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# **Gender Roles and Female Labour Migration**

**A Qualitative Field Study of Female Migrant Workers in Beijing**

**By Lisa Eklund**

**2000**

**Department of Sociology**

**Lund University**

**PROP Report No. 29**



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## List of Content

1. Introduction	3
2. Definitions	9
3. Methodology	14
4. Chinese Women and Labour Migration	29
5. Consequences of Migration on Female Migrant Workers' Social Status	45
6. Consequences of Migration on Migrant Women's Gender Roles	52
7. Concluding Discussion	74
8. References	80
9. Interview Guide	82



# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 The Floating Population in China

The population movement in China today is often called the *floating population* and refers to rural-urban migration. The floating population movement began in the early 1980's and is a natural component of the modernisation process in China, in which mobile labour is a prerequisite for the fast growing industries, as well as the expanding service sector in the urban areas.

The large scale of the floating population is a consequence of the development strategies prior to 1979, when the economic reforms started. When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, the process of industrialisation was led by a very strong central authority, which held a very restrictive attitude towards migration. Urbanisation and population movements were seen as a threat to peace and order in the country and the development-strategy was to develop the capital intensive, rather than labour intensive, heavy industries in the urban areas. It was impossible to move between different rural areas, and moving from rural to urban areas was out of the question. The government maintained its strict view upon urbanisation until the planned-economy system was replaced by the economic reforms (*gaige kaifang*) in 1979.

On a micro-level, the transition to market economy was most revolutionary in the countryside, where the collective system was replaced by the *household responsible system*. In the new system, which was submissive to the market forces, the family became the basic unit for production. The tangible effect of this, in combination with decades of relatively high population growth, was a sudden surplus of labour in the agriculture sector, as well as land shortage.<sup>1</sup> The development strategy changed from being heavy industry oriented to be light industry oriented and the aim was to industrialise the rural areas. Consequently, people began to change employment from the agricultural to the enterprise sector and there was a great upswing in the town and village enterprises (TVE:s), which resulted in people gradually leaving the agricultural sector while still remaining in the rural areas. After some years the TVE:s began losing productivity, due to poor quality and ineffective management, and people began to lose their employment. At the same time the power of the state became more decentralised and people became freer to choose employment and place of domicile. Therefore, the rural residents headed for the cities instead, where the comparative advantages were better and this gave rise to the floating population. In the beginning of the 1980's the size of the floating population amounted to 2 million people and it has, since then, increased significantly each year. According to the Ministry of Public Security there were 80 million people absorbed in the floating population in 1992 with an expected increase of 10 million people each year. However, it is difficult, or even impossible, to estimate the exact size of the floating population. Already in 1993, numbers have figured between 120 million and 200 million people (Li 1993: 51). The fast pace of economic growth has also led to unequal growth in different parts of the country. Thus, the floating population is not only heading

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<sup>1</sup> China accounts for 22 percent of the world's population, but only 7 percent of the world's arable land.

towards the more developed cities, but also towards the eastern provinces along the coast, where economic development has predominated for the past two decades.

These days the Chinese government does not appear to be attempting to control the floating population. One reason might be that the people who belong to the floating population are often low educated and unorganised, whereas the potential political threat that the floating population may constitute seems to be of relatively little concern for the government (Li 1993: 51). Some people have argued that the number of people migrating is so great that it will not get significantly larger<sup>2</sup>, while others predict the population movement to continue as long as there are significant differences between the rural and urban areas (Cai Fang, interview). Professor Cai Fang, who is director of the Institute for Population Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, believes that the amount of people leaving the rural areas will continue to grow since the disparities between rural and urban areas are actually widening. Cai Fang sees the government as one of the three authorities that have the legitimacy to control the floating population. The other two are the local authorities in the rural areas, who try to promote people to work in the cities and the city authorities, and who try to restrict the rural dwellers from moving to the city. Professor Cai Fang is of the opinion that the passive attitude of the government is due to the fact that they have to see to the well-being of the over-populated rural areas at the same time as seeing to the socio-economic situation in the cities. Furthermore, the government wants China to urbanise in order to become a modern state. Even though the process of mass migration over a short period of time may be painful to a large number of people, the government does not take any measures to prevent this process as long as it does not threaten the national security<sup>3</sup>.

The passive attitude of the government and the restrictive attitude from the city authorities cause the rural migrants in the cities to become marginalised, which leads to social problems. All migrants, irrespective of sex or age, are in need of housing, employment, health facilities and schools for their children. The shortage of this has a very negative impact on the rural migrants since they are deprived of any welfare rights in the city due to their absence of an urban hukou<sup>4</sup>. Impossible to overlook, the rural dwellers are forming a new lower class that only has access to things that the urban dwellers have rejected.

It has been said that all non-Beijing residents would be sent out of the city due to the government's fear of unrest during the 10th anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary day of the People's Republic of China. This, however, proved to be untrue. At the time of data collection for this thesis the whole city was, as usual, full of people from outside Beijing, which shows that there is a need for these rural migrants. It seems as if the rural dwellers are indispensable and a part of Beijing's city life, since they constitute a cheap labour force with low requirements for welfare and other benefits. Nevertheless, the urban population still does not welcome them. On the contrary, they are accused of taking the urban

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<sup>2</sup> Opinion held by Steven McGurk at the Ford Foundation in Beijing, mediated in February 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The hukou system, or the household registration system, was in the beginning designed for keeping track on the structure of the population, as in any other country. However, as the developmental gap widened between rural and urban areas, the hukou system functioned as a means to prevent rural residents from moving into the more prosperous urban areas. Today the hukou system allows migration, but deprives rural dwellers from enjoying certain rights that the urban dwellers are entitled to.



people's jobs, of being involved in drug dealing, of crimes, of the spread of STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), and especially women are accused of prostitution and of escaping family planning policies. (Mallée 1995-6: 109).

## **1.2 Gender Disparities in the Floating Population**

To look at gender disparities of the floating population is a new research topic and, once again, the data available is insufficient. Divergent results have been presented regarding the ratio between women and men, probably because different definitions of the floating population have been used. According to statistics from the Chinese population census in 1990 the ratio between women and men of all migrated people was 1.17:1. But a disaggregation of different kinds of migration indicates large disparities between male and female migration. According to Hein Mallée, who has put together a number of Chinese surveys on the floating population, men constitute between 70 and 84 percent of all rural labour migrants (Mallée 1995-6: 114). In terms of migration for marriage, male migrants constitute only 8.6 percent, according to a survey made by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This survey also reveals that 93.4 percent of all men that migrated were labour migrants, while 62.8 percent of all women that migrate were marriage migrants (Tan Shen 1997: 42).

Statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture show that the ratio of men compared to women has shrunk in labour migration. In 1988 the ratio was 3.75:1 and in 1994 it came down to 2.29:1, but other inquiries made by Elisabeth Croll and Huang Ping show the opposite. According to them, the proportion of male to female migrants has risen over the years (Croll & Huang 1997: 129). However, any type of migration statistics in China should be treated with some criticism, since it is unlikely that the census has recorded all of the informal migration (Hoy 1997:3).

Compared to men, women tend to migrate within their own province, rather than to other provinces. Furthermore, if women leave their home province they concentrate to Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong province, Jiangsu province, and Zhejiang province, that is, places with a well developed industry (Tan Shen 1997: 43). It is estimated that one million of the three million people belonging to the floating population in Beijing are women (Xie Lihua, interview).

## **1.3 Theoretical Background to Migration**

Before we move on, a theoretical perspective is needed in order to give a frame to why migration is taking place. In migrations studies, there are two main approaches that have prevailed in the explanation of migration, namely the *neo-classical school* and the *historical-structural school* (Brochmann 1990, Skeldon 1997, Hugo 1993, Rodenburg 1993).

The neo-classical school assumes that the economic law of supply and demand can explain migration and that migration is due to the decision of the individual, who compares losses and benefits and then decides whether to stay or move. Migration is then a means for the individual to improve his/her economical situation and also a means for a region to accomplish economic development, since human capital is redistributed to the areas that demand human capital. Human capital is thereby transferred from the areas where demand for labour is plentiful (wages low) to areas where demand for labour is scarce (wages high) (Hugo 1993: 60). Therefore, labour migration helps to balance the disequilibrium in demand and supply between different regions and thus this approach is also called the equilibrium school. This hypothesis has been heavily criticised for not taking into account non-economic factors in migration.

The historical-structural school was developed partly as a response to the neo-classical school, and has based much of its theory on Marx's historical materialism. The historical-structuralists assert that migration can only be fully understood if analysed in the same context as socio-economic as well as political structural changes in society. They argue that capitalism and migration are strongly connected and that migration is due to imbalances between the social relations in production. The individual's decision to migrate is explained in terms of "the stream and changes in social classes" (Brochmann 1990: 29-31). The historical-structural approach to migration is strongly connected to development theories, since labour migration is seen as giving rise to unequal development and the exploitation of the rural labour force.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Approaches to Female Migration**

The floating population is very often referred to as a phenomenon of structural changes in the Chinese society and is therefore analysed according to statistical features such as destination and volume. Also, economic aspects are emphasised in line with the two schools, which surely is an explanatory variable to why the migration process started in China.

However, the stance of this thesis is that these schools are not enough to explain female labour migration. The reason for this is not only the lack of a micro-level perspective, which would include social and cultural aspects apart from the economic but, above all, the fact that they are constructed with men as the frame of reference. As well as other migration theories, these two schools were said to be gender-neutral and have thereby contributed to the concealment of female migration (Hugo 1993: 60). This may be explained by the fact that these theories have been concentrating on the traditional economic aspects of migration and, in the cases where female migration has been brought up, it has been analysed from an economic point of view (UN 1993: 3). Considering Chinese rural women's position in the family as well as in the society, other approaches need to be taken. Chant and Radcliffe have suggested that two approaches are important to consider in order to understand female labour migration. The first one is the *behavioural approach*, which implies that both women and men are influenced by the ideologies and cultural norms that determine gender roles, which make them prone to adapt to the expectations that are placed on them. This approach has also

been pointed out by other scholars, who argue that it is important to examine the interaction of the migrant's individual characteristics with the prevailing norms and values that determine gender relations and gender roles in female migration (Lim 1993: 197-218, Thadani & Todaro 1984: 50). The second one is the *household strategy approach*, which implies that the power relations and decision-making structures in the family mould the aspiring female migrant. It may be that it is strategically more rewarding to send a male member of the family to work in the city, due to men's general higher level of income. However, it may also be that women are restricted from migrating due to the power-hierarchies in the family and the socio-cultural expectations of gender, which again go back to the behavioural approach (Chant and Radcliffe 1992: 20-24).

One aspect of the behavioural approach is sociocultural norms about motherhood and marriage as important factors in female migration (Thadani & Todaro 1984: 50). Women's roles as mothers and wives can be so deeply rooted in the traditional patterns of gender divisions of labour that they become obstacles to migration and, thereby, function as an explanation to the low participation of women in migration. Families with strong patriarchal traditions may not allow their daughters to migrate and, if they do, they may try to restrict and control the woman's life as a migrant so that the woman does not benefit as much from it. This can be done by arranging it so that other people in the city, such as friends and/or relatives, supervise her or influence her in taking a job that is secure and gives her little freedom to do what she wants. Such jobs are common in large work units, where the migrant workers live, work and eat together and have little connection with the outside world. This is particularly noticed in Muslim countries as well as in countries where Confucianism<sup>5</sup> is strong, such as China (Rodenburg 1993: 286-287).

Furthermore, common attitudes and sometimes prejudices concerning women and female migration are that girls should retain their traditional position in the household and that boys are more dispensable in the village than their hard working sisters. There is also a fear in the families that girls may be allured to 'play around' and become pregnant or marry outside their communities if they migrate, which would mean restricted control over marriage exchanges and bride-price payments. The fact that girls would enter the westernised urban world if they migrated, and subsequently be exposed to unacceptable attitudes and behaviour, is also a common fear of the family, which may in turn be an obstacle to migration (Lim 1993: 218).

Another approach to why female migration is taking place points at obstacles as well as facilitators in migration that either encourage or prevent women from migrating. The most commonly mentioned non-gender obstacles are financial resources – the migrant has to take into consideration the travelling expenses to the place of destination and the fact that living-expenses are often higher in the urban areas. Another obstacle may be the distance. Besides that, long distances mean higher travel-costs, and if migration is expensive less people are likely to migrate. Distance is often associated with the dimensions of cultural and social contrasts that the migrants face in the replacement area. The social and economic differences between home and relocation widen with distance and may discourage people to migrate

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<sup>5</sup> Confucianism is a code of rules that prevails the Chinese value system. These rules constitute of five 'relationships', which are; the ruler superior to his subject, the father superior to his son, the husband superior to his wife, the elder people superior to the young, and the equal relationship between friends.

(Parnwell 1993:16). In terms of female migration it is anticipated that the obstacles are somewhat different from those that men encounter since the social position of women is different than that of men (Brochmann 1990: 37). And in line with the behavioural approach a woman's position in her family is likely to affect both her wish to migrate and the likelihood of her decision to migrate to be accepted (Davin 1999: 121).

## **1.5 Purpose and Research Questions**

Many scholars have studied the phenomenon of migration, but only since the 1970's, scholars have made attempts to understand migration from a gender perspective. Research has shown that the circumstances around women's migration are of a more complex nature than that of men (Hoy 1997:2). It is important to analyse migration from a gender perspective in order to gain a deeper understanding of female migrants, who previously often have been analysed in the same context as male migrants (Chant & Radcliffe 1992: 19).

It has been shown that women are often disadvantaged in migration due to their already subordinate role in society. Without a proper understanding of women's situation it is difficult to eliminate old prejudices and discrimination surrounding female migration, both from a household perspective and a state policy perspective. To change this, it is important to understand the different aspects of female migration, and the purpose of this thesis is to explore the question of female labour migration by viewing migration from a social and individual perspective. And, in particular, to study why young women migrate and what impact it has had on migrant women's gender roles in terms of daughters, wives and mothers. Furthermore, the reasons behind any such changes will be investigated.

Thus, the focus of this thesis is Chinese women's gender roles and female labour migration and it will be examined by answering three different questions:

- Why do Chinese rural women migrate in order to join the urban labour force? And how are Chinese female migrant workers' gender roles as daughters, wives and mothers related to their decision to migrate?
- Does migration lead to the improved status of female migrants? And how is migrant women's social status in the city related to their gender roles?
- What are the consequences of migration on migrant women's gender roles as daughters, wives and mothers?

## 2. DEFINITIONS

### 2.1 Defining Gender Roles

Gender is a social construction, which implies that the roles people play due to gender are not biologically related to the sex of the person, but rather to the norms and social structures the person has grown up in. That is, women and men play the roles they are expected to play and they are socialised into these roles according to the prevailing ideology of how women and men 'should' act. Both women and men play different gender roles and not all are related to their biological function as fathers and mothers.

In this thesis I have chosen to use the concept of migrant women's 'gender roles' as referring to women as daughters, wives and mothers. These are all roles related to the family, whereas 'women's roles in the family' or 'domestic roles' could have been possible concepts, but to use either of these concepts would limit the definition to include only roles played within the family. In my analysis of gender roles and female labour migration, I also intend to include female migrants' social position in the society in correlation to their gender roles and hence the concept 'gender roles' was chosen.

### 2.2 Defining Migration

It is difficult to give a final definition of what migration really is, since there are so many aspects to it. There is no obvious criterion that can put one form of population movements into a certain category. Migration is often defined by distance, direction and duration, which all are measurable variables that can be quantified by statistical measurement methods. However, migration can also be defined with respect to the purpose of migration.

#### 2.2.1 Different forms of migration with respect to purpose

The motivation or purpose factor is very important in classifying migration and in this respect the voluntary or involuntary factor is most important. However, it is not easy to make the distinction between voluntary and involuntary forms of migration. Rural-urban migration might seem to be a free choice but, on closer inspection, the migrant might not have been left with very many choices but to leave the rural area. Refugees might not only move due to enforcement, but to the economical benefits movement would entail. To circumvent this contradiction, Parnwell (1993:24-25) adds a third aspect to the motivational dimension, which he calls impelled. In the impelled movement the mover "retains a modicum of power to decide whether or not to leave" (Parnwell 1993: 24), where the person who migrates has to weigh different advantages and disadvantages against each other.

Female migration can be divided into certain categories determined by the *motive or purpose* of migration. According to the United Nations (1993:108) female migration of today is often divided into three different forms: *marriage migration*, *associational migration*, and *labour migration*.

Marriage migration is the traditional form of migration, when the woman moves away from her village to marry somebody from another area. This form of migration is especially common in societies that have very strong traits of patrilineal tradition.

It has been suggested that a large part of female migration is associational migration, which implies that women themselves do not have any particular motive to migrate, rather than to follow their husband or family (UN 1993:3). However, this is a very misleading observation, since associational migration does not exclude that the woman has certain motives when she decides to accompany someone else. Furthermore, it has become increasingly common to observe female migrants who move unaccompanied by a spouse or family member.

Labour migration is often associated with male migration. Labour migration presupposes that the migrant gets involved in the production system in the receiver area and has, therefore, been classified as migration determined by economic motives. Female labour migration has attracted more attention than the other two categories of migration due to its role in economic development.

The above mentioned marriage migration is not to be confused with the form of migration that is initiated by the wish to find somebody to marry. Thadani and Todaro (1984: 46) call this *marital migration*, which could be added as a fourth category. Marital migration implies that a single woman migrates in order to find a husband. This form of female migration is quite new and most common in the rural-urban migration and has become very popular, while marriage migration is most common in a rural-rural migration context.

#### 2.2.2 Different forms of migration with respect to distance, direction and duration

The most established way of defining different forms of migration is to look at the spatial dimension, which refers to movement from one place to another. The most important elements are *distance* and *direction*.

There are long-distance movements and short-distance movements. However, there is no certain criterion that determines when a movement is considered to be short or long. One way would be to separate different administrative units, whereas movements within units would not be classified as migration, movements between closely situated administrative units would be short-distance movements and movements between far-situated units would be long-distance movements. The problem with this definition is that the sizes of units differ. Ravenstein's famous "law" concerning female migration, which refers to that women are more mobile over short distances is therefore difficult to prove, since it is a question of defining administrative units (UN 1993:94). Short-distance movements would then depend on the size that determines different administrative units. Thus, a short-distance movement in a

large country like China might be classified as a long-distant movement in a small country like Bhutan.

The notion of direction is also important in classifying different forms of migration. In the Third World most people move in the direction towards the cities, leaving the rural areas, while the direction of movements in developed countries are between cities. Another characteristics for Third World population movements are that the developed areas attract migrants from the less developed areas.

Another criterion for defining migration is the temporal dimension, or the duration of the movement. People move for different time-spans. E.g., there are people who commute to get to work, people moving far to collect fuel and water, and farmers going to the local market to get the necessities needed for every day life, while other people leave their homes for longer periods to move to other areas and seek employment. Again, the problem of defining migration is difficult, since there is no certain time limit for when a movement is considered to be migration.

Another difficulty is to classify in advance one sort of movement as short-term or long-term. The time the migrant intended to be away when leaving the place of origin might as well be prolonged or shortened depending on the circumstances in the place of destination. The duration of the movement can only be determined after the migrant has returned to their place of origin. To labour this point, the duration of the movement can only be determined after the migrant is dead, since there is always a chance that the migrant, due to different reasons, moves back during his lifetime.

Parnwell (1993: 11-28) has classified different forms of movements with respect to destination, direction and duration:

*Circulation Migration* often refers to cases where the migrant does not stay at the place of destination for all of his or her lifetime. What characterises this form of movement is that the migrant moves back to their place of origin after a long period and then moves to another place again. It is, in other words, not a one-way movement.

*Return Migration* is when the migrant, after some time in the place of destination returns to their place of origin to settle there again. The migrant does not move back to the place of destination and, in cases where he or she does, it is classified as circulation migration.

*Counter Stream Migration* refers to when people move in the opposite direction compared to other migrants. It is often referred to as 'deurbanisation', when originally urban citizens move to the rural areas. This trend is very rare in developing countries, where the migration streams goes towards a rapid urbanisation in the major cities.

*Refugees, Evacuees.* This form of movement, in contrast to the other forms of movement, is not based on a free choice. These migrants are, due to political, economical, religious or environmental circumstances, forced to leave their natal area to move somewhere else inside or outside of the country.

*Step Migration* is when the migrant moves in different stages upwards in the urban hierarchy. The first movement might head towards a small municipality town, the second towards an even larger city and the last to a major city.

*Permanent Migration, Emigration* is when the migrant has no intention of returning to the place of origin and puts a lot of effort into becoming established in the place of destination, and emigration refers to when the migrant does this in another country.

### 2.3 The Notion of Migration in this Thesis

The nature of migration in China is difficult to grasp. Who migrates, for what reason, and where to, have been questions of great concern for both foreign and Chinese demographers for the past ten years, but due to a lack of statistics and insufficient data it is impossible to estimate the features of the Chinese people who belong to the *floating population* (Hoy 1997: 2). It is also a question of definition. Tan Shen (1997: 42) makes a distinction between labour migration and migration for marriage. She argues that the floating population only refers to the people that move in order to seek employment, since the people who migrate for marriage often tend to settle very quickly, and thereby stop being 'floating'. Li Debin has a broader definition and includes all people who "travel beyond a certain limit, leave their registered permanent residence temporarily, and travel to and from their homes on a regular basis" (Li 1993: 65). He also includes those who travel to and from home on the same day and those who change trains on the way, which would also include tourists. Consequently, there are no real criteria for when a person is considered to be a migrant and depending on what criteria you use for duration, distance, direction and motives, the size of the floating population alters (Davin, 1999: 20-21).

