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Abstract: While the decision to migrate is always essentially economic, men and women experience different “push and pull factors” and different opportunities resulting in different strategies.

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China is in the midst of the greatest wave of migration in human history, as millions of people move from rural areas to cities in search of better social and economic opportunities. Although rural to urban migration generally accompanies transition of societies from agrarian to industrialized, the case of China is unique because of the sheer number of people involved. Two other factors make Chinese migration different from the normal patterns observed in other contemporary societies: (i) the *hukou* system, which limits the mobility of rural individuals by regulating their domicile and by constraining the social benefits and work opportunities afforded to them, and (ii) the fact that, unlike in other contemporary societies\(^1\), migration is an overwhelmingly domestic phenomenon rather than one involving transnational movements. My research is limited to the reasons that motivate the decision to undertake domestic Chinese migration, and seeks to establish whether that motivation is different for men and women, and if so, how.

To be properly understood, the domestic migration phenomenon must also be placed in the context of the unique dual legal and political structure of Chinese society. There are essentially two forms of citizenship, property regimes and governance in China: one for rural people and one, better, for urban people (Naughton, 2007).\(^2\) Naturally, this distinction has implications both on income and social status and one of my assumptions is that an improvement in status can be part of the motivation for migration.

There were an estimated 167 million migrant workers in China in 2012. About a third of them are women. Because of China’s long history as a largely unified country, Chinese migrants do not face the same issues of religion, culture, language and mores as, for example, a Moroccan immigrant would face in France. This does not mean that immigration in China is an easy or risk-free proposition, however, or that a successful migration experience is guaranteed. I
conclude that (i) the decision to migrate is a primarily economic one across groups, with social status concerns playing a secondary role, (ii) men and women experience somewhat different “push” and “pull” forces in making the decision, (iii) women’s decisions tend to be more individual-based rather than group-based, (iv) women have an additional migration strategy not available to men: marriage.

My research sources have been primarily books and academic articles. However, I have also included information from oral histories and newspaper articles because I feel constricting research to strictly academic works risks ignoring an important part of the migrant experience as well as missing its rapidly evolving nature.

**Push vs Pull**

Denise Hare identifies a “push” and “pull” dynamic in the formulation of the decision to migrate (Hare, 1999). Hare’s research has four shortcomings for the purposes of my study: (i) she focuses her attention on seasonal migration, (ii) she ignores important non-quantifiable cultural factors such as filial piety, (iii) having been published in 2006, her data may be out of date, and (iv) she does not differentiate by gender. However, the impact of seasonality would appear to be higher on her study of the motivations to return, and her “push and pull” framework provides a useful tool in understanding the dynamics of the migration decision. Hare defines pull factors as those attracting a person to the migration decision (higher wages, increased status and opportunities), and push factors as those dissuading a person from staying in his/her village (low wages, absence of opportunities). However, each of those factors differs according to what group an individual belongs to because of (i) the opportunities associated mainly with education, and (ii) gender.
The Role of Education

Higher education (university attendance) is a primary means to obtain highly paid employment in an urban area, and facilitates the obtention of an urban hukou with all its attendant benefits. It thus acts as a strong “pull” factor. Conversely, lack of opportunities for university graduates in rural areas are a “push” factor (Hare, 1999). According to some scholars, education did not always function as a push/pull factor in this way. In his study of the impact of the Cultural Revolution on rural education, Dongping Han underscores that the Cultural Revolution reversed the trend of depletion of talent from the countryside (Han, 2008). Before the Cultural Revolution, talented youth would leave the village to study in the city and never return. Part of the aim of the Cultural Revolution was bringing that talent with its skills and knowledge back to the countryside, and young educated people were expected and required to return to serve their villages. In addition, young urban college graduates were required to spend time in the rural areas, a process known as shangshan xiaxiang. This trend was reversed once more through decollectivization, according to Yan Hairong very much to the detriment of rural women in what she calls “the emaciation of the rural” (Yan, 2008).

Individual vs collective factors – the weight of Filial Piety

What motivates individuals to abandon their hometowns and families in a society that places clan and soil at the center of identity? As Fei Xiatong explains in From the Soil, the village and the soil are traditionally at the root of a Chinese person’s life (Fei, 1992). This basic belief, compounded with the Confucian values of filial piety, would naturally lead us to expect lower mobility in Chinese society than in its foreign counterparts. Yet that does not appear to be the case. According to several authors, the important distinction seems to be that
the decision that an individual will migrate is made by households rather than individuals (Naughton, 2007). Thus, while the prime motivation is economic opportunity, the returns are expected to inure to the benefit of the household rather than just the individual (Naughton, 2007) (Hare, 1999). This is because both the initial and long-term costs of migration are high. There are travel and initial housing costs until an individual finds a job, and the opportunity cost of having the individual’s labor in the household. Children left behind must be cared for by relatives, and farms must be tended by increasingly elderly parents.

Hands-on research seems to indicate, however, that the categorization of the decision to leave as one made collectively ignores the different situations of men and women, as we will see below.

