

**Rural-Urban Migration Pathways and Desires under Neoliberal Socioeconomic Reform in Contemporary China**

by

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# **Rural-Urban Migration Pathways and Desires under Neoliberal Socioeconomic Reform**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2019

In this thesis, I analyze how the neoliberal practices – especially the commodification of labor power and deregulation of the labor market in China — have caused the displacement of millions of Chinese rural peasants. The premise of the study is that China in many ways exhibits qualities of a neoliberal state in its policies such as rapid urbanization, rural-urban migration, deregulation, and privatization. In general, I use neoliberalism as a term that indicates how macro level policies exert influence on individuals and families on a micro level, culturally, economically and socially.

To address these questions about the relationship between migrant workers and neoliberalism, I focus on a specific case study of two generations of one migratory family's inter-provincial migration experiences in China since the 1980s. By focusing on what has been happening to the Huang family's relationships and gender roles, and how people experience family relationships in this bigger neoliberal development context, I try to understand the factors that shape the lives of those who are involved in rural-urban migration under China's form of global neoliberal capitalism today. My ethnographic research closely examines the family's first and second-generations of migrant workers. The generations mainly discussed here are the generation of parents (three siblings who are now in their fifties) and their children's generation (mainly three cousins who are now in their twenties). This family helps illuminate some of the broader social changes and subtle changes in family relationships that have taken place under China's neoliberal socioeconomic reform since the late 1970s. Alongside migratory opportunities, they have experienced changes in family relationships, gender roles, and social

hierarchies. By looking at the neoliberal reforms in China and how they have influenced the lives of the people involved in rural-urban migration, I connect individual experiences of China's socioeconomic development to broader global development and neoliberal capitalism.

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## Preface

Growing up in the southern China, I have witnessed and experienced the astonishing economic growth of contemporary China under the "opening up" reforms. I have also witnessed the growing social inequalities and tensions, changing social relations, labor relations, and individual experiences through my own family and the specific social environment in which I was immersed. Due to my family background, I have always been concerned about migrant workers' livelihood, social welfare and labor-related problems in China. I always aspired to make a difference in their life situations, because I share similar sentiments with them.

Upon graduation from high school, I decided to work and experience workers' daily lives and struggle under the militarized dormitory labor regime at Foxconn's factory in Shenzhen for two weeks after the tragedies of a series of suicides of young migrant workers at Foxconn. That 2-week experience significantly changed my perspectives. That was the first time I truly understood the despair and anxiety of young migrant workers due to their workload, isolation, loneliness, intense surveillance, and rigorous labor regime. This motivated me to study sociology, politics, cultural anthropology and philosophy in my undergraduate years because I want to understand how the political and social system functions in a way that causes the structural violence which has contributed to the suffering of migrant workers. I also wondered how we can change the status quo. From this experience I learned that I enjoy fieldwork and field research because I can interact and communicate well with people from all walks of lives, and their stories often inspire me to uncover deeper social issues and causes.

Inspired and advised by Dr. Nicole Constable and Dr. Roger Rouse in the field of cultural anthropology, I received funding from the Office of Undergraduate Research and University

Center of International Studies in 2018 to conduct my first ethnographic research and to make a documentary film about rural-urban migration pathways in contemporary China under neoliberal socioeconomic reform. Through this ethnographic research and documentary filmmaking from May to August 2018, I developed a deeper understanding of the lives of people involved in rural-urban migration, and different social relations such as labor and class. My passion for conducting ethnographic research and making a documentary film about people's social suffering motivated me to pursue the further study in the field of migration, labor politics, gender and class relations because I wanted to contribute my findings to making a difference in both academia and among socially disadvantaged groups.

I would never be able to find enough words to convey the extent of my gratitude and respect for my thesis advisor, Nicole Constable. With criticisms being always gentle and encouragement so ample, she has taught me how to properly and carefully write academic research paper as a student scholar, often pushing me to think out of the box and realize my own limits. Given such a short amount of time, I appreciate her time and patience giving valuable advice to my thesis. She has been my inspiration and role model for my future academic path.

My dissertation committee members—Dr. Roger Rouse, Dr. Yue Ding and Dr. Arianne Gaetano—have given me useful suggestions and help on revising my thesis. With their diverse expertise in neoliberalism, China Studies, and Cultural Anthropology, they have challenged me to write clearly and think of a broad audience. I am especially grateful to Dr. Rouse for being so generous with his time and words, for his guidance on my undergraduate years, for superb comments and indispensable practical tips on my academic life at Pitt as an international student. I thank other professors at the University of Pittsburgh, especially those from the Global Studies

Center, Political Science Department, and Anthropology Department, for creating a diverse intellectual community.

My warmest and special thanks are to all of the research participants in my ethnographic research on rural-urban migration, my parents who supported my decision to study abroad, and to my extended family in China. Thank you for your support and understanding. Without the recognition from all of you, I cannot accomplish this project which is most important to me.

## 1.0 Introduction: Neoliberalism and Rural-Urban Migration

“It is nice to come back home to see my old mother and my siblings healthy and live a pleasant life with their family, but in the end, I don't belong to here anymore. ‘Home’ is not home to me. Most of the time, my presence here is just an outsider or guest to my family. I still need to go back to the city. The city has been my home since I left here even though I still struggle to find my value in that place.”

---Xia (interview in Hunan)

Since the implementation of neoliberal policies in the U.S. in the late 1970s, including deregulation, commodification of public goods, and redistribution of wealth, neoliberal reforms have been promoted to broader regions in Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere. Neoliberal capitalism, which is typically characterized by the free flow of capital, privatization, deregulation and market globalism, has been introduced to most of the countries of the Global South since then. According to Steger (2009), market globalism advocates for a consumerist, neoliberal, and free-market world, with an emphasis on individualism and free choice. Influenced by this ideology, generations of people in the global south are transformed into neoliberal subjects in the sense that they are individuals with the freedom to practice their agency in the consumerist neoliberal era. Although neoliberalism has different manifestations in the economic, cultural, and political realm, Gilbert (2013, 11) identifies two key factors that define neoliberalism. First, he notes that there are some regularities and similarities in the basic elements of “neoliberal policy” worldwide. He asserts that neoliberal policies mainly include privatization of public assets, contraction and centralization of democratic institutions, deregulation of labor markets, reduction in progressive taxation, restrictions on labor organization, labor market deregulation, and active encouragement of

competitive and entrepreneurial modes of relation across the public and commercial sectors (Gilbert 2013,12). Second, he points to the extent to which a range of significant cultural phenomena share and work to reproduce the basic presuppositions of neoliberal thought and the long-term social objectives of neoliberal policies (Gilbert 2013, 12).

China's economic development clearly exhibits the privatization of communal assets and market liberalization since the late 1970s, and thus well exemplifies one of the key neoliberal features described by Gilbert. In "A Brief History of Neoliberalism", David Harvey presents a well-researched analysis of the history of China's socioeconomic reform, and he emphasizes that the key substantive achievement of neoliberalization has been to redistribute wealth rather than to generate wealth and income (Harvey 2005,159). What Harvey means by redistribution is that the mechanism operates under the rubric of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2005,159). Based on the "accumulation by dispossession", Harvey refers to Marx's ideas about the continuation and proliferation of accumulation practices during the rise of capitalism (Harvey 2005, 159). These practices include the commodification and privatization of land, the forceful expulsion of the peasant populations, and the commodification of labor power. China, where more than 274 million peasants were displaced [by 2014] (Ye 2016, 910) thus serves as a prime example of Harvey's neoliberal practices. To define neoliberal practices, he assumes that the policy regime is oriented toward the maximization of private and corporate profit through the deregulation of labor markets, the political repression of organized labor, and the privatization of state and communal assets. This neoliberal ideology is clearly seen in Europe and the U.S. In this thesis, I analyze how the neoliberal practices – especially the commodification of labor power and deregulation of the labor market in China -- has caused the displacement of millions of Chinese rural peasants. According to Parnell and Robinson (2012), the demographic

transition of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has shifted the locus of urbanizing populations from the global north to the global south. In other words, rural-urban migration has become an integral part of urbanization and neoliberalization in the global south. Millions of rural people in the global south have become the main targets of neoliberal reforms that are aimed at transforming peasants into wage laborers to facilitate urban development. In terms of labor, urban neoliberal development requires the deregulation of the labor market, the commodification of the labor force, and the redistribution of wealth. Facilitated by the privatization of farmland and the reduction of the social safety net, most rural people have few choices but to leave their rural homes in pursuit of economic opportunities that are changing the social landscape of both urban and rural China (Fan 2008).

In addition, the hukou<sup>1</sup> or household registration system, and rural-urban migration in China facilitate the Chinese state's urban neoliberalization and contribute to a unique phenomenon in China that is referred to as "semi-proletarianization" (Ngai and Lu, 2010). Neoliberal capitalist reform has caused proletarianization, transforming peasants into low-wage workers in the urban areas. Proletarianization is a pivotal process of capitalist development, and by definition, it is defined as an increase in the number of people who lack control over the means of production and survive by selling their labor power. Ngai and Lu (2010) describe semi-proletarianization as a process that is distinctive of modern China's socioeconomic development model and its reliance on rural-urban migrant workers. From their perspective, China has become "the world's factory" and has given rise to a new working class of rural migrant workers as a result of its reform policies (Ngai and Lu 2010, 493). This process

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<sup>1</sup> Hukou Registration has long been, remain today, the central institutional mechanism defining the city-countryside relationship and shaping important elements of state-society relations in the People's Republic. Hukou registration not only provides the principal basis for establishing identity, citizenship, and proof of official status, it was essential for every aspect of daily life (Cheng and Selden 1994, 644).

underlies the path of semi-proletarianization of Chinese peasant workers, and this process has become critically relevant to the second-generation of peasant workers. They are in a constant state of displacement and are trapped by an incessant vicious migratory cycle – shifting back and forth between their rural hometowns and their urban workplaces. For both first-generation and the second-generation migrant workers described in this thesis, the repeated temporary movement between the city and countryside, rather than permanent migration, has become a way of life and an essential means of economic betterment, as it has for millions of Chinese peasants (Fan 2008). Based on Fan's account, this strategy entails "negotiation within and across households and changes in the gender division of labor" (Fan 2008, i).

The growth of wage work has had a profound impact on all areas of social life: it has transformed the ways people work and relate to one another. It has altered the structure of family and community, and it has led to new political demands and collective actions. The dominance of neoliberal capitalism has dramatically changed labor relations, family relations, and individual experiences, by transforming people into neoliberal subjects through neoliberal ideologies that are characterized by consumerism and individualism. There is little discussion in the existing literature on how the rural-urban migration caused by neoliberalism and neoliberal practices can differently influence individual peasant workers' lives and family relations. In my thesis, by focusing on two generations of one migrant family, I attempt to bring the concept of neoliberalism into an analysis of how rural-urban migration has changed individual peasant workers' everyday lives. In particular, I am interested in how it has affected their personal, familial, and wider social lives. It is important to introduce a neoliberal analysis to Chinese rural-urban migration studies because urban neoliberalization -- which is the main force of rural-

urban migration and redistribution of wealth between urban and rural population -- is guided by neoliberalism and neoliberal practices.

### **1.1 Primary Research Questions**

The premise of the study is that China exhibits some elements of neoliberalism in its policies such as urbanization, rural-urban migration, and privatization. Drawing on my ethnographic research conducted during the summer of 2018, I ask how neoliberal reforms have influenced the lives and relationships of the Huang family. Based on the research with this family, I explore how neoliberal reforms have created a need and desire to migrate, and how migration, which is encouraged by neoliberalism, has impacted individual and family lives. Also, I examine how individuals in this family respond differently to neoliberal pressure and opportunity presented by migration which helps to illustrate the microlevel changes under neoliberal reforms. I argue that the idea and concept of neoliberalism is useful for us to understand how China accomplishes contemporary socioeconomic development, and how it uses the massive labor force and migratory movement to facilitate development. In general, I use neoliberalism as a term that indicates how macro level policies exert influence on individuals and families on a micro level, culturally, economically and socially.

To address these questions about the relationship between migrant workers and neoliberalism, I focus on a specific case study of two generations of one migratory family's inter-provincial migration experiences in China since the 1980s. By focusing on what has been happening to the Huang family's relationships and gender roles, and how people experience family relationships in this bigger neoliberal development context, I try to understand the factors

that shape the lives of those who are involved in rural-urban migration under the form of global neoliberal capitalism in China today. My ethnographic research closely examines the family's first and second-generations of migrant workers. The generations mainly discussed here are the generation of parents (three siblings who are now in their fifties) and their children's generation (mainly three cousins who are now in their twenties). This family helps illuminate some of the broader social changes and subtle changes in family relationships that have taken place under China's neoliberal socioeconomic reform since the late 1970s. Alongside migratory opportunities, they have experienced changes in family relationships, gender roles, and social hierarchies. By looking at the neoliberal reforms in China and how they have influenced the lives of the people involved in rural-urban migration, I will connect individual experiences of China's socioeconomic development to broader global development dominated by neoliberal capitalism.

## **1.2 China's Rural-Urban Migration**

The story of migration in the post-Mao era is a story of modern China's development. With the surging urbanization and neoliberal economic reform in China's major coastal cities beginning in the late 1970s, migration has presented new opportunities for many rural men and women. Dreams of wealth, modernity, job opportunities, and economic liberalization have attracted millions of migrant workers from rural areas to major cities in China, after decades of political and economic turmoil, causing the largest human migration in human history (Miller 2012). Even though economic need is a significant factor that has motivated many rural people to migrate, migrant workers' migration choices are not simply determined by

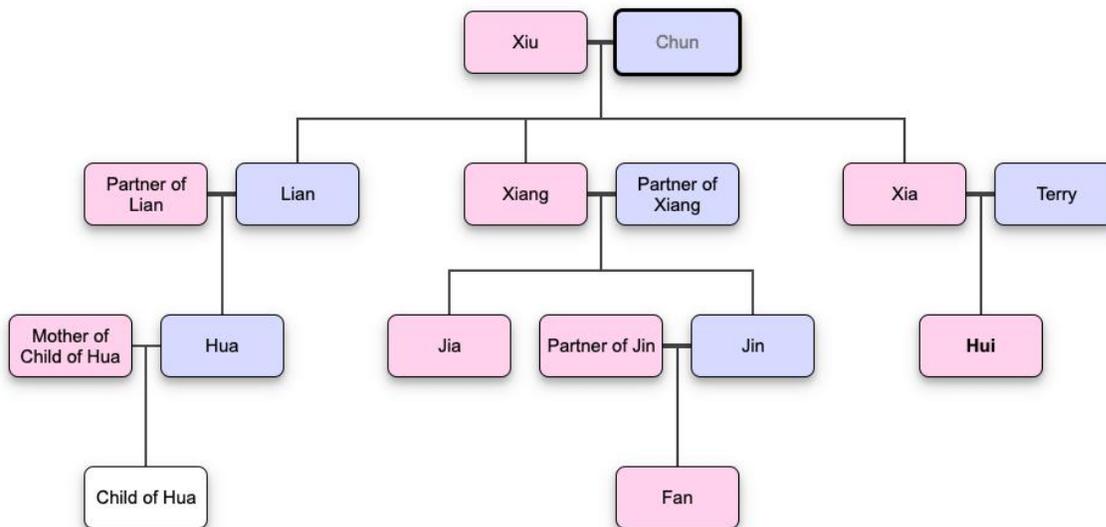
economic incentives under the neoliberal socioeconomic reform. There are other factors at play in their migration choices, such as the desire for modernity, love, freedom, consumer culture (Jacka 2004, Chang 2009; Gaetano 2015; Ngai 2016 or 2012).

Rural-urban migrants are not merely economically driven actors. From my ethnographic research of a rural migrant family from Hunan, I learned of more complex entanglements of family relationships, individual motivations, and cultural influences that have shaped rural migrants' life trajectories under China's socioeconomic neoliberal reforms. During the ethnographic research, I looked back at their pasts to understand why they chose to migrate, or not migrate to cities; how the first-generation workers in this family educated their children; and how their individual migration experiences influenced their children. I also examined how family relationships, cultural influences, and the broader socioeconomic environment of China influenced their life trajectories. Mainly, I ask how the first and the second-generation migrant workers relate differently to neoliberal urbanization and neoliberal labor regime of the Chinese State.

### **1.3 The Huang Family**

This specific migrant family consists of four generations of living family members who currently reside in three different provinces of China: Hunan, Zhejiang, and Guangdong (See Figure 1. Genealogy). My research touches briefly on the lives of the oldest generation, consisting of Chun, the elderly patriarch who passed away in 2018, and the matriarch, Xiu,

who still lives in Hunan with her eldest son, Lian.<sup>2</sup> I barely touch on the lives of the youngest generation as they are still very small children. I focus mainly on the two subsequent “migrant generations” (the central foci of chapters two and three). The first migrant generation includes Xiu and Chun’s adult children, the siblings I refer to as elder brother Lian, older sister Xiang, and younger sister Xia. The three siblings were born in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Their children, the second migrant generation, were born in the late 1980s and 1990s. The migration trajectories of both generations reveal certain similarities, differences, and connections. In this family, the three siblings' relationships have changed over the years, largely because of their different economic situations and status.