The present paper sticks to the more narrow definition of the floating population in line with Tan Shen's definition above, and defines the floating population as those who have left their homes on a temporary basis<sup>6</sup> in order to improve their lives by joining the labour force (thus not including marriage), no matter what legal authorisation they have. That is, some have official working permits and some do not, but none of them have official resident permits (urban hukou).

The forms of migration focused on in this thesis are limited. First, the focus of this thesis will be limited to female *labour* migration. However, it is assumed in this study that labour migration, marital migration and associational migration are impossible to separate. It would for instance be possible for a woman to labour-migrate with the purpose of finding a marriage-partner under the veil of accompanying somebody to the city. Furthermore, this thesis only explores female labour migration with the direction of *rural-urban* movements. In

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<sup>6</sup> People are included in the definition of the floating population on a temporary basis, which means that they stop being floating after a while, either because they return to their homes in the countryside, or they settle down in a certain place and receive permanent residence permit (hukou). The first phenomenon is far more common than the latter, partly due to strong cultural traits, which emphasise the family and the 'old home' (laojia), but also due to political regulations, which make it extremely difficult to get a permanent residence permit.



line with Parnwell's classification, the question of 'free choice' in migration has been considered, whereas the migrants, who are subjected to this study, are called *impelled* migrants. And finally, the rural-urban female labour migrants are within the groups of *circulation migration*, *step migration* and/or *permanent migration*. However, it is difficult to determine whether it is a question of permanent migration, since the political system in China restricts people with rural hukou to change it into an urban hukou. Thus, migrants may live in the city permanently without being officially recognised as urban residents by the authorities.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This was a combined literature and empirical study. Data collection for the empirical study was carried out in Beijing in China during seven weeks in the summer of 1999.

#### 3.1 Choice of Methodology

When I first started to read about the female floating population and about female migrant workers in the Chinese cities I did not have any clear idea of how to approach the problem. At first, I considered making a quantitative survey, which would have meant that I should be able to generalise and compare different variables. Nevertheless, as my research questions developed, I realised that using a quantitative method would not be preferable in answering my questions, since my focus was rather to examine *why* women migrate and *how* it is related to their gender roles, both before and after the migration took place. I came to the conclusion that a questionnaire or a structured interview method would limit the scope of information that the respondents would give me and that it might function as a way to simplify and generalise and fail to explain the very complicated process of female migration. I thought that making semi-structured in-depth interviews would be a better way to gain an understanding of these women's experiences and attitudes.

My plan of how to conduct the study according to qualitative research methods was mainly based on two books in methodology, namely *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun* [The qualitative research interview] (Kvale 1997) and *Methods for Development Work and Research* (Mikkelsen 1995).

I decided to make twelve in-depth interviews with respondents and additional interviews with experts in the field. My choice of number of respondents was based on Kvale, who was critical about the amount of respondents used in qualitative methodology. His stance is that a larger amount of respondents does not improve the results considerably, or make them more trustworthy, rather it complicates the analysis process. That is due to the time-consuming process of transcribing and analysing each interview, which is often restricted due to the time limits for when a study is to be completed. A larger amount of interviews could therefore imply that the quality of the analysis would deteriorate (Kvale 1997: 98-99). Furthermore, the number of twelve interviews was adequate, since the relatively small number made it possible to separate the respondents and each one of them became very personal and clear to me.

However, the fact that a qualitative research method was used makes it difficult to talk about representativity. The respondents can account merely for their own experiences and thoughts and give a deeper understanding of the problem from *their* point of view. Consequently, no attempts were made to use the qualitative interviews to generalise about female migration in China; rather they were used as a means to give depth and make examples of the phenomenon of female migration, which was also examined by interviewing experts and accounting for different theories and other people's research.

To compensate for the problem of representativity it is possible to test the validity of what the respondents say by using a triangulation method (Mikkelsen 1990: 205). Using a triangulation method implies that the researcher checks the results derived from one person with other people who are expected to have knowledge about the person or about the topic that is subject to investigation. One possible way of doing this in the context of rural-urban female labour migration would be to travel to the native homes of the respondent and talk to her family or to other people who knew the person before they migrated. However, that was not possible considering the time limitation and therefore the literature and the expert interviews functioned as a means to ascertain if some of the results were significant for female labour migrants in general or not.

### 3.2 Secondary Sources

Secondary data were collected through five different means; by collecting literature, by interviewing experts<sup>7</sup>, by being an intern at the Rural Women Knowing All (RWKA)<sup>8</sup>, by attending a conference on migrant women's rights in the city, and by visiting a training campus, which is run by the RWKA. The last three means will be accounted for under the heading *alternative data collection*.

#### 3.2.1 The literature

Literature was collected in order to supplement the empirical data with over-all migration patterns and information of previous quantitative studies, just as the empirical data was to supplement the literature.

The literature that was available on migration theories in general was very comprehensive. I found numerous books that examined the phenomenon of migration from a macro-level point of view. Less literature was to be found concerning micro-level aspects of migration such as the individual's motive to migrate and migration's impact on the individual, and literature on migration from a micro-level perspective with a gender-approach was even less frequent. Much of the literature that was available on women and migration had the characteristics of theoretical considerations rather than fully developed theories. In other words there were no comprehensive theories on female migration and it seemed as if these considerations were

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<sup>7</sup> The data derived from the experts will be referred to as 'secondary sources' rather than 'primary sources' even though it was collected through interviews. The division between secondary and primary sources is based on Pål Repstad's definition: *Secondary sources*. Secondary information. Account or judgement from somebody who has not experienced what he/she tells about him/herself (Repstad 1999: 143).

<sup>8</sup> Rural Women Knowing All (RWKA) is both a monthly magazine and an NGO. They were established in 1993 under the All China Women's Federation (ACWF), where they also lent money to start their activities. RWKA is nowadays free from its dept to the ACWF and raises funding from different organisations internationally. RWKA has also set up Migrant Women's Club, which basically provides migrant women with opportunities to improve their lives by giving them a chance to educate themselves. RWKA also has a training centre outside Beijing with two weeks intensive courses for migrant women on different topics varying from how to improve agricultural skills to how to become re-employed.

based on results from a number of studies, but that too few studies had been made in order to work out a comprehensive theory on female migration. This was also the case for Chinese female migration and in particular labour migration. A significant number of studies on the floating population were found, but few focused on migrant women. The studies on migrant women mainly covered the debated issue of migrant women's fertility as well as marriage migration. I learnt that both All China Women's Federation and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences had made qualitative research on why women choose to migrate and how they perceive their situation in the city. However, no results were to be found in the literature, since they had not been published yet. Moreover, the results could only partly be shared with me through interviews with experts at respective institutes.

The literature that was used was available in the database Sociofile, in Libris, on the Internet, at Lund University, at NIAS (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen) and in Chinese manual databases. Key words in the literature search were: *demography, urbanisation, migration, gender roles, social status, fertility, marriage* and all searches were combined with *China*. Additional literature was obtained in the reference lists of the sources found through these procedures. Further literature was found through personal communication with Stephen McGurk at Ford Foundation in Beijing. The literature about migration theories and theoretical considerations about women and migration in general were found in books written by non-Chinese scholars, while female migration in a Chinese context was based both on Chinese scholars and Western sinologists. These writings were often published as articles in scientific journals.

Literature in Chinese, Swedish and English was used and the Chinese and Swedish titles were translated into English in the list of references.

### 3.2.2 Interviewing the experts

I thought it was important to interview experts in the field in order to illustrate my research questions, mainly due to their vast knowledge of the female migrants. This was on the advice of Stephen McGurk at the Ford Foundation, who implied that there were no foreign scholars that really grasped all the aspects of the complex situation of migration. Furthermore, the research reports that can be found in the Chinese libraries may not reveal all the details of female migrant's experiences, since China still is a closed country in many ways and the scholars often use some kind of self-imposed censorship. This was also underlined by one of the experts (Ding Juan).

Four Chinese experts were interviewed and they were chosen because they were regarded as most knowledgeable about the female floating population. Interviews were made with Ding Juan (F) professor at the Research Centre at the All China Women's Federation, Xie Lihua (F), chief-in-editor at the RWKA, Tan Shen (F), professor at the Department for Sociological Research at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Cai Fang, director at the Department for Population Studies at CASS.

The main topics during the interviews were about general patterns of the floating population and in particular female migrants. Topics such as rural life-styles, marriage customs and rural women's status were also discussed, as well as migrant women's lives in the city regarding their social status, dreams and hopes for marriage and motherhood, and their options to associate with other migrants and urban residents. The topics for each interview changed somewhat depending on the field of research for each expert and the experts gave their point of view according to the angle of their approach to the problems.

At some point the experts referred to surveys and investigations that their different research institute had made. In cases where the results were not officially published, these data were simply referred to as data collected through interviews. (E.g. Ding Juan, interview).

### 3.2.3 Alternative data collection

As Mikkelsen points out, *participatory methods* are useful for explorative questions, which is breaking with the traditional approach of letting the experts identify the problems. She writes "exploring problems and issues and defining the context become joint efforts between the involved parties, and a learning process for all" (Mikkelsen 1995: 84). The output of the participatory observations can be a good way of gaining information and develop questions for the in-depth interviews.

However, I did not use a participatory method in its traditional sense. Instead of participating in the collective of the female migrant workers (which would have been difficult for a foreigner researcher), I participated in the collective of the expertise that deals with female migrant workers. The term participatory observation is therefore used in a broader sense to include both female migrant workers *and* the bodies that work for/with female migrant workers to be *one* collective. In order to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of female rural-urban migration I accepted an internship at Rural Women Knowing All. I thought that working with these people would be helpful in order to come closer to the problem, since it was a good opportunity interacting with both female migrants and people who were knowledgeable about female migrants' situation. China can sometimes be a difficult place to conduct research. According to Chinese law a foreigner has to get a permit in order to conduct interviews, and even though foreign researchers often neglect this law, institutions and organisations can be reluctant to supply them with material and information because they know that they can be blamed for it afterwards. Therefore, it is very important to have contacts, or what the Chinese call *guanxi*, and that is why I thought that an internship at the RWKA would be useful. This also proved to be true, since I was introduced to people who would not have accepted me as an interviewer if I had made the initial contact myself. Aside from this, many female migrant workers visit the organisation, which offered opportunities for informal conversation with migrant workers that I would not have been able to create on my own.

My responsibilities at the RWKA were not burdensome in any sense, and amounted to two afternoons a week during five weeks, which I thought was time very well spent. My main tasks were to translate documents, give advice on how to conduct and analyse social surveys,

and to take part in the arranging a conference on women's rights in the city, which was due 17-19 July, and which I was also invited to attend.

About 25 people attended the conference, which covered sociological, legal as well as practical problems of the female migrants. During the conference I got in touch with many knowledgeable scholars in the field and I also gained access to all the papers that were presented. I was a bit restricted when using the papers of the conference in the thesis, since most of the papers were drafts that were not yet published. I have therefore not indicated the author of the paper, but merely referred to it as information derived during conference.

Apart from the work I carried out at the Rural Women Knowing All, I spent a considerable amount of time in the office, which was a great opportunity for me to get informal insight in the local work for migrant women. We often talked over a cup of tea and they told me about their own experiences. One of the staff members was a migrant worker herself and was very keen to discuss things with me. Other staff members were former university lecturers, who had committed themselves to the work of improving the lives of female migrant workers. The Rural Women Knowing All is not only functions as an NGO, but also issues a monthly magazine, and the editorial staff are inundated with letters each day, which unveil the stories of many female migrant workers.

I also took part in the activities that the RWKA arranges on a regular basis, which was not included in the two afternoons a week. At one point I travelled to a training campus that the RWKA has set up in order to educate rural women in a variety of ways that can help them improve their lives and roles as women. They have courses directed towards both rural women in the countryside and rural women in the city. On their schedule were topics such as 'how to look for employment', 'how to use modern techniques in farming' and 'gender roles in society'.

The above mentioned occasions, when I had a chance to make participatory observations, were very rewarding, since I had the opportunity to observe different physical structures, social differences, and actions and discuss all these things with various people. The participatory observation or, as Mikkelsen calls it, *direct observation* is common in anthropological research (Mikkelsen 1995: 84-85), yet I thought it was helpful as a source of inspiration in my research as well.

### **3.3 The Empirical Study**

#### **3.3.1 Selecting the respondents**

The main target group for this project was composed of female migrant workers who belong to the floating population, that is, those women who have left the countryside to travel to urban areas to seek employment. Another characteristic of these women was that they lacked permanent urban residence permits (*hukou*), and only had temporary, if any, work permits.

They were also selected according to their marital status. I wanted some to be single, some to have boyfriends, and some to be married.

Before I started to conduct the interviews I had an idea that I wanted to use the migrants' registers at the local Public Security offices in Beijing and use a *random* selection method (Mikkelsen 1995: 204). But once I came to Beijing and started to investigate the possible selection methods, I realised that it would be impossible considering the limited resources I had as well as my own position. Getting access to the migrants' registers would require both a research-visa as well as very advanced contacts within the Public Security Bureau<sup>9</sup> in Beijing, which I lacked. However, it would have been preferable to select the respondents from the existing migrants' registers, since they reveal both age, sex, and marital status. Nevertheless, it might not help in achieving a representative sample, since a large proportion of female migrant workers lack the required documents to register. In addition, many people simply do not bother to register, since registration in most cases does not give any privileges. Also, it would have been very difficult to find the respondents, since the home-addresses are often incorrect, and since a large number of people are often registered in the same household. Furthermore, it was necessary to include the *informal* migrants in the study, in order to gain a proper understanding of the social aspects of female migrant workers' lives, and these could not be found via the registers.

Accordingly, I selected the respondents from what possibilities I had, and I did so by using a *purposive* selection method (Mikkelsen 1995: 204-205). The Rural Women Knowing All was of very great help when I selected the respondents. They introduced me to people, who in turn introduced me to other people that helped me to arrange different interview occasions. In the end it was not me personally who selected these respondents, I merely stated what sex, age (18-35) and marital status of the respondents I wanted. Eight respondents were selected this way and four were selected by myself. I used my personal contacts from the time when I was studying at Peking University. I knew a few migrant women from that time and the four women who were included were those that I was able to make an appointment with during my stay.

I did not pay any special attention to time spent in Beijing, educational level nor origin, since I did not aim to compare any groups.

The respondents who were selected by me personally were quite open-minded people who were used to western students and who, therefore, had also adapted some sort of western attitudes. This was especially obvious in their outspokenness and their critical attitude towards the authorities. When I, in turn, asked them to introduce me to friends and relatives they knew, many people did not want to be interviewed. I think this was due to their insecurity in relation to foreigners and possibly also the fear of getting into trouble. I assume that this was also the case for the people at the RWKA when they asked female migrant workers to accept an interview. Thus, I believe that the people I interviewed belong to the group of outspoken and self-confident people, who are not suspicious towards foreigners, that is, people who have been in Beijing for some while and who are relatively well-educated. I think that potential

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<sup>9</sup> The Public Security Bureau is a branch of the police authorities.

respondents, who were more reserved and more “rural”, or sometimes poorer and less educated, might have declined my request to interview them. This apprehension was also confirmed after I compiled the educational level of the respondents. All but three had spent nine years in school and many of them had gone to evening courses in the city after work to study computer studies or English.

### 3.3.2 Facts about the respondents

The age of the respondents varied from 19 to 34 years and they were all from rural areas, temporarily living in Beijing. All but one were still registered in their native areas. Four of them were married and had one child each, five were single and three had boyfriends that they “might” marry in the future. All but one had a very solid experience of living as rural residents in an urban area. The one who had been living in an urban area the longest had been there for 17 years, while the others had stayed in Beijing 2-6 years. Even though I did not aim to select respondents on the basis of their native area, it turned out that I got quite a broad sample, with respondents from all over China, where the respondents from the nearby provinces Shandong and Hebei were slightly over-represented.

### 3.3.3 The Interviews

The interviews were conducted at various places; at their work, in their dormitory, outside in a park, at a cafe or in the office of the Migrant Women’s Club. It was preferable to interview people indoors to get good audio sound quality on the tape, but this was sometimes impossible, since there was no private space for the respondents to go. Also, it was much more discreet when the interviews were made in a room, since no one disturbed the conversation but, on the other hand, the interviews in the park were conducted at dusk, which means that not so many people paid attention to the interview.

When interviewing the experts and the respondents the basic idea was that the respondents possess information that the researcher was not aware of in advance. It had to be taken into account that the researcher is from the West, and lacked experience of living under these women’s conditions. Therefore, the choice of using the method of semi-structured in-depth interviews was very important.

All of the twelve respondents were interviewed on an individual basis, with only the respondent and the interviewer present. I had planned for a Chinese colleague to attend the interviews to help out with the Chinese language in case the respondent spoke poor Mandarin, but that proved to be unnecessary.

An interview guide was prepared in advance by the researcher, but the questions only functioned as a means to make the respondent speak, which means that there was no detailed predetermined plan of how the interview should proceed, or in which order the topics should be discussed. The interview guide was changed and modified during the first two weeks when three test interviews were made as well as an expert interview. After the process of



interviewing respondents started little change was made in the interview guide. Naturally, the questions were posed somewhat differently depending on the respondent. Therefore, the focus of each interview differed, but the intention was to cover all the main questions.

Each interview started with an introduction of my research project and me. I also assured each respondent that the things they told me would not be told to anybody else and that their names would be changed into unrecognisable ones. After that I asked general questions about the respondent in order to establish some sort of trustworthiness between the respondent and me. I tried, to the extent it was possible, to relate the topics to my own experiences so that the respondents would not feel that it was a one-way interrogation. The main topics regarded why they migrated, what they thought about their social structures in the village and in the city and what experiences, attitudes, and expectations they had on marriage and child-bearing (See further: interview guide, page 80).

All interviews were recorded on a tape-recorder to the extent it was possible. Three interviews were not recorded. This was because it was practically inconvenient to use a tape-recorder and then I made notes during the interview, which were copied immediately after the interview. However, the overall impression was that using a tape-recorder did not make the respondents more cautious and nervous, as Kvale warned for (1997: 120). I found that recording the interviews when possible was very convenient since the interviews proceeded much more easily and that the risk that the interviewer would interrupt the respondent by asking her to repeat the answer would be reduced. However, sometimes I had to interrupt the respondent, since I at some points missed what they were saying. This was due to my language proficiency, which of course is limited in some sense, but I still think that the negative consequences of that are smaller than the use of an interpreter would have been.

### 3.3.4 Ethical considerations

Sometimes I found it difficult to pose certain questions concerning their social position and attitudes towards marriage and their hopes for the future. And sometimes I was afraid that I would ruin their dreams or make them realise that their dreams were hard to fulfil. For example, I asked some of the respondents whether they thought that they were subject to any discrimination in their own family compared to their brothers, which may have been a question that they had never thought of before, but started to think more about after the interview was made. Also, I felt that I asked them about things that they had only thought about themselves and never dared to share with anyone, such as their hopes to stay in the city and marry somebody from Beijing. Those were all very sensitive questions, both since they all felt very strong obligations to return to the village and stay with their parents, and since it is a very far-fetched dream considering their social position. That is, it may be only dreams, and therefore embarrassing to share with somebody else. However, the fact that they told their dreams to a foreigner may not have contributed to the embarrassment, since it may be easier to share one's dreams and inner feelings with someone who is a complete stranger. I did not, at any point, feel that the respondents were suspicious towards me because I was a foreigner. Rather I felt trust, or as one of the respondents expressed, "there were reasons to trust me

considering the circumstances I had come to them”. However, some of them may have felt a bit overwhelmed to talk to me, since some of them had never spoken to a foreigner before.

### 3.4 Inter-subjectivity

An important problem in interpreting and analysing a certain phenomenon is the question of objectivity. Is there an objective truth or are there many truths? In contrast to a positivistic approach, which claims that there is an explanation to everything, the main attitude in this thesis is that there are things that cannot be explained and that *truth* has to be modified depending on the context it refers to. For example, female migration is interpreted in various ways, depending from whose perspective it is approached. The policy maker is likely to have one view compared to the rural migrant who, in turn, is likely to apprehend migration differently from the city dwellers or the scholars who study migration from various perspectives. Especially in qualitative research it is very difficult to determine what objectivity really is. The person that identifies and tells about a phenomenon does this from her personal apprehensions, which are coloured by her own experiences, and so does the person who receives and interprets the information. However, it is not a question of subjectivity either - “it is not an objective neither a subjective method” as Kvale puts it (1997: 66). Rather it is a question of inter-subjectivity, which implies that it is important to have in mind the notion of biases and that the validity of the results can only be reached by criticising them according to the context they figure in. There is no real solution to the question of objectivity. One can only be aware that the core of the interview is the inter-subjective interaction between the respondent and the interviewer (Kvale 1997: 66). Mikkelsen’s advice is [to] “lay open your values and your methodology may be a better principle than to aim for unobtainable objectivity” (Mikkelsen 1995: 207).

