migration process. A broad range of aspects of migration experiences were involved, mainly including the reasons for out-migration and migrating home, opinions on working and living conditions in cities and the gains, difficulties, problems and changes related to migration. The information on each case usually formed a distinct story, which the respondent relayed to the interviewer. Most of the individual interviews were conducted at the respondents' home.

Information from village and county government officials was collected using focus group interviews. At the village level, focus group interviewing was conducted in each of the 12 villages, and interviews usually consisted of three or two village leaders depending on the village in question. The information collected from the county government officials mainly covered data on the local economic development situation, local policies relevant to rural labour mobility, and so forth.

The paper is organized as follows: The information presented in the next section will serve as the background in which the story of changes of family support are taking place. Following that, the practices and capacity crisis of family support in rural China which take place in the circumstances of changing socio-economic background will be illustrated, concentrating in particular on the generational support patterns developed by the female migrating-mother households, and analyzing how this new pattern deals with the capacity crisis of the traditional system. Then, the characteristics of the newly emerging generational contract will be identified, and I shall try to offer some explanations as to why the pattern works. The penultimate section explores the nature of government's social policy in terms of the development of policy goals and its implications for both traditional welfare institutions. The final section will draw conclusions and offer discussion.

Social security poverty of rural-urban migrant families in cities

Although most researchers have argued that China's social security system was already established in the early 1950s when the first nationwide unified formal social insurance program was introduced (Chow & Xu 2001; Saunders & Shang 2001; Wong 1998; Zheng 1997; Kong 2001), until now, there is no nationwide program covering all residents in China. In fact the Chinese social security system is a fragmented system characterized by inequity and incomplete coverage (Saunders & Shang 2001). Social security provisions have been segmented along the lines of a rural-urban divide and all schemes are confined to either the urban or rural residents (Hussain 2000). On the other hand, from the rural resident's point of view, the social security system is an arrangement that is biased towards urban citizens and almost all main social security measures are designed to protect solely the urban labour force and residents. For the rural residents, including a great number of migrant workers, the main source of security comes from their own labour capacity and their families. The formal social security provisions existing in rural China are sparse. Aside from the so-called disaster relief program which aims to mitigate extreme poverty caused by serious natural disasters, the government introduced a marginal social assistance scheme which was limited to the most destitute people, mainly those who had no means of living and no family from whom they could get support (MOCA 2000). Furthermore, the rural social assistance scheme was and still is largely operating at the grassroots level and financed by the villagers themselves. In fact, the voluminous rural population is not covered by any formal statutory social security system and is excluded from social protection.

During the era of the centrally planned economy, the Chinese government rigidly controlled labour mobility and migration, especially the residence changes from rural to urban areas and job transfers from farming to non-agricultural work. It was almost impossible to migrate from rural to urban

areas, except with permission rarely given by the authorities. This control has functioned through the household registration system (Hukou system), which is a unique institutional arrangement that strictly segregates rural and urban areas (Cai 2003). The Hukou system was set up in the mid-1950s. It functioned as a domestic passport preventing rural residents from entering cities, and rural labourers were excluded from working in non-agricultural sectors⁵. Under this system, an urban Hukou membership was required in order to stay in cities and get employment. The urban Hukou status included a series of social entitlements (Song, Huang & Liu 2002) like food quotas, jobs assigned by government, as well as associated social security benefits such as old-age pension, free housing and free health care. Hukou membership also guaranteed privileged access to urban public services such as education.

Since the economic reforms started in the late 1970s, the system of the centrally planned economy has changed in many respects. Up to the mid-1980s the rigid controls on rural-urban migration were gradually eased. As a consequence of the market-oriented reforms in labour policy in particular, food and housing provision in urban areas, employment, housing conditions and food supply regulations in cities were gradually changed. Hence, more and more rural labourers are able to move to cities to find employment. This movement led to the so-called phenomena of ‘the surge of a floating rural labour force’ (*Mingong Chao*) (Du & Bai 1997, 2; Cai 2000). Until 2000 the central government tried to introduce some policy changes and made attempts to abolish some local discriminatory regulations (Song, Huang & Liu 2002). However, pervasive legal restrictions for rural-urban migrants still exist. Under current policies, rural-urban migrants have access to some occupations in urban areas, but nevertheless they are just like ‘foreign labourers’ (*Wailai mingong*) working in the cities, and only in very few cases can the rural resident status be changed to urban status. All in all, this means that the majority of rural migrants remain excluded from the urban social security system (Luo 2000, Song, Huang & Liu 2002). Despite the fact that most of the rural-urban migrants are no longer self-employed farmers as they have become employed in non-farming sectors, they are still treated as rural residents in terms of their social identity and continue to be marginalized as secondary workers in the urban labour market. Policymakers still assume that migrant workers have some means of social security because, at least in theory, they own farmland in their home villages. Hence, the majority of migrants are still not covered by mandatory urban social security programs. As a result, migrant workers and their families suffer social security poverty in cities, they do not have social rights –to even basic health care, old-age pension, work injury insurance or educational rights for their children in cities.

When we take a closer look at a special group, the rural female workers and their families, the situation regarding social security becomes even worse. Due to the fact that migrants are not covered by mandatory social insurance programs, and employers are not required by law to make any social security contributions, the female migrant workers are left on their own. Moreover, the local city governments regard the migrant workers simply as labourers rather than residents and

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