**Figure 1. The Huang Family Kinship Chart**

<sup>2</sup> The names are all pseudonyms to protect the identity of the family members.

Older brother Lian, now in his 50s, has depended on farming for his livelihood and has lived in Hunan with his elderly parents Chun and Xiu in their home community for decades. When he confronted the choice of whether to migrate or not, he was deeply influenced by Confucian values of filial piety, rural patriarchy, and the role of the eldest son in relation to his parents and to the land. However, through our interviews, I discovered that his migratory choice was also determined by his own individual definition of “freedom.” In contrast to his sisters, he believed that he would have greater freedom in his rural hometown rather than in a factory where he expected to have highly limited mobility and where he would not be his own boss, compared with subsistence farming where he was in control of his time and efforts. In contrast, his two sisters hold very different views. Older sister Xiang and younger sister Xia both thought that working in the city would allow them greater mobility and freedom. Yet, despite the fact that both sisters were migrant workers, they had very different life trajectories. They also approached migration, marriage, education, and their rural and urban identities very differently.

The older sister, Xiang, now in her early 50s, married a man who was introduced to her by her parents and a matchmaker when she worked in a factory in a nearby town. After they married, she gave birth to a daughter, Jia, and a few years later to a son, Jin. After living for a few years with her husband in his rural hometown, her younger sister Xia helped her find work in the city of Shenzhen, a Special Economic Zone<sup>3</sup> on China’s southeast coast.<sup>3</sup> Xiang thus migrated to the city to work, but traveled back to her rural hometown once a year, for a number of different reasons including her poor health, needing to take care of her children, and financial constraints. She changed her occupation from factory worker, domestic worker, janitor and then

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<sup>3</sup> Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are contained geographic regions within countries – a demarcated area of land used encourage industry, manufacturing, and services for export, and are typically characterized by more liberal laws and economic policies than a country’s general economic laws (Wang 2009, 2).

back to factory worker over the course of her migration trajectory. During the years she worked in the city, she left her two children behind in her husband's rural hometown while her mother-in-law took care of them. Even though she did not want her children to be "left-behind children"- a common social phenomenon among the rural migrant workers' children -- she could not afford the high cost of bringing her children to the city. Xiang's husband went to Shenzhen with her and worked as a bartender for two years and then returned to rural Hunan and did farm work while Xiang remained in the city to work. However, after several years of separation he rejoined Xiang again to work in Shenzhen. Due to their lack of a good educational environment and adequate parental care, her children dropped out of school at a very young age and became the second-generation migrant workers who, like their parents, engage in circular migration between city and rural hometown. They only go back to their rural hometown once a year, during the New Year holiday.

Even after decades of economic reform, the majority of rural-urban migrant workers in China still perform low-paying jobs and live in poor conditions in urban areas (Wen and Lin 2012, 120). Migrant workers and their children still face formidable obstacles to access public goods such as primary education and medical care (Xiang 2007). Therefore, a significant number of migrant workers cannot afford to bring their children with them to their urban migration destinations. Wen and Lin argue that left-behind children are "disadvantaged in health behavior and school engagement" (Wen and Lin 2011, 120). Their study of left-behind children in China also shows those children who are left behind by their migrant mothers are the least engaged in school compared to the children of non-migrant in rural China (Wen and Lin 2011, 126). Their observation helps to explain Xiang's children's low school engagement and

academic achievement, which resulted in their decisions to drop out of school and take a migration path.

Younger sister Xia, now in her late forties, left rural Hunan Province for Shenzhen, the sister city of Hong Kong, several years before elder sister Xiang, and she later helped Xiang to find work there as well. Xia's migration experience is different from her siblings' because she chose to settle in the urban area through marriage to a Hong Kong businessman. Although Xia has lived a relatively well-off life compared to her siblings, she said "Home is not home to me," in the interview as she found she could no longer fit into her rural family after years of living in the city. Xia left home when she was 19 years old, and worked first at a garment factory and later as a hostess in a high-end restaurant where she eventually met her husband, a businessman from Hong Kong involved in cross-border trade, who was 18 years her senior. Because of her marriage, and because she stayed in Shenzhen and occasionally Hong Kong during her adult life, her life path is different from those of her siblings. Her life situation improved significantly after her marriage and she gained the opportunity to live in Shenzhen and Hong Kong, where her husband was based. Younger Sister Xia's daughter, Hui, now in her twenties, received far better education in both in Shenzhen and Hong Kong, and experienced far better living conditions than her cousins, the children of elder brother Lian and older sister Xiang.

Most importantly, during the 27 years that Younger Sister Xia resided in Shenzhen, she was unable to secure an urban *hukou* that would allow her to be an official urban resident due to policy constraints. Her inability to attain an urban *hukou* in Shenzhen, or residence in Hong Kong, will directly influence her life prospects after she retires. Despite such policy constraints, the competitive urban working environment and various financial setbacks she has experienced, she still chose to remain in Shenzhen rather than return to Hunan. She said that

she sees herself and identifies as an urban citizen (despite her lack of *hukou*), and as someone with good *suzhi*<sup>4</sup> (Gaetano 2015) or cultural qualities, not as an uneducated rural peasant of low cultural quality. Consequently, the three siblings' different life choices have had a significant influence on their lives and on those of their children (who are now in their twenties and thirties). Their children can be seen as belonging to different social classes, as defined by their educational attainment and their career opportunities.

This specific migrant family illustrates not only its own idiosyncratic experiences, but also the broader development of contemporary China's new class formation that simultaneously undermines and marginalizes the social status of the working-class (including rural-urban migrants), alongside the phenomenal rise of China's middle-class. From the perspective of labor, the comparison between first-generation and second-generation migrants in this family indicates the changes in individual reactions and views pertaining to the "dormitory labor regime" that Ngai (2012), describes as precarious living and working conditions, the sense of displacement and insecurity, and unfair state policies targeted at migrants in Chinese society. In terms of their personal lives, the second-generation migrants in this family have more easily assimilated to urban life including its consumerist culture, and they have prioritized freedom, and have exhibited individualism when they are making life choices.

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<sup>4</sup> Since the 1980s when China started implementing its economic reforms, the Chinese state has constructed the discourse of quality to ascribe China's underdevelopment to the low quality of its population (Wang 2016, 18).

## 1.4 Methodology

In my research, I utilized ethnographic methods to study this specific Chinese migrant family from rural Hunan Province. The project is approved by the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board (IRB) as exempt research in foreign site. I knew this family through close family contacts but I encountered some minor difficulties conducting the interviews due to their use of local dialects, some difficulties with scheduling, and my beginning interviewing skills. Nonetheless, all of the family members I interviewed consented to take part in this research project. Some, such as elder brother Lian, were more concerned about their anonymity and my purpose than others.

I conducted multiple semi-structured recorded interviews in Mandarin or Cantonese with each of the family members, between May 2018 to July 2018 in Hunan, Shenzhen, Hong Kong Hangzhou and Jinhua. During this period, I also did participant observation and took fieldnotes regarding family relations and interactions, as well as their living conditions and life styles. I mainly tried to understand the factors that shaped their migration trajectories and their family relationships in the context of China's neoliberal socioeconomic development.

I spent between two days and a week with each family member and tried to get a sense of their daily lives. After interviewing them, I transcribed the interviews in Chinese, and then translated them into English for my thesis. In this thesis, I utilize pseudonyms and include kinship relations to make it easier for the reader to follow each character and their relationships with one another (e.g., elder brother Lian, older sister Xiang, younger sister Xia, etc.). In order to address the significance of socioeconomic development and neoliberal capitalism in China, I

draw from secondary literature, especially that which concerns labor politics, class relations, family relationship, and global neoliberal development.

## **1.5 Thesis Organization**

In contemporary increasingly globalized societies, neoliberal capitalism has influenced individual's ideologies, life trajectories, personal relationships with family members and with broader society. In the case of the rural migrant Huang family I studied, the family relationships have subtly changed due to each family member's economic status and different life experiences. I argue that these changes in family relationships have been shaped by broader neoliberal development economically, politically and culturally. The experiences of the members of this rural migrant family cannot be separated from China's neoliberal development since the 1980s. This thesis addresses how China's neoliberal forces have shaped several individuals' life trajectories. In my thesis, I examine this migrant family's case from multiple directions and aim to use this example to answer my general questions about how rural-migration and individual experience in China have been influenced by the neoliberal development paradigm since the opening up reform in the late 1970s.

This thesis consists of this introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter one contextualizes rural-urban migration in China and describes the factors that have shaped it. Chapter two describes the eldest generations of the Huang family, first briefly describing Xiu and Chun, and then the three siblings (Lian, Xiang, and Xia) of the first migrant generation (introduced above). Chapter three describes the migration experiences of the second-generation migrants, mainly focusing on three cousins, young adults who are currently in their twenties and

thirties, and how their migration experiences compare with those of their parents' generation. Chapter four discusses the connections and disconnections between the two generations of migrant workers. The concluding chapter, addresses my main argument and illustrates the significance of this case study of a migrant family within the wider context of China's neoliberalism. I also ask how my research can contribute to the broader debate about the relationship between migrant workers and neoliberal development.

## **2.0 Rural-Urban Migration in China**

### **2.1 Introduction: Is China Neoliberal?**

In light of China's unprecedented scale and pace of economic development since the socioeconomic reforms began in the late 1970s, China has seemingly adopted the neoliberal development model with market privatization and the incorporation of the transnational capitalist class. Most importantly, the need for urbanization and industrialization in China required the Chinese state to transform millions of rural peasants into wage laborers in the urban labor market, causing the biggest human migration in human history. However, the strong presence of the Chinese state in its socioeconomic reform raises debates about whether China is in fact neoliberal or not. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to define what I mean by neoliberalism and whether China fits into the neoliberal development model. In this chapter, I will first contextualize China's socioeconomic reform initiated by Deng in the late 1970s, and the contrast of socioeconomic systems in the pre-Mao era and post-reform era. Then, I will define what I mean by neoliberalism in my thesis, and argue how China's socioeconomic reform fits in to the neoliberal development paradigm. After that, I will introduce how Deng's reform has led to two waves of migration, and the change of key policy in the reform era.

It is commonly acknowledged that neoliberalism began its rise to become a hegemonic ideology as a reaction to the crisis of the capitalist world in the 1970s (Weber 2018). While the crisis originated in the Western centers of capitalism, the rise of neoliberalism was on a global scale. Neoliberalism is an ideology that can be characterized as a series of policies including market liberalization, the deregulation of the financial sector, making massive tax cuts, privatization of public sectors, down-sizing of government, cutting the social safety net,

increasing the free flow of capital, and expanding international markets through economic globalization (Steger 2009, 42). These neoliberal measures have helped the transnational capitalist class and private corporations accumulate enormous amounts of wealth especially through free flow of capital, deregulation, outsourcing jobs to the global south, and moving labor-intensive industries to the global south with exploitation of low-paid labor. China also experienced a political and economic crisis in the late 1970s, and the crisis made neoliberalism relevant to China. In order to clarify this, it is necessary to provide a historical account to examine closely to the nature of the crisis based on China's collective economic order and political structure in the 1970s. The Chinese social order that was based on a central command economy faced the danger of collapse in the year after Mao's passing in 1976 (Weber 2018). The impulse to carry out socioeconomic reform became irresistible when the state experienced the political and economic turmoil in the late 1970s. China was in deep crisis with as the persistence of poverty in rural areas, the backwardness in terms of industrialization and urbanization, and the continuous occurrence of resources shortages. In this context of crisis, neoliberal ideology which against the Maoist emphasis of central planned economy was attracted to China, and thus Deng Xiaoping launched a series of socioeconomic reform based on the neoliberal development model with socialist characteristic and government intervention. Reforms such as increasing privatization in public sectors, cutting social safety net, a shift toward a more decentralized economy have matched the neoliberal development paradigm. The reform was unorthodox to China during that time as it challenged the Maoist idea of collectivist forms of economy and the rejection of division of labor.

The Maoist developmental model was fundamentally different and opposed to neoliberalism which endorsed the division of labor, small government, and the privatization of

market. The reforms in the late 1970s that turned the Maoist emphasis on self-sufficiency to efficiency brought a new shift in the social landscape and in the rural-urban dynamics. Deng's embrace of a division of labor in the manufacturing sector and the implementation of a "just-in-time" production model that successfully attracted the transnational capitalist class to invest in China after Mao's demise, can well be seen as fitting a neoliberal model. These changes resulted in a reorientation toward the division of labor instead of communal production, and more liberal economic development. The transnational capital class in China is involved in the reform process, and they help accelerate the migration flow from rural areas to cities. Rural-urban migration has since become an important accelerator of China's urban and economic growth accompanied by strong presence of the Chinese state.

## **2.2 Deng's Reforms, the Floating Population and the Semi-Proletariat**

Although Deng's socioeconomic reforms, clearly based on neoliberal ideology, have transformed China into an economic giant in the international stage, the deep contradictions among the Chinese state, capital, and labor are still prevalent, and can cause potential social crisis and domestic instability. The impact of demographic changes and geographic shifts in population caused by the massive scale of migration has brought a new social landscape in both rural and urban areas. The rapid surge of migration has been integral to modern China's market economy reform. Rural-urban migration, in particular, has been essential and critical in facilitating the astonishing urbanization and industrialization, which also contributes to the restructuring of social demographics, social relationships, family formations and socioeconomic development.

In this context, people who are involved in migration are called the “floating population,” referring to people who are not living in places where they are registered and are constantly in a state of migration (Fan 2008, 16). Since the opening up reform in the late 1970s, China’s urbanization has increased from 21 percent in 1982 to 58.2 percent in 2017(Fan 16). Meanwhile, the floating population has also increased from nearly 79 million in 2000 (Liang and Ma 2004) to 250 million 2011 (Li and Freeman 2013). The massive flow of migrants from rural to urban China to become wage laborers was an inevitable process, as urbanization and industrialization required huge amounts of cheap labor.

Yet, the Chinese state has strategically controlled the mobility of the floating population in the urban areas with the *hukou* system (defined in the introduction), in order to reduce the social welfare burden on the urban areas. Different from rural-urban migration in other national contexts, the Chinese state has played a significant role in incorporating peasant workers into the urban labor market while heavily monitoring and limiting peasant workers’ social mobility and their access to social welfare. Undermining the mobility of the peasant workers, the Chinese state denies them the right to reside in the cities where they work. The constraints to rural migrants in the urban areas are highly visible and addressed through their limited occupational choices, deprivation of social welfare, lack of security, vulnerable position etc. Gradually, the contradictory relationship among the Chinese state, capital and labor lead to the formation of a new class, the “semi-proletariat class” (Ngai and Lu 2010).

The Chinese state’s unique neoliberal development paradigm leads to the proletarianization of rural migrants which is distinctive to contemporary China’s development model according to Chan and Selden (2014). More specifically, they argue that the Chinese state

has fostered the growth of a “semi-proletariat” numbering more than 200 million to fuel labor-intensive industries and urbanization (Chan and Selden 2014). Semi-proletarianization is essential to the migrant population as they are constantly in a state of displacement and trapped by an incessant cycle of going back and forth between their rural hometowns and urban areas. On one hand, the capitalist reforms in China have accelerated the remaking of class relations in China, and labor and its class, and its relation to capital and the state are in constant conflict. On the other hand, semi-proletarianization which relates to the making of global production space has caused a series of acts of social unrest over two generations of migrant workers (Chan and Selden 2014, Ngai and Lu 2010).

### **2.3 Two Waves of Migration**

The generational gap between the first-generation and the second-generation migrant workers is also essential to contemporary China’s socioeconomic development as it indicates the migrant workers’ generational difference and the changing social dynamics. Different from the first-generation of migrant wave in the 1980s and 1990s, which was mainly led by the state, the second-generation migration wave in the 2000s is mostly self-motivated and catalyzed by the growing urban consumerist culture led by neoliberal development model. However, the proletarianization process in China limits second-generation migrant workers’ possibilities to be assimilated into urban regions because the state policies targeted at migrant workers disconnect the process of industrialization and urbanization.

Chan and Selden address the importance of the second-generation migrant workers in modern China's socioeconomic development and their desire to move socially upward as an urban working citizen:

“As the backbone of the nation's industrial development, young workers today have higher expectation than the first wave of rural migrants. They aspire to develop technical skills, earn living wages, enjoy comprehensive welfare, and hold the full range of citizenship rights in the towns and cities they inhabit” (Chan and Selden 2014, 616).