Language differences are a source to bias in research (Mikkelsen 1995: 107). Some people argue that the language creates reality and every language creates its own reality (Kvale 1997:46). As a foreigner in China this would imply that there is a great risk that a word is interpreted differently and thereby leads to misinterpretation. However, different languages are not only dependent on which country the person comes from, but also what social class, age, sex and educational background the person comes from. For example, a woman brought up in the rural areas in China may not consider herself as being subject to gender inequity, while a woman at the university may feel discriminated, even though the university is a much more gender equal place than a rural village. I believe that misinterpretation due to language differences in terms of mother tongue is of less concern than the language differences due to social and cultural settings. However, this will be taken into account when the results are presented and will also be a part of the analysis.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

During the interviews, with both experts and respondents, I saw new patterns emerging and new angles of approach. Therefore, I switched between making participatory observation, interviewing experts and respondents. This is defined as *chains of interviews* by Mikkelsen (1995: 75) and I found it very useful, since it was a way to improve my questions and derive as much as possible from the interviews. I could thereby ask the other respondents and experts about the new aspects that were introduced to me.

Both the interviews with respondents and experts were transcribed. The expert interviews were not transcribed word by word, but were rather summarised into coherent text. The interviews with the respondents were however transcribed word by word and I tried, to the full extent of my capabilities, to indicate their state of mind by using (...) for pause and by writing (laughter) (reluctant) or (embarrassed) when needed. Some of the transcription work was made in China, particularly the expert-interviews, while the largest part of the respondent interviews was transcribed in Sweden. The time of transcribing one hour of interviews took between six or eight hours, since they were in Chinese and I translated them into English before I transcribed them. Sometimes the sound quality was poor and in case I did not hear what they said I got help from Mrs. Yan at the Asia Centre in Lund.

The next stage in the analysis process was to interpret what the respondents had said. One problem when studying female migration is that many studies, like this one, are conducted after migration has taken place, which means that there is a certain degree of rationality that may change the respondents' view of a certain phenomenon (UN 1993: 3). For example, when the respondents were asked how they believed they had been affected by migration, and how they thought their attitudes had changed, it has to be taken into account that the time in Beijing might have changed them to the extent that they may not be able to account for how they were thinking before they left the village. This is also a fact in terms of their motivation to migrate, which was also pointed out by many of the respondents. That is, their motivation to migrate at the time they left the village might not be the same as the perceived motivation for that move today. This was taken into account when the results were presented.

I analysed the interviews by first selecting the parts that were relevant and then by categorising these parts into main topics. Then certain patterns were searched for, which were subsequently divided into main themes.

These themes will be used as core phenomena from which the expert interviews and the literature will be analysed. The results from the interviews with the respondents and the experts and the literature will constitute three tracks that will be presented in parallel with the results section.

### 3.6 Introducing the Respondents

In order to give some sort of substance to the characteristics of the interview persons they will all be briefly introduced here. In order to make a distinction between the respondents they have been categorised according to civil status, where single, boyfriend and married are the three categories. However, the results will not be presented according to these categories. The interview persons will be referred to as 'ip' and their number in the result section below (example: ip 2). (The results section can be read without this background information.)

#### *The single respondents*

**1. Yi Jialing** is a 25-year-old girl from the Hebei province. She has been in Beijing for four and a half years, working as a cleaner. She is the middle child in a family with an older brother and a younger sister. After she finished junior middle school she worked in a factory in her native village, which went bankrupt. Yi Jialing is single at the moment, but was previously, on the initiative of her father, engaged to a boy in her native village, but she declined the engagement offer and went to Beijing.

Yi Jialing gives the impression of being a very careful person, who plans everything and who arranges things. She works in the hospital, cleaning the doctors' tools and she is the favourite of the person who is in charge of the migrant workers, which means that she enjoys certain confidence, and gets small assignments, such as introducing me to other female migrant workers. She has also been placed in a room with only four people so that she will get some peace and quietness when she wants to study. She is very aware of her own social position and seems to have adapted to her situation. She seems a bit old-fashioned, and she is extremely polite and receives me as a guest and almost refuses to accept my gift to her. Furthermore, she is very well dressed and looks very pretty and fashionable just like any other girl from Beijing. She invites me back and every time I meet Yi Jialing after that it is a very pleasant experience.

**2. Er Xiumei** is 29 years old and comes from Shandong province. She was unemployed after she had finished junior middle school and accepted the opportunity presented when people from Beijing came to a place nearby her village and offered people the chance to go to Beijing and work. She has worked with providing meals for the patients in the hospital ever since she arrived. She has no boyfriend, and never has had one, nor is she planning to get one. She has little contact with the outside world and has not really thought about marriage. Er Xiumei says that marriage is something that she has to do sooner or later, but that she does not want to do now.

Er Xiumei looks much more 'rural' than Yi Jialing, with a short haircut and casual clothes. She says she is quite introverted, but seems quite talkative when I interview her, even though she seems a bit shy and less go-ahead spirited.

**3. San Xiangfen** is the youngest one in her working place. She is just 19 years of age and has been in Beijing for almost a year, working with disinfecting tools in a hospital. She went to school for nine years and was then offered a job in a factory, but declined it. She rather wanted to go to Beijing. Her mother is originally from Beijing, and she has lots of relatives here, which facilitated her wish to go to Beijing.

San Xiangfen seems very young from her behaviour, even younger than the 19 years. She is very shy and finds it hard to express what she thinks. She is one of those girls that you would guess is from the countryside, not because of her looks, but because of her insecurity.

**4. Qi Wenwen** is a 22-year-old migrant worker from Henan province. She has been in Beijing for two and a half years and has worked as a nanny in a family, where she also lives, ever since then. She is the youngest out of six sisters and brothers. She finished junior middle school and wanted to continue in high school, but her parents could not afford to pay the tuition fees, since her elder brother was going to get married the same year. She has no boyfriend. Qi Wenwen is a member of the Migrant Women's Club.

Qi Wenwen is very ambitious and sees her work as a nanny as an opportunity to combine work with studies. She is very well informed about the societal problems that also affect her, but she seems confident that the awareness will help her progress. She is very eager to speak, but seems at the same time to be very humble and cautious.

**5. Ba Liduo** is 21 year old and comes from Shandong province. She, just like Qi Wenwen, was very eager to go on to high school, but was restricted due to her family's economic situation. Her brother was going to start junior middle school the same year, however, her parents couldn't afford to pay for another tuition fee. Ba Liduo is the oldest of five children in her family, and is also a member of the Migrant Women's Club, and works as a maid in an old woman's house, where she also lives.

Ba Liduo has the voice of a little girl, but is very pleasant to interview because she doesn't hesitate in what she says and she has thought things over carefully, a quality that she thinks she has acquired since she came to Beijing. She also looks a bit girlish with long hair and pretty clothes, but it is apparent that she is quite mature in her mind.

#### *The respondents who had boyfriends*

**6. Si Yanjuan** is 23 years old and comes from the Northeast province Heilongjiang. She went to school for nine years. Then she went to a state-run school that educated people for serviceable purposes for two years, but due to the great changes in the society during the past few years, there were no jobs to be found in her profession after she graduated. She has been in Beijing for one and a half years and works as a cleaner and shares a small room with eleven other girls. She has found herself a boyfriend from Beijing, whom she will marry soon.

Si Yanjuan is a very out-spoken person and is the respondent that is most critical of her own situation. She underlines the notion of independence over and over again and is, sometimes, aggressive towards anything that would restrict her and make her less independent. She also often uses the word 'trust' and says that she does not trust anybody but herself.

**7. Yao Rui** is 20 years old and comes from Hebei province just like Yi Jialing, San Xiangfen, and Shi Pingfen. She is the respondent who came to Beijing the youngest. She came at the age of 14 after she had finished six years at school. She has had various jobs in Beijing and now works in a canteen in a work-unit, where her boyfriend also works. She lives in a dorm with five other girls. Yao Rui is one of the respondents whom I had known previously.

Yao Rui, just like Si Yanjuan, is a very out-spoken young girl and doesn't hesitate to say what she thinks. She has changed a lot since the last time saw her, but is still very down-to-earth and very natural. When I first got to know her she was working as a dish-washer, but now she has advanced to selling the dishes. She used to have short hair, but now she has let her hair grow and wears jewellery.

**8. Wang Xiaotao**, just like Yao Rui, is 20 years old but comes from a very distant province – Gansu. She has been in Beijing for two years and works in the reception of a big dining-hall, which is her second job in Beijing. She is the youngest child in her family and has an elder sister who also works in Beijing. Wang Xiaotao is the only respondent who does not have any older or younger brothers. She has a boyfriend that she met in Beijing, but he is now working in Shenzhen, which is thousands of kilometres away.

Wang Xiaotao is a bit shy and reluctant when she speaks and does not further develop what she starts to say. However, she is more prone to speak the more I talk to her. She looks like any other ordinary Chinese girl.

#### *The married respondents*

**9. Wu Jianjun** is the one who has been away from her home village the longest. She has lived away from her village in Jiangsu province for 17 of her 34 years of age. She has had various jobs from maid to cook to salesperson, and has also tried her fortune in different cities of the country. She is also the only respondent who, thanks to good fortune and good will, has managed to take a degree from a self-funded university. At the moment she is working as a staff-member at the Migrant Women's Club and she is married to a man from Beijing and they have a small child. She lives in a very modern apartment in a newly built house, which belongs to her husband's working unit.

Wu Jianjun is very aware of her own situation and the inequalities in society and she likes to talk about it. Despite her marriage to a man from Beijing and a nice job she feels that she has not been accepted as an urban resident, something that continues through the whole interview.

She is still a bit 'rural' in her appearance, not in an insecure way, but it is still reflected in her openness and down-to-earth approach. And she laughs a lot, especially at her own misfortunes in the past.

**10. Liu Yaohua** is 29 years old and has been in Beijing for three years. She got together with her husband from Anhui province and together they set up a small restaurant outside one of the gates of a university. She and her husband have been accompanied by other relatives all of the time, but they are the only ones who have stayed the entire length of time. The relatives have moved back to the home village in order to get married and have been replaced by others. Before they used to share a box-like shed, which was repaired with cardboard, but now they can afford to rent a room in an old-fashioned courtyard. She went home to her native village for a couple of months when she had her child. The boy now lives with his grandparents in Anhui and they meet only once a year. Liu Yaohua has only gone to school for six years and has a very poor family; in fact she is the poorest one among the respondents.

Liu Yaohua is one of the migrants that I know personally. She has always been a bit dissociate towards me, but has become more and more friendly during the years. And this time when we meet she is very open-hearted and also a bit curious about me. She has also changed in the way she looks. When I first met her she had long hair and long trousers even in the middle of the summer, but this time she has cut her hair short and wears shorts and sandals just like any other young woman in Beijing.

**11. Jiu Cuixiang** is 26 years old and has been in Beijing on and off over the years. She is originally from Shandong province but met another migrant worker from Wuhan in Beijing and married him. Just like Er Xiumei she was recruited by the local authorities in her native village to go to Beijing. She works as a cleaner and is lucky enough to be able to live for free in a relative's flat. She has a young child.

Jiu Cuixiang, like so many other migrant workers, is an ordinary young woman that you can hardly tell is from a rural or urban area. However, she is wearing her working clothes when I meet her, but you can tell by her hairstyle and make-up that she is a modern woman. She is not shy, but seems a bit overwhelmed that I'm a foreigner, and seems a bit more submissive than the other married women.

**12. Shi Pingfen** is 27 years old and comes from Hebei province. She had previously tried to work as a temporarily employed worker in a nearby city at the age of 17, but did not like it. She is the youngest of four children. She came to Beijing eight years ago, and then she started to date a boy from her own village and later on they got married. She returned to her village for a while when she had her child. The child was left in her parents-in-law's house, but was recently sent to Beijing. Shi Pingfen and her husband rent a small room and a small hut where they can cook.

Shi Pingfen is a very kind person who laughs easily. Strangely enough she speaks Mandarin with an accent, even though she comes from a nearby province of Beijing, which can be

explained by the fact that her husband is from the same village. She seems to have fewer expectations for the future than the unmarried respondents, which may be explained by her financial situation, which is quite bad.



## 4. CHINESE WOMEN AND LABOUR MIGRATION

Chapters four, five, and six will be devoted to the presentation of the results from the field study. The results will mainly be based on the respondents and the experts, and the literature will be brought up as references when relevant. In order to answer the questions of why rural women migrate and how their decisions to migrate are related to their gender roles, chapter four will begin with a description of what rural women's gender roles as daughters and potential wives and mothers can be like. Then a general overview of obstacles and facilitators in female rural-urban labour migration will follow, since that is important in understanding why female labour migration may or may not take place.

### 4.1 Rural Women's Gender Roles

#### 4.1.1 Growing up as a daughter in the rural areas

According to the Chinese customs, the eldest son in the family takes over the responsibility for the clan and cares for his parents. The daughters will be married off to the care of her husband's family, which becomes her new home and she will help her husband take responsibility for his clan and care for his parents. To further this point, it would be more important that the son is healthy and well educated and, above all, more important to have a son. The ideology of esteeming sons in the Chinese families is called *zhongnan qingnu*<sup>10</sup> and is still leavening the Chinese rural families, which to a large extent are constructed in a traditional way. If the options are limited, the family will direct their resources towards the son, since any improvement of the son's qualities will benefit the family directly. For example, if the son goes to school, his educational level and thereby social status will improve, and that will have a direct impact on the family. This was also expressed by the respondents, one of whom said:

"If a boy and a girl go to school and the boy continues to university, then it is good for the family, but if a girl goes to university it is a waste, since she will marry a man in the end anyway and move out" (ip 4).

According to Tan Shen, Chinese rural daughters are part of this context as soon as they are born and they know that the sons in their families are more important than they are (Tan Shen, interview).

Even today the notion of regarding men as superior to women is common in the rural areas. All respondents agreed that it is much better these days, but still the ideology shines through. However, only one respondent saw a correlation between her inferior role as being a daughter and the fact that she chose to migrate.

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<sup>10</sup> Son preference is a huge problem in the Chinese rural society today. One of the most striking outcome of this ideology is that the ratio between women and men is increasing. Some families spend less money on food and medical treatment on female infants, which leads to increase in infant mortality for female infants. For a deeper discussion see Zhu, Bo and Li (1998: 10-17).

“The notion of regarding men as superior to women was partly the reason why I migrated, I’m the only daughter and when I was young I very seldom got anything. I felt that my parents were partial and favoured my brothers. (...) My mother was taking care of my older brother all the time and then she was caring for my younger brother too, because he was so young. But their one and only daughter they didn’t pay much attention to. Sometimes when there was tasty food in the house they left all the good food for my brothers. Sometimes I was very upset by this” (ip 7).

Investigations made by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences show that it is very clear that families in all rural areas hold sons higher and do not pay as much attention to the daughters (Tan Shen, interview). Some evidence of this is that rural families in general want to have a son. Several respondents in this study said that if their parents gave birth to a daughter they would continue to have children until they got a son. However, the respondents thought that the ideology of men as superior to women stopped there and nobody, except for the respondent who was cited above, expressed that they were subject to any further discrimination while they were growing up.

“If you look at our family with four daughters and one son, and the son being the youngest one, everybody would say that we have zhongnan qingnu (men superior to women) (...) when they decided to have children they had the concept of zhongnan qingnu in mind. They wanted to have a son, but after that they haven’t practised it. And they have never loved him more” (ip 5).

#### 4.1.2 Prospects for rural women as wives and mothers

It is argued that the patrilocal, exogamous nature of most Chinese rural marriages still reinforces the authority and superiority of the husband (Jacka 1997: 61). One indicator of the deterioration of women’s status is that bride prices and dowry have become common practice<sup>11</sup> and also increasingly expensive. Apart from the bride price, the husband’s family also has to build a new house for the couple and arrange a wedding feast. Investigations have shown that peasant families save money for five to six years and borrow money from relatives and friends in order to be able to get one son married. The expensive bride prices have contributed to the notion of women as commodities and the increasingly big bride market, where young women are taken away from their homes and sold as wives, has demonstrated this (Jacka 1997: 62). One respondent, who married another migrant worker in the city, told that she opposed that her husband’s family would pay a bride price for her. She did not know exactly why she did this, but she had a general feeling that bride prices belonged to the past, and she thought it was very tradition-bound and conservative and, hence, she wanted to be treated like a modern woman. She tried to convince her father that he should refuse to accept the bride price, but since the husband’s family was unknown for her parents, they could not refuse, due to courtesy. The bride price became a symbolic ritual between both families, without the participation of the two spouses, and it has shown to be impossible to change the old traditions.

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<sup>11</sup> Bride price and dowry were prohibited after the revolution in 1949. However, it has become increasingly common during the 1980s and 1990s, since the authoritarian rule in the countryside care less and less about the family traditions. The occurrence of bride price and dowry is exclusive for the rural areas and they are abolished in the urban areas. After the return of bride price and dowry the dowry has remained low, while the bride price has increased dramatically.

One potential risk with bride prices is that women are expected to act according to their family-in-laws' wishes, since they actually paid for her. This can, for example, be seen when looking to the extent in which family members can decide over a woman's timing, number, as well as the sex of children.

#### 4.1.3 The gender division of labour

Another aspect associated with the gender roles in rural areas, is in which sectors women can be active. Different parts of China show different patterns of division of labour between women and men, but there seem to be common traits. Many of the respondents told of how their families possessed land that needed less labour than their families provided, and that one reason why they migrated was that there was no need for their labour in their village. Other investigations have shown that the re-adoption of market-oriented means of production has also led to the re-adopting of old patriarchal hierarchies. According to an investigation made in northern China, the majority of women were occupied in farming, and for those who stated that domestic work was their major occupation, farming was placed second. Ninety-two percent of the women were occupied in farming or housework, while only 20 percent of the men were occupied in farming. Men were more often involved in enterprises and construction work and, in cases of labour surplus, women were often the ones who were withdrawn from the production process first (Zhang Weiguo 1998: 193, 209-210). Therefore, women can, in many cases, only choose between working in the household or in the fields.

Considering these circumstances, one is justified in asking what would have happened to the respondents if they had not migrated. Considering the land scarcity, the solution for labour intensive families may be to try to arrange for their daughters to marry at as early a stage as possible so that they do not need to take responsibility for their well-being. As the husband's family may have the same problem with labour surplus, there is a risk that the women are excluded from the agricultural work and left with domestic work.

## 4.2 Obstacles and Facilitators in Female Labour Migration

There are a number of gender-related obstacles and facilitators in female labour migration and they need to be addressed as one aspect in understanding female migration.

One gender-related obstacle to migration is the traditional view of women. Women are considered to be more vulnerable and, thus, less capable to deal with the outside world and are in need of protection by their family. When telling her parents that she wanted to migrate one respondent recollected:

"They didn't agree at all. Their first concern was that it wasn't safe, and the second was that going to the city working as a maid was not prestigious in their eyes" (ip 9).

The concern about prestige is in line with the negative attitudes towards female migration that were accounted for in the introduction. This view implies that migration may contribute to female migrants being affected by urban life in a negative way. This may be a threat towards her traditional position in the family, which demands that the young women retain their role in the household. According to Davin, this view is related to the family's wish to preserve the young women's virginity and thereby her marriageability. Furthermore, the family may be reluctant to allow the daughter to migrate since that would probably break down the barriers for other family or village members to migrate (Davin 1999: 122).

The traditional view of women is most often functioning as an obstacle in female labour migration, but it can also function as a facilitator. The reasons for this are mainly the traditional patterns of marriage, where daughters are married off to another family where they are accepted as family members. The view of women as out-movers, irrespective of whether they migrate, may lead to the parents adopting an attitude of 'they might as well go and work in the city for a while, since they are going to move out sooner or later anyhow'. In the Chinese society it has been suggested that women are mobile to a larger extent than men due to this very attitude. Furthermore, any economic contribution to the family from daughters is welcomed, since daughters normally do not contribute with money to their families, since they get married off early (Strauch 1984: 65, 72-74). It has been suggested that some families even send off the younger daughters because they are not needed in the family, since the agricultural work and other job opportunities in the rural areas are limited (Lim 1993: 214). This has, for example, been shown in Anhui province where daughters were sent off to work as maids in the city (Davin 1999: 76). The families preferred to send a daughter instead of a son, since daughters were more likely to acquiesce to the authority of the head of the family. Daughters were also seen to be more obedient and less apt to spend money on themselves than sons were (Rodenburg 1993: 274).

Another important obstacle to migration is the lack of information. Without knowledge of a certain area it is very difficult to move there and to find a job (Davin 1999: 73). In the literature it is generally assumed that women are more dependent on social networks in the destination area than men are. If the female migrant has relatives or acquaintances in the city it might function as a motivation and pull factor for her to move, since that would bring more security to her vulnerable social position (UN 1993: 27, 108). Therefore, it is very important to have a social network in the area of destination that can help in providing contacts for jobs and housing. Relatives or people from the village, who have already moved to the city, often constitute social networks. Only one respondent spoke of how she came to Beijing completely without any social contacts, and she arrived accompanied by her husband. However, their purpose was not to look for temporary jobs, but to set up a small restaurant, which meant that they did not have to depend on job offers from others. All the other respondents were dependent on some sort of social network in the city, and the most remote acquaintance could be extremely useful when looking for jobs.

"There was another girl in my village who knew somebody that had left for the city to work as a maid and I wrote a letter to her, telling her that I also wanted to find a job as a maid in the city, and if she could help me. And then she answered me and said that she could" (ip 9).

There was an exception to the social network pattern, and that was the migrants who had migrated with the help of temporary job centres in the countryside. The job centre provided contacts with work units in the city for potential migrants who lacked a personal social network. After the construction boom and the growth of the service sector, migrant workers became an indispensable part of Beijing. As early as 1982, local women's federations set up agencies to recruit rural women to go to the cities and work, mainly as maids (*baomu*) and shortly after unofficial agents also popped up. The official agencies under the women's federations are important links between the migrant and the employer, since contracts, registration, and possible conflicts can be handled by the agency, for a small fee from both the migrant and the employer (Solinger 1998: 27-28). However, not all local branches of the All China's Women's Federation arrange this kind of semi-official migration, and these organisations seem to concentrate on the areas that are fairly well developed, since that is where fairly well-educated potential migrants are most likely to be found. Unofficial agencies may, on the contrary, force peasants to accept inferior work and poor living conditions or make them work without contracts. Some of the respondents migrated with the help of these organisations, and claimed that they would not have been able to migrate if the organisation had not been there to facilitate for them. In one case the local branch of All China's Women's Federation arranged a meeting for recruitment in a small township, where women from the nearby villages were invited and the respondent was offered a job in Beijing.

Another factor that makes women more or less migratory seems to be the size of the family. The old Chinese saying *duozi duofu* (the more children, the happier) has been challenged by the modern family planning policies, but still the people who are in their twenties come from families that are relatively large, which facilitates migration. Some respondents pointed to this fact:

"My sister has to take care of my parents. She can't go out [migrate], because somebody has to take care of them. If I was the only child I wouldn't have been able to go to Beijing" (ip 1).

"I have an older sister and one older brother who can help my parents to cultivate the land, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to leave" (ip 2).

#### **4.3 Who Migrate?**

Given the facilitators and obstacles that surround female labour migration, as well as the setting in which the gender roles are developed, some women choose to stay in the countryside and some choose to migrate, even though the migrants and non-migrants are exposed to similar socio-economic conditions. In order to understand why female migration is taking place it is important to ascertain which women migrate.

In China, as in other parts of the world, the typical migrant is young. The *young age* is possibly due to the fact that young people are less likely to be tied down by family responsibility and thus, more prone to migrate. Furthermore, young people are more adaptable than older people since they are often more educated and know more about the outside world (Davin 1999: 31). The greatest proportion of migrants is between 18 and 25 and, generally

speaking, women migrate at an earlier stage than men do. According to Mallée, 70 - 80 percent of all migrants in China are under 30 years of age. The number of rural women in the urban labour force declines significantly after their mid-twenties. In 1995, 83 percent of all female migrants were under 30, while the proportion of men under 30 was only 55 percent (Mallée 1995-6: 117).

*Level of education* and mobility are strongly connected to each other. Even very basic education seems to increase the mobility of a person and his/her aspirations (Davin 1998: 32). In China, the majority of rural migrants have at least junior middle school education and, in general, the proportion of migrants who had completed this level was higher than in their place of origin (Mallée 1995-6: 118). In Shanghai it was found that 66.4 percent of migrants had gone to junior middle high school or above, while the average in China was only 37.12 percent (Zhang Kangqing 1998: 86). The respondents were aware of this too:

“At that time it was like those who hadn’t gone to school were very different from those who had. Those who were not educated were looking for a suitable partner and would live as their parents had. But I was different” (ip 11).

It is common to view migrants as poor peasants, and truly they are poor in urban terms, but relatively speaking they are not the poorest people in the countryside. Many scholars have found that the poorest people do not migrate (Skeldon 1997: 154, Davin 1999: 76). There seems to be a *threshold of welfare* that you have to exceed in order to be migratory - only when the family has reached a certain level of welfare is migration considered to be a way to improve the individual’s and/or the family’s conditions (Tan Shen, Ding Juan, Xie Lihua, interviews). This was also true for the respondents. Whereas none of them stated that they were starving before they migrated, only one stated that her family was completely without money when she decided to move. The reason is that poor households simply can not afford the travelling expenses and other investments that are required in order to send off a family member to work in another area. Another explanation as to why women from the poorest families do not migrate might be that poor families tend to have more fundamental patterns of patriarchal structures, which restrict women from working inside the household (Cai Fang, interview).

*Civil status* is another aspect often looked at, in understanding which people migrate. The typical migrant in the developing countries is unmarried, which is especially true for women (UN 1993: 6, 22, 25). However, this observation is not always correct, since the women who migrate at an older age often tend to migrate due to marriage or as already married, and thereby tend to be less active in the labour force. Therefore, little attention is paid to these women, since they are economically inactive. However, in terms of female labour migration the typical worker is both young and unmarried.

Although difficult to prove, it has been suggested that the personality of a person plays a certain role in migration. Inquiries made in Taiwan have shown that the migrant women tended to be more out-spoken than the non-migrants in the capital Taipei (Rodenburg 1993: 284). Xie Lihua, who argues that personality factors partly determine whether an individual becomes a migrant or not, has made similar observations. She claims that female migrants are intelligent, outgoing, self-confident, purposeful, brave and hardworking, and she even goes so

far as to claim that women who migrate are often very beautiful and well esteemed in their native villages (Xie Lihua, interview).

#### **4.4 Why Do Rural Women Labour Migrate?**

As accounted for in the introduction of this thesis, previous migration theories have more or less equalised labour migration with economic motives for migration. In the Chinese migration context this assumption has also been adopted to a large extent and it seems unreasonable to contradict that money is a very important asset. Xie Lihua, for instance, claimed that 80-90 percent of migrant women move due to economical reasons (Xie Lihua, interview). However, as Tan Shen among others has pointed out, economical motives may not be purely economic, and when looked deeper into, it may be shown that other factors lie behind the economic factors. According to a survey made by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), both women and men were asked about their motive for migration and they could choose between two broad answers. One answer was that earning money was the main motive and the other answer concerned chances of developing oneself. There was a great difference between women and men, where men to a larger extent stated economic reasons as their main motivation and women development reasons, such as “looking for opportunities that could change their future road” (Cai Fang, interview). One respondent expressed this as well:

“I think that many female migrants seem to move in order to develop themselves, and that money is not so important, but that men often move in order to earn money and then they return to the village to get married and build a house” (ip 5).

In contrary to the prevailing understanding of migration, but in accordance with Cai Fang, very few of the respondents stated that economic motives were the main reason for migration. Instead, usual answers were to develop oneself, to get the opportunity to educate oneself, to become independent, that is, to see ‘the real world’ and broaden one’s views.

##### **4.4.1 Individual motives for migration**

The motive for migration must not always be very clear in the beginning. As Tan Shen points out, “They have just heard that it is great outside, and migrate without having any clear goals. The goals appear after some time and keep changing all the time. In the beginning they may think that they want to earn loads of money and some may think that they want to stay in the city, but once they have migrated they realise that it is not that simple” (Tan Shen, interview).

This was also expressed by the respondents: “When I first came I thought that I wanted to earn some money according to my ability but then I thought that I wanted to be in the city to study some skill in order to improve the chances for my future” (ip 11).

One respondent, who migrated already in the 1980’s, said that she had not heard anything about life in the city before she migrated:

“I left because life in my home was quite hard and poor. In the rural areas, there was really nothing else to do but to cultivate the land, and therefore I wanted to leave. At that time I didn’t know what I wanted to achieve. I just wanted to leave. I didn’t want to be left in the countryside” (ip 9).

Her wish to migrate was also strengthened by a general feeling of injustice towards rural people, which shows that she still had some sort of feeling that the city was better than her home village. She said: “People from rural areas are disadvantaged. The government is not fair to us rural people. Towards the urban people they are too good and towards the rural people they are not good enough!” (ip 9).

Rural women can also feel as if they have no other option than to migrate, even though they do not have any clear purpose in migration except for making living easier for their families. Many large families cannot support all their children and some of the respondents had to take up a job in another area, see to their own survival and, if possible, contribute with money to the family members who are left in the countryside.

“At that time [of migration] I was very young. I was thinking that I wanted to go to the city and earn some money and then go back and give it to my parents so that I could make living easier for them” (ip 7).

Another respondent told that she migrated against her will. She had no other choice, since there were no jobs in her home village and the land her family possessed was too small to feed all the members of the family. Also, her family was poor, since they had to pay for her elder brother’s tuition fees (ip 6).

Thus, some respondents were more focused on finding a job and earning money. The countryside is strongly connected to limited job opportunities and many rural areas can only offer jobs within the household, mainly cultivating the land. However, some rural areas still have TVE:s<sup>12</sup> that are running, and even though a job in one of these industries may be better paid than a temporary job in the urban areas, the city is more attractive due to its varied and plentiful supply of restaurants, cinemas, amusement parks, and tourist sights. One respondent, who was actually able to find a job in her home village, better paid, but also harder than her present temporary job, told:

“I wanted to move away from my home village. My father and the others said that I shouldn’t move, and that it would be much better if I just found myself a job in the village. I said that I wanted to go away so that I could see what it was like. In the village you can’t see anything, nor experience or gain understanding of anything” (ip 3).

Apart from finding a job many respondents were attracted to Beijing due to its glamour, flashing lights and cultural activities. Several of the respondents that were interviewed thought that their home villages were dull and that the old way of living was uninteresting and boring:

“The rural areas belong to the feudal and conservative ways of living; it is still a feudal society. But

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<sup>12</sup> The Town and Village Enterprises refers to the light industries in the rural areas that accounted for the up swing of the industrial sector in the countryside during the early years of reform. These days many of them are closed down, but some industries, like the textile industries, are still profitable.



the city is a place where you can catch sight of everything. Everything is so colourful and glamorous, but in the countryside there is nothing and in the evening it is very dark and you can't see anything. Here there are coloured lanterns everywhere, and it is really not the same" (ip 7).

Another main motive for migration was access to education that is, by far, in more abundant supply in the urban areas than any rural area. One situation that was common to several of the respondents was that they wanted to go to school, but were deprived of the opportunity for further schooling due to the economic situation in their families, which had to afford schooling for all sisters and brothers in the family. After finishing school in the rural areas there are few opportunities for further education, and when there are courses, the level of education is low and the topics to be studied are related to the traditional life of farming, which is of little interest for most young women. One respondent told when asked about why she migrated:

"In spite of that you don't earn much money, it is good if you want to come out and see the world and get experience. I think that the amount of money is less important. I want to get experience and study a little bit. If I compare Beijing with my home village you can work at both places, but only in Beijing can you combine it with extra studies" (ip 3).

Beijing has loads of opportunities for further education that can be combined with work. There is a vast supply of evening courses in language, accounting and computer. However, none of them are free and those respondents who thought they could spend money on evening courses had to give up large sums of their salaries.

The desire to get a job was, in most cases, the first motive and the motives described above may develop after some time in the city. Above all, getting a job is a prerequisite in order to be able to fulfil the goal of education and to be able to take part in the cultural activities that the city offers. One respondent, who said that education was one reason why she moved to the city in the first place, told of how money was very important in order to obtain the purpose of education and to pay the tuition fees to the evening courses.

"My purpose is to earn some money and at the same time study something. And if you want to earn more money you need education. Without education you won't get anywhere" (ip 3).

Thus, there was an inter-dependant relationship between the desire to educate oneself and the wish to get a better job.

An additional factor, to some respondents' migration motives, was the notion of independence: "My family didn't lack food or clothes, so my father didn't want me to leave and work outside too early, but I had a very strong desire to become independent. So I really wanted to work outside" (ip 4).

The respondents stated that they wanted to become independent individuals, and be able to live their own lives without support and supervision from their families. Independence in the sense of living apart from your family, earning your own money, and retaining the control over that money, is practically non-existent in the rural areas. Rural lives imply that you are a member of a household, either the biological family or the husband's (Tan Shen, interview).

According to data from All China's Women's Federation about migrant women from Sichuan province, one reason for women to migrate was that they did not want to become the housewives left behind, while the men migrated to the cities and became experienced. The women thought:

"...that [it] would be considered to be a failure for the marriage (if they stayed and their husbands migrated). [They were] afraid that the man would come back after a few years and have gone through a change and not like the wife anymore, and that the men would become more liberal and experienced, while the women remained the same, which would lead to difficulties in communication. Therefore, the women were also aware and thought that they should go outside and gain experience" (Ding Juan, interview).

There was a great difference in the way the respondents wished to live, compared to their parents, and several of the respondents said that they did not want to become like their mothers. One respondent told that "If I would stay in the countryside I would be like my mother" (ip 11). Also, the attitudes and values concerning marriage and childbearing seemed to differ. They did not want to marry young, have children at an early age and live the life of a farmer. They wanted to "become modern and loving wives and mothers" (ip 3).

#### 4.4.2 How important is money?

It may seem as if money, and thereby economic motives for migration, was not so much a focus for the respondents, however, since it would be wrong to deny the economic factor in the motivation for migration, another angle of approach is to ask: how important is money? And why is money important? Is it a means to achieve economical welfare or to achieve something else? Through the interviews it was indicated that earning money was important in order to live, but that the amount of money was less important. One respondent told:

"I didn't care how much money I got, I even told my boss that I could work for free, as long as he could assure me that I could stay in the city" (ip 9).

It is very common that migrants send money back to their homes, which implies that migration can also be beneficial to the family. Thus, money can be important for the migrant's family but not for the migrant herself, and economic motives can be a great motivation for families to let their children migrate, while the migrant herself is more concerned about developing herself. Another unmarried respondent, who sent money back home on a regular basis, thought it was a good solution for the family that she was working in the city. In that way, she could give away the money she did not need in order to live an acceptable life and, at the same time, she "had a chance to live an independent life, meet interesting people and learn from the urban life" (ip 5).

## 4.5 How are Migrant Women's Gender Roles Related to their Decision to Migrate?

### 4.5.1 The decision-making process

One way of discerning how migrant women's gender roles are related to her decision to migrate is to see what role the woman concerned had in the decision-making process. The role in the decision-making process is often strongly linked to the woman's position in her family and the general position of women in society. If the woman herself makes the decision to migrate the outcome of the migration is more likely to be profitable than if somebody else makes the decision for her (UN 1993: 10). However, it is hard to find out whether the woman makes the decision herself, since she may very well state that she decided herself, even though the motive was to help her family (Thadani & Todaro 1984: 38).

As far as the respondents unveiled, the initiative to migrate was taken by the migrant herself. However, the decision was most likely affected by all the family members and their wishes and needs. It has been suggested that Chinese women, to a large extent, are very sensitive to their families' needs and may therefore make the decision to migrate out of consideration for their families, even though they may perceive their choice as being made on an individual basis. Jacka argues that decisions about work patterns are never made in isolation, but rather in consultation with the other family members (Jacka 1997: 58-59). However, it could be that even though the decision was *apprehended* as being taken on the initiative of the individual, and the parents showed resistance when the suggestion was put forward, the decision was not made completely by the migrant. It could be that when she decided to migrate she did it subconsciously out of concern for her family members. In that case her family indirectly influenced her decision to migrate and was, therefore, implicitly part of the decision-making process.

In several cases there were major contradictions when the decision to migrate was made. The majority of the respondents said that their parents did not agree when they mentioned that they wanted to move to the city. Almost all of the respondents managed to persuade their parents to agree to the migration, but actually one respondent left without telling her parents. Her parents did not want to discuss the matter of migration so she decided to leave without telling them.

"[I left] when they weren't paying any attention. We live in a two-storey building and they were on the bottom floor. Then I asked a very good friend to stand on the back of the house, and then I used a rope and heaved down my bag, and then I let her take it to the station where we met up" (ip 4).

Not all migrants are faced with obstacles and facilitators related to the traditional attitude towards women. The fact that female labour migration is quite common these days proves that the previous restrictions surrounding women's mobility are loosening up. Nowadays, almost everybody knows somebody who has worked in the city for a few years, and the spreading of information through television, as well as migrants who have recently returned, undoubtedly leads to a less restrictive attitude towards migration.

There were some respondents who claimed that they did not face any resistance upon migration, and that their parents understood that they wanted to go to the city and broaden

their views and see the world outside the village. In these cases, it seems as if the decision was made completely based on the needs of the migrant herself. The reason, as to why these respondents were believed to have made the decisions on an individual basis, is that they did not come from very poor families and, furthermore, these women came from quite atypical families, where presumably the traditional patriarchal patterns were not so strong. The former came from a family with only daughters, and the latter from a family where the father had died and the brother was also working in the city. However, another respondent who told that her parents did not have any particular objections when she decided to migrate was only fourteen years old at that time, which may be an indicator that the decision was made in the frame of the parents' needs and attitudes.

There were basically two different situations described above. In the first instance, the migrant was faced with resistance when she told her family that she had decided to migrate and, in the second, she did not meet with any resistance. Is the migrant in the first situation subject to ideologies that say that women should retain their traditional role and remain in the household, or was the family sceptical out of concern for the daughter's well-being? Was the migrant in the second situation subject to modern thoughts of liberal attitudes towards young people's wishes and needs or was she subject to the ideology of utilising female labour to the largest extent possible since she would move out anyhow? Or, in other words, do women migrate on an individual basis or for the sake of somebody else?

#### 4.5.2 For whose sake do they migrate?

Just as it is complicated to ascertain the role of migrant women in the decision-making process, it is not always easy to tell whether a person migrates for the sake of herself or her family. Some respondents admitted that they migrated for the purpose of helping their families, as accounted for in the section above on why Chinese women labour migrate. According to a survey made by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, it is very common for young women to migrate in order to help their brothers. When asked why they worked in the city, a very common answer by migrant women was that they wanted to help their brothers go to school, while none of the migrant men that were asked gave this answer (Tan Shen, interview). Tan Shen further argues that it is natural for a rural daughter to try her best to improve the situation of her brother, considering the cultural setting that all Chinese people are born into, where patriarchal marriage patterns and son preferences are natural elements in their everyday lives (Tan Shen, interview).

The easiest way to examine for whose sake a person migrates is to see whether the migrant keeps the money she earns herself or sends it back to the family. One respondent told that she sent back all the money she had left to her family, since her parents were desperate for money due to her older brother's marriage.

“My parents wear themselves out with work just so that they can allow my brother to get married. And when you get married you need at least a house with four rooms and a courtyard that you give to the bride. And you have to give several thousand yuan<sup>13</sup> to the bride's family. Otherwise the bride's

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<sup>13</sup> One Yuan is equivalent to one Swedish Crown.

family won't agree to the marriage" (ip 7).

Even though the migrant did not believe that she migrated for the sake of somebody else it was quite obvious that she did, since a large part of her gains was sent back to her brother. Thus, women can migrate for the sake of somebody else, but they may not always apprehend it like that. Furthermore, several respondents had quit their evening courses and studied on their own in order to save money for their families.

Nevertheless, even though Chinese women do not always recognise their personal interests or separate their own interest from their families, they are not completely lacking to grasp the notion of personal welfare (Jacka 1997: 60). Many of the respondents migrated in order to help their families by sending money back home, but some still made sure that they kept what they needed, and that they only sent the money that they were able to spare.

Some respondents migrated without giving any money to their families. One woman I interviewed told:

"All the money that I earn has been spent on tuition fees. No money has been sent back home, and my parents sometimes even want to give me money" (ip 1).

Many of the respondents had difficulties, emotionally, with the fact that they were living in the city separated from their families, since they thought they did not fulfil their role as a daughter, which basically implied staying together with the family or the family-in-law. Accordingly, they had a bad conscience about living independent lives, in particular, when they felt that they migrated for the sake of themselves only. Especially married women thought that they were egoistic since they had to spend all the money they earned each month on housing and kindergarten fees, money that would have been saved if they lived with their families-in-law. Previously, they had been able to send money back home, as with the unmarried respondents. Thus, the money earned through migration, which was seen as a way of improving the lives of the family members, was just enough for the well-being of the nuclear family in the city. This was an end that felt awkward to these women, since they were used to sharing the work and gains with everybody in the larger household in the rural areas. Consequently, the feeling of guilt, and also gratitude towards the families that allowed them to go, made the respondents happy to send money back to their families if they could.

"...my parents haven't had an easy time. I think that they have helped me to grow up and that was really not easy for them. I have always given all the money to my parents during the Spring Festival<sup>14</sup>, because people in the countryside appreciate the Spring Festival very much. I want my parents to have a pleasant Spring Festival" (ip 4).

Another respondent was very ambiguous and felt that she was trapped between two different ways of living. On the one hand, she wanted to spend her money on a modern life, to the extent that it was possible.

"I need money in order to be able to go to classes in the evenings. And being a girl in her twenties,

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<sup>14</sup> Spring Festival is the Chinese New Year, which is due every year between mid January and mid February. It is based on the moon calendar and is the greatest festival in China.

living in a big city, also means that I want to dress beautifully. I need to study and my salary is not very good so I don't have any spare money to send back to my mother" (ip 6).