The new generation of young migrant workers dream of achieving their Chinese dream through their hard work, labor and perseverance. However, without certain and appropriate legal framework and institutional environment, workers' welfare, right, and well-being are difficult to guarantee. In China's proletarianization process, both the first generation and the second generation have faced the same obstacles of being displaced and transient. As Ngai argues “this is a defining feature of China's urban political space that sustains an incomplete proletarianization commonly experienced by the first and second generations of migrant workers” (2010, 151).

## **2.4 The Household Responsibility System**

On the household level, Deng's socioeconomic reform in China transformed the Maoist period of communal production to the Household Responsibility System (HRS). In contrast to the Maoist period when peasant households were part of communal production, the HRS adopted in the late 1970s returned decision-making to the household (Fan 2008, 7). The new system aimed to boost agriculture production; however, it negatively affected peasant's lives and contributed to

their decisions to leave their rural hometowns. First, improvement in agricultural productivity worsened the problem of labor surplus in the rural areas. Second, the abolition of communes indicated the state's shift of emphasis from peasants and agricultural work to other industries and social classes. As a result, rural youth sensed the increasing pressure to work in agriculture, but the rising rural-urban gap made living in rural areas more difficult than ever. In the reform era, income from agriculture could barely support peasants' livelihood as they received little state support and had to rely on their labor, contracted land, and household strategies for survival (Fan 2008, 7). In this context, persistent poverty, labor surplus and the removal of state protection in rural areas have driven the rural youth to shift their focus from rural agriculture to urban areas for opportunities.

This chapter has argued that China's socioeconomic reform since the late 1970s has fit the neoliberal development paradigm defined by scholars such as Steger. The introduction of the household responsibility system by Deng in the late 1970s has facilitated China's transition from the communal production to just-in-time production. Based on this change, the needs of urbanization and industrialization, facilitated by the state and the transnational capitalist class, have thus catalyzed the migration waves that consist of millions of peasant workers. However, the state meanwhile has initiated the *hukou* policy to constrain rural migrant workers' social mobility and their access to social welfare, which has directly created the so-called "semi-proletariat." Although China's dramatic socioeconomic transformation from the Maoist era has aligned with many of the features of neoliberal development paradigm, the strong presence of state and the state's intervention have also contradicted the idea of neoliberalism which endorses less government intervention. In order to address the contradiction and better examine China's neoliberal reform, in the following chapters, I will focus on the case of the Huang migrant family

and elaborate on how China's contradictory neoliberal practice has influenced individual and family, and address this contradiction.

## **3.0 The First-Generation Migrant Workers**

### **3.1 Introduction: The Huang Family**

The Huang family includes four generations of family members who currently reside in three areas in China: Hunan province, Zhejiang Province, and Guangdong Province. My research focuses primarily on the second and third generations of this family, three adult siblings: the older brother, Lian, the elder sister, Xiang, and the younger sister, Xia, who were born in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, and their children: Jia (Xiang's elder daughter), Jin (Xiang's younger son), and Hua (Lian's son) who were born in the late 1980s and 1990s. However, before turning to Lian, Xiang and Xia's generation, it is also important to say something about their parents (and Jia, Jin, and Hua's grandparents) because of the rapid change that took part in the course of their lives and because of their connection to the subsequent generations. The youngest generation, very young children of Hua and Jin will only be mentioned briefly in the next chapter.

### **3.2 (Great) Grandparents Chun and Xiu**

Tracing back to the parents of the first-generation migrants, the mother, grandma Xiu, and the late father, grandpa Chun, lived in Hunan and spent most of their youth in the commune system during the Maoist era. Both of them were born in the late 1940s, and both experienced the founding of the People's Republic of China under the socialist regime in 1949. In the interview with Grandma Xiu, who is now in her 70s, she described her life in the commune with her husband and her three children, and how they experienced the change and collapse of the

commune system. Xiu met her husband, Chun, a veteran and a high school graduate, through a matchmaker, and married him in the 1960s when she was around 18 years old while Chun was 22 years old. She later gave birth to her three children, her son Lian, elder daughter Xiang, and younger daughter Xia.

Grandma Xiu grew up in the era of collective living, and she worked the land that had been appropriated by the state from the local landowner<sup>5</sup>. Since the collectivization of agriculture began in 1952, the Chinese state absorbed most of the farming household into “mutual aid team” or “advanced cooperatives” (*gaojieshe*)<sup>6</sup>(Li, 2015, 23). Xiu grew up in a period in which independent households were strictly discouraged by the Communist Party. Li writes about the government’s aggressive role in bringing rural populations to join the mutual aid teams during the 1950s. Li argues that intimidating slogans such as: “Eliminate independent households!” and “Independent households are backward elements” (*luohou fenzi*) imposed fear and coerced villagers in order to implement social restructuring in Chinese society (Li 2015, 24). Villagers who failed to cooperate were further condemned as “unwilling to listen to Chairman Mao” and “refusing to take the socialist road” (Li 2015, 28). However, village cadres mainly cared about the output and quality of agricultural products, and failed to consider the individual team members’ performance in the work unit. As Li states:

“Households that contributed more labor to others than they received found it difficult to make up their deficit, and some found it difficult to have their extra labor contribution

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<sup>5</sup> For histories of this period focused on individual men’s lives, see Huang (1999), Seabolt (1996).

<sup>6</sup> From 1952 to 1957, collectivization in rural China underwent three stages, in which different levels of collectives prevailed in succession: “mutual aid teams” (*huzhuzu*), “primary cooperatives” (*chujieshe*), and “advanced cooperatives” (*gaojieshe*) (Li 2015).

paid [...] no one was willing to compromise [...] many mutual aid teams broke down or existed in name only” (Li 2015, 29).

As a result, the Communist Party established the rural people’s commune after the collapse of cooperatives in 1958, which signaled a new political and economic organization (Ahn 1975,631).

Xiu had spent most of her twenties under the commune system that was introduced in 1958 by the Chinese state and formed by the redistribution of land and resources. The commune was designed to narrow the widening gap between industry and agriculture under China’s first five-year-plan. The state merged agricultural producers’ cooperatives into larger units or “communes.”<sup>7</sup> After Xiu married Chun, she lived in a commune with him, and then with her children. Xiu worked on the collective farmland while her husband worked as a bookkeeper in local government.

The commune, a new political and economic organization, aimed to disrupt the intimate old social relations in the rural communities (Ahn 1975, 632). The rationale for this was to mobilize resources through “central ownership, planning, marketing and distribution” (Ahn 1975, 632) to achieve the social restructuring. The Communist Party wanted to expedite the transition to communism while increasing agricultural productivity which the party saw as shackled by old rural social relations. Although Chun had a relatively stable and prestigious job at that time, Xiu said that their family still struggled from the scarcity of resources, due to their low stipends under the commune system. Because Xiu was the only one in her household who contributed to collective farming, the food distributed to her household of five was based solely on her own productivity. Under the people’s commune system in force from 1958-1982,

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<sup>7</sup> Between August and December, 99 percent of the Chinese peasants joined these communes (Ahn 1975, 632).

the income of a peasant family depended directly on the number of laborers who contributed to the collective fields (Hays 2008). Thus, hunger was still a common phenomenon in the collectivization era for Xiu and her family.

Before Chun and Xiu were married, Chun had served in the People's Liberation Army for three years. After he left the army, he began working in the local government as a bookkeeper and then married Xiu. After a few years of working in the government, Chun lost his stable job due to a corruption scandal in the local village government. According to Xiu, Chun was a scapegoat of other senior village cadres who were involved in corruption. That incident was a major strike to Chun's career and discouraged him from continuing to work in a corrupt system. Eventually, he became a grade school teacher in the local village. However, after a few years as a teacher in local school, he again was forced to leave the school during the outbreak of Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s.

After various phases of political turmoil, Chun was not interested in getting involved in any social movements. Instead, he decided to start his own small business selling rice to local traders, while his wife, Xiu, continued to work on the collective farmland. From what Xiu remembered, the commune system and the associated collective lifestyle collapsed in her area of Hunan around the year of 1978, the beginning of the "opening up" of socioeconomic reform. After the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and previous failed social restructuring, the Chinese communist government started to emphasize labor management problems in production teams. Seeing them as the key to improve productivity, the state suggested measures to "relate rewards to performance more closely" (Lin 1987, 1). Since 1979, the emergence and prevalence of the Household Responsibility System (HRS), which replaced the production team system as the

unit of production and income distribution, brought dramatic changes in rural China (Lin 1988, 199).

The reform era involved a decentralized system compared to the centralized system of the commune era. In his study of the changing state-society relations in China, Chen argues that the evolution of state-society interactions in China led to the emergence of unorganized collective action which helps create a “diffusion of the power center and the flattening of bureaucratic hierarchies which make local leaders much more sensitive and responsive to political demands from the local populace” (Chen 1998,1223). Therefore, the new state-society relations contributed to the collapse of the state’s coercive structure such as the old commune system. The reforms that started in 1978 shifted the collective economy to a more capitalist economy. It implemented decollectivization which embraced privatization and individualism. For Xiu and her husband, the reform brought them private farmland and a private household. But Chun’s small agricultural business eventually failed, and he ended up doing subsistence farming along with Xiu, to produce a better yield and sufficient staples, such as rice.

However, with the social restructuring and neoliberal reform in rural China’s socioeconomic structure, most rural families relocated themselves and altered their collective way of living, which left many rural elderly members struggling to adapt to the new social climate and system. After the abolition of the commune system, “mandatory plans have been abolished, prices decontrolled, and administrative controls decentralized” (Chen 1998, 1226). Most importantly, the agricultural production was decollectivized, and many peasants joined the “Township and Village Enterprises” (TVEs) while in urban areas, state control over the work unit was weakened (Chen 1998, 1226).

Comparing the commune lifestyle and the individual lifestyle, Xiu addressed her concerns about living in the privatized society. As she described, when her family lived in the commune, she felt the strong community support and they enjoyed the collective economy. Although they still suffered from resource scarcity, the commune life had provided them with a sense of security and a stable way of life. In addition, the implementation of the Household Responsibility System completely changed her family's situation, as they gradually lost the social safety net provided by the state and they had to take care of their own household by themselves.

As a result of these reforms and changes, Xiu said that famine still could not be eradicated and was still a persistent phenomenon in the early years of decollectivization. As she explained, the implementation of the Household Responsibility System in her rural household meant that they could barely survive based on the profits from agriculture. She further addressed her discontent towards the transition from collective system to individual household responsibility. As she recalled, most of the peasants simply could not adapt to the new household system and most of them had a difficult time supporting themselves. The HRS, as a move towards privatization, along with the weakening of the social safety net, can be seen as a turn towards a neoliberal development agenda. The diminishing social safety net under the implementation of the HRS severely influenced the livelihood of the rural households. From this perspective, the HRS system was aligned with the neoliberal development paradigm that embraced privatization in an effort to increase production at the expense of a more egalitarian society.

In pre-Mao, pre-revolutionary China, the core welfare institution was the Chinese family itself (Leung 1997). That started to change after 1949 when Mao attempted to “shift the loyalty

away from the family toward the construction of socialism” (Leung 1997,88). In the Maoist pre-reform era, the Chinese state was in control of providing social welfare to people in the commune system. In the rural areas, the Communist government had introduced the “five-guarantees” scheme, including the guarantee that “the childless elderly” would receive “provision of food, housing, clothing, medical care, and burial expense” (Leung and Nann, 1995).

Since the market reform, economic liberalization, social restructuring, and privatization of farm land and other industries in 1979, however, the role of family in providing welfare has been re-emphasized by the Chinese Communist government (Leung 1997; 88). The economic function of the rural household has been revitalized. Also, with the abolition of the commune system, the “five-guarantees” scheme for the childless elderly became unreliable. As a result, elderly parents now have to depend on the support and care of their adult children instead of on the state (Leung 1998, 89). Leung’s observation helps to explain why first-generation migrants (like sisters Xiang and Xia, discussed below) carried more responsibility to send remittance back home to their elderly parents.

### **3.3 From the Collective to the Reform Era**

The absence of a government social safety net influenced Xiu’s and Chun’s three children’s education and life trajectories. elder brother Lian, elder sister Xiang, and younger sister Xia were born in the 1960s and the 1970s. All of them dropped out of grade school due to the cost of tuition and their lack of motivation, including their limited opportunities in the rural countryside. Different from their parents' generation, who had experienced the collapse of the

collective economy and its social structures, the siblings' generation experienced another drastic socioeconomic transition under the market reform and social restructuring.

This restructuring in the late 1970s, introduced in chapter one, was based on a neoliberal development paradigm that emphasized individualism and individual responsibility over collectivism. This shift during the reform period propelled rural people to migrate to urban areas in search of work. In contrast to the collectivist era, individualism and consumerism were encouraged by the state, and each of the three siblings made different life choices within this specific socioeconomic context.

Both Xiu and her children's generations experienced the rural reforms of the 1970s and early 1980s, characterized by de-collectivization, privatization of the land, and more mechanized agriculture, which increased agricultural productivity but created surplus of labor, with an estimated "150-200 million surplus laborers in rural China in the 1980s" (Wang and Ding, 2005). Although the establishment of Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) temporarily relieved the labor surplus problem by absorbing large numbers of rural laborers, it still failed to resolve the long-term issue, as the TVEs had very slow employment (Shi 2008, 1). As a result, the rural population started to flood into the cities to find employment opportunities. There was a marked increase in the number of rural migrants during the reform era when the numbers more than doubled from approximately 30 million in 1989 to 62 million in 1993 (Shi 2008, 1). Xiu and Chun's three children joined the first-generation of rural-urban migrant workers within broader social context of China's neoliberal socioeconomic environment described above. Most of the literature about migrants focuses on the economic and social forces that drove the rural population's migration to urban areas. However, from my ethnographic research with this Hunan migrant family, I discovered more complex entanglements between family relationships,

individual motivations, and the cultural influences of both Confucianism and neoliberalism that shaped rural migrants' life trajectories under China's neoliberal economic reform. More important, as I aim to show in the following chapter, are differences in how the first-generation migrants and the second-generation migrants in this family respond to and experience the broader development of contemporary China's new class formation, one that undermines and marginalizes the social status of the working-class while also promoting the rise of the middle-class.

In terms of labor, there is a clear shift experienced by Xiu and her children's generation, from a collective labor regime to an individualized but "militarized dormitory labor regime" (Ngai 2012). A precarious living environment and precarious working conditions existed for all three generations in this family. Yet, not every individual responded or adapted to this changing social climate the same way. Xiu's three adult children each responded to the changing situation in different ways. Their choices regarding how to adapt to the neoliberal socioeconomic reforms are reflected in their decisions of whether or not to migrate. Regardless of their choices, the three older generations of family members, beginning with Xiu and Chun, and the two subsequent generations of migrant workers, constantly adjusted their way of life in accordance with China's social changes from collectivization to individualization with mixed of concern, excitement, struggle, and hope. In terms of the personal lives of two generations of migrant workers, the neoliberal socioeconomic reforms which brought the idea of individualism, freedom, and consumerism, drastically changed their way of life and their ideas about love, intimacy and marriage. A combination of social and individual factors, tied to social changes, led to the reconstruction of the family structure and the process of family formation as well.

### 3.4 Elder Brother Lian: A Non-Migrant

In this family, elder brother Lian, now in his 50s, has been depending on farming and lived with his elderly parents for decades. As the oldest son in the family, according to his sisters, he enjoyed the privilege of receiving the most attention and care from his parents when he was growing up due to the traditional higher value of boys in China. In its earliest history, China was a matriarchal society (Jay 1996), until the period of Confucius and Mencius, by which time the superior status of men was established, and gender roles were based on the absolute superiority of men (Xie 1994). For example, Confucius wrote “*Shaoren* [small people] and women are difficult to handle. If you get familiar with them, they cease to be humble. If you keep them away, they get resentful” (Analects 17, 25).

In traditional Chinese society, before the revolutionary period, women were expected to observe the “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” while there was little cultural and moral restraint to men (Chan and Leong 1994, 273). A woman was expected to be obedient to her father and elder brothers before her marriage, to her husband when married, and to her sons when widowed. Sons in the Confucian family scheme are expected to be the ones who take care of their elderly parents, and to be economically responsible. Since daughters marry out, they cannot play this role. Traditionally, “having posterity” means “having a male child” (Hays 2008).

Preference for sons has long been a feature of the patrilineal family system which implies that “adult sons stay with their parents to care for them in old age while daughters marry into their husbands’ households to continue the family line” (Murphy, Tao, and Lu, 2011, 665). Therefore, sons enjoy a superior status in Chinese families because “a son keeps incense at the ancestral alter burning” while “investing in a daughter is like pouring water onto another’s field”

(Attane and Guilmoto, 2007; Shi 2009). The superiority of the son has continued to stand out, even in the revolutionary and reform period, especially in the traditional rural context in China, because sons are expected to be the main laborer in the field while daughters take the role of fulfilling household duties.