On the other hand, she felt obliged to share her money with her family back home so that they could also benefit from her migration, that is, she did not feel comfortable with the fact that she spent the money on herself. Whenever she had good food or did something extra she was reminded of the hard days in the home village. She thought she became increasingly spoiled and felt disgusted by this and felt guilt that she was living in such 'luxury'.

Another aspect is that some respondents actually migrated for the sake of their parents, which implies that they chose to migrate in order to relieve their families from the heavy burden of bringing up many children. The respondents did not express this in words, but one respondent said:

"I feel that I have made it easier for my parents, after I left it was at least a bit less tough for my parents. They don't need to bother about my going to school. It's a bit more relaxed at home" (ip 7).

#### 4.5.3 The issue of gender inequality

It is very rare that women in the countryside feel discriminated due to their gender. The reason for this is not that the rural areas are gender equal, but that the rural women, in general, lack a knowledge and awareness about gender equality and, therefore, do not consider these issues. The rural woman lacks the basic apprehension that she has certain rights and, as she does not obtain much information from outside, this means that she can not compare herself with others.

"[The average rural woman] doesn't see her social status. If you compare a professor at the university with a rural woman, the professor is the one who feels that her social position is lower because of her gender, and not the rural women, because she does not recognise it. In the case of problems or mistreatment in their families rural women often connect it with personal problems rather than to their inferior role as women" (Tan Shen, interview).

Furthermore, investment in sons must not be seen as unequal or unfair in the daughters' eyes, since they know that their families will have to secure their future through their son. She also knows that her future husband will have received preferential treatment in his family, which is something that she will benefit from in her life as a married woman.

To complicate things further, the lack of an apprehension among Chinese rural women concerning gender equality may have been reinforced due to misleading definitions of gender equality. Years of propaganda during the first decades after 1949 did raise some kind of gender awareness. However, it is questionable if that awareness led to any improved position of women, or if it merely contributed to concealing the debate of real gender equality (Croll 1995: 80). Years of propaganda that China is a communist country, in which women and men are viewed as equals, may have contributed to rural women accepting their subordinate roles and position as women, since they believe that this is what gender equality means.

The notion of being less important than a brother was very difficult to approach in the interviews, since many rural women think that 'it is the way it should be'. Therefore it was quite complicated to discuss such matters with the respondents and none of them agreed that

they were subjected to discrimination, compared with their brothers, or that they were less important.

## **4.6 Conclusions**

There are several factors that determine whether a potential-migrant will migrate or not. Migration is most likely to take place if the potential-migrant fits within the categories of (1) young age, (2) single marital status, (3) relative high level of education and (4) the relative welfare of their families. At an initial stage, information about the place of destination as well as some sort of social network is important, which, in cases where information and/or contacts are lacking, can be substituted with recruitment organisations that provide jobs and housing.

However, not all potential-migrants fulfil their dreams of migration. Apart from individual reasons, especially, female potential-migrants may be prevented from migrating due to the negative view surrounding female migration. The majority of the respondents were met with resistance when they told their parents that they wanted to migrate. This was due to the parents' concern for their safety but, also, due to the fact that migration was not perceived as a sign of prestige for girls, on the contrary, they may get a bad reputation as a result. This thesis maintains that this view originates from the traditional view of women, which advocates that women should remain with their family and devote themselves to domestic duties. Considering the fact that the respondents migrated, it is probable that the respondents did not belong to the families with the strongest patriarchal customs. However, other investigations, as well as the results from this study, have indicated that the traditional view of women as workers for the household, as well as out-movers (since they move out due to marriage sooner or later) may function as a facilitator to migration. This is because daughters can become a contributing factor to the family's economy through migration. Furthermore, it was found that the number of children in a potential-migrant's family was a determinant for migration, since a family with one or two children would be more hesitant to allow their child to migrate.

There are several reasons why women leave the rural areas in order to move into the cities to join the urban labour force. Common answers among the respondents were that they wanted to see the world, educate themselves, broaden their views and gain experience, gain independence, and achieve a better life in general. There were also reasons for migration that were directly related to their gender roles that had been shaped by the patriarchal setting of son preferences, exogamous marriage patterns and bride prices in the rural areas. Examples of these included wanting to escape the old patterns of marriage and childbearing (marry young and have children young), and the additional fear that they would be inferior to their future husband if they did not migrate and gain experience. Since it was more common for men to migrate, this means that there was a greater chance that they would marry somebody who had been working in the city. I believe that it is possible to trace several of the non gender-related reasons for migration to the migrants' gender roles, even though the respondents did not explicitly express so themselves. For example, it is possible that the wish to educate themselves was a consequence of their parents' actions in investing more in the welfare of the sons of the family, and that the quest for independence was related to their expected role in taking over responsibility for the domestic duties.

One interesting aspect of how migrant women's gender roles were related to their decision to migrate was to discern their role in the decision-making process. It was found that all of the respondents took the initiative to migrate themselves, but that does not mean that they migrated exclusively for their own sake. There were also implications in that migrant women's subconscious feeling 'of being a burden', which was related to the rural woman's subordinate role in her family, initiated the respondents' wish to move. The main tool to measure whether the migrant migrated for their own sake was to pose the question if they kept their money or sent it back to their families. It was found that in several cases the respondents did send money back to their families, even if the family did not have any economic problems, and the respondents who did not send money back home felt bad about it, confirming that the feeling of working for the benefit of the family is very strong.

However, only one of the respondents thought that she was being subjected to unfair treatment in her family due to the fact that she was female. The majority of the respondents thought that they were treated relatively equally compared to their brothers, and the above mentioned gender-related reasons for migration were more associated with the general structure of the rural society than the structure of their families. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that rural women migrate due to the traditional setting in the rural areas, which includes the traditional gender roles. The view maintained in this thesis is that the respondents' disregard of any gender discrimination within their families may be a consequence of their weak apprehension of gender equality.

Another important observation from the results of this chapter is that economic reasons for migration are not always so pronounced. It was found that money, in itself, was not so important an issue for the respondents, as long as they could survive and remain in the city. Therefore, it is justified to argue that economic motives for migration are not so valid for female migrants, but that it may be a motivation for their families to allow them to migrate. Nevertheless, the original purpose of migration can be reshaped after some time in the city, and their goals keep changing. Thus, it is possible that some purposes appeared after migration and, while the initial purpose of migration was more economically oriented, it became more socially oriented after some time. This is also valid for the gender-related reasons for migration, which may have become clear only after migration, when the migrant could look back on her previous life and compare it with her experiences from living in the city. Therefore, the conclusion of this observation is that economic motives are one reason as to why women choose to migrate. However, social motives for migration, such as the wish to gain experience and independence, broaden their view, and improve their lives through certain means are more important in understanding female migration, both from a spatial perspective (women tend to stay longer in the city than men) and a motivational perspective.



## 5. CONSEQUENCES OF MIGRATION ON FEMALE MIGRANT WORKERS' SOCIAL STATUS

One of the most significant changes in migrant women's lives is that they participate in the urban labour force, which is very different from taking part in the rural labour force. Many migrant women are accustomed to working individually in the fields and, if other people would work on the same fields, they would all belong to the family. The situation in the city is quite the opposite. As a temporarily employed worker you need to work during fixed hours, which often includes working late at night and on weekends. Furthermore, it is likely that you are employed at a place that has various jobs at different levels of skills and proficiency. Migrant women are often at the bottom end in these hierarchies, which means that they often hold jobs such as cleaners, waitresses, dish-cleaners, nannies, and other low-status jobs. This new set of hierarchies is in most cases new to the migrant worker, who has been working in the fields surrounded by her equals.

### 5.1 Social Status

One of the most frequently debated subjects concerning female migration has been whether migration leads to improved status for women. This section will account for women's social status and how their social status in the city is related to their gender roles. To illuminate this issue different approaches need to be taken. Several factors determine a migrant worker's social status. Besides income and type of work there are complicating factors such as gender, native area, and the migrant's perception of her own status, which may be determinants of migrant workers' social status. Furthermore, the state policies may play an important role in setting migrant workers' social status.

#### 5.1.1 Female migrant workers' social position in the society

Female migrant workers form the least threatening political group in the Chinese society. They are not organised in any way and they constitute a low-paid and low-educated group that does not possess any important positions in the society. Furthermore, they are both rural and female, which makes their potential to oppose the government or claim their rights small<sup>15</sup>.

However, even if this group had had an intention to claim their rights, they would not, according to Chinese law, have the same rights as female urban workers. This is due to the hukou-system already mentioned, which is the fundamental discriminating facet among rural/urban dwellers in the Chinese society. One consequence of the hukou system is that no rural dweller is entitled to choose the job they wish or to rent the houses they would like in the city. Both Beijing and Shanghai have a decree which prevents rural dwellers from holding a great number of occupations. This limits the migrants' possibilities to improve their social

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<sup>15</sup> Opinion held by Steven McGurk at the Ford Foundation in Beijing, mediated in February 1999.

position. Even though they can go to evening schools for further training, they have little chances to utilise their new skills. One respondent expressed her disappointment over this: “I have never been able to use my skills in my job” (ip 1).

The wages migrant women are offered reflect their low position. The respondents were aware of this, as well as their very long working days:

“The temporarily employed work much more and get paid less. But the permanently employed work less and get paid more” (ip 7). Another respondent agreed and told: “No matter where it is, if it is in the hotel business, or in restaurants, they never need to do as much work as the migrant workers” (ip 6).

The difference in wages was obvious to the migrant workers but, otherwise, there seemed to be little awareness of political matters and no deeper reflection concerning migrant workers’ rights in the city. However, one respondent was aware of this:

“When you are temporarily employed you don’t have anything. You are not qualified for pension, you have no health care insurance, and no social welfare whatsoever. You are just a temporary worker and you get paid for each day that you work. And if you don’t go to work then you can just go back to your home, that is, there is no social welfare ” (ip 9).

She was quite upset by this fact and thought the government needed to take certain measures to change the situation.

“The government has to give us a fair chance to compete under the same conditions. If it is not competition under equal conditions, then what kind of market economy is it? (...) Migrants have to take the dirtiest and worse paid jobs. That is not very fair. No matter where a person comes from they should have the same possibilities. If we’re not suitable then we shouldn’t do the job, but we should at least get the chance. We’re all people, so why would the government protect a certain part of the population and ignore the rest?” (ip 9).

### 5.1.2 The issue of discrimination

The notion of low status is not only a state policy matter. It is also a question of native people’s attitudes towards newcomers which, in this case, refers to urban people’s attitudes towards the rural labour force. Several of the respondents thought that they had been subjected to discrimination and it was expressed in various ways.

For example, in one case the respondent moved to the city with the help of the social network, which was constituted by relatives. However, the fact that the migrant was related to the persons in the social network did not guarantee that the migrant was well treated upon arrival. It was shown that the scorn for rural people was not reduced by kinship. The respondent had been promised to stay with her father’s cousin, who lived in a large city, and that he would help her look for jobs. The father’s cousin had been visiting her family regularly every Spring Festival, but at the time of arrival she was completely ignored by his wife and children, who were having supper and refused to answer the door, while the father’s cousin was at work. After the cousin had come home she was accepted, but she always felt that the wife and the children looked down upon her:

“At once I realised that they did not want me to come... When they ignored me I felt very bad inside. I had travelled such a long distance and they didn’t take any notice of me” (ip 9).

She was also forced to address them with titles that indicated that they were more respected than her father was, even though her father was older than his cousin. She felt very disappointed by the fact that the family in the city did not respect her and she disliked being dependent upon other people, and thought that the only way to get by was to depend on nobody but herself.

The fact that the respondents were migrant workers also made them feel discriminated by the city authorities, which are concerned with preventing illegal migration. One respondent felt humiliated, since the police want to check the workers’ documents all the time.

“They check you all the time. They want to check all sorts of documents and they are very hard on checking. If you are from Beijing you don’t need any documents. They won’t check you. As long as you have an ID card it is all right” (ip 7).

Another expression in which migrant workers’ low social status is shown is in the working and living conditions they are offered in various jobs. One respondent told that the people at work and the boss were nice to her, but that she was not given the same treatment as the others. That is, she had to sleep in inconvenient places and was not given as good food as the others. One respondent told:

“When we were eating they always ate first and then I ate the leftovers, like mantou (Chinese bread) and stuff. They wanted me to look after the child while they were eating. And after they were finished they let me eat a little bit of the things that were left over. Then after 18 days I left that family” (ip 9).

One respondent, who was working in the canteen at a university, experienced her first years in Beijing as being hard, since people looked down upon her because of her job.

“When I first came and when I was doing the dishes they all looked down on me. Sometimes they even yelled at me. They were looking down on me because I washed the dishes. In the beginning I felt very bad and people were talking behind my back and I felt miserable. The people in the canteen and the ones in the reception all have different positions and everybody is treated according to what position they have” (ip 7).

However, there was evidence indicating that discrimination was a phenomenon that became increasingly rare with more years spent in the city. This was not only due to their advancement to new jobs, but also due to the fact that they learned to ignore it.

“I think that I’m quite good at handling when other people look down on me. When I come across situations like that I just let it pass. I think it is a natural phenomenon and there is no need to take it personally” (ip 4).

Furthermore, their self-reliance and self-confidence increased, since they were able to earn their own income.

“When other people look down on me I don’t think that they look down on me. I think that in the future I will definitely be better and stronger than them. I don’t think that they are better than I am. I

think it is worthless to think that others are worth more and others less. I think that the most important thing is that I'm satisfied with myself, without depending on anybody else. And I'm now earning my money without depending on anybody else" (ip 6).

However, not all respondents thought that they were subjected to discrimination from the urban residents. One respondent told that she had a very good relationship with the people she lived next door to:

"They are very nice. Especially the landlady is very kind. And now since the child has come back she goes and buy snacks for him to eat and she also makes sure that the dustbin gets emptied every day, since I'm at work all day. She is very kind. She doesn't at all look upon us as being from outside Beijing or look down on us. If we have bought anything special to eat we also give her some and when she has something special we always get a piece. It is very good" (ip 12).

### 5.1.3 Migrant workers' perception of their social status

The majority of the respondents though that migration had little effect on their social status. In terms of looking for a partner, living more expensive lives and having fancy jobs, rural women have a general feeling that they cannot get the same opportunities as the urban residents. They also want to have the same life. "As soon she arrives in the city things become different. In the city they only get the jobs which have the lowest status, for example maid. Migrant women have no political status and are not allowed to vote. Her social status is also limited by the fact that she can not enjoy neighbourhood activities or services. Also, Beijing television reflects Beijing people's lives, and not the migrant workers. Migrants are left out and their cultural status is low as well" (Ding Juan, interview).

Many of the respondents even thought that their social status had deteriorated after they migrated since social status always is relative to the social environment. This means that for a rural woman, her social status in the countryside may have been relatively high, but when she came to the city it became low in relation to the people that surrounded her (Cai Fang, interview). Many of the respondents told that they had not even thought about social status back home, since everybody had more or less the same social status, but once they came to the city they realised that they were at the bottom end of the social status hierarchy.

"I don't think my social status has improved after I came to Beijing. Back home the differences were not so big, but when you came to Beijing it was suddenly obvious that I was of the lower class" (ip 2).

"I think that my social status was higher back home. Because when you are home you may for example be considered to be well educated. While when you come to Beijing, you are in other people's eyes just a migrant worker from another part of the country" (ip 6).

Therefore, they thought that they had lost in respect, in spite of the fact that their economic level was higher compared to before and that they had a proper job.

Discrimination could be what the migrants perceive it to be and must, in reality, not be a question of a discriminating act (Ding Juan, interview). One practical thing is that the lack of proper housing and a real job may make the migrants insecure and they may feel looked down upon by the urban dwellers. However, the fact that they often devalue themselves and do not

dare to talk because of this may be self-assumed (Xie Lihua, interview). One respondent expressed similar apprehensions: “It is not that Beijing people behave badly, but sometimes as an outsider (waidiren) you look down upon yourself and therefore you think that other people do too” (ip 2).

The respondents who took part in activities outside their work-units and their communities of migrant workers were more prone to believe that their social status was low. These respondents, to a large extent, thought that they were subject to unfair conditions due to the fact that they were rural migrant workers. This may be explained by the fact that they interacted with people with higher social status, to the extent that they started to compare themselves with them.

“I think that I, in many respects, am not inferior to the people who live in Beijing, I can definitely move here and find a job. But since I don’t have a hukou I can’t get these jobs. I can only get jobs like maid-jobs” (ip 9).

However, some respondents thought that their social status had improved. In some cases it was shown that the devaluation of themselves actually led to the respondents’ perception of their own level of status being somewhat higher than it was in the rural areas. This was especially common for respondents who were less active in participating in the urban society and the main reason was that they thought the urban workers in their work-unit treated them nicely. The respondents thought that their urban colleagues, who were more civilised and held higher positions, treated them as equals, which contributed to a feeling of respect and human dignity. One respondent expressed this by saying that people who held similar positions, as their colleagues, in the countryside would not have treated her as nicely (ip 3).

The respondents also pointed to the different dialects in the Chinese language, which they thought was one thing that contributed to the feeling of inferiority and of being outsiders. China is a large country with many different dialects and, even though everybody learns Mandarin in school, it is easy to tell if a person is from other parts than Beijing and if she/he has a low education. One respondent thought that it was difficult to communicate during the early period in the city and, sometimes, it could even be difficult to understand what other people were saying. However, after some time the rural accent usually disappeared and the Beijing dialect came naturally to many of the respondents.

In the cases where respondents did not reflect over their low position in society there were signs of gratitude towards society because they had been able to migrate. Many of the respondents expressed gratitude towards the people who employed them. This feeling was similar to the gratitude they felt towards their parents for letting them migrate. The feeling of gratitude was expressed when the respondents viewed back on China’s history, where the allowance of migration is a new phenomenon.

“I think society has helped me, since I would not have been able to come here if that organisation [the recruitment organisation] had not come and looked for me” (ip 2).

Even a respondent who felt treated as inferior due to the state policies expressed some kind of gratitude towards the policy makers. She added that she did not have so much to complain about:

“If it was not for the open door policy I would never have been able to become what I’m today. So I’m very grateful to Deng Xiaoping<sup>16</sup>. Otherwise I wouldn’t be able to meet my husband and have such a rich experience. I’m happy with my life now. I’m also happy with my country (...) The open door policy has been very rewarding for us rural people” (ip 9).

There were more expressions of ambiguous feelings among the respondents concerning their social status. On the one hand, they thought that their status had improved, since they became economically independent and had a ‘real’ job. On the other hand, they thought that their social status had deteriorated, since they compared themselves with other people in the city, who were considerably better off and treated with more respect than themselves. Taking these two aspects into account, the end product of this was that their social status remained the same. Some respondents said that:

“I think it is the same, because in the rural areas all are peasants and there is little difference, but in the city I cannot improve my status because I’m a migrant worker. When I first came to Beijing I was wondering what kind of place it really was. Because when I first decided to move I hoped that I could improve my social status. But when you’ve been here for a while you realise that it is not that simple” (ip 7).

One respondent felt very frustrated by the fact that her social status was low and she was very anxious to improve her social status:

“I wanted to change my status and identity. I was always thinking about changing my identity. I was feeling really bad inside. It was always something that depressed me and I let other people look down on me. I was feeling so shut in. I wanted to move forwards, but I was not able to move. And this was only because they city did not recognise me. It did not recognise me because I was from the countryside. I did not have any status. I did not have any economical status, or social status. It was so depressing. I wanted to shake the ground. I felt as if somebody was binding my feet and hands. It was hard to put up with” (ip 9)

According to Ding Juan most female migrant workers do not think of their low status. They think it is the way it should be because they are rural migrant workers. They are not aware of their human rights of equality and these are underlying facts invisible to the female migrant worker. If they would be aware of their lack of social rights they would oppose the authorities (Ding Juan, interview). This lack of an apprehension of social status was found to be true in some sense, since it seemed that some respondents started to think about the issue of social status only after the subject was brought up during the interview. Ding Juan further argues that the fact that migrant workers feel that their own social status is low is a step forward. If a woman had stayed in the countryside she would not have been thinking of social status. But after she moved to the city she would realise her low status and then the next step would be to try to improve it. This was also pointed out by one of the respondents:

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<sup>16</sup> Deng Xiaoping was the Chinese leader, who became China’s main leader in 1978, two years after the Mao-era ended. He was the one who introduced the open door policy in 1979 and even though there were some periods when he did not have an official position, he was the main leader in China until his death in 1997. This period is also referred to as the Deng-era.

“I think that my own capacity and ability to improve my social status has improved gradually. I think that the knowledge about equality has changed me so that other people now respect me. And I think that in order to be a young person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century you need knowledge and information to lay back on” (ip 4).

Some respondents expressed that they thought that the disadvantageous position of being rural and female functioned as some kind of motivating power:

“... I don’t want my child and husband to have any troubles, and I don’t want my child to have a life that is as difficult and unfair as mine has been, and that also brought me to where I’m today. If I look back on my life I think that the fact that I migrated has enriched my life (...) due to the difference between rural and urban areas I have been inspired to fight for the position I have today. The difference gave me pressure but also motive power and that has paved the way for where I am today” (ip 9).

Another view on social status was reflected in that one respondent did not want to argue about her social status in the city. She thought that social status was an issue for the future and thought it was natural that she had the social status she had today considering her job:

“Social status is a question for the future. My status now is a fact and it is due to my situation. I think that if you are not satisfied with your social status, then it is up to every person to improve it. But I think that if a person doesn’t pay any attention to her social status, then she doesn’t have any ability to succeed” (ip 6).

## **5.2 Migrant Women’s Social Status in Relation to their Gender Roles**

In China migrant workers have no right to claim unemployment insurance. “We call them people who live on the borderlines of the society and, even if everybody who had a proper job could get a hukou, some would have to go back to the rural area. All factories want young people. As soon as you get married and get children the factories do not want you anymore” (Tan Shen, interview). Thus, the fact that the migrant is female seems to be a threat to her ability to improve her status by getting a good job.

Tan Shen further suggests that women, to a greater extent than men, are able to accept their low status in the city. The reason is that women, in general, do not have very high expectations of themselves since their parents never held any high expectations for them. Therefore, the society does not have any high expectations of them either and, consequently, they are placed in low-paid, low-status sectors, without reflecting over their low position. Thus, women can accept lower status and lower payments, and they do not need to gain high status, because there are no expectations of them to do so (Tan Shen, interview). It seemed as if some of the migrant women accepted their position as being marginalised and at the bottom end in the social hierarchy. “All people have different conditions, people’s families are not the same, I guess you could call it fate” (ip 7). This expectance of migrant women’s low social position is an expression of their inferior view of themselves that has been passed on through their gender roles in the family. The fact that those rural migrants look down upon themselves and think that they are obliged to do the bad jobs because they are rural is, in reality, also a

question of them being female (Ding Juan, interview).

However, none of the respondents were aware of the fact that they may benefit less from migration due to their inferior position as women in relation to their families, employees, and society as a whole. Rather, they referred to the fact that they were rural and lacked education as the main reason for their social position being low.

### **5.3 Conclusions**

There are several means through which the city authorities can act discriminatingly towards the floating population. Most important is the hukou system, which legitimates the ignorance of migrant workers' social rights. Furthermore, Beijing is one of the cities in China that has adopted a decree that prevents rural migrants from possessing certain jobs. This regulation is likely to strike female migrants the hardest, since they become discriminated within the labour force not only because they are rural but, also, because they are female. Women's needs, in terms of maternal leave and other social benefits associated with childbearing, resulted in them being given employment in labour-intensive, low-skilled and low-paid jobs, which makes the improvement in social status difficult.

It is very difficult for a female migrant to obtain a good job or become promoted and, furthermore, the negative view of migrant workers is a reason for employers to offer low wages and poor working and living conditions. It was shown that this negative view is so deeply rooted that not even kinship reduces the distance between rural and urban people.

In general, the respondents did not think that the fact that they had migrated had any direct impact on their social status. Despite that they earned more money compared to before, some respondents even thought that their status had deteriorated, since they compared themselves with the urban population. This was especially the case that respondents who were relatively active in the urban society thought that their status had deteriorated, possibly due to the fact that they had integrated with the urban society in a way which illuminated their own low position. On the contrary, one respondent, who was less active, thought that her social status had improved, since she felt respected by people who she respected. Other respondents thought that their social status remained the same since their economic status was higher, but their cultural and political status lower. However, the apprehension of having low status, and the feeling of being discriminated, can sometimes be self-assumed and being rural can lead to submissive attitudes among migrants.

However, most of the respondents did not pay so much attention to their social status and they thought that they had learnt to deal with other people's bad attitudes and, as such, had become more confident being in the city. Some respondents even expressed that the fact their social status was low was a reason for them to fight to change it. This was also the belief of Ding Juan, who meant that in just realising your social status is a step forward in improving your social status.



The experts had very clear ideas of the reasons to why women accepted the bad working and living conditions that were related to migrant women's gender roles. The first reason was that they were brought up in an environment where their parents had held little expectations for them. Therefore, the migrants naturally accepted society's low expectations, which was expressed through the inferior jobs that were offered. The second reason points to the fact that migrants accept inferior jobs because they think they are obliged to do them due to their rural status. Sometimes, however, female migrants get inferior jobs due to the fact that they are women.

There were indications that social status was something that the respondents started to think over after they had migrated. However, there are reasons to believe that rural women migrate in order to indirectly improve their social status, since so many of the respondents stated social reasons for migration as important, as was concluded from chapter four.

It seems, as in the case of gender equality, that the notion of social status only became clear to the respondents after migration took place. It appears as if social status, as well as gender equality, was unimportant when the family was the basic unit and the individual existed for the sake of the collective (the family) in the village. However, migration was a way for the migrants to view themselves as individuals, independent from their families, which may have contributed to their recognition of their own position in society.

As was shown in chapter four, it was common that migrants sent money back home, something that seemed to be related to their gender role. The deduction from this, in correlation to the possibility of improving their social status, is that sending back money undermines their chances of improving their social status. This is due to the fact that social status is dependent upon economic position and educational level. Nevertheless, some respondents did not send all their money back home, but spent some on schooling, which still gave them a chance to improve their social status by further education.

## 6. CONSEQUENCES OF MIGRATION ON MIGRANT WOMEN'S GENDER ROLES

As discussed above, migration of women in China, as well as in other developing countries, has led to the debate whether migration leads to the improvement of women's status or not. Another debate associated with female migration is the altering of women's roles. It is believed that migrant women's new economic role is likely to increase women's bargaining-power. In addition, their attitudes are expected to change due to the exposure to different ideas and attitudes in the city (Hugo 1993: 64). This chapter will deal with the changes in women's gender roles and begins by discussing how migrant women change due to their adaptation to urban life.

### 6.1 Adopting Urban Lifestyles

During the first period of migration many of the respondents did not like the city at all, but after a while they got used to it. The respondents thought that they had adjusted to life in Beijing quite well. However, in spite of that the respondents thought that they became increasingly integrated in the urban society there was one thing that slowed down this process. This was the fact that it is common for female migrants to share dormitories with other migrants, which may be a facilitating factor in the adaptation process in the city in the beginning. The new friends became a substitute for their families and they felt secure in the friendship of their colleagues. The new community of migrant workers may replace the rural community and very friendly relationships may develop or, as one respondent expressed, "We're just like a big family" (ip 3).

However, even though none of the respondents revealed that they thought they took less part in the urban life outside their work units, due to these new communities, this is something that was pointed out by the experts. The community functioned in a way that made the migrant workers less apt to try to enter the urban life. Moreover, they were, for the most part, engaged in the activities the other migrant workers took part in. Therefore, they spent little time outside the work unit and their dormitories, except when they went to classes in the evenings. This can be seen as an extension of women's traditional role in the family, where she spends most of the time inside the household and is less active in the public activities of the village (Ding Juan, interview).

However, even though there were signs of living outside the urban community they still adopted certain urban values and life-styles. According to Tan Shen, this could be a consequence of the fact that women are prone to adapt. Women know that they will have to adapt to new situations, since they will have to marry and live with another family for the rest of their lives (Tan Shen, interview).

One respondent thought that she had changed her own character, and that moving to Beijing made her grow up and feel stronger.

“I think that my mind and thoughts have changed, and also my intellectual level has improved a lot. When you graduate from junior middle school you don’t know much, but now I have studied on my own and I think that my thoughts have changed meanwhile” (ip 4).

The respondents also agreed that they had been inspired by the fashion in Beijing and they paid much more attention to clothing.

“Before I came here I did not dare to wear skirts. But I think that the atmosphere is quite relaxed in Beijing when it comes to clothes and make-up, except for work, where I wouldn’t wear a skirt” (ip 12).

The adaptation to urban lifestyles also brings about a widening gap between the migrants and the people from their native villages. One respondent told that she did not gain so much from talking to the people in the village anymore.

“I think that it is all right when you chat with them and such thing. But sometimes when they talk, the way they express themselves can make me feel that the content of what they say is a bit awkward. Because they don’t have the same training as I have and they are a bit rougher. In the city you learn to understand lots of things and when you return to the village you think that there is a significant difference” (ip 11).

Even though not all respondents expressed that they thought that people in their villages were less sophisticated than them, it was clear that the urban lifestyle was much more appealing than the rural.

“I think that I have quite a strong personality and if I’m in the city I think there are more possibilities for me to develop. There are also more options for me when I want to study. I think that since Beijing is the capital and also the centre for political and cultural activities in China, just being here means a constant improvement of yourself” (ip 4).

The fact that they had got used to the lifestyle in Beijing and that they saw what the urban life could offer contributed to their repugnance towards moving back to their villages.

“I wanted to have the same conditions and prerequisites as the urban people. Therefore, I didn’t want to go home. I wanted to have a life that was as good as the urban people’s lives” (ip 9).

Migrant women’s dreams about establishing themselves in the city was also shown in their future plans and what aspirations they had for new jobs. One respondent, who was working as a maid, spoke of how she was happy with being a maid now, because she could combine her job with studies, which she hoped would contribute to a better job in the future:

“I think that everybody has her own ways of living and I think that the job I have now fits very well with the way I want to live. And there is no pressure on me in the job, and I can combine work with studies. This will be good for me in the future. And then I will be able to get an even better job” (ip 4).

However, not all respondents wanted to stay in Beijing forever, and there were even those who were forced to stay there, since they had no other place to go.

“I can only choose to stay in Beijing, I don’t have any other choices. I cannot go back home. If I go back home I don’t have a single thing. When I’m here, at least I have the ability to support myself. I

don't need to depend on any other person. If I would return back home then I would add a burden to my mother's life" (ip 6).

Along with the adaptation to urban values, money becomes increasingly indispensable. Fashion, good food and leisure was not important in the beginning but, as one respondent expressed herself: "You get spoiled after a while and want more" (ip 6). Thus, the motive for migration, which at first may have been a way to develop oneself and broaden one's view, became much more money-oriented. Some respondents who had not cared about money in the initial stage of migration said that money became increasingly important after some years in the city, since their way of living changes to become more like the urban way of living.

The fact the respondents were subjected to different values and lifestyles in the city made them prone to develop interests that differed from their parents' ideas about where they should live, work, and whom they should marry.

## **6.2 The Relationship to the Family**

It seemed as if the relationship between the migrated daughter and her parents remained strong despite the fact that there were hundreds of miles between them. One expression of this was the occurrence of homesickness. Almost all of the respondents spoke of how homesick they were, especially in the beginning. This shows that the emancipation from the family was not so easily brought about. There was also an idealistic view of their parents, which shows that the ties still remained strong.

"No matter to whom you have a relationship, friends or colleagues, you have to think about what you say and how you act, but if you are with your family then you can be the way you like. If you scream and shout there is no big deal. If you compare, the relationship to your family is a matter of ties of blood, and your parents are always close to you" (ip 11).

One of the main characteristics of being a daughter in a traditional Chinese household is that you are expected to see to the needs and wishes of the collective that constitutes the family. As was shown in the part that dealt with for whose sake the migrants migrated, there were traits that indicated that the respondents migrated for the sake of the collective rather than for their own sake. It has been suggested that migration may lead to more decision-making power inside a migrant's own family due to the money she contributes (UN 1993: 29). The interesting thing to see is whether migration has led to increased bargaining-power in the family due to the migrant contributing with money or, alternatively, if migration itself increased their bargaining-power.

There were differences in the extent to which the migrant could make her own decisions without the involvement of her parents, depending on if the respondent sent money back home or if she kept the money herself. The parents of respondents who sent money back home thought, to a larger extent, that they had the right to decide where their daughters should work. One respondent, who got a job in a canteen at a university, said:

“When I told my parents that I was going to work in a canteen, my mother cursed me and said that she wouldn’t allow me to work here. I told her that it was a very good job and that there were lots of students and other people from Beijing, but she said that it was not all right” (ip 7).

In the end it was shown that the respondent accepted the job anyway, but the example illustrates the fact that the parents did not consider the daughter mature enough or to have the right to decide where to work.

Another respondent told that her parents had opinions about when she should get married. If she waited too long her parents would protest.

“If you can not decide whom to marry then your family will oppose it. They would think that now since you are so old... They would be eager to make you marry really soon (ip 4).

Another respondent, who did not send money back home, said that she wanted to stay in Beijing for the rest of her life and marry somebody and have a child in Beijing. She had already told her parents about her plans, and they did not do anything to prevent her. She said that they understood that she wanted to have a joyful and enriching life and that the life in the village would not contribute anything to her life. This understanding attitude towards her wishes may be a result of the short distance between Beijing and her home village. The respondent went back to visit her family several times each year, since communication to her village was so convenient (ip 1).

However, not all the respondents that did not send money back home were able to make all the decisions they wanted. Some parents had opinions about whom their daughters should marry. The parents did not want their daughters to stay in the city too long, and they wished that they would return to the village and marry there. One respondent retold how she met a man from a village far away and that her parents did not agree to their marriage in the beginning.

“My parents were very pessimistic when I first talked about marrying and staying in the city. Also, Wuhan<sup>17</sup> is very far from where my parents live, so when I would go back to the countryside I would go to my husband’s home, and that was not preferable for my parents” (ip 11).

However, the respondent did not give any consideration to her parents’ objections, which she thought was very egoistic afterwards.

The fact that female migrants tend to marry outside their village contributed to a change in the traditional pattern where the wife moves to the husband’s parental home, especially if the wife’s family lives nearer to the city than the husband’s. Some of the respondents recounted that they had lived with their own families during the birth of their children, and during the following months or years after the childbirth, and they told that so had other women in the same situation. This implied that the daughter gained a closer relationship with her own parents compared to if she had gone to her family-in-law to give birth.

In spite of the fact that migration not always led to complete emancipation from the parents,

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<sup>17</sup> Wuhan is the nearest main city to the husband’s village.

there were signs that the relationship between the migrated daughter and her parents improved. One respondent, whose parents refused to agree to her moving to the city, told that there had been a great change in the way her parents viewed the fact that she migrated. She had gained much more respect and they now felt safe about having her in the city.

“They think that me being on my own outside the village, able to support myself and having the opportunity to educate myself is very dignified. They haven’t said anything about me playing around or wasting my money on leisure. They feel comfortable having me in the city now” (ip 4).

Another respondent, who thought that she was subjected to unequal treatment compared to her brothers when she grew up, thought that the parents treated her much better after she migrated.

“I come home once a year and stay for only one week. I just stay shortly and eat with them, and I feel that my parents appreciate me very much” (ip 7).

### **6.3 The New Role on the Marriage Market**

Marriage was an additional factor in the respondents’ lives that was subjected to changes.

“If I would have been in the village, I think that I would never have been able to change the old traditional values that leaven through everything. After I came to Beijing I have met all kinds of people and every kind of situation and even though I haven’t experienced it all myself, you always hear about new things from other people. I think that I have changed in every respect. My parents would have wanted me to get married a bit sooner, but now I don’t want that. To get married too early is not good. As soon as you have a family and a child you have so much pressure on you ” (ip 7).

Another respondent expressed similar changes in her attitudes towards marriage. “When I was living in the village everybody else got married and if I had stayed, my parents would have been eager to make me get married, and I think that I would have got married just for the sake of getting married. But after I came to the city I don’t want to get married that early anymore” (ip 4).

One of the new facets of the migrant workers’ everyday life was that they were able to meet people from the opposite sex to a much greater extent which, of course, increased the possibility of finding a partner. Several of the respondents had found partners after they had moved to Beijing. However, it was found among the single respondents that even though the opportunity to meet men increased significantly, they did not make use of it completely due to various reasons.

First, several respondents lived in the same dormitory as many other migrant workers, which contributed to a very strong feeling of community, as accounted for earlier. This had a negative impact on the likelihood that the respondent would take part in activities outside their dormitories and work units. They stated that they spent most of the time inside with their roommates, chatting, reading, listening to music or watching television. Therefore, they did not make friends with people outside their work unit to any large extent. Inside the work unit, the male migrant workers and the female migrant workers were segregated and, subsequently, did not have much contact. Furthermore, their lives were rather dictated by routine and they

had all the meals in the canteen in the work unit and there were few natural occasions when the respondents could meet other people.

“I hardly ever go outside the work unit. I rather stay at home and read or listen to music. I’m a bit shy. But I love to spend time with my roommates and the other girls. But we’re not allowed to stay up later than ten o’clock at night, because then the lights are switched off” (ip 2).

The single respondents who did not live in dormitories with other migrants were working as maids in Beijing families’ houses. They also spent most of the time inside the house, even though they did not have any roommates that could replace the community.

Second, the probability that a man from Beijing would take a liking to a migrant worker is low. This is due to the fact that any child in a conceivable future marriage between an urban man and a rural woman (hereafter referred to as rural-urban marriage) would automatically get the same hukou status as the mother. Therefore, neither the mother, nor the child would be entitled to any social benefits and, furthermore, when the child reached school age she/he would only be granted a place in school in her/his mother’s home village. Thus, urban men prefer to marry urban women, and only in case the man cannot find an urban woman does he consider marrying a rural woman (Ding Juan, interview). One respondent told that she thought it would be difficult to find a partner in Beijing:

“In the city it is difficult to find a partner, because nobody would want to find a wife from rural areas. There are already so many nice girls from Beijing, so why would they look at somebody who is from the countryside?” (ip 7).

This means that urban men who are available are the ones who have the lowest position in the urban hierarchy and sometimes they are disabled (Xie Lihua, interview)<sup>18</sup>.

Furthermore, migrant women’s social position makes them less attractive. Even if they were very diligent, ambitious and good-looking there would be too many prejudices against such a marriage and people would begin to think that the man was incapable of finding an urban woman and therefore had bad qualities (Ding Juan, interview).

The conditions for rural-urban marriages may be better in other places than Beijing, since the city authorities in these places are less restrictive than Beijing. One example of this is Shanghai. According to an investigation made on migrant women’s marriage customs in the city by the SASS (Shanghai Academy for Social Sciences), marriages between men from Shanghai and women from surrounding villages are increasingly common. It was found that women who married urban men wanted to gain better economic and social status through marriage but, since their own social status was low, they could only find partners that were unable to find wives from Shanghai, just as in Beijing. These marriages often contributed to the neighbours looking down upon the man and they considering him incapable of finding himself a dignified wife. It was found that this kind of discrimination often led to the man

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<sup>18</sup> The rule that a rural wife retains her rural hukou status in case of a rural-urban marriage is not valid in case the urban spouse is disabled. Then the wife (and any future children) gets urban hukou status after a certain time.

projecting his anger and frustration on the wife, whereas maltreatment and abuse was frequently reported<sup>19</sup>.

Even though many respondents did not manage to improve their social status, they thought that their social status in the villages had improved. When they went home, relatives and neighbours were curious and wanted to hear stories from the person who had been in the city and seen the world.

“If I would go back to the village, the people in the village would think that I was very exotic. They would say, oh, you’re just back from Beijing, what have you seen? And they would think that I looked healthy and that my skin was whiter than theirs. They would say that I had Beijing skin. In my village everybody is very sun-tanned” (ip 12).

The fact that they earn their own money would also contribute to higher status in the village.

“If I would return to the countryside now, many people in the village would think that I was something, since I have a job and I have an income” (ip 7).

However, the fact that female migrant workers were influenced by the urban lifestyle and that they became economically independent, and thereby able to improve their social status in the eyes of the rural natives, did not necessarily imply that the likelihood of finding a suitable man in the village increased. According to Ding Juan, there are many prejudices against female return migrants among the rural population.

“Rural people think that women who have been outside and worked as temporarily employed workers are strange and that these women are bad. At least the rural men, who have not worked in the city, prefer to marry a woman who has the traditional virtues of a rural woman” (Ding Juan, interview).

One respondent, who was working in the canteen at a university, told: “Especially if you have been working in canteens or in shops people would say that you have become bad. If other people would hear that I worked in a canteen they would think it was bad. And sometimes when I went back [to my village] I felt that I did not dare to say that I work in a canteen. If you tell people in Beijing no one would care, but if you told people back home they would laugh behind your back” (ip 7).

The fear among rural men that migrant women, in general, have become bad and have been involved in shady businesses is, of course, unjustified. For example, very few women get involved in prostitution or illegal affairs and most women are unmarried and do not have any sexual relations. However, there is a possibility that the migrant women have had a relationship with another man, which may be seen as a crime in the eyes of villagers with traditional values. It has become increasingly common that migrant women co-habit with either migrant men or urban men (Hoy 1996: 3). These women feel unsafe in the city and want somebody to share their lives with. According to an investigation made by the All China Women’s Federation, very few of these women have the intention of having a temporary relationship, but when it comes to marriage the boyfriend often withdraws. There are various reasons for this. In cases where the boyfriend is from a rural area, it may be that he is already engaged or even married.<sup>20</sup> It could also be that the rural man does not want to marry

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<sup>19</sup> Information from a paper that was presented on a conference on “Women’s rights in the city”, which was due in Beijing 17-19 June 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Before rural men migrate their families often want to make sure that their sons have a spouse in order to



somebody from another area, since rural men do not have the same desire to marry outside their village as women have. In cases where the boyfriend is from the city he may simply be unwilling to marry a woman with a rural hukou and, therefore, continues to stay with the woman only until he finds somebody to marry (Ding Juan, interview).