In elder brother Lian's case, since he became an adult he has been the main decision-maker of the family and, according to his sisters, he received more attention from his parents. However, his two sisters, Xiang and Xia took more responsibility than he did both in the fields and in relation to the household duties. Growing up, his parents spoiled him such that he did not need to work too hard in the fields. The burden of working in the fields was instead left to his two younger sisters. Gradually, the relationship between Lian and his sisters grew more distant, as Lian developed a sense of superiority and arrogance, and as his sisters took on more responsibility in household and looking after their aging parents and became increasingly conscious of the unfairness and gender inequality of the household.

Under Confucianism, the most senior male is regarded as the unchallengeable authority. In my previous visits to this migrant family, when Chun was still alive, Chun and his son Lian's ultimate authority in the household was well established and visible. They exhibited their masculinity and their decision-making power especially clearly during the family dinners. In Chinese family culture, conversations among male and female family members commonly happen during the evening meal. The power dynamics among male and female family members can be observed from the seating arrangements during dinner, and from the conversation and decision making. The elderly parents and the sons typically sit at the main seats, or the most prominent or prestigious places, while other female members sit beside them. At Lian's dinner table, he and his elderly parents were always the central figures, in terms of seating and family

discussion. As Lian grew older and married, he gained more decision-making power in the family, and he gradually supplanted the role of family decision-maker from his father Chun at the table.

Confucianism defines a family as the basic social unit of society, and thus family harmony is a key element to achieve social harmony. One of the most important ways of achieving social harmony is through imposing family hierarchy and social hierarchy. This concept still applies to China to date – despite the attempted changes and reordering of the Maoist period -- as the Chinese government again after the post-Mao reforms were introduced emphasizes the importance of family harmony in order to achieve wider societal harmony. In addition to the family hierarchy based on gender and age, filial piety is another important factor that maintains family harmony and social harmony (Huang and Gove 2012). Chang and Holt argue that Confucianism promotes social harmony, including human relationships and family relationships (Chang and Holt 1991). Within the context of family, harmony is reached by reinforcing the parents and the elders' authority, filial piety, conformity, and each individual and each generation's responsibilities (Lu and Shih 1997). Filial piety is highly valued as a key to maintaining harmony in Confucianist household. Therefore, complying with parents' expectations and obeying on parents' authority are viewed as central tenets of filial piety in Confucian-influenced Chinese households (Huang and Gove 2012,12).

In Lian's case, as the eldest (and only) son, he was expected to take on the role of the main caregiver for his elderly parents after he got married. However, since Lian got married, Lian haven't spent much time actually taking care of his parents, Chun and Xiu, and Xiu still needed to work in the fields up to the time of my research. After Lian married, through a

marriage arranged by his parents, he still lived with his elderly parents under the same roof. Lian's wife, as expected, took responsibility for the household and elderly care. Yet, Lian did not financially and physically contribute as much as expected to the household or to the field labor. He did not spend much time fulfilling filial expectations of caring for or demonstrating respect to his elderly parents, either, even though he shared the same house with them. Therefore, Lian's two younger sisters, Xiang and Xia, took responsibility of taking care of the elderly parents as much as they could. For example, supporting them financially and fulfilling household duties before they got married.

In pre-reform China, sons and their wives commonly lived with the son's parents until the parents passed away, and the sons then divided the household and property (Hays 2015). Based on this Confucian value, Lian fulfilled his filial duty to his elderly parents because he stayed in the same house with them after he married. On the other hand, as the elder son and the only son in the household, he failed to contribute his best efforts to the household by not supporting his parents much financially, and by not helping them much in the fields. Instead, Lian's two younger sisters shared his filial responsibilities by providing financial support and performing household duties, and thus securing family harmony. In this sense, Lian's case contradicts the Confucian gender role expectations as his sisters took on more responsibility for supporting the old parents financially, and spending more time caring for them. But supporting gendered expectations, he married, had a son, and remained in the village with his aging parents. He did not become a migrant worker.

In terms of migration, Lian made a different decision from his two younger sisters. He chose to stay in his rural household despite the powerful wave of migration and urbanization in the region. Facing the choice of working as a wage laborer in the city, Lian chose to stay in

the home village in rural Hunan and to work, at first as a carpenter and then later to work in subsistence farming after he married. The reason he chose to stay in the rural area instead of migrating to work in the city cannot be attributed to conventional Chinese cultural value of fulfilling filial piety. In the interview, he explained that his choice of whether or not to migrate was determined by his individual desire for freedom. Most importantly, he thought that freedom would be more accessible to him in his rural hometown rather than in the intense militarized factory floor where he would have limited freedom. In contrast to Lian, his sisters Xiang and Xia held very different views concerning working in the city. They saw urban migration as giving them easier access to social mobility and greater freedom to realize their personal pursuits. Yet these two sisters who were both migrant workers, also have very different life trajectories from one another, based on their different views and experiences of migration, marriage, education, and self-identity.

### **3.5 Older Sister Xiang: Intermittent Migration**

Older sister Xiang, now in her 50s, had an arranged marriage to a fellow villager when she was around twenty years old and worked in a factory in a nearby town. In the interview, she said she was always the one who took the most responsibility in the household and in the fields as she and her siblings were growing up. As the most industrious among the three siblings, she said she felt a strong responsibility to take care of her parents because her elder brother Lian and her younger sister Xia were expected to work less. According to her, they were their parents' favorites. Because Lian is the elder son and Xia is the youngest, they had the natural advantage of doing less work and being spoiled by their parents. From her words I could tell that she felt

that she contributed more than anyone else to the household. In this household, it was clear that women occupied the role of taking care of domestic work and that men enjoyed a higher position than women.

After Xiang and her younger sister Xia dropped out of school, they went to work in a factory in a nearby town for three or four years. During the time while Xiang worked at the factory, she was responsible for her elderly parents as well. She frequently went back home to cook for her parents and stayed with them whenever she had a day off. Her burden increased after she gave birth to a daughter and then a son. She then had to commute back and forth between her new family and her natal home as caregiver to both her parents and her two children. Compared to younger sister Xia, Xiang lived a relatively stable life after she got married; she settled with her husband, in his rural hometown, and they went back to doing subsistence farming.

Elder sister Xiang's settled way of life had started to change when she was introduced to a job as a factory worker in Shenzhen, by her younger sister Xia. Xia had left their rural hometown when she was 19, as the first migrant worker in their family. Due to the lack of development in the rural areas and the surplus of rural laborers in the early 1980s, subsistence farming could hardly support the family. Thus, Xiang migrated to Shenzhen and secured a job in a factory through Xia's connections when her elder child, her daughter Jia, was 5 years old. Xiang's decision to migrate can be attributed to socioeconomic, family, and individual factors.

First, due to China's shift of focus to urbanization and the urban population in the late 1970s under the neoliberal socioeconomic reforms, rural development stagnated and an increase of mechanized productivity in agriculture led to a huge surplus of rural laborers.

Different from Grandma Xiu's generation that received social support from the commune and the state, Xiang, Xia, and Lian's generation experienced the implementation of privatization and individual responsibility. The state had largely reduced its social safety net to rural population early during the reform, and thus most rural youth found subsistence farming in the rural area less and less attractive. In addition, the backward social environment and the reemergence of Confucian values of fulfilling filial piety and complying with family traditions prevented some rural youth from achieving individual autonomy under the individualist sentiment of the reform era.

Second, the mounting family pressure from older sister Xiang's family pushed her to seek a new way of life as she took on the role of mother to two children, as well as those of wife and daughter. Xiang has a very tough personality, and she was always eager to try her best to fulfill her responsibility to her immediate and extended family. Migration, which represents well-being, job opportunities, and modernization brought her new hope to enable her to better fulfill her responsibilities. As a result, she was determined to join the army of migrants and join the first-generation migrant workers and floating population in China.

However, throughout her years of migration, Xiang went back and forth to her rural hometown due to household duties, childrearing burdens, and residency constraints. Due to her lack of urban household register (*hukou*) Xiang was unable to bring her two children with her over the years when she stayed in the city. She had to leave her two children behind in rural hometown and her mother-in-law took care of them. She did not want her children to be "left-behind children," a common social phenomenon among the children of rural migrant workers due to their lack of access to urban welfare and education, but she could not afford the high cost of bringing her children with her to the city with her slender income. Besides, even if she

had been financially capable of bringing her children with her, her work schedule would not allow her to take the full responsibility as a caregiver.

Xiang's constant night shifts and ten to twelve hours of work a day had exhausted her during most of her youth. During the time she was working in Shenzhen and other faraway locations, she could only go back home once a year, during the new year festival. As a result, after a few years of work in the city of Shenzhen, in the late 1990s she returned to her husband's rural hometown in Hunan province to take care of her children. At that time, they were around 7 years old, and she started her own small agricultural business.

Displacement, instability of work, marginalization, and the lack of social protection in the urban areas all contribute to migrant workers' decisions to return to their rural hometowns. As Gaetano argues, "modern motherhood is increasingly a full-time occupation"; therefore, it is quite difficult for migrant mothers to balance among their limited income, inflexibility of work schedule, and full-time childcare (2015,115). In Xiang's case, and that of other married female migrants, fulfilling the responsibility of primary caregiver is one of the most important factors that lead to their return to their rural natal homes. Eventually, Xiang had decided to return to Hunan to fulfill her childrearing duties, while many other migrant women prioritized their migrant work in the urban areas. This phenomenon reveals that migrant workers are not only economically driven subjects, but are also individuals who are strongly influenced by family attachments, household duties, cultural influences, and gender roles.

Demurger and Xu argue that, return migrants are more likely to bring back "accumulated human, social, and financial capital" which enable them to start their own business when they return (2011, 3). Although many migrant workers aspire to start their own small businesses when they return to their rural hometowns, freeing themselves from the dormitory labor regime (Ngai 2012), and in an effort for independence and self-actualization, many of them fail miserably and lose their

savings. As Ngai and Lu describe, “only 2.5 percent of the returned migrants did business in their hometown” (2010, 504). This resonates with Xiang’s case, as she went back to rural Hunan after several years of being a factory worker, planning to start small scale agribusiness with her husband. After a few years of hard work, her small agribusiness did not provide enough to support the family and financial pressures forced her to migrate again with her husband, at the age of 43, after her children had grown up.

Especially after land reform in the rural Hunan, where much of the land was appropriated by the local government for city planning, they found it extremely difficult to earn a living. Therefore, Xiang and her husband left home again. At the time of my interview with Xiang in summer 2018, she had already left the factory job that she had worked at for 5 years. She and her husband had returned to her husband’s rural hometown in Hunan. Years of hard work and saving equipped her and her husband with the financial ability to build a three-story-house in her husband’s hometown in rural Hunan. She had earned a relatively good life by local standards. In Xiang’s younger sister’s words, “Among three of us, Xiang is the most hard-working and industrious one who has worked as a migrant factory worker, domestic worker and janitor in Shenzhen and Zhejiang.” Xiang and her younger sister Xia used to have a close relationship growing up; however, after Xia's frequent financial setbacks in the city (discussed later), their relationship became more and more distant.

Although older sister Xiang lived a relatively better life compared to her siblings, Xiang’s two children, as described in the following chapter, dropped out of school at a very young age and became second-generation migrant workers who move back and forth between city and rural hometown as their parents did before. From the Confucianist perspective, Xiang fulfilled her

duties as a filial daughter, as she spent as much time as possible taking care of her elderly parents and sent remittances to support them financially.

### **3.6 Younger Sister Xia: A Permanent Migrant**

In contrast to Xiang, her younger sister Xia, now in her late 40s, left rural Hunan Province and was attracted to the Special Economic Zone (SEZ)<sup>8</sup> of Shenzhen, the sister city of Hong Kong, in Southern China when she was around 19 years old. Xia first worked in a factory in Shenzhen, then as a hostess in a restaurant, and then later married a businessman from Hong Kong. Her life path is strikingly different from those of her siblings. In a way, she challenged the Confucian notion of being a filial daughter, the conventional ideas about love and marriage versus duty, individual autonomy, and the constraints of social mobility to the rural population. Xia is the only member of her family who settled permanently in the city and gained upward social mobility after marriage. Different from her siblings' migration trajectories, Xia has not only participated in labor migration to improve her livelihood, but also engaged in marriage migration as marriage has provided her a way to remain in cities and transformed her identity of a peasant worker to an urban citizen.

The neoliberal socioeconomic reform in China since the late 1970s has completely changed the rural women's trajectories of marriage migration. Xia's life situation improved

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<sup>8</sup> Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are contained geographic regions within countries – a demarcated area of land that the Chinese government used to encourage industry, manufacturing, and services for export. SEZs are typically characterized by more liberal laws and economic policies than a country's general economic laws (Wang 2009, 2). Shenzhen, in Guangdong Province, and situated between the cities of Hong Kong and Guangzhou, was the first established of the SEZs.

significantly after she married and gained the opportunity to settle down in Shenzhen. Her daughter, who was born in Shenzhen, also received a significantly better education and grew up with much better living conditions than Xia's siblings' children. Thus, Xia's decision to migrate resulted in greater social upward mobility compared to her siblings. However, Xia's relationship with most of her family members soured when she decided to settle in the city and when she married a man who was much older than her, without her family's permission.

In the interview, she explained that the first time she left home, she didn't even tell her parents about her decision to migrate because she knew her parents would prevent her from going far away from home. She said she was rebellious at that time, and she wanted to pursue autonomy and new opportunities in the city. The ideas of modernization, urbanization, and autonomy attracted her ever since she was young, even though migration at first was not easy for her. Xia recounted her past long journey and how she took the green slow train from her small village in western China to Shenzhen in southern China. She praised China's rapid economic development over the past few decades and the new technology that she said really helped to change the way people could migrate from one location to another. When the green old train was the only affordable way for people to travel from their small rural villages, it took at least 24 hours to travel to southern China from Hunan for most migrants. She said,

“Nowadays, the green and slow train is not the only option of transportation for migrants; instead, there are more expensive but more time-efficient forms of transportation, such as planes and high-speed trains that provide easier and faster access for migrants, who can afford the cost to reach their urban destinations. Migration to the cities has become more and more accessible to the rural population.”

Xia dropped out from school at the age of 13, and had worked in a local factory for 5 years in her hometown. At 19 she left home secretly and went to work as a factory worker in Shenzhen. However, her internal struggles over remaining at home and being a filial daughter versus migrating as an autonomous individual and for her own well-being, created a serious dilemma for her. She ultimately left home for a better life, but she experienced a constant feeling of guilt for failing to fulfill her duties by remaining close to her parents. Through the years, she never forgot about her filial duties, but instead of fulfilling them by looking after her parents in person, she did so by sending them remittances. Her remittances have been used to refurbish the rural household and to enhance her parents' quality of life, even though her mother and father kept working well into their seventies.

Migration provides young rural migrant women with chances to imagine a different future other than going back to their rural hometowns (Gaetano 2015, 112). After she migrated to Shenzhen, Xia first worked in a factory as an assembly worker. Later she later changed her occupation to the service industry and worked as a restaurant hostess. That is where she met her husband, Terry, who was a businessman from Hong Kong. They got married soon after they met, and she gave birth to her only child at the age of 21. After her daughter's birth, Xia quit her job and worked as a housewife for the next 13 years. During that time, she continued to send her parents money, with her husband's support. Her rural family, meanwhile, became better off, and lived better than they had in earlier decades. However, as Gaetano argues, few rural migrant women are able to "marry above their social status, as numerous obstacles weigh against rural-urban marriages" (Gaetano 2015, 112). Although marriage with urban men provide migrant women the possibility to move socially upward, in many cases, their status as rural migrant women with "low *suzhi*" (low quality or cultural capital), undermine their social status and

position in their new family. As Gaetano observes, “rural women who marry hypergamously to urban men are outsiders in both their new households and the city, and particularly dependent on their husbands to facilitate inclusion and instill a sense of belonging (2015,113).

In Xia’s case, she improved her economic well-being with her husband’s support for years, which and also benefited her rural household, to whom she sent remittances. However, her husband’s family in Hong Kong did not consider her as part of the family, even after they got married. Due to her relatively low social status as a rural migrant woman, her husband’s family looked down on her. This factor prevented her from living in Hong Kong, because her husband’s family’s strong opposition. In addition, after her husband’s business failed during the 2008 economic recession, which influenced the global economy on a large scale, she had to go back to work. In her 30s, she returned again to the service industry in Shenzhen, and worked as a sales assistant.

In my interview with Xia, she highlighted the difficulty she experienced when she stepped back into society to work again, after being a housewife. “It was very tough when I went out to work again after being a housewife for more than 10 years. That feeling was similar to how I felt when I decided to leave my rural village at the age of 19.” Throughout 27 years of residing in Shenzhen, Xia gained the freedom she had wanted when she first migrated. This included the freedom of spouse selection, and the freedom to choose her occupation. However, she faced financial setbacks later in her life, and experienced unstable work and living conditions. Most important, during the 27 years she lived in Shenzhen, she still had no ability to secure an urban *hukou*. She expects that her lack of urban *hukou* will directly threaten her quality of life after her retirement, in the near future. Despite the *hukou* constraints, economic pressures, and social marginalization as a rural migrant woman, she still chooses to remain in the

city as feels she belongs there now, much more than she does in her rural natal community. She perceives herself as more of an urban citizen with good cultural quality (*suzhi*) rather than an uneducated rural peasant, with low cultural quality.