Furthermore, the returned migrants may not want to get married to a native villager. The female migrants have been subjected to the ways of life in the city, and they have become more concerned about having a loving relationship with their husband. One respondent spoke of how she wished she would be able to stay in Beijing for the rest of her life and marry somebody from Beijing. "I was hoping that I would be able to stay in Beijing. That would be preferable" (ip 3). However, their broad experiences may contribute to the feeling of rural men being traditional, primitive and boring. One respondent recounted:

"Last year during the Spring Festival I went home and then I wanted to see if I could find somebody to marry. But the viewpoints of the boys back home are not the same [as mine]. They haven't experienced anything. It seems as if they are incapable of opening their eyes. Sometimes I think that female migrant workers are the most miserable people, because they can not even find a husband without difficulties. Sometimes female migrants come to the city to find a partner, but they don't manage to find a suitable one. And then when they go back to their home villages they are not able to find one either, because all the good men or the men who come from relatively well-off families are already engaged" (ip 7).

Due to the small chances of marrying an urban man many migrant women are forced to marry somebody just for the sake of getting married one day. The rural men with good qualities who are the same age may already be married when the migrants return to their home villages, and maybe they have to marry somebody they do not love (Ding Juan, interview). The problem becomes aggravated by the Chinese marriage tradition, which implies that women should be younger than their husbands. One respondent told:

"In the countryside you get engaged very early. For example, my brother is only twelve years old, but there are still people who have suggested that their daughter and he should get married. It is a very big problem. All the clever boys are already engaged or married. And then when the female migrants return to their villages they want to find somebody that they really like and respect, because they have gained so much experience in the city, and then there is nobody to like in the countryside" (ip 7).

None of the unmarried respondents were living with their boyfriends. Nevertheless, they faced similar situations in terms of difficulty in finding an urban husband, and the aversion to marrying somebody in their villages. There was also a great uncertainty about the future and they did not know where they would be able to live and work. In terms of marriage, the unmarried respondents did not know where, when or to whom they could get married. They also felt pressure from their parents, resulting in them trying to combine their personal interests with the expectations of their parents.

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guarantee that he returns (Ding Juan, interview).

### 6.3.1 Whom shall I marry?

Not all respondents had very clear thoughts about marriage. When asked about their preferences in terms of an 'ideal man' they all seemed very rational. They did not really think in economic terms, as one could expect from women in a developing country. One respondent thought:

"I don't think that there is any need to say that I definitely want to marry somebody that is from Beijing, or somebody that is not from Beijing. As long as you meet somebody that you like I think it is good. I don't want to marry somebody just for the sake of marriage" (ip 5).

Thus, they are concerned about true love. "If I find a man, no matter where he comes from, I will see how dignified he is and then I will think about the probability of marriage from that respect. It is not a matter of origin. It is a matter of the quality of a person" (ip 4).

However, there was a difference between respondents who thought that they would prefer to marry somebody from the city and those who would rather marry somebody who was from the countryside. The unmarried respondents without boyfriends thought, to a larger extent, that it was a positive thing if they would be able to marry somebody from Beijing.

The respondents who were married or already had boyfriends were not so tempted by the idea of marrying a man from Beijing, if they would have had the option while unmarried. This may be an indicator that their ideas about the ideal husband changed when they met somebody they liked. They said that in the first place they would rather find somebody they liked:

"I think that no matter if a person is poor or rich, if two people have a good relationship then it is right. I don't care what happens later, if I return back home and set up a small business, or live a quite life. As long as we're together it is fine. I don't want to become extremely rich. If I can just live an ordinary life then I'm happy" (ip 7).

The respondents who were married or had boyfriends had all been introduced to their partners by either relatives or colleagues. This shows that the use of the social network, which facilitated migration in the first place, was extended to be useful in the context of finding a partner.

#### *Marrying Urban Men*

To marry somebody from the city would imply lots of advantages, but the respondents seemed to fear that such a marriage would be problematic:

"In almost all respects life would have been easier if I had married a man from Beijing. Then I would live integrated in Beijing. And he would surely have a stable job, with a stable income. But if you ended up marrying him, I'm sure that there would be things that you were not happy with. And then you wouldn't be satisfied anyway" (ip 12).

Furthermore, they seemed to be aware of the fact that urban men do not fancy rural women. One respondent said: "To marry a man from Beijing would have a lot of advantages, but since I'm

not from Beijing it would be very difficult for me to find a man that had good qualities” (ip 4).

The doubtfulness concerning marrying an urban man was also strengthened by a general attitude that men from Beijing were ‘bad’, which is similar to the view of migrant women, who were perceived as ‘strange’ and ‘bad’ in their villages. This indicates that anything strange and alien is easily associated with bad qualities.

However, there may be some justice in the view of urban men as ‘bad’, since it is possible for them to misuse their position of having urban status, as was shown in the investigation of rural-urban marriages in Shanghai. Of course not all men from Beijing would misuse their status as urban and, moreover, it is not impossible that an urban man could actually fall in love with a rural woman. One respondent was introduced to a man at her job. He had an urban hukou and she liked this man very much and they started to see each other. However, there were many difficulties to overcome and after some time she felt that she did not want to continue with the relationship.

“I thought that I did not want to love him anymore. He was a very good person but I did not want to make trouble for him or hurt him so I left that job (...) He was also anxious and uneasy [to see me]. He really liked me, but with so many practical problems he was very unhappy. I was also very unhappy. It was not at all a question of that there was a difference or distance between the two of us, it was merely a question of difference in social and economic status. It was very hard to overcome” (ip 9).

She felt very frustrated due to the obstacles that prevented her from being with the one she loved:

“All the problems that we were facing wouldn’t be solved due to my ability. These were societal problems. It was not a question of me being able to get a hukou if I was very successful. No matter how hard I struggled I would never be able to change my destiny. The destiny of a peasant was impossible to change. I was very miserable, but I thought that I could only give up because it was above my head to try to change anything. It was like trying to move a mountain, and I just couldn’t move it” (ip 9).

Furthermore, her boyfriend felt pressure from the people around him, and he also thought it was very hard to put up with: “They thought it was a bad idea and asked him for the reason as to why he found himself a migrant worker and things like that. And he felt pressure from them” (ip 9).

Another obstacle was the attitude of her boyfriend’s parents, who did not want to have a grandchild with rural status: “They liked me, but they thought that our social and economical status was not suited to each other. So they did not agree in the beginning” (ip 9).

This respondent also indicated a potential risk in rural-urban marriages in that spouses lack an understanding of each other. When she left her job she was only able to get a job as a maid, and her husband-to-be phoned and asked why she did not have any self-confidence in making progress, which made her very angry:

”He said that I should have a better future and that I shouldn’t be working as a maid again. But I thought that he was not able to understand me. And that was because he came from the city. He had lived all his life in the city and his life had always been quite peaceful. He did not realise that when I

had left that job I could only work as a maid because there were simply no other jobs to get. It was not that I ultimately wanted to be a maid” (ip 9).

### *Marrying Rural Men*

Several respondents pointed to the disadvantages of marrying urban men and the respondents, who had partners from rural areas, thought that having a rural spouse was very advantageous.

One respondent thought that rural men were more down to earth and that she preferred to marry somebody from a rural area, especially, somebody who came from a place nearby her own village, since that would contribute to the possibility that the man would have a deep understanding of her:

”I think it is better to find somebody from your own area. Maybe it is because I have never seen another boy, but I think that boys from the same area as oneself are very tender and they love you very much” (ip 8).

Another respondent said that it would be impossible to marry a man from the city since she had a rural hukou. Instead, she pointed out that she wanted to marry somebody with the same status and experiences as herself, and therefore she thought it would be good to marry a rural man:

“Now you can choose to whom to get married without any problem, but it is still most common that somebody introduces a partner to you. If I get married I want somebody with the same social class as me and with somebody who has some experience and knowledge. Maybe somebody who also has worked in the city. It is quite common that migrant women meet other migrant men” (ip 2).

#### 6.3.2 Being a rural wife in the city

Even though it would be difficult to state how it would be for female migrants in general if they would have become wives of urban men, one can presume that the woman would retain some of her inferior perception of herself. As was shown in the investigation in Shanghai, there is a risk for the women to be subject to discrimination and mistreatment. Concerning the respondent who married a man from Beijing, it can be shown that even though the marriage was happy there were signs that pointed to the woman’s devaluation of herself. She told how she blamed herself when any problems arose, and she had a persistent feeling that her husband could have had a better and easier life if he had married somebody from Beijing. Therefore, she did everything she could in order to please her husband:

“I wanted to care for my child and my husband. I thought that my husband hadn’t had an easy life. He could have had a normal Beijing life without all the problems associated with me. But he has had to put up with lots of things because of me. So I feel very sorry for him and I wanted to give him a proper family, with a child and a loving wife” (ip 9).

This may also increase the pressure to perform and be a good wife.

Regarding the respondents who lived in the city with their rural men, the most significant

change, compared to if they had lived in the village, was that they did not have time to fulfil their traditional role to the extent they would have wished. Several respondents expressed stress due to the fact that they had problems with babysitters and so forth. They had to have a full-time job, which increased their work burden, since they were supposed to take care of the child as well.

## **6.4 The Issue of Motherhood**

Becoming a mother is one of the most important things in life for Chinese women, and it may be particularly true for Chinese rural women. Even though not all respondents expressed a burning desire to become a mother, they all agreed that it was an inevitable part of marriage. One respondent actually said that she did not want to become a mother, but probably would have to anyway (ip 2).

### **6.4.1 Views on motherhood and childbearing**

Contrary to the traditional ideal that advocates bearing many children, and preferably sons, the respondents held somewhat different attitudes towards childbearing and motherhood. Despite the majority of rural families being allowed to have a second child<sup>21</sup>, not all respondents expressed a desire to do so. One respondent, who had two brothers, said: “I want to give all the love my parents split into three to just one child. I don’t want a second child” (ip 7).

Ding Juan argues that migrants consciously, or unconsciously, connect the relative welfare of children in the cities with urban families’ low number of children and that they, therefore, choose to have fewer children (Ding Juan, interview). An example of this is one respondent, who said: “Sometimes I don’t feel like bringing up more than one child, because we were too many children in my family” (ip 5).

Some respondents not only stated that they wanted only one child, in addition, they also expressed indifference towards the sex of the child, which contradicts the traditional notion of son preferences. “I just want a child that is intelligent and then it doesn’t matter if it is a boy or a girl” (ip 5).

Some respondents even stated that they would prefer to have a girl. “Girls are much easier to dress up so that they become pretty. Boys are so common and also disobedient. Girls listen to what you say” (ip 7).

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<sup>21</sup> All families are subjected to family planning policies in China. In the cities, families are allowed to have only one child, and sometimes the policy is misleadingly called the one-child-policy. However, few rural areas are subjected to one-child-policies and most areas allow families to have a second child if the first borne is a daughter. Furthermore, a second child is allowed if the first borne is disabled and all minorities are allowed to have at least two children, no matter the sex of the child, if the parents belong to the same minority.

Some of the respondents also stated that they wanted to have daughters in order to give them what they had lacked themselves. “I want a daughter (...) I hope that she will be able to fulfil the dreams that I was never able to. I would like to help her make her dreams come true” (ip 4).

In general it seemed as if motherhood was seen as an end to their period of migration. That is, as soon as a woman has a child, it becomes very difficult for her to stay in the city. Despite the fact that neither of the married respondents had left after they had children, it is common that women move back to the countryside when they get children (Xie Lihua, interview). One respondent said:

“When you want to have kids you can’t live like that [the life of a migrant] and you can’t work in temporary jobs. The child needs stability and security” (ip 7).

All the respondents who had children had to leave their work-units when they got pregnant, and none of them were granted employment when they returned to Beijing after they had been home with the child. However, one of the respondents was offered to return to her job as a cleaner in the hospital when she, by chance, visited her old work unit with her sick son, something that she was very grateful for. This is a factor that should not be taken for granted, and it all depends on the relationship with the employer. One respondent told about a colleague of hers who got pregnant. The colleague worked in a work unit where she met another migrant worker whom she liked. After a while, she became pregnant and they got married.

“Now she is back in her home village and her husband is still working in Beijing in order to earn money. He only gets paid for the hours he works, so he can very seldom go and visit his child and it is not for sure that she can come back to work here. She could leave the child with her mother, but even if she would return without the child she could only have her job back if the relations with her boss remain really good” (ip 7).

However, another respondent thought that future motherhood had been an additional reason to stay in the city and, in addition, that it was a motive for her to try to improve her situation and be accepted in the city. She thought it would be unfair, and a question of ‘giving up’, if she would return to the countryside.

“Then the child would have the same problems as me. I think that that wouldn’t be fair to the child. Today I am having a hard time myself and feel depressed and held back. I can’t let my coming generation have the same problems. I can’t let my child be in this social class [being a migrant worker] and have this inferior identity. I thought that I needed to change my identity for my child” (ip 9).

#### 6.4.2 How well can a female migrant make decisions over her own reproductivity?

Whichever the case, there were certain pressures that affected the likelihood for the respondents to act according to their own views on motherhood and childbearing. Other people’s expectations of the woman may function as a hindrance for her to perform according to her own preferences. In other words, the women possess certain values which, afterwards, they were prevented from living according to, due to other people’s intervention. The fact that the women lived far away from their parents and parents-in-law did not always imply that they became free to make their own decisions about their reproductive goals. Even though the

geographical distance may be far, the psychological distance may remain the same, which means that the women may feel obliged to fulfil their traditional reproductive role. The respondents told of how the older generation's expectations were often expressed through the husband, who had a different view of reproductivity, coloured by his parents' demands and wishes. The parents-in-law were often eager to have a grandchild and, above all, a male grandchild. "That is what the traditions are in China" (ip 9). The wife's parents can also have expectations of their daughter's childbearing, since a dignified woman is supposed to give birth to a child at a relatively early age, otherwise people will begin to wonder. One respondent who got pregnant six months after her marriage, at the age of 24, told:

"My parents thought that it was time to have a child, since I'm the oldest in the family. That is a custom in the rural areas; as soon as you have got married you are supposed to have a child" (ip 11).

Several of the respondents, who stated that they wanted only one child, said that their husbands and boyfriends were of a different opinion, which contributed to the pressure to provide her family-in-law with a grandson, something that is increasingly difficult due to the strict implementation of family planning policies. Women who give birth to daughters are often blamed for not providing her family with a son, and that may lead to mistreatment and the possibility of being abandoned by her husband (Jacka 1997: 65). Men were more prone to want two children, if possible, and they also want to have a son. One respondent said that her boyfriend, as a matter of fact, did not care if they would have a son or a daughter, but that his parents would most likely expect him to have a son:

"I think that they want to have a grandson. In the rural areas the son is the head of the family so they still want to have a grandson. But I don't care. I say that a girl will also have the same last name as you. A girl is also a person. Sometimes I tell him not to be like the traditional customs tell you to be" (ip 7).

In general, the respondents were aware that the decision to have a child was not completely made by the respondent and her husband. One respondent, who was the mother of a son, revealed that she "probably would have had to want a second child if the first child had been a daughter" (ip 11).

Nevertheless, it was not always seen as coercive, since there was a wish to please the parents-in-law as well as the respondent's own parents:

"I think it [childbearing] depends a lot on the environment you live in. The decision is not only up to you. Your husband and parents-in-law will also have things to say. And they may want a son and then it is difficult to have a different opinion" (ip 12).

This respondent was the mother of a five-year-old daughter and she felt ambiguous towards having another child, partly because she had a very difficult delivery when her daughter was born, and partly because of their bad economic situation. But she was still considering having a second child:

"I think that since we're allowed to have a second child where I come from, I might as well have a second child (...). It is not me who wants to have a second child, but if I say that I definitely don't want a second child, then I wouldn't be honest either. I want a second child but it is mainly to please his [the husband's] family, because they are so desperate to have a grandson (ip 12).

Her husband also felt obliged to give his parents a grandson: “He [the husband] was with me when I had my daughter and it was a very complicated delivery, and he cried and said that he didn’t want me to go through it again. But if you talk about his family being without a grandson then he is very willing to have a second child and then he is also very fond of the thought of having a son” (ip 12).

#### 6.4.3 Mothers and their wish to secure their children’s education

The issue of motherhood did not only lead to discussions about timing, number and the sex of children. One recurring topic was the issue of the children’s future, which was strongly connected to the wish of providing the children with good education.

Many of the respondents had themselves found that education was a prerequisite for a better job, and that it was difficult to improve their situation since they had low education. Furthermore, education was a major motive for many of the respondents to migrate and, accordingly, the majority of them stated that they thought it was their duty to provide their children with the opportunity to go the school. “I want my child to get a proper education. That’s what I think” (ip 7). However, even if the opportunities for the child to get a good education would be better in the city, it would not be an option in most of the respondents’ eyes.

“It would be impossible to afford. If we put together his [her husband’s] salary and mine and then have to rent a room as well and pay for the child’s school fees it would be impossible. We wouldn’t even have enough to eat” (ip 7).

One respondent said that her child would be forced to return to her (the mother’s) native village to go to school, even though the child had been living in Beijing all her life and the fact that the father was a Beijing resident. If the child was to go to school in Beijing, they would only be accepted after all the children from Beijing were accepted, and an additional tuition fee of 30 000 RMB would have to be paid.

“So my child is also an outsider, somebody who comes from the outside. She can’t enjoy all the benefits that other children can. It’s just the same as when nobody wanted me when I was looking for jobs” (ip 9).

Many children of migrant workers never go to school or drop out of school at an early age due to the fact that they lack the right to schooling in the city. There are schools that have been set up in Beijing recently in order to combat the problem of migrant children’s schooling, but these schools have not been recognised as official schools by the Beijing City authority. This means that the schools constitute a separate system of schools that do not qualify the students to continue to junior middle school in the urban schools. If they would want to go to school for more than six years, the children would be forced to give up their life in the city with their parents and move back to the mother’s native village.<sup>22</sup> Even though schools for migrant workers’ children are better than no schooling at all, there are more obstacles. Putting

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<sup>22</sup> Information from a paper that was presented on a conference on “Women’s rights in the city”, which was due in Beijing 17-19 June.



migrants' children and native children in separate schools increases the segregation and it will limit the migrant children's opportunities and force them to remain in the lower class<sup>23</sup>.

"I don't want my child to go in a school for migrants. What shall I tell my child when all the other kids in the neighbourhood start to go to school? If my child can't go to the same school as her friends, but will be forced to go to a poor school far away, then what effect will that have on her self-confidence? Starting from when she is very young, she will ask me why she can't be like the others. And then I will have to tell her that it is because she doesn't have a hukou. I'm afraid that she will feel inferior and that she won't dare to play with the other children. This is very critical for a child's future. And I'm afraid that my child won't get a good education (...) when she is with her family she will learn that she is always 'number one', but what will happen when she goes out in real life? She will realise that she is not as good as other people. How shall I explain that to her?" (ip 9).

This is a very stressful factor for many mothers, who think that they should make a brighter future for their children and, also, give them a chance to have a better life than they had themselves. Instead, they are faced with either sending their children back to the village, or to pay sums of money that they may not be able to earn in a decade. The goal is therefore hard to achieve and the mothers have no means to change the situation due to their lack of economic and political power.

## **6.5 The Issue of Female Migrant Workers' Productivity**

It has already been accounted for that the respondents held a somewhat different attitude towards childbearing compared to traditional values, which led to their fertility becoming lower in some cases. In other cases, the respondents were not able to act according to their own reproductive goals. However, there were factors in the respondents' lives that contributed to the alteration of their reproductive role, irrespective of their own preferences and other people's expectations.

Firstly, the fact that they had migrated was a factor that delayed their marriage and childbearing age. All the unmarried respondents but one stated that they would undoubtedly have been married and had children if they had not migrated.

"If I had not left my native area I would probably have been married by this time and had a child" (ip 1). Another respondent told: "If I didn't leave my native area I think I would have been growing things with my husband by this time and had a child" (ip 2).

The disadvantageous economic situation of the respondents was another reason for not having children. Low wages contributed to the absence of proper housing, coupled with the fact that migrant workers have to work full-time in order to be able to live. Establishing a family and having a child is very expensive, especially in a long-term perspective, due to the high school fees for migrants' children, as accounted for above. One respondent, who married a rural man in the city, retold how it was only after she had a child that she realised how difficult it was to make ends meet:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

“I think that having a child is a heavy burden. It is not easy to earn much money, and at the same time you have to satisfy the needs of the child. I don’t earn much money so I think that it is better to have only one child. If I had more than one child I would have to think about too many things, that wouldn’t do” (ip 11).

Few people manage to stay after they have got a child. “But people are not that realistic. They say that they want to get married and then they marry but they can’t afford to stay here for a very long time” (ip 7).

Many of the respondents stated that they could consider having a second child if they had the economic prerequisites for it:

“If our living conditions are good in the future then we can have more children. (...) I think that to have children you have to pay a lot of money and you need to give up a lot of your own stuff, so I think that it is better to have fewer children. If you only have one child you can make her eat better and you can have a more pleasant life yourself (...) I can’t have my second child until I’m 28 so I have to wait until next year, but I think that I will wait even longer” (ip 12).

Thus, the low economic position of female migrants was an incentive for not having children, or at least for waiting and giving birth to the second child later. This observation is in line with other studies on migrant women’s fertility, and they also confirm the fact that migration leads to longer birth intervals (Hoy 1996: 2).

Another factor influencing when migrant women wanted to have their first or second child was the fact that they lacked a family that could help them with childcare:

“My greatest concern is that there is nobody to look after my child. Neither my husband’s parents nor mine are living nearby and there is only me to take care of him. I start work at six o’clock in the morning and then I quit work at 16.30 (...) and then I have to hurry to the kindergarten as soon as I can and that is very tiresome. Every time I get there my child is the only one left. If there was a grandmother or grandfather in Beijing they could come and pick him up earlier” (ip 11).

#### 6.5.1 Do female migrant workers escape family planning policies?

There are three main reasons why female migrants would not escape family planning policies. These reasons are neither dependent upon changes in migrant women’s attitudes towards childbearing, nor on economic prerequisites.

The first reason is that any migrant who would attempt to escape the family planning policies would be punished severely in the event that she was discovered. In addition, many villages have implemented a new system, where the migrant woman has to sign a contract before she migrates that guarantees that she will check if she is pregnant every third month (Yu Yan 1998: 33-36). This is because if the migrants escape the family planning policies her local village authorities will be responsible for it and, therefore, they are eager to do what they can in order to prevent it.

“When I left the village I had to sign a contract with the local family planning authorities to get checked every third month. I have to go to a hospital every third month to get checked so that I’m not pregnant (...). If I got pregnant they would force me to have an abortion, and if I choose not to show

up and give birth to a child illegally, then I would have to pay 40 000 to 50 000 yuan in the event that they found out. And if I wouldn't be able to pay they would go back to my village and tear down my house" (ip 10).

The second reason is that the risk of being discovered is relatively high. The Chinese family planning authorities cannot manage to control all migrants at all times. However, the lack of control in an initial phase of a female migrant's fertile age should not imply a lack of control in a later phase. One example worth mentioning is of one respondent who was trapped between the regulations of two city authorities. The respondent did not have any intentions of escaping the family planning policies, but when the authorities discovered that she was pregnant they treated her as if she had. Furthermore, the example is a good illustration of how easily the family planning authorities can exercise their control. The respondent had managed to get her hukou transferred from her native village to the city Shenzhen, where she was working during the first months of pregnancy, while her husband was working in Beijing. After a couple of months she was worn out and the doctor told her to rest and due to her bad state of health she flew back to Beijing. When she was hospitalised in Beijing they asked her for the birth permit, a document which she, according to Beijing City regulations, was supposed to apply for before getting pregnant. However, since she had become pregnant in Shenzhen she did not have a birth permit, since the regulations in Shenzhen stated the childbirth permit could only be applied for after six months of pregnancy. Therefore, the family planning authorities in Beijing compelled her to pay 3000 yuan in fines due to her lack of a birth permit. The whole situation appeared so absurd to her and, coupled with the huge sum of money (which would have been ten times higher if it was her second child), made her very overstrained and already in the fourth month she had a miscarriage:

"I thought that I had struggled so much for so long and then when I wanted to have a child that too was full of problems. If it wasn't for my hukou I would have got married a long time ago and I would probably have been a very happy wife in a happy family with a child, who was a few years old. But due to the absence of a hukou I didn't dare to get married until recently" (ip 9).

The possibility for a migrant to hide in a city is also minute, since anybody who sees a pregnant woman and knows that she has already had her entitled number of children can report it to the nearest family planning centre (Ding Juan, interview).

Finally, a great number of family planning clinics have been set up in Beijing recently in order to provide the floating population with reproductive health services and to control the fertility of migrants (Davin 1998: 312-313, 1999: 132). Provincial or city authorities, other than Beijing, often set up the clinics. This is to prevent the migrants neglecting to check their health. Previously, they were entitled to free health checks in their village but, since the majority of the migrants lived far from their villages, they did not bother to return and in Beijing they had to pay for the check themselves. Therefore, they simply did not do any pregnancy checks. Thus, the local family planning clinics constitute a win-win situation, where the migrants save money and the local authorities have an opportunity to control the fertility of migrants. The first cross-provincial family planning association was set up by Zhejiang province in Beijing and it managed to bring about a significant reduction in the number of unplanned births (Hoy 1996: 4). Nevertheless, Ding Juan is critical of these clinics, since she thinks they are set up only to prevent births outside the birth quotas, but fail to care for the migrants reproductive health (Ding Juan, interview).

## 6.6 Conclusions

The respondents thought that they had become more mature and grown-up since they migrated, and that they had adopted some urban values, which brought about several changes in their gender roles as daughters, wives and mothers.

It was shown that the relationships with their families remained strong and, as well, there were limitations in the extent to which the respondents could exercise their bargaining-power concerning different matters. There seemed to be a correlation between the scope of the bargaining-power and the occurrence of sending back money to their families, which contradicts the assumption made by the UN that contribution of money to the families would increase migrant women's bargaining-power. Nevertheless, it seemed as if the respondents who sent money back home felt more respected due to their economic contribution to the family, and the fact that they were economically independent. The reason why migration in these cases did not increase their bargaining-power considerably may be that they, from the beginning, constituted a part of the families' survival strategy, as was concluded in chapter four as a potential risk in female migration. There were also indicators that female migrants may achieve a closer relationship with their biological family, in the case when they married somebody whose parents lived further away than their biological families. In this case, the migrant would return to *her* parents for childbirth and childcare.

In terms of marriage, migration was a cause of great changes in the migrant women's role as potential wives. The urban values affected migrant women, to such an extent, that their position on the marriage market became very complicated, since they developed certain values that differed from their parents', such as the wish to remain in the city. Thus, it seemed as if the respondents became trapped between urban ways of thinking and a situation where their social and economic situation, as well as their parents expectations, prevented them from integrating into the urban society. This contributed to difficulties in terms of finding a partner, since the migrants became more particular in the choice of partner. The fact that they lived in the city contributed to a greater supply of potential partners, but it was not made use of due to their limited interaction in the urban society. As was concluded from chapter five, migrant women did not think that their urban social status improved significantly. However, their social status in their native villages improved, but this did not facilitate the chances of finding a partner in their home villages. This was due to several reasons. Firstly, the migrants adopted different wishes concerning partners, which meant that they were no longer satisfied with marrying the average rural man. Secondly, the negative attitude towards migrant women in the rural society contributed to cases where rural men did not want to marry migrant women, since they did not know what they 'had been up to'. In addition, in the event that there would be a suitable partner in their native village, it would be too late to catch a good husband, since they had spent considerable time outside their villages during the time when the largest proportion of young people in the village got married. Furthermore, there were less chances of finding an urban partner, since urban men prefer a wife with urban hukou status.

In terms of childbearing, the respondents held some attitudes that differed from the traditional views of childbearing. This was expressed, especially, in when they wanted to have children,

how many children they wanted, and whether they wanted a son or a daughter. It was found that some respondents preferred to have daughters, since they wanted to give their daughters chances that they had not had themselves. However, there were limitations to the extent in which the respondents could act according to their own preferences. The parents-in-law, the husbands, as well as the biological parents had opinions about their reproductive goals. This also confirms that migration had limited impact on increasing in their bargaining-power. Nevertheless, the fact that their economic position was low left them with no other choice than to postpone marriage and childbearing, which they considered to be positive things, since none of them wished to marry and have children early. Furthermore, the authorities' fear that migrant workers would escape family planning policies was minimal, mainly due to the fact that they would not have been able to afford a second child. A further reason was due to the severe punishments women and their families would incur if they gave birth to children outside of the birth quotas.

## 7. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

### 7.1 Gender Roles and Female Labour Migration

The results of this study have shown that there were many aspects in female migration, apart from the economic aspect, that explained why female labour migration took place. For example, there were several examples of respondents migrating with the purpose of gaining something beyond economic returns, such as to gain an education, broaden their views, develop their independence, and to see the world. Thus, there were considerable underlying social factors behind the respondents' decision to join the urban working force. Other aspects of why migration took place were related to the respondents' behaviour in relation to their gender roles, as well as their families' expectations of them. This confirms the assumption that the behavioural approach, which points out that each migrant acts according to the prevailing norms and values that determines gender roles, is important in understanding female migration (Chant and Radcliffe 1992: 20-24, Lim 1993: 197-218, Thadani & Todaro 1984: 50). It was also shown that the household strategy approach, which points to the power relations and decision-making structures within the family as determining factors for migration, is important in order to grasp the complex phenomenon of female labour migration (Chant and Radcliffe 1992: 20-24). There were several signs of this, and these are important approaches to bring up in order to understand female migration.

There were indicators that the patriarchal society, which is characterised by son preference, bride prices, and the bride's move to her husband's family, sets the scene within which rural women's gender roles are shaped, and women learn to be subordinate to their families and men in general. There were examples of discrimination and gender-related problems that could have been a reason for the respondents to migrate but, still, it is hard to argue that rural women in China migrate because of their subordinate position in their families and the patriarchal control. Only one respondent indicated that she had migrated due to unfair treatment, otherwise the respondents did not perceive their position within their families as being a question of gender inequality. Another reason why the argument falters is that, even if a woman were to perceive herself as discriminated within her family, it would not be a reason to migrate since she would move away from her family in order to get married. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that rural women migrate in order to escape the patriarchal setting in the countryside in general and not due, particularly, to their low position in their own families. Other studies of the Third World have shown similar results and it has, for example, been suggested that African women may see migration as a means to escape their traditional subordinate gender roles (Thadani & Todaro 1984: 45). In China, as in other countries, participation in the labour force might be a means to gain something beyond economic resources, such as independence, improvement of social position and emancipation.

There were also indicators that rural women become part of their families' survival strategies, which means that they voluntarily migrate in order to help their families. This phenomenon is not only valid for families that are very poor, but also for the average rural family. It was not uncommon for female migrants to send back money in order to help their families afford their

brother's schooling or their brother's marriage. This can be explained by adding the behavioural approach as an explanation to migration, considering the fact that rural daughters are brought up within a context where the sons are expected to take over as head of the family and thus need the money.

It was found that the respondents, similar to other female migrant workers, were employed in the low-skilled and low-paid sectors. This is characteristic of many Third World countries and, it has been suggested, one reason why women tend to end up in the low-skill and low-paid sector is that women's productive role is strongly connected to their reproductive role. The prevailing ideology in the Third World is that women are naturally bound to take care of the household and serving others, while men are obliged to provide the economic means for women to be able to undertake their reproductive role. Thus, the idea of women as dependent on men legitimates their low salaries and, thereby, their low social status (Brochmann 1990: 39-41). An additional observation made from this study is that rural women's fixed gender roles are a hindrance for them to improve their social status by moving to the city.

It has been argued that migrant women's economic contribution to their families would increase their bargaining-power in general, which would also imply increased bargaining-power in terms of reproductive goals (Hugo 1993: 64). However, it was questionable if the respondents could act according to their own wishes and values. The persistent close relationship to the biological parents as well as the parents-in-law, the remaining bride prices, and the limited job opportunities contributed to the fact that it was difficult for the respondents to break the patterns of inferiority. Furthermore, all respondents had incomes that were less than half the sum of their husbands' income. Thus, the married respondents' economic contribution to their family was not more than in the village in relative terms, which may be a reason as to why their bargaining-power in terms of reproductive goals was not so strong. Therefore, there is a potential risk that migration could cause the traditional roles to become reintegrated into the new situation in the city. This observation has also been made in other countries (Brochmann 1990: 46).

As was discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the notion of female labour migration has been associated with economic reasons for migration. The conclusion of the results in this study is that this association is too simplistic. Female labour migration includes many purposes, apart from purely economic gains, related to the migrant's wish to live integrated within the urban society and, as well, to be able to benefit from such a life.

## **7.2 The Issue of Migrant Women's Fertility**

Contrary to allegations that female migrants attempt to escape family planning policies, the fertility rate among the respondents seemed to be lower compared to if they had stayed in the countryside (Liu & Goldstein 1996: 145-153, Davin 1999: 130).

Other non-China specific studies have found that there are three theories that explain why fertility declines for migrant women. (1) The adaptation theory explains lower fertility as a

product of the adoption of urban values so that the fertility among migrants moves towards that of urban women, which is a result of new family-size norms, as well as the costs of a child. (2) The selectivity theory sees the decline as an outcome of the selectivity among migrants and that women who migrate have lower fertility goals than women who chose not to migrate. (3) A third explanation is the disruption theory which indicates that migration in itself is a disruption in fertility since it postpones marriage and childbearing, or promotes separation of spouses, and leads to increasing physiological stress (Hugo 1993: 64-65, Tan Xiaoqing 1994: 182-184).

The disruption theory is unambiguously true for the migrants of this study. All the respondents, with the exception of one, were certain that they would have been married and had children by now if they had not migrated.

However, it is difficult to ascertain whether the relatively modern attitudes towards childbearing were a consequence of their adaptation to urban lifestyles or, conversely, if the respondents held these attitudes from the beginning. Thus, the selectivity model is hard to confirm in this study.

Furthermore, the adaptation theory has to be discussed with some reservation due to China's family planning policies. Since no family in China is allowed to have more than two children it is difficult to argue that migrant women adapt to urban women's norms concerning the number of children. On the contrary, the traditional influence and the need for a future 'old-age-security' seem to be causes for the respondents' desire for the number of children they are allowed to, as long as the economic situation allows. However, it may be that the migrant women adopt urban values in the sense that they are convinced that fewer children is good and they may, hence, perceive family planning policies as less coercive.

The signs of alteration of reproductive goals among migrants are likely to affect the rural society, since most migrants sooner or later return to their native villages, which may contribute to lower fertility among rural women. This is in line with the goals of the state family planning commission, which advocates the campaign *later, longer, fewer*, which means that they try to encourage people to marry later, have longer intervals between births and have fewer children. Caroline Hoy goes as far as to claim that "Migration may prove to be one of the most powerful forces in China's demographic history, replacing the family planning policy as medium of change" (Hoy 1996: 24). However, the results from this study also show that the traditional traits are still strong and, moreover, that the relationship to the family and the family-in-law causes migrants to neglect their new views on marriage and childbearing. This implies that there is a possibility that the migrants do not marry as late, have longer intervals between births, and have as many (few) children as they would really want themselves.

Irrespective of whether migration leads to lower fertility rates or not, I believe that return migrants may contribute to the development of women's position in the rural areas and that migration is a means to spread more equal and more modern ideas about women's roles, marriage and childbearing.



### 7.3 Western contra Chinese Perspectives

There are many examples in this thesis that point to the unfavourable position of women. However, as a Western reader, one has to be aware of cultural differences between China and the West, and that one thing may be viewed completely differently depending on the prevailing norms and attitudes the interpreter holds. For example, the fact that one respondent gave up her salary in order to make her older brother's wedding more prosperous, instead of spending it on tuition fees or her own wedding, may be seen as unfair and upsetting from a Western individualistic perspective. One might wonder why the respondent did not take the initiative to spend the money on something that benefited herself, or even, why did her brother not work in the city in order to make *her* marriage prosperous? However, in a Chinese context it may seem more natural that she is actually spending her money on her brother's marriage, since the family, and not the individual, is the basic unit. Therefore, it might have been astonishing in Chinese people's eyes if she had *not* given her money to the brother's wedding, since his wedding will contribute to the welfare of their parents, which also lies in the interest of the daughter.

### 7.4 Methodological Considerations

No research reflecting migrants' own views and attitudes seemed to exist. A qualitative approach, aimed at gaining detailed, in-depth knowledge about the migrants' situation, was chosen, since there was no evidence, so far, pointing towards important areas to concentrate a broader quantitative study of the research questions that this study focused upon. There were sources describing surface-knowledge, such as the migrants' age, destination, educational background, and main occupations, and this has served as a context for the present study. The results of this study will hopefully serve as a basis for developing a larger study where the relative importance of different variables can be explored, such as the variables mentioned above as well as place of origin, the original family's economy and so forth.

Some issues that have been examined in this thesis could have been approached by extending the investigation to include the native villages of the respondents, which would have given an insight into how the families of the respondents perceived the situation. For example, there was a problem in the analysis of the decision-making process, when the decision to migrate was made, since it was hard to ascertain if the families' resistance to migration was due to ideologies that say that women should retain their traditional role and remain in the household. Or was it a question of the family being sceptical due to concern for the daughter's wellbeing? Furthermore, in the cases where the family showed no resistance, was it a question of the migrant's family possessing modern thoughts and liberal attitudes towards young people's wishes and needs? Or was it a question of utilising female labour to the greatest extent possible, since she would move out in any case? To find some answers to these questions it would have been necessary to get to know the views of the families.

It would also have been useful to interview the husbands of the married women in order to delineate how the respondents' roles as wives and mothers were affected by migration. Thus, it is important to bear in mind that the results of this study are based on the migrant women's views and experiences, which might be different from the views of their family members. To include the family members in an investigation of female labour migration and gender roles would hopefully also be an interesting theme for future research.

Furthermore, it is possible that the respondents reshaped some views of the past after some time in Beijing. For example, the small role they gave to economic reasons for migration could be a question of reconstruction. If the respondents would have been interviewed just before, or just after, migration their answers might have been more money-oriented and, it is possible, that their purpose of migration became more focused on their self-development only after some time in Beijing. Another example is that their awareness that opportunities for development in their native villages were lacking might be something that they became aware of after migration took place. It is possible that only after the respondent had spent some time in the city, and learnt about how life could be, did their motives and purposes concerning self-development and education appear. However, it could also be that the respondents' subordinate role within their families, which made them feel obliged to send back the money they did not spend on basic living, made them incapable of benefiting from the migration economically and, therefore, they were left with no other option than to take up any other advantages of living in the city.

### **7.5 Future Prospects for the Female Floating Population**

The way the female labour force is utilised is quite remarkable, since there is obviously a need for women to join the urban labour force, both from the household economy perspective and the need of services for the urban population. In other words, neither the family nor the government do the migrant women 'a favour' in allowing them to participate in the labour force, as it is sometimes put forward and also perceived by the female workers. It is clear that the Chinese government does not take enough measures to combat the problem of the floating population. The floating population actually constitutes a problem since they are left with less attractive jobs and houses in the cities, leading to segregation, marginalisation and social unrest. There are few measures to meet the special needs of the migrants, and especially women, due to their already subordinate role in society.

In order to change the subordinate position of migrant women, changes in state policy are needed. One example of how state policies affect the migrants is the effects of the hukou system. In several situations the respondents were restricted due to the hukou system. If migrant women are to benefit from migration, to the extent that they should be entitled to, the hukou system needs to be changed. This system is under reform and cities, other than Beijing, have tried to reduce the hukou system and give rural migrants a chance to integrate into the urban society. The hukou system needs to be changed in the sense that any child in a rural-urban marriage should have the right to obtain the same hukou status as the father. It also needs to be changed in the sense that the legislation concerning unequal working conditions

for rural and urban residents needs to be abolished. If migrant workers would be allowed to compete in the job market under the same conditions as urban dwellers, and if the migrants' children were included in the school-system, then there would be a great change in female labour migration. For example, it has been shown that the family planning policy might not benefit women but, rather, can lead to stress and discrimination if women fail to provide their family-in-laws with sons. This stress could be avoided if the migrants were able to have a well-paid job and remain in the city. When the hukou system becomes less rigid it is expected that rural women will be able to fulfil their dreams of establishing themselves permanently in the cities as urban residents.

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## 9. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Name:

Age:

Marital status:

Number of children, if any:

Level of education:

Place of origin:

A.1 When did you come to Beijing?

A.2 What do you work with? What are the working-conditions like?

A.3 What is your work-history in Beijing?

A.4 What did you do before you migrated?

B.1 Why did you migrate? What was your motive?

B.2 What did your family say? Were there any conflicts? What is your family like?

B.3 Was the decision to migrate related to your position in the family?

B.4 What expectations did you have when you came to Beijing?

B.5 What do you think about your living-conditions? What if you compare your native area with Beijing?

B.6 How important is money?

B.7 For whose sake do you earn money? Do you send money to your family?

C.1 What do you think about social contacts in the city?

C.2 How do you believe the Beijing people perceive you and how do they treat you?

C.3 Do you think that your social status improved after you migrated?

D.1 What are the prevailing family planning policies in your home village?

D.2 What are the marriage customs in your village like?

D.3 What about equality between the sexes in your village? Is there still an ideology of men superior to women (zhongnan qingnu)?

D.4 What is your family's attitude towards your marriage and childbearing?

D.5 Do you have a boyfriend?

D.6 How do you feel about marriage? What is your ideal marriage like? (if unmarried)

D.7 Did you have any expectations about future partners?

D.8 What is your ideal husband like? Is there a difference between rural men and urban men?

D.9 What do you think about childbearing? What does your boyfriend/husband (if any) think of childbearing?

D.9 Do you want to return to the countryside to get married or do you want to find somebody in the city? (if unmarried)

D.10 Do you miss home?

E. If you had not migrated, what would you be like today?

F. In what respect do you think that the fact that you migrated has changed you? Has it changed your attitude towards marriage and childbearing?