Consequently, the three siblings' different life choices have had significant influence on their own lives, and also -- as discussed in the following chapter -- on those of their children. Unlike many other migrant workers, who return home at least once annually during Chinese New Year holidays, Xia goes back to her hometown only occasionally, on an irregular basis. She first went to Shenzhen around 1991, and for 27 years, she went back to her hometown no more than 10 times because of time constraints and financial constraints, the main issues that prevent migrants from traveling back their natal homes as often as they might want to. Her father, Chun, passed away during Chinese New Year in 2018. Hence, Xia said she always regrets that she did not return home sooner and that she did not spend enough time with him and taking care of him. The dining room in her rural natal home is an important place where they host guests for funerals, weddings, and other events. When Xia walked into the dining room and saw the picture of her father hung on the wall this summer, while I accompanied her in summer 2018, she could not control her emotions and she burst into tears. She said she could not get used to the idea of her father's absence, because she remembers every time she came back, her father sat on a little chair outside the dining room, waiting for her to come back home.

After years of living in Shenzhen, the gap between Xia and her family has enlarged due to the spatial distance, cultural difference, and changing perceptions. Although she had been sending remittances home to them on a regular basis for many years, and she talked her mother by phone at least once week, she has been perceived as an unfilial daughter by her elder brother Lian and other family members because of her rebellious decisions to leave home and

to marry without her parents' permission, and because of her lack of conformity to rural traditions. As a result, the relationship between her and her extended family has become strained and increasingly distant.

After Chun passed away, Xia's her elder brother Lian became the official head of the household. During dinner at Xia's natal home, Lian sat at the head of the dining table. He treated her as a guest and did not communicate much with her during the meal. Instead, he spoke in the local dialect with their sister Xiang, with his wife, and with other family members, seemingly avoiding any direct conversation with Xia. From my observations, Xia rarely spoke during the meal and just quietly finished her food.

Years of life in the city have changed Xia's perception about the idea of home and her sense of belonging. She said that she spent most of her youth and time in the city, and that her Confucian sense of gender roles has been severely weakened; instead she says she values individual autonomy more than ever. Over years of living in the city, Xia's perspectives and ways of thinking have been gradually changed as she assimilated to urban culture. This has no doubt enlarged the gap between her and her family members. Gradually, she has come to feel like an outsider in her own natal home.

Although there are migrant women such as Xia who eventually settled in the city through marriage, Judd argues that "women remain more likely to be present in the countryside through the normative patrilocal residence which separates women's natal and marital spaces" (Judd 2010, 936). During the interview, Xia said that she does not feel a sense of belonging to her hometown because she owns nothing here. She said the only reason she went back home was that she wanted to see her family members safe and healthy. Shenzhen is more like home to her because she has spent most of her time, and effort there. She said she has more autonomy to

pursue what she wants in Shenzhen than in her hometown. Due to her current financial incapability, most people in her rural hometown Hunan look down on her, and that is why, for so many years, she did not return home for Chinese New Year, the usual time when migrants go back to visit family and are expected to arrive with gifts and money. She said unlike the last time she said goodbye to her mother, in 2018 she did not shed tears; instead, she gave a hug to both her mother and her sister, and left without regret. She said, “I saw that my family is living a peaceful life, and that is what I wanted.”

From examining the life trajectories of the great grandparents’ generation and the first-generation migrant workers, we can tell the different life patterns and individual choices in according social context. The three adult siblings, Lian, Xiang and Xia’s cases and different migration choices address how the macro level policy changes in the reform era have influenced their individual life and family relationship. The contrast of the great parents’ generation with the three adult siblings’ generation also indicate the social transformation from the Maoist era to the reform era which has applied the neoliberal development paradigm. In the following chapter, I will address the cases of the Jin, Jia and Hua, the second-generation migrant workers in the Huang family.

## 4.0 The Second-Generation Migrant Workers

### 4.1 Introduction: Changes for the Second Generation

Since the first wave of rural-urban migration in the late 1970s (Chen 2012) when older sister Xiang and younger sister Xia migrated, the Chinese government has launched a series of reforms that have changed the situation for the second-generation rural migrants. First, one of the most important of these is the *hukou* household registration system, mentioned earlier. The *hukou* system regulates and restricts population mobility. It was one of three key instruments used by the Chinese government to push industrialization in the Maoist era. Today, it is one of the most important mechanisms determining entitlement to public welfare, urban services and, more broadly, full citizenship. In its application, it is the basis for the most serious form of institutional exclusion against mainly rural residents. *Hukou* is used to regulate China's population mobility (Chan and Buckingham 2008, 587; Zhao 2018, 22). Reform of China's *hukou* system has been in progress for many years.

The main step in reform of the *hukou* system has been implemented in small towns/cities, where obtaining a local *hukou* became much easier. But in large cities and metropolitan urban areas where many migrants work, progress has been slow. The *hukou* reform in large cities tends to focus on giving a local *hukou* to migrants who have relatively high education or those with the ability to purchase commercial housing. Since the majority of floating migrants – including the migrants from the Huang family, fall into neither category, a local *hukou* continues to be beyond their reach (Liang and Ma 2014, 284). Although the *hukou* reform has not made significant change to young rural migrants' livelihood, the relaxation of policy has encouraged more permanent migration (Zhao 2018, 22).

Second, farmers in rural areas were granted more property rights, allowing them more freedom to “transfer, rent out or mortgage collectively-owned rural land on the market” (Zhao 2018, 22). Although the land reform helped to increase the productivity of land and also increased the labor productivity, as noted in chapter two, it also created a significant labor surplus in rural areas. Compared to the first-generation migrant workers, the second-generation of migrant workers have less need to spend less time in the fields, and they have more time and opportunity to do non-farm activities. Therefore, second-generation migrants are more likely to engage in migration than their parents’ generation because they have little incentive and less need to devote their labor to farming, and little desire to join the rural surplus labor force.

Third, due to Chinese state’s increased attention to the education of the rural population, there has been significant expansion of rural education, including the “implementation of the 9-year compulsory education law and the free compulsory education reform in both rural and urban areas” (Zhao 2018, 22). As Montgomery writes, The Compulsory Education Act in 2006 ensured rural migrant children free access to compulsory education (encompassing six years of primary and three years of junior secondary education) in state schools. Wide-scale demolition of private schools continues while migrant children are still turned away from the state school system in large numbers (Montgomery 2012, 593). Nonetheless, increased rural educational attainment has provided the rural youth with more knowledge of urban modernity, wealth, adventures, and more incentive for individual pursuits. These three reforms together have contributed to the changes in migration opportunities and trajectories among the younger generation of migrant workers. To some extent, this is illustrated in the second generation of Huang migrants.

The young adult children of the three siblings are each located differently both geographically and in relation to social class. Older brother Lian's only son, Hua, and elder sister Xiang's two children, Jia and Jin, all voluntarily dropped out of middle school when they were in their mid-teens, leaving their hometown to go to cities and to follow their migratory dreams. This echoes Pessar and Mahler's description of "...youth who envision themselves as becoming migrants to such a degree that they stop attending school, seeing very little utility in education..." (2001, 8).

In comparison, younger sister Xia's daughter, Hui, who grew up in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, is the only one of the four cousins in the family who received a college education and now resides overseas. The lives of the third-generation members of this family differ greatly from the lives of their grandparents, Xiu and Chun, who struggled with starvation and lacked education, growing up under the commune system of socialist China. Their lives also differ from those of their parents who, as first-generation migrants, experienced the early turbulent reform era that began in the late 1970s. The members of the younger generation were born with better living conditions, more educational opportunities, and with greater access to urban consumer culture and internet and communication technologies under China's capitalist reform. However, all three cousins who grew up in their rural hometowns chose to drop out of school and followed the example of Xia and Xiang, migrating and becoming urban wage laborers in the manufacturing and service sectors. Throughout my interviews with the two second-generation migrants, specifically, Xiang's two children, I was intrigued by how their migration choices were driven by different motives from those of their parents and their aunt Xia. Given their greater educational opportunities and fewer financial constraints, I wondered

why the three cousins voluntarily gave up their educational opportunities and chose instead to engage in migration.

#### **4.2 Xiang's Children: Jia and Jin**

Was migration their best alternative? Or, how did they envisage migration as a way to achieve their life goals? With these questions in mind, I went to Hangzhou and Jinhua in Eastern China to interview both of Xiang's children, her elder daughter Jia, and Jia's younger brother Jin. They migrated to different cities: Hangzhou, Jinhua, from their rural hometown after they dropped out of school at the ages of 15. Since then, they have engaged in "circular migration" a dominant form of labor migration in China in which migrant workers frequently move between the cities where they work and their rural hometowns (Zhao 2018, 19-20). This migration paradigm applies to both the first-generation and the second-generation migrant workers in the family. However, unlike the first-generation migrant workers, the second-generation migrants consider themselves primarily urban workers and identify themselves as such, rather than as farmers or rural people as did many first-generation migrant workers (Zhao 2018, 20).

The elder daughter, Jia, is now in her late twenties. She left home at the age of sixteen, and since then has worked in several different cities in Guangdong province and Zhejiang province, first as a factory worker, and then as sales assistant, which she has done for the past 13 years. Although I did not know her very well, she was willing to share her feelings and open up to me during the interview. In the interview, she discussed her family relationships and her ideas about her younger brother. She said her younger brother, Jin, has not yet found a stable job, and that he always gives up on his work. She sighed when we talked about Jin's young wife

and daughter, explaining that Jin has long heavily relied financially on their parents, and that he did not work for a two-year period. She told me that when he was at home in the village, he and his young wife always argued over very trivial things, but that their relationship has improved since he went back to work again in 2017.

### **4.3 Lian's Son: Hua**

Jia also told me about Lian's son, Hua and about family relationships. In terms of family relationships, Jia explained why the relationship between her uncle Lian and her aunt Xia had worsened in recent years, and the role played by Hua in this matter. As she explained:

“Money is always the factor that causes conflict in this family. Cousin Hua, uncle Lian's son, who is also a migrant worker, wanted to buy an apartment in his hometown, but he couldn't save enough money to pay the installments, since his barber shop business failed last year. A couple years ago, aunt Xia encountered some financial setbacks due to her husband's failing business in Hong Kong, and she borrowed some money from uncle Lian to support her family. Last year, cousin Hua needed money to pay the mortgage for his apartment in town. He was aware that aunt Xia, still owed his father money. So, he pressured his father to demand the money back from aunt Xia. My aunt has huge financial burdens, and she needs to support her daughter's tuition overseas. Gradually, my aunt's inability to pay uncle Lian back last year, exacerbated the problems and worsened their relationship.”

Jia's narrative reminded me of her uncle Lian's reaction toward his sister Xia when I interviewed him in Hunan. I told Jia that Lian barely talked to his younger sister Xia when I saw them both in Hunan in summer 2018. The only time I heard them converse was when Xia apologized to Lian and promised him that she would try her best to return the money to him as soon as possible. I asked Jia, "Do you think the relationship between your uncle and aunt would have been okay if Hua didn't impose pressure on his father Lian for the money? Do you think it was appropriate for cousin Hua to intervene in the issue between his father and his aunt?" Jia answered, "I don't think my cousin's behavior is appropriate, because he is supposed to be responsible for his own mortgage payment instead of asking his father to give him the money. His father already helped him when he started his barber shop in town. If he can't afford an apartment yet, he shouldn't pretend to be rich and do something beyond his capability."

Lian's son Hua used to be a migrant worker, and he got married in his early 20s with his former classmate, Xu. His son Xian, was born after 15 months of his wedding. After he got married in his rural hometown, he had stayed in his rural village with his father Lian. However, he did not want to remain in rural area due to the lack of opportunities, and thus he chose to migrate to work again after his son Xian was born. After one year of work in a factory in Zhejiang Province, he did not want to work at a factory anymore and decided to use a loan he had acquired and his father's financial support to start his own barbershop. Unfortunately, his business failed after just one year, and he had to go out to work again with his wife to satisfy his ambitions. Naturally, his son, Xian, has since become one of the left-behind children as Jin and Jia were. Last year, with his savings from working in Zhejiang as a factory worker, and with his father's financial support, he planned to buy an apartment in town. When he needed the money to pay the monthly mortgage, he thought about his aunt Xia, because he knew she owed his father

money due to her husband's business failure in 2008. He started to demand that his father ask his Xia for the money back. Gradually, Lian and Xia's relationship worsened because of cousin Hua. From the conversation with Jia, it was clear that she disapproved of her cousin's behavior. She saw it as unfilial. Not only did cousin Hua show little respect to his father, on whom he relied to fulfill his pursuit of becoming a member of the petty bourgeoisie, but he was also unfilial (*buxiaozi*) because as an adult and an only child, he should have been preparing to support his parents, not the other way around. Jia's explanation of family relationships helped me to better understand filial, gendered, and generational expectations, but also how financial issues play an important role in the internal conflicts in this household, and how family relationship can be shaped by them.

According to Jia, her cousin Hua was unwilling to go back to live with his father in his rural hometown after a few years away as a migrant worker. She said that he sees and imagines himself as an urban citizen with his own small business. Chan and Selden argue that among the first generation of rural migrants who were drawn into the labor market into the 1990s, many eventually returned to their rural villages to marry, settle down and raise children. However, those belonging to the new generation of migrants rarely returned to or settled in their rural villages as the first-generation migrants did (2014, 602).

Those who were born in the post-Mao China have grown up with new and different hopes and expectations than their parents (Chan and Selden 2014, 603). Jia's cousin Hua is a case in point. He has completely different prospects and expectation than his father, Lian, and he is not willing to return to his rural village. Owning his own business and his own apartment in town would be his way to prove his independence and determination to cut his rural ties. However, despite such ambitions, as Chan and Selden argue, the second-generation of Chinese

rural migrants “has not completely left the countryside or cut their rural ties.” They describe this as a form of “incomplete proletarianization” (Chan and Selden 2014, 601). In other words, state restrictions on *hukou* and denial of urban social welfare to rural migrants, still significantly hinder both the first-generation and the second-generation migrants’ ability to earn their livelihoods and to establish themselves permanently in the cities. In Jia’s cousin Hua’s case, he has chosen, for the time being at least, to settle in a nearby township instead of in his rural village, by purchasing apartment and engaging in entrepreneurship such as barber shop business. Although compared to his father, he has better assimilated to urban life and has managed to loosen his ties to his rural village, he cannot be fully financial independent and still rely on his father’s financial support to satisfy his pursuit of an urban lifestyle.

#### **4.4 Neoliberalism, Individualism, and the Second Generation**

The neoliberal idea of individualism and individual responsibility – in the sense of the emphasis on individual pursuit and modern consumption -- has influenced two generations of people in this family. In Hua’s case, both individualism and collectivism seem to have impacted on his life as he has grown up in a Confucian idea of traditional family under an increasingly individualist society. In Hua’s household, the influence of collectivism imposes pressure on him as he is expected to abide by his family values such as fulfilling filial duties and taking care of the elderly. Instead of fulfilling filial duties of taking care of his aging parents at home, his modern consumption patterns and his goals of owning his personal apartment and business in town indicate his willingness to live farther away from home. Individualism has played an important role in his consumption habits and individual pursuits. Meanwhile, his economic

reliance on his father implies that he is not yet fully independent, and still counts on family support. China's rapid economic and political transformation has brought a dramatic change to the social landscape and ideological change from collectivism to individualism. For those who were born in the 1990s, the influence of individualism and consumerism is conspicuous as we can see from Hua's case. Hua is not the only case that indicate individual ideological struggle. The state is constantly trying to preserve its own social identity and to undermine the Western capitalist influence on Chinese people. According to Ong (1997), the market reforms which launched in 1991, known as "socialism with Chinese characteristics," represents an attempt to establish greater state control over capitalism to increase the power of the Chinese nation. However, the consequences of such economic and political transformations have had a mixed impact on the new generation of migrant workers as they struggle more to pursue modern consumerism and individualism despite their financial difficulties.

For the last 20 years, China has brought about extensive economic reforms that have transformed the country into a pseudo-capitalist market economy (Steele and Lynch 2012, 442). In this context, whether China is still a "collectivist" society remains debatable. Wang (2002) claims, for example, that "as long as the Chinese communist party continues to govern in the name of socialism, it must continue to avert the emergence of values such as individualism that are clearly identifiable as central to Western capitalism" (Wang 2002, 47). Other scholars such as Moore (2005), and Yan (2010) have discussed how decades of socioeconomic change have transformed the country into a much more individualistic one. Yan argues that the Maoist path to modernity was gradually negated and replaced by the language of market economics and privatization (Yan 2010). She views the increasing number of choices for individuals as the most noticeable change in the post-reform China which encompasses both the rise of the individual

and individualization of the social structure (Yan 2010, 489). He further argues that even socially disadvantaged groups now accept an “ethic of personal responsibility for their successes and failures” (Yan 2010). However, Hua represents a different case, based on Yan’s argument, because Hua sacrificed his father’s interest to satisfy his own individual pursuit of individualism and modernity, yet he has been unable to attain individualism in the sense of financial independence.

#### **4.5 Jia’s Life in Hangzhou and Filial Pressures**

Xiang’s daughter Jia currently works as a sales assistant in a shopping mall in Hangzhou. She said she is satisfied with her current job and she did not complain about the working conditions, although she said that she is working daily 12-hour shifts, with only two short breaks for meals each day. She said she has much more flexibility and a better work environment compared with the tedious and inflexible factory work she did before. She told me that she is the best sales assistant in the store, and that her boss relies heavily on her. When I asked her about her future prospect and career plans, she said she does not want to go back to her hometown because the lifestyle and social environment there are sterile and stagnant. Similar to her aunt, Xia, who has resided in Shenzhen for more than 25 years, Jia has already gotten used to urban life and the work environment. It would be hard for her to return and readjust to her rural hometown and to settle down there, given the stagnant development and “boring life” she described there. Compared to her aunt Xia and her mother Xiang, she faces less pressure to fulfill her filial duties of taking care of her parents. She also faces less pressure to send remittance back to her parents in an increasingly individualistic Chinese society.

Confucianist values were undermined and criticized after the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, and Confucianism was banished during the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution. However, since the market reform in the late 1970s, the Chinese Communist Party has gradually allowed the resurgence of traditional values, especially after the 1989 pro-democracy protests. Since President Xi Jinping gained power, the Chinese Communist Party has strongly endorsed the revival of the traditional Confucian values such as filial piety, respect for the elders, social ritual and personal moral virtue (Page 2015, 5). There are multiple factors at play that contribute to the comeback of Confucianism. As discussed above, the four decades of rapid economic reform based on the neoliberal development paradigm has caused a series of social consequences, such as increasing individualism among the younger generation accompanied by a weakening sense of filial piety, as illustrated in the case of Hua.

As stressed above, one of the key features of the Chinese neoliberal development paradigm is the decline of the social safety net provided by the government. With China's increasingly aging population and the weakening social safety net, the pressure for elderly care has mostly fallen to the younger generation. Yet, the rising influence of individualism has worked at cross purposes, undermining the traditional value of filial piety as responsibility for one's elders. As a result, the Chinese state has started to initiate the movement of reviving traditional values through political propaganda and education to protect its neoliberal development path. Besides, as China's recent economic slowdown hit the nation, the Chinese Communist Party has been seeking to revive Confucianism to help reestablish party legitimacy. As Page (2015) notes, the

“China Dream” has been promoted by the Chinese communist government in this context to reinvent the CCP as the inheritor and savior of a 5000-year-old civilization.

Jia represents a more individualist migrant woman compared to the previous generation of women migrant workers. She enjoys living as an independent working woman, even though her work cannot guarantee her urban residency or economic well-being in Hangzhou. When it comes to whether Jia will in fact be able to follow in her aunt’s footsteps and settle in a city, Jia said she dreams of settling down in Hangzhou. However, she further indicates that the skyrocketing property prices and living costs might well prevent her from doing so. Hence, she fears it is likely that she will have to go back to her hometown eventually and settle down there.

In terms of her marriage prospects, and the norm and filial obligation to marry, she said that she does not like men in her hometown because she thinks they are not ambitious, hardworking, or responsible. She said, “a lot of men in my hometown just act like my younger brother who has little responsibility to take care of family and children.” Given her age and her unmarried status, Jia is often viewed by her rural relatives and neighbors as a “left-over woman” (Feldshuh 2016). She is currently 29 and is in no rush to marry. She wants to be more financially independent before forming a family. She prefers to find a marriage partner in an urban area, preferably someone who shares similar values, who is oriented toward an urban life, unlike the villagers in her rural hometown. Her hopes regarding her future husband reflect recent changes in perspective with regard to love, marriage, and intimacy in the context of China’s neoliberal era.

Compared to the first-generation migrants, the new generation of migrants started their migration journey in their mid-teens and very few of them remained in the countryside (Zhao

2018, 21). In both Jia and her younger brother Jin's cases, they migrated during their mid-teens, earlier than their parents did. They foresee a more promising future in urban areas than in their rural hometown. Like many others of their generation, they occupy the manufacturing and service sectors in mostly electronic and garment factories in urban areas. Another defining characteristic of the new generation of migrants is they tend to send fewer remittances back to their rural households because most of their migration motivations are self-driven and they currently have fewer household burdens of childrearing or elderly care (Zhao 2018). This phenomenon closely ties to the change of their attitude about their marriage prospects and intimate relationships. In the case of Jia, she prefers to seek a partner in the city rather than marrying someone who is in the countryside, as was preferable and common in her parents' generation.

In my interview with Jia's mother, Xiang, she said that she would not intervene her daughter's personal life and marriage decisions, and that it is Jia's own decision whether come back to their hometown or remain in the city. Xiang's open-minded attitude toward her daughter's individual choices suggests a less paternalistic and hierarchical rural family structure as the first-generation migrants have been exposed to urban culture and increasing influence of individualism, and the expectations they place on their children shift.

#### **4.6 Jin's Migratory Path**

In contrast to Jia's experience and values, her younger brother, Jin, (now in his early twenties) was married at the age of twenty and who now has a three-year old daughter. Similar to his sister Jia, he left school and went out to work as migrant worker at 16. He started to work as a factory

worker in Zhejiang. However, when the factory manager discovered his young age, he fired him after just a few days of work. Since then, Jin has worked in the cities of Changsha, Hangzhou, and Jinhua, and in Hunan and Zhejiang provinces, to seek wealth and opportunities. His occupational choices have mostly been limited to the retail sector and the manufacturing sector, however, due to his low education. He migrated to several different cities and worked in a motor vehicle factory, as property sales agent, and as a construction worker over the past five years. Two years ago, when he was working in Changsha, the capital of Hunan province, he met his wife, his former classmate. They got married just a few months after they met, because she had unexpectedly become pregnant. Since he got married, he stopped working and chose to stay at home with his wife who is currently a housewife and a sales assistant in Jinhua. I asked him why he didn't go out to work again after he got married, but he did not give me a clear answer. He said he just stayed at home and hung out with his friends every day and did a lot of gambling and drinking. I could tell from what he said that this laid-back lifestyle did not give him much pleasure. When I asked whether he wanted to get married and form a family at such early age, he answered without any hesitation that he never imaged this would happen. He indicated that he always planned to build up his career in his twenties, and to start a family after that. Apparently, early marriage and childrearing pressures limited his mobility.

Both siblings, Jia and Jin, were considered rebellious children by their parents, and they are more individualistic – in the sense of their self-driven migration -- and they have not followed “traditional” Chinese values such as filial piety and conventional gender roles. From their appearance, they do not look much different from most of the urban residents I saw, but from their own perspectives, they are constantly pulled in different directions by the shifting socioeconomic environment, the unpredictability of their career prospects, and by unknown

future developments, not knowing whether the rural area or the city is the best place for them to realize their individual pursuits.

In Jin's case, he is not satisfied with his current occupation as a factory worker on an assembly line. Throughout my conversation with him, he repeated his unwillingness to do repetitive and tedious factory work, on a daily basis, for the rest of his life. He said to me, "I see little hope for myself and few prospects for the future." The tedious factory work has consumed the twenty-two-year old young man's energy and passion. I could sense his frustration and hopelessness from both his words and his face. When I asked about his everyday life, he told me, "The life experience here is the same every day. When you wake up, you know you are getting ready to work. At work, you expect to go back home to rest from the exhaustion. And at night, you expect there will be something new in your life tomorrow. However, when you wake up again the next morning, everything stays the same. Nothing really changes...ever."

The second-generation of migrant workers who grew up with the influence of modern culture, mass media, technology and consumerism have higher expectations for their lives compared to their parents' generation. Jin said he always desires adventure in his life; yet, mechanical and repetitive factory work and mounting debts have forced him to devote himself to doing work he does not want to do. As Ngai and Chan explain, the younger generation of better-educated migrant workers desire a new life, but toiling day and night on standardized assembly lines provide them no real-life prospects (2010, 19). Therefore, they face a "huge discrepancy between soaring expectations and the harsh reality of factory lives," similar to Jin's experiences (Ngai and Chan 2010, 19).

According to Jin's description, factory life is stable, predictable, and inflexible. He doesn't have time to explore his surroundings because the daily 11-hour workload has already

consumed most of his energy. His face is filled with stress, exhaustion, and despair, and he looks much older than his twenty-two years. I was intrigued by his current occupational choice because working in factory was not his only choice. He used to work as sales agent and construction worker in different cities. When I asked him about the change of occupational choice, he again expressed regret about getting married so young. “If I didn’t get married and have burden of raising a child, I wouldn’t have to work in a factory and live my life like this now,” he said.

He explained that his parents placed pressure on him, because he had not had a stable job for two years. The birth of his daughter, Fan, created more of a financial burden on him, and thus he had to seek a stable job instead of wandering around and perhaps finding something better. Jin’s parents considered working in factory relatively stable work, compared to working in the service industry as a salesman. Therefore, Jin faces a constant internal struggle about his life prospects, his responsibilities, and his individual desires.

However, he still has some hope about his future, as he dreams of starting his own business in his hometown after a few years of saving his factory wages. Unlike his sister Jia, he eventually wants to settle down in his hometown while Jia is open to any better options, whichever seems more feasible and desirable. His willingness to return to his hometown aligns with the patrilocal pattern that sons live with their parents while daughters marry away from home. However, Jin did not give any indication that his possible future decision to return to his hometown would be driven by filial duties. Instead, he said that he would like to return to Hunan because his parents have already prepared a new apartment for him in his hometown, and thus he has little incentive to settle in an urban area where he can hardly gain urban residency. Similar to Hua’s case, Jin relies on his parents for future housing, and his

individualistic pursuit of modern life will likely to diminish when he eventually returns to his hometown and lives near his parents. In his current everyday life working at the factory, like many of his peers, he desires freedom, modernity, technology and wealth. During his leisure time, he hangs out with his co-villagers to play computer games, gamble, or drink to ease the stress and anxiety about work and family.

Both Jia and Jin are more educated than their parents and they migrated at an earlier age. In addition, they are generally more individualistic in the sense of their self-driven migration. They mostly have occupational choices in manufacturing and services sectors compared to most of the first-generation migrant workers who made more of their occupational choices in construction sector. For the new-generation migrants, they tend to be more mobile and to engage in inter-provincial migration (Zhao 2018, 21). As they are influenced by urban culture at an early age and spent more time in non-farm activities growing up, they have assimilated to urban culture more easily and seem to resemble urban residents in terms of their appearance, at least more than was the case with their rural-oriented parents. This phenomenon shows that the integration of rural migrants into an urban and consumerist era of China has made significant progress.

Jin and Jia's cases show that at least some second-generation migrants have less attachment to their rural hometowns, compared to their parents. Remittance was a highly significant factor motivating the migration of the first-generation migrants and their families in their rural hometowns relied on their remittances to support their livelihoods. However, as in Jin and Jia's case, fewer of the second-generation migrants face pressure to send remittances because their parents or their family members who are the first-generation migrant workers can

support themselves through saving from their hard work in the cities (Zhao 2018). This at least seems to be the case for Jin, Jia, and Hua.

As this chapter has illustrated, China's urbanization, facilitated by neoliberal reforms, has continued to influence second generation rural migrants on both personal and socio-economic levels. From most literature on internal migration, many scholars (e.g., Zhu 2002; Zhao 1999; Seeborg, Jin and Zhu, 2000) argue that economic incentives are the key motivation that has driven the first wave of migration in China. Even though most of the rural population engages in migration for their economic well-being due to the lack of opportunities in most rural areas, there are multiple factors intertwined with their migration decisions, as in Xia's case, and in some cases, migration is not always the preferred choice for rural people, as we can see in the case of elder brother Lian.

Fan argues that "out-migration has become a necessary, desirable source of livelihood and employment for many rural Chinese, and a key instrument to relieve agricultural labor surplus" (Fan 2012,163), but for the second-generation migrants, labor migration has become more than primarily an economically-driven activity and become more self-driven in the recent post-reform era. This phenomenon, as illustrated in the cases of Xia in the first generation, and of Xiang's and Lin's children indicates that labor migration has firmly established itself as a way of life throughout China's rural areas (Fan 2012,163; Lee 2007, 204; Zhao 1999). In the next chapter, I will discuss there are connections and disconnections in the migratory purposes and patterns for the two generations of migrant workers.

## 5.0 Connections and Disconnections between Two Migrant Generation

### 5.1 Introduction

By observing the life trajectories of the three generations of family members in this migrant family over four decades of reform, we can examine the influence of neoliberal development since the 1980s in China on the rural population, on semi-proletarianization, and on migration, family relationship, gender roles, and individual pursuits. Especially among the two generations of migrant workers, the drastic social changes led by the reform has brought a changing migration patterns over the two generations of peasant workers.

From this case study, it appears that the first generation of migrant workers, illustrated by sisters Xia and Xiang, are driven by different determinants in terms of their migration trajectories. Both of them chose to migrate to Shenzhen in Southern China during the first migration wave as the Southern China Pearl Delta region was the flagship of Deng's market reform. Deng Xiaoping's strategy of establishing four Special Economic Zones in the coastal cities of South China has proved to be effective in attracting foreign capital to China. In the beginning of 1980s, the four Special Economic Zones: Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen, were chosen in order to take advantage of the highest concentration of overseas Chinese (Wall 1993, 246). Shenzhen, the first established Special Economic Zone in 1980, is contiguous with Hong Kong and Macao which were more economically advanced than mainland China in the reform era. Deng's strategy of geographical containment of foreign capital was not initially successful. Deng's key impetus for the reform was not only to attract foreign capital, but

also modern technology. However, the key modern technology was not owned by the overseas Chinese capitalists but by large Western and Japanese corporations (Wall 1993, 247).

Most Western multi-national corporations at that time did not want to invest in the less developed Special Economic Zones in the late 1970s and bring in their technology. Instead, they preferred “larger centers of population with plenty of skilled workers, good infrastructure including national and international communications” (Wall 1993, 267). Therefore, in order to achieve technology transfer and achieve full socioeconomic reform, a large population of rural migrants were drawn to Southern China to build better infrastructure and to contribute to the low-wage labor force that would attract foreign corporations’ investment.

As a result, Deng initiated reform policies based on pragmatism (Wall 1993), flexibility of labors, and a dormitory labor regime (Ngai and Smith, 2006). Since the reforms in Southern China, more and more cities and provinces opened their markets to foreign investment and trade. Sisters Xia and Xiang came to Shenzhen in the early 1990s when Shenzhen was still in the early stages of expanding its manufacturing and service sectors. Through her rural social networks, younger sister Xia first, for a short while, worked at a factory as an assembly worker. Later, discouraged by the fixed work patterns of factory labor and the poor working conditions, she decided to find work for the service sector as a hostess at a restaurant where she then later met her husband. Her change of occupation is similar to the shift in occupation of many of rural migrant women, from the factory to the service industries in the 1990s in South China.

Female migrant workers have constituted a major part of the migrant workforce since the reform era, and they have been a focal point of neoliberal development because the migrant labor regime is gendered in China. Factories mainly target young migrant women because they are considered as having good attention to detail and easier to control, as more subservient and

obedient than their male counterparts (Ngai 2012). Meanwhile, the entertainment and service industries grew rapidly in South China since the 1980s along with the growth of manufacturing sectors (Zheng 2009). According to Zheng, in the name of entertainment, and with the promotion of cosmopolitan consumption in the global economy that was dominated by the service industry, women's bodies are "given price tags" and skillfully packaged to male customers. This phenomenon has become popular in China's urban landscape (Zheng 2009).

Younger sister Xia went to Shenzhen in the early 1990s, during the period of state reform that targeted state-owned enterprises (SOEs). That wave of reform, which featured privatization on a massive scale, aligns with the typical neoliberal development paradigm. The state-owned enterprise reform was one of the key initiatives for China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy. When the reform started in late 1978, SOEs were omnipresent, and they dominated China's industrial sectors (Lin, Cai and Li 1998). However, after 18 years of gradual transition, especially after the massive layoff in SOEs, their share of industries in China declined from 77.6 percent in 1978 to 28.8 percent in 1996 (Lin, Cai and Li 1998). The drastic reform of SOEs in the late 1980s changed the urban economy and fostered a shift in the labor force to foreign-invested or private-owned new sectors (Fan 2008, 103). These new sectors, which are characterized by jobs in service industries, became key industries for the employment of temporary migrant workers because these employment opportunities are heavily market-driven (Fan 2008, 103). The social restructuring based on privatization of state-owned enterprises caused massive unemployment in urban China, which aligned with the neoliberal development paradigm aimed at increasing privatization. With the rising emphasis on the service industry, the abundant job opportunities in the private sectors successfully attracted millions of migrant

women to come to work in South China, including Shenzhen, where the service industry was prioritized and where younger sister Xia went to work.

Comparing sisters Xia and Xiang's migration trajectories, the key difference is that Xiang migrated after she got married back in her rural hometown while Xia came to Shenzhen as a single woman. Marriage migration is a distinctive feature of rural-urban migration. The high representation of young, single individuals among the female rural migrants has given rise to the term *dagongmei*—young migrant women workers (Gaetano and Jacka 2004, 5). Scholars such as Ching Kwan Lee use the term “maiden workers” which refers to young and single female migrant workers who are perceived to be docile workers (C. K. Lee, 1998). Why are young, single migrant women in demand in the urban labor market? And why are married, older migrant women less likely to migrate and work in the service sector? Xia and Xiang's cases illustrate the contrast between single woman and married women in the urban labor market.

According to Xia's narrative, the reason she chose to migrate to Shenzhen in the late 1980s was because of its spatial proximity to Hong Kong, its abundant job opportunities, and its booming manufacturing and service sectors. Although later she settled in Shenzhen for marriage and family reasons, the prosperous service sector in Shenzhen was another key reason why she has stayed here for the past two decades. Since she left the factory floor and joined the service sector, she has worked first as a hostess at a restaurant hostess then later as a sales representative in a pharmaceutical company. She indicated that most of the new generation female migrant workers prefer to work in the service sector as sales agents, waitresses, and real estate brokers, and that factory work becomes less attractive to migrant workers, especially to migrant women. She said,

“There are more educated young women and migrants who came to Shenzhen for opportunities, as Shenzhen has become a world-known metropolis and its GDP already surpasses that of Hong Kong. Factory work heavily constrains their freedom, and thus they have little chance to engage in social networking and meet new people. As a sales representative, I gained chances to interact and communicate with different people in my everyday life, and this really helps me improve my interpersonal skills. This job exposes me to a lot of opportunities as well”.

For both the first and second-generation migrant workers, Shenzhen exposes them to innovation, hope, wealth, economic liberalization, abundant job opportunities, and a city attracts those who aspire to engage in the service sector.

Marriage and gender roles are widely considered key to explaining differences in the migration process between men and women (Cerrutti and Massey 2001; Radcliffe 1991).

Different from Xia’s case, elder sister Xiang migrated to Shenzhen mostly driven by economic factors because she and her husband struggled to support their two children with the meager earnings they received in rural Hunan. Given the financial pressure of childrearing, and the connection with her younger sister Xia, Xiang was introduced by Xia to a factory in Shenzhen.

Scholars, such as Fan, argue that gender roles and unequal gender relations governed by patriarchal ideology are essential to the family formation strategies in relation to migration (2008; 10). In the rural areas, women often have low educational attainment, marry young, and are expected to fulfill care-giving, household chores and farming while husbands migrate out to work (Fan 2008, 10). However, Xiang’s case is an outlier based on Fan’s statement because Xiang is the one who migrated out to work under the split-household strategy, while her husband

stayed at home to do the care-giving and farming during the 1990s. Xiang's role in her family was unorthodox at that time, and challenges the Confucian influenced gender roles that designated certain household responsibilities to married women. Although the spilt-household strategy, which has been the model of gender division of labor in rural in China, defines men's sphere to be outside, based on the conventional idea of "men till, women weave", the neoliberal development paradigm in China provides rural women legitimacy to enter the labor market.

In the Maoist era, women's status had improved as can be seen from Mao's famous statement that "women carry half of the heavens on their shoulder" (Fan 2008, 10). This statement indicates that women's contribution to economic production mattered to the state's development. Indeed, women's participation in the labor market has significantly increased since the Maoist era, and the female labor force has become key components of sectors such as manufacturing and service. This development paradigm is similar to those in Western industrialized economics (Riley 1996). However, rural migrant women face dual pressures as they are expected to fulfil the household duties designated by Confucianist gender roles and the financial responsibility to their family in the Post-reform era.

Park argues that even in the post-Mao era, the Chinese state seems to have promoted patriarchy and undermined women's interests by pursuing a developmentalist agenda (Park 1992). Policies such as the one-child policy undermined women's agency by legitimizing the state's surveillance of women's bodies and penalizing fertility (Smith 2000, 315). In terms of women's position in the labor market, there are numerous studies that have claimed that women's position has deteriorated, and there is "discrimination against women in the hiring process and career development," and "they are segregated into 'female' sectors in both urban and rural areas" (Fan, 2008; 10). In addition, as Smith argues, decollectivization in agricultural

production is also gendered due to the return to household-level decision-making that reinforces the husband's position and women's subordination (Smith 2000, 309-311). Therefore, rural migrant women face challenges to exercise their agency in both the household and the workplace in the post-reform era.

In terms of the occupational choice, Xiang told me that she didn't like to work in the service sector due to her married status and her lack of communication skills. As a married woman, she said, "working in the service sector was deemed unconventional and inappropriate" in her rural hometown. Even Xiang's decision to migrate to work instead of her husband is unorthodox and challenged Confucian gender roles and patriarchal sociocultural traditions that continue to be prevalent in rural China. After a couple years, Xiang left the factory and became a domestic worker in a rich household in Shenzhen. She quit her job after a few months and went back to factory. As she explained, when she worked as a domestic worker in Shenzhen, the family mistreated her and wasn't willing to give her identification card back to her. She did not go into the details of her experiences as a domestic worker, but she indicated that the experience gave her sense of humiliation and that she would not go back to work in the service sector – at least not as a domestic worker -- again. Compared to the service sector, factory work is more stable and less risky because, as a married woman, all she wanted was a stable income to help her support her family. The difference in personality between Xia and Xiang also led to different career paths. Xiang, as a married woman was more risk-averse than Xia, who was willing to take more changes. Their different occupations situated them in different social classes<sup>9</sup>. Xia and Xiang's individual choices of migrating to Shenzhen to work signifies two specific migration patterns in the early 1990s for migrant women in China.

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<sup>9</sup> China's class structure is changing dramatically in the wake of post-1978 market-oriented economic reforms. The creation of a mixed "market-socialist" economy has eroded the institutional bases of a cadre-dominated social

The first-generation migrants experienced China's early economic liberalization since the 1980s, during which time communal protections were removed, large rural labor surplus was created, and the rural population in the countryside had to deal with poverty. Rural women actively participated in migrant work in urban areas, while those who stayed in the rural villages took up the bulk of the responsibility for agricultural work (Fan 2008, 7). In both agricultural and migrant work, women were an important segment of the labor force. However, most of the women in the migrant work force performed what have been characterized as "poorly paid, low-skilled, and temporary jobs and rampant exploitation are rapidly expanding" (Fan 2008, 7). In Xiang's case, she spent years working in the low-skilled manufacturing sector and was responsible for childrearing duties when she returned to her rural hometown. Although the transiency of migrant work and her lack of urban residency disincentivized her stay in the city, her decision to go back and forth to her rural hometown, Zhijiang, was mostly driven by childrearing duties for her two children. Her case helps to show how migrant workers, especially women's migratory decisions are not solely economically driven, but are complicated by familial factors that influence their migration pathways, such as providing care the young and the elderly in their households. As a result, the first-generation rural migrant women constantly sought a middle ground between their urban migrant work and their household duties in their rural hometown.

Four decades of socioeconomic reform and rural-urban migration have significantly changed the social landscape and migration pattern in China. The children of Lian, Xiang, and Xia, the new generation of rural migrants, gradually replaced the aging first-generation migrants. Growing up in a migrant family, the children of Xia, Xiang and Lian each have

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hierarchy and created conditions for a new pattern of social stratification (Bian, Breiger, Galaskiewicz and Davis, 2005).

different life paths and they are situated in different social classes with different occupations. As addressed in previous chapters, both Xiang and Lian's children engaged in low-skilled migrant work, becoming the second-generation migrant workers who situate in the semi-proletariat class while Xia's daughter who situates in the urban middle class has gained opportunities to study abroad, obtaining higher education.

Compared with Xia and Xiang's migration pattern to the southern SEZs, the second-generation illustrate different migration patterns. They had greater opportunities to work in Eastern China, regions that have successfully attracted capital and labor, as Shenzhen had done earlier. The key generational differences among the migrant generations are represented by the following: (1) changes of migration destination, for SEZs to more of China's Eastern inland cities; (2) increasing educational attainment; (3) fewer expectations that they will send remittances to their parents; (4) changes in consumption patterns, including iPhones and Nike shoes.

## **5.2 Destinations**

With regard to destination, the new generation of migrants, as exemplified by Jia, Jin and Hua, are more likely to migrate to eastern regions of China instead of the Pearl Delta region in South China. Zhao's studies of the new generation of migrants, utilizing the Rural Household Survey (2003-2012), shows that 66.52 percent of migrant workers are currently located in Eastern provinces and that the new generation of migrants are more likely than the first generation to work in the eastern provinces (Zhao 2018, 35). Although the data cannot generalize different migrants' changes of migration destination, the data suggests that the overall trend of migration has shifted from southern China to

the eastern China in recent years. The switch of migration patterns also indicates the change of state's reform policies.

Since the opening up reform in the late 1970s in southern China, the process of opening up has continued and expanded from southern China to eastern China. In the 1990s, Shanghai, the most important metropolis, gained increasing political influence in Eastern China. With the increase of political influence and the reform policies, the reform expanded to Shanghai and its neighboring cities (Steele and Lynch, 2013). In recent years, the main shifts are a move away from the Special Economic Zones to a broader geographical sphere, and thus the increasing manufacturing and service sectors in the eastern China have attracted the second wave of migration in which the new generation of young rural migrant workers take part. In this context, the change of migration destination is mainly driven by the State's developmentalist policy and its impact on different regions in China.

Jia is the only one among her cousins in the younger generation who currently works in the service sector in Hangzhou, eastern China. She is a saleswoman in a downtown department store while both her younger brother Jin and cousin Hua work in manufacturing sector as assembly line workers in other industrial cities in eastern China. Eastern metropolises like Shanghai and Hangzhou have been a new focal point of booming retail, trade, and finance industries, and they are privileged by state policies to attract foreign investors by setting up free trade zones and enjoying the policies of Special Economic Zones (Steele and Lynch, 2013). As a new financial hub, the Eastern cities represent a new wave of hope, wealth, and prosperity for the second-generation migrants while their previous generation of migrants settle their dreams and pursuits in the South.

### 5.3 Education

Regarding education, compared to the Xia, Xiang and Lian who only received primary school education, the second generation of migrants Jia, Jin and Hua all went to junior high school before they dropped out of school and migrated to work in urban cities. The increased investment in education by the Chinese state has significantly improved the educational attainment of the second-generation migrants. As a result, the higher educational level is more likely to raise the new generation migrants' awareness of their legal rights in workplace (Zhao 2018, 26). On one hand, the increasing educational level of migrants can improve the core competence of China's manufacturing sector as China is changing its development paradigm from a low-skilled labor-intensive manufacturing industry to manufacturing sectors characterized by high-skilled labor that would inevitably requires more educated workers. On the other hand, the more educated workers have generated more demands and pursuits compared to their previous generations of workers, and thus they are viewed as a more rebellious new generation.

Scholars in recent years, such as Ngai and Lu (2010), Chan and Selden (2014) have discussed the increasing anger and desperation of the new generation migrant working class, as demonstrated by rising labor protests and growing class tensions in China. In fact, the rebellious second generation of migrants has struggled to make a living during the semi-proletarianization process, a by-product of China's four decades of neoliberal socioeconomic reform. The semi-proletarianization is essential to understanding the situation of the second-generation working class, because they are constantly in a state of displacement, feeling trapped by an incessant vicious cycle of going back and forth between their rural villages and the urban cities where

they work. Ngai and Lu address the process of semi-proletarianization of Chinese peasant migrant workers and how it has shaped the quasi status of peasant-workers.

The new Chinese working class, represented mainly by the second-generation migrant workers, express increasing anger, anxiety, tension and take part in collective action (Ngai and Lu, 2010). In Jin's case, he has experienced an unstable work environment, discontent, and the household pressure. He switches jobs between the service industry and the manufacturing industry, and he finds no security in either sector. He is not satisfied with his current job as a low-paid assembly line worker who is tied to a fixed and very strict work pattern. Low-skilled factory work is still the main industry in China even though China is accelerating its pace of industrialization 2.0 (Zhang and Stening 2010). However, growing numbers of new generation migrant workers no longer want stable factory jobs that pay a low fixed hourly wage and that cannot help them move socially upward or gain residency in the urban areas. As a result, more of them switch to jobs in the service industry and become real estate brokers, sales assistants, or they take on other occupations with better earning capacity, such as wages that are tied to commissions as in Xia case.

Urban culture plays a great role among the second-generation migrants than the first. Different from the first-generation of migration that was mainly led by the state, the second-generation migration wave is mostly self-motivated and catalyzed by the growing urban consumer culture. When the second generation of migrants are exposed to the urban consumer culture, few of them are willing to go back to the pristine lifestyle in the rural areas. As a young migrant worker is quoted as saying, "If I had to live the life that my mother has lived, I would choose suicide" (Chan and Selden, 602) The new generation migrants spend less time on farm activities (Zhao 2018) and they feel disconnected from the rural lifestyles. Jia described how

she felt when she went back to her hometown to visit: “I don’t want to stay in my hometown for too long, because there are not many fun things I can do, and I already get used to the urban lifestyles with more exciting things going on in my everyday life.” Her description is similar to the quote above from the young migrant worker who would rather commit suicide than live in her rural community. This points to the relatively stronger adaptation of the young generation workers to urban consumer culture than their previous generation of migrant workers.

#### **5.4 Consumption Patterns**

Another significant feature for the young generation is their change of consumption patterns. According to Zhao, the migrations of those born after 1980 are more likely to have longer durations, to receive lower monthly incomes but have higher consumption in urban area (Zhao 2018, 29). Because they tend to spend more of their monthly wages on urban consumption, they send back less remittances to their rural households, a pattern that is very different from the first-generation migrant workers. The new generation of migrant workers who were born during the neoliberal reform era is strongly influenced by individualism and urban consumerism. The pursuit of high-tech and branded products such as iPhones and Nike sneakers characterize their everyday lives. In Jia, Jin and Hua’s cases, all three have been using iPhone for two or more years while their monthly wages are far below the cost of a single iPhone. Jia and Jin purchased their iPhones with loans that they have to repay with interest in monthly installments. For them, the pursuit and ownership of branded high-tech products signifies their identities as urban working citizens instead of rural peasants.

However, the proletarianization process in China limits the possibilities for second-generation migrant workers' to be fully assimilated to urbanization because state policies targeted at migrant workers disconnect the process of industrialization and urbanization. The Chinese state still denies the right of the second-generation workers to reside in the cities where they work, even though the state has relaxed the *hukou* policy (Zhao 2018). The constraints to rural migrants in the urban areas are highly visible and are reflected in their limited occupational choices, deprivation of social welfare, and lack of job and life security. Chan and Selden (2014) addressed the importance of the second-generation migrant workers in modern China's socioeconomic development and their desire to move socially upward as an urban working citizen. "As the backbone of the nation's industrial development, young workers today have higher expectations than the first wave of rural migrants. They aspire to develop technical skills, earn living wages, enjoy comprehensive welfare, and hold the full range of citizenship rights in the towns and cities they inhabit" (Chan and Selden 2014, 616). The new generation of young migrant workers dream of achieving their Chinese dream through their hard work, labor and perseverance. However, without the appropriate legal frameworks and institutional structures to provide workers' welfare, rights, their well-being cannot be guaranteed. In China's proletarianization process, both the first generation and the second-generation migrants have faced the same obstacles of displacement and transience that Ngai argues "is a defining feature of China's urban political space that sustains an incomplete proletarianization commonly experienced by the first and second generations of migrant workers" (Ngai 2010, 151).

Given the fact that the urban-rural gap is widening, the second-generation migrants are no longer satisfied with the quasi status of peasant-worker along with the unfinished process of

proletarianization, since most of them are attracted and influenced by the urban consumerist lifestyle. As Ngai and Lu describe, “anger, frustration, and a sense of unfairness were mounting in the workplace” and migrants dream of embracing freedom, success, well-being by working in the cities, which are supposed to provide more opportunities than they have in rural areas (Ngai and Lu 2010, 509). As Ngai and Lu write, “There is now a greater desire among the second generation of migrant workers to look for ways of staying in the city” (2010, 508). However, unstable living conditions, lack of social society net, limited occupational choices, policy constraints, social marginalization, and unsatisfying work prospects in the cities indicates that young migrant workers must constantly engage in displacement and circular migration.

In post-socialist China, individuals are increasingly stratified in terms of economic status; however, the massive migrant population is among the most vulnerable as they are separated from traditional family and hometown bonds and are marginalized, isolated and not accepted in the urban areas. As transient residents, the second-generation migrant workers still face serious difficulties securing urban residency and urban welfare. They are still hindered by the *hukou* system. While facing difficulties staying in the cities, most young migrant workers refuse to move back to their rural hometowns or to rely on conventional subsistence farming. The younger generation has a greater desire to look for possible ways to stay in the city, and they dream of being entrepreneurs instead of being a part of the cheap migrant labor force. The unfulfilled expectations and the internal struggle of the second generation of workers has increased while they experience long term systemic suppression and exploitation by the state and the global capital. As Ngai argues, “the incessant frustration of moving back and forth between the city and the country, as experienced by the second generation, inevitably creates anger and grievances

that cannot find release” (2010, 80). Therefore, the second generation of migrants are characterized by their collective activism, resentment, and anger (Ngai and Lu 2010). However, in Jin’s case, his resentment and dissatisfaction do not lead to collective activism; instead, he expressed his anger in a more personal way – by quitting his jobs. The labor struggles of both the first generation and the second generation have aggregated into a stronger force to confront the suppressive labor regime that includes intense surveillance, control and suppression by the state and corporations.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Since the late 1970s, socioeconomic reforms, based on a neoliberal development paradigm in China, have dramatically changed China's social landscape in both rural and urban areas. The semi-proletarianization, which came after the neoliberal reforms, transformed millions of peasants into low-wage workers in the urban areas in order to facilitate urbanization and industrialization. The semi-proletarianization process of rural migrants is distinctive to modern China's socioeconomic development model, which has given rise to a new working class, the first- and the second-generation migrant workers (Ngai and Lu, 2010). The social mobility and well-being of the two generations of migrant workers have been constrained by state policies such as *hukou*, and the dormitory labor regime (Ngai 2012). A series of broader state policies have influenced rural migrants' individual lives, and their familial and social relations, because they are in a constant state of displacement and circular migration. These policies also have impacted the lives of those migrant workers' children and their family members.

One of the key debates in the literature about China's socioeconomic reform involves the question of whether China is neoliberal or not. My thesis has attempted to validate the argument that the Chinese state has adopted a neoliberal development paradigm while maintaining some of its socialist characteristics and strong government intervention. Through an examination of the first and second generation of rural-urban migrant workers in China, we can observe a drastically changing social landscape and social relationships. Social relationships of family members and patterns of labor in both rural and urban areas have been shaped by the Chinese state's unique neoliberal developmental paradigm since the late 1970s. China's unique neoliberal developmental model, which simultaneously features the strong presence of

government and market, has not only brought about drastic domestic social development, but it has also had an impact on the international stage, as the number of migrant workers in Chinese cities who have played a significant role in global supply chain rivals the total international migrants worldwide (Fan 2008, 1). Rural-urban migration, has been the main source of urban growth in China, which “is rapidly reshaping the economic, demographic, and social landscapes of the Chinese city and countryside” (Fan 2008,1).

Since the reform and China’s “opening up,” China has gradually developed its reputation as a “world factory.” It has relied on low-cost manufacturing that is supported by millions of low-waged rural migrant workers. The rural migrant labor (*nongmingong*) makes up China’s labor force, and become a “comparative advantage in its ascendancy as the world’s factory” in China’s manufacturing sector (Chan 2010, 660). Chan argues that the “Made in China” success story of the past two or more decades is the story of rural migrant workers who provide cheap labor and toil for subsistence wages to produce low-cost consumer products (Chan 2010, 660). China’s rural migrant workers have not only become the backbone of China’s manufacturing sector and modern economic development, but also the global supply chain (Chan 2010, 660). Therefore, rural migrant workers are closely intertwined with China’s economy as well as the global economy, as many countries have relied on China’s low-priced exports.

As addressed in this thesis, China’s urbanization under reform created abundant job opportunities in the urban areas of China. The growth of wage work transformed the ways people work and the ways they relate to one another. In terms of labor, the dormitory labor regime and the “just-in-time” production emphasized by the neoliberal paradigm have played an important role in peasant workers’ individual and social lives. The dehumanized nature of

factory work combined with state policies that targeted migrant workers, have heavily constrained migrant workers' social mobility, and that of their children. They can work in cities, but they and their children still have little chance of settling in cities permanently. State policies, especially the *hukou* system, not only contributes to the temporary nature of migrant workers' migratory experiences, but also leads to the problem of "left-behind children," which directly impacts the well-being of the children of migrant workers, as illustrated in the cases of Jia and Jin.

A series of state-initiated policy constraints such as *hukou*, and class stratification under the social restructuring, have given rise to significant and increased influence of individualism and consumerism among the second-generation migrant workers, which is greater than among their parent's generation. The generation that includes Hua, Jin and Jia are the ones who perhaps struggle most with the neoliberal sense of individualism, and with the Confucian idea of filial piety, family values, and collectivism. By examining the Huang family's individual migration experiences and family relationships, we can observe China's transition from a socialist regime to a mix of neoliberal capitalist development and state control regime. This thesis and the ethnographic research upon which it is based, drew on the lives of two generations of migrant workers in this family, with a stronger focus on the first-generation migrants' experiences, especially on younger sister Xia and older sister Xiang. Working on this research has been a learning experience. In retrospect there are improvements or additional important areas that can be explored in future research. For instance, "left-behind children" are a unique problem in China's rural-urban migration which involves both the first and the second-generation migrants and is key to the rise of the second-generation

migrant workers. However, this thesis focuses more on the discussion of migrant workers instead of the “left-behind” children issue and the vast literature on this topic.

In addition, as I address in the introduction and the body of this thesis, in many ways China exhibits qualities of a neoliberal state paradigm in its policies. However, due to the contradictory nature of China’s neoliberal development with “socialist characteristics” and strong government intervention, deeper examination of secondary literature and state policies would be needed to better answer the question of how China can, in many ways, be seen as applying a neoliberal development paradigm, and how its approach differs from paradigmatic Western examples.

In general, one migrant family’s multi-generational experience cannot be taken as the basis from which to generalize about China’s rural-urban migration, but I have argued that it is important to examine how the broader social policies have influenced different individuals, and how the interplay of the social dynamics and social relationship signifies people's different reactions toward and experience of the neoliberal socioeconomic environment, based partly on the secondary literature review I have done on migration studies.

In the case of the Huang family, each generation has been influenced by state policies that hinder their ability to increase their upward social mobility. The first-generation in this family, elder brother Lian, older sister Xiang, and younger sister Xia each illustrate different migration experiences, life choices, and migration trajectories. As a result of their choices, their children also have significantly different lives. As described in chapter two, Lian, Xia, and Xiang all dropped out of school after they finished grade six due to poverty, household responsibilities, lack of motivation, and the lack of development in rural Hunan. As a result, Xia chose to leave her natal home and sought a better life in Shenzhen. Her rebellious behavior of

leaving the rural hometown and marrying a Hong Kong man against her parents' will, was opposed by her parents and siblings.

Confucian ideology still governs gender roles in rural China to some degree today, despite the critiques of the Maoist period, and have reemerged in post-Mao official rhetoric, stressing the importance of filial piety, and rearticulating the notion of family members' responsibilities, such as providing care for the elderly. According to Confucianism, the elderly should enjoy superior status, and the younger generations are expected to obey the elderly and to take care of them to fulfill their filial duties. Therefore, Xia's decision to disobey her parents and leave her rural hometown in the late 1980s, was viewed as a filial failure.

In terms of younger sister Xia's migration decision, although labor demands and urbanization under market reform are the main driving force of her migration trajectories, the notion of marriage migration which signifies security and upward mobility has also played an important role in her migration pathway. Marriage migration has its roots in ancient China but most of the cases took place within a short distance, usually among different rural villages (Fan 2008, 139). However, villages in close proximity usually have similar economic conditions, and this type of marriage migration usually cannot significantly improve women's social mobility. The neoliberal socioeconomic reforms in China since the late 1970s have significantly changed rural women's trajectories of marriage migration. Long-distance marriage migration became more prevalent as the data shows that "although labor migration is the biggest force of interprovincial migration, marriage is another leading reason for female migration according to the 1990 census, accounting for 4.4 million of female inter-county migrants and 1.4 million of female interprovincial migrants by the 2000 census, the number of female inter-provincial marriage migrants has increased further to 1.6 million" (Fan 2008, 141).

Although younger sister Xia did not indicate whether labor migration or marriage migration was the main driving force of her migration trajectories, marriage migration which provided her with some security and upward mobility has significantly influenced her livelihood in the city, and her relationships with her natal family. Her migration experience also has been shaped by the widening rural-urban gap due to the spatial restructuring since the neoliberal reforms, as the large regional differences motivate rural women to seek spatial hypergamy across provinces (Fan 2008,142). Xia's marriage to a Hong Kong man can also be seen as challenging rural paternalism and gender roles that constrain rural women's spatial mobility and social mobility. However, marriage migration cannot guarantee migrant women improved social status. In Xia's case, her rural identity caused her husband's family to reject her, and her inability to settle in Hong Kong.

Furthermore, migration does not guarantee the absence of patriarchy and social mobility in rural women's lives. Instead, marginalization in the labor market based on gender, the persistent gender wage gap in the labor market, and the hierarchical labor regime in the workplace also limit rural migrant women's chances to achieve upward mobility and gender equality. Although from pragmatic and transactional perspectives, hypergamy is a way to gain certain security and upward mobility, some studies have found that "men that marry migrant women are typically older or poorer than other men and some are mentally or physically disabled" (Ma *et al.* 1995; Xu and Ye 1992).

In Xia's case, she married a man who is 18 years older than her, and the age gap between her and her husband offset, from his perspective, her less desirable background as a rural migrant. Yet, patriarchy can still exist in migrant women's marriages regardless of the husband's urban identity, because migrant women from poor regions are perceived to be "diligent workers"

in the household and they tend to expect a lower bride-price and less costly weddings (Liu 1990; Xu and Ye 1992). The pre-conception of rural migrant women's attributes as more submissive to the husband has contributed to the hierarchical gender relations in marriages between rural Chinese women and urban men. Although gender inequality still exists in rural women's rural-urban marriages, the upward social mobility can benefit the migrant women's children, as in the case of the Xia's daughter who received a high-quality education and has access to far more opportunities than her cousin.

In contrast to Xia, her older sister Xiang has had a different migration trajectory and marriage choice, and thus her children have very different life paths from Xia's daughter. Older sister Xiang spent much of her life in her rural hometown and migrated to several different cities as a migrant factory worker. Unlike her younger sister, Xiang was considered a filial daughter as she stayed close to her natal home for much of her life, and agreed to a marriage arranged and approved of by her parents. Before Xiang migrated out to work, she used to go back to her rural village once a week to visit and take care of her old parents, while younger sister Xia went back less than once year. Filial piety in China generally refers to care of the elderly, yet the ways of fulfilling filial piety are viewed differently within this household. Younger sister Xia considers sending remittances to her natal home a way of fulfilling her filial duty, while older sister Xiang views staying closer to her elder parents a better way of doing so. After Xiang was married to a man from another village, they relied on subsistence farming in rural Hunan. However, the lack of development in rural China, and the rising competition for agricultural products in the post-reform era have made subsistence farming increasingly difficult.

We have seen that Xiang's children dropped out of school at an early age and then

became migrant workers like their mother. There are different factors that contributed to their decisions to drop out of school. Through multiple interviews with Jin and Jia, I learned that they both realized the importance of having more schooling to be competent in the labor market, and they later regretted dropping out of school. However, they acknowledged that they both lacked motivation at that time, and they did not realize the importance of education for their future success in the job market. They consider their lack of understanding and guidance about the value of education, one of key reasons for their current situation. Indeed, their parents tried to stop them from dropping out, but they had already made up their minds, thinking that migration was a better option. Left-behind children are more likely to drop out of school at an early age because of financial pressure, psychological pressure, peer pressure and poor-quality education (Wen, Ming and Lin, 2011). Compared to rural children, urban-educated children are less likely to drop out of school and they have a deeper understanding of the significance of education to their future well-being (Wen, Ming and Lin, 2011).

As we have seen, the *hukou* system has not only played an important role in limiting rural migrant workers' mobility, but also in preventing rural youth from receiving urban education. The *hukou* system in the Maoist era was originally used to implement the Maoist state's development philosophy. The Chinese state used it to block flows of labor from rural to urban because the government wanted rural people to remain in the countryside (Fan 2008, 4). Binding the rural labor force to the countryside guaranteed a supply of cheap agricultural goods to support urban industrialization (Cheng and Selden, 1994). The state created barriers for people to migrate to urban areas to suit its development model. The *hukou* system was changed during the post-Mao neoliberal market reform period when the Chinese government wanted to encourage more rural-urban migration with lesser restrictions. However, the role of *hukou* remains an

instrument of migration control, but differently than in the Maoist era. Nonetheless, rural-urban barriers still exist as the *hukou* system limits migrant workers' mobility by depriving them of urban social welfare and residency. The Chinese state has enforced a migrant labor regime in which migrant workers are marginalized economically and culturally. This system reinforces a social order in which migrant workers are inferior to urbanites.

China's neoliberal reform has exerted different influence on China's first-generation migrant workers and second-generation migrant workers. It has contributed to the semi-proletarianization of rural migrants which is distinctive to modern China's socioeconomic development model. Semi-proletarianization is a key feature of the first and the second-generation migrant workers because policies such as *hukou* have severely limited their social mobility, which has contributed to their displacement and circular migration. From the state's perspective, semi-proletarianization which has influenced migrant workers who are denied urban *hukou* and entitlements, can still benefit the state's economic growth, as it ensures the constant work opportunities during China's urbanization and industrialization process. The Chinese state thus makes a large supply of rural labor available at low cost for neoliberal economic development while ensuring that most migrant workers eventually return to their rural hometowns without burdening the state (Fan 2008, 4). The large supply of cheap labor has attracted transnational corporations to invest in China's manufacturing sector as China's low cost of labor can maximize their profits. Migrant labor serves as an instrument of the Chinese state, as a driving force for China's ambitious neoliberal market reform and development. Many developing countries that seek rapid urbanization and industrialization share a similar migrant labor regime, providing a cheap and unskilled labor force to boost other economic sectors.

*Hukou* constraints have played an important role in the persistence of the rural-migrant working class as it prevents rural children from accessing urban quality education. The lack of access to quality education and proper guidance have caused a number of rural youths to lose incentive to continue their studies. For many of the rural youths, instead of pursuing education, they view labor migration as the best route to escape the rural environment and to achieve well-being. Although neoliberal reforms have brought some development to rural China, there still lack opportunities. Therefore, a large number of rural youths drop and join the reserve army of migrant workers. The *hukou* system has thus become a double-edged sword used to constrain first-generation migrants' mobility and to provide a persistent source of labor. The decision of rural youth to drop out of school cannot be simply viewed as the interplay of personal and family factors. State policies are a key factor. This helps explain how migration of the first-generation, the *hukou* constraints, and the issue of "left-behind children" benefit China's urban economic development.

For almost four decades, China has undertaken a transition from the former socialist model into a socialist market economy that has been influenced by a neoliberal development ideology. The role of the state in the socioeconomic development obscures China's role in the dominant neoliberal capitalism and globalization process since the 1980s. The dominant pattern of neoliberal capitalism has promoted a free market and less government intervention; however, China's strong intervention into its social restructuring and economy have contradicted the Western idea of neoliberalism. Interestingly, China's strong state-controlled system does not correspond well to the neoliberal ideology of free market and small government. The Chinese adoption of market logic coexists with the strong presence of state control in China's economy.

In that light, the “socialist” part of “socialist market economy” refers less to political ideology and more to the domination of the Chinese Communist Party and the very planning function of the state (Fan 2008, 3). The question of whether China is or is not neoliberal remains unresolved because of the complicated nature of Chinese socioeconomic development, and because its political system cannot be defined simply as “neoliberal.” In general, the question of whether China is neoliberal or not remains highly debatable, and further observation and research is needed to better understand the complexities of China's development model and ideology.

Although this thesis cannot provide a full answer to whether China is neoliberal or not, I have nonetheless considered it worthwhile to ask what elements of neoliberalism have become relevant to China’s contemporary development, how a dominant form of global capitalism has influenced China's modern socioeconomic development. Though the Chinese state has changed its developmental model from time to time, its shift toward a developmental agenda is undeniable (Fan 2008, 3). This shift has significantly influenced how the Chinese state redefines its position, how it has engendered migrant labor regime, its relation with peasants, and gender roles, which are central for understanding rural-urban migration in China.

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