*Legal factors*

Beyond the cultural factor of filial piety, the *hukou* system and the peculiar legal structure of land property in China introduce two unique factors into the decision to migrate. The *hukou* system ties every individual to a specific place and socioeconomic category (urban/rural, agricultural/nonagricultural) and determines his/her access to food, lodging and social resources (Cheng and Selden, 1994). It was created during the Mao period to control rural migration to urban areas, and continues to serve this purpose, albeit more loosely. Today, there are only two relatively simple ways to exchange one’s *hukou* of origin for a more desirable one: university education leading to employment, and marriage.

Until as recently as 1998, it was impossible for a woman to change her *hukou* status, even by marriage, and a child inherited the mother’s *hukou* (Naughton, 2007). Because they have no access to urban benefits, holders of rural *hukou* are easily identifiable and have historically faced
discrimination. According to some authors (Zhang, 2010), absence of an urban *hukou* severely restricts a worker’s job mobility and thus his chances of improving his/her economic lot by changing jobs. But drawing on data from two very different-sized cities and extensive case studies, Beijing and Chifeng, Shaohua Zhan contends that the *hukou* is all but irrelevant, and other factors such as social exclusion (inability to cross social boundaries) and lack of access to resources (training programs) intervene to limit the chances of success of migrant workers but that labor markets and demographics have changed to improve the bargaining position of migrants, irrespective of *hukou* (Zhan, 2011).

Today, on the other hand, a woman can change her *hukou* by marriage. In effect, the *hukou* system has therefore morphed into a push/pull factor for women practicing hypergamy, while remaining a negative push/pull factor for all others.

**Land Ownership**

Agricultural land is owned by the commune, not by individuals or families. The commune has the right to redistribute land according to the needs of its residents. The corollary of this is that everybody has access to a plot of land, and this means that unlike in other countries, the decision to migrate is based on economic betterment, not sheer destituteness (Naughton, 2008). This also means that migrating out carries the risk of losing land allocation. That is another reason the decision to migrate is made collectively, and more often than not, at least for males, involves *sojournment* rather than permanent relocation: the migrant’s objective is to return to his land and his family one day, with increased resources, to enjoy the fruits of his labor (Naughton, 2008).
Women and a special word on marriage

Where women are concerned, neither of the above narratives may be quite representative. Yan Hairong examines the special case of women from a different framework than Denise Hare. Rather than “individuals” responding to a dynamic of “push-pull”, Yan believes that Post-Mao decollectivization and the elimination of the “Iron Girl” as a societal model has resulted in a loss of identity for young rural women. Yan sees this as part of a wider trend that reverses the primacy of the countryside during the Mao era in favor of the city. Aware that their Iron Girl mothers had a better life as autonomous individuals, young women see escape to the city as a means to escape from domestic bondage. These women are dissatisfied with their role within rural families – first serving their parents and later their husbands, and traditional filial piety exerts a weaker push on them than on their male counterparts. For one, the obligation to take care of the elders in the natal family rests with the male, who is also responsible for carrying the family name and the rites of ancestor worship (Yan, 2008).

We would therefore expect the motivation for women to migrate to be slightly different. We would expect the decision to be made more individualistically, and the clan to have a lower expectation of support and return. Yan’s research bears out this assumption. According to her, almost half of the women she surveyed did not have the approval of their parents. In addition to the women interviewed by Yan, the women interviewed by Chang seem to bear out this assumption. “There was nothing to do at home, so I went out”, Chang reports some of her interviewees as saying. Among the motivations of Chang’s subjects to migrate, they also included “seeing the world”, “developing myself” and “learning new skills”. Nonetheless filial piety still seemed to weigh on them, in spite of some girls reporting that they kept their wages and did not share them with their parents unless compelled (Chang, 2010).
Women have an additional migration strategy not available to men: they can marry. The motivations of marriage migrants are very similar to those of other migrants: social and economic improvement. Fan and Huang, among others, have noted the Chinese tendency towards hypergamy – or women’s tendency to marry men of higher status than themselves. Fan and Huang find that rural marriage migrants tend to have the lowest educational attainment of all female migrants groups, and that marriage accomplishes their goal of social improvement by simply moving from a less desirable to a more desirable rural area, perhaps closer to an urban center, and by achieving the higher status conferred by marriage at all. Like the other groups, they employ the means at their disposal to better their lot and often marry older men or men of lower status who are undesirable to their own peers, with rural hukous. This group of women largely remain rural workers, and their labor often enables sojourner males to seek economic opportunities for the family in the fringes of the city as floating workers. For example, de Brauw et al. found that agriculture is being increasingly feminized in China. De Brauw et al. define female-managed farms as those on which a female is named as the head or where the male was absent for six months or more and concludes that agricultural work is indeed being feminized, with no adverse impact on production. They, however, do not move beyond observing that the share of farm work done by women has increased sharply since the 1990 to the causes of the increase (De Brauw et al., 2012).

The story is different for educated women, for whom hypergamy means lower marriage prospects, as Chinese men typically marry women of lower educational and economic attainment than themselves (Qian, 2013).
Conclusion

In conclusion, there appear to be gender differences in the decision to migrate based on important social, cultural and economic disparities between the genders. Nor is the group “migrant women” uniform in terms of the opportunities they had to begin with, and consequently, the strategies they adopted to achieve their goals and ambitions.

China is in the midst of one of the most vertiginous economic transformations in human history, as it moves from a largely land-based society to an advanced industrial society in record time. The realities of economic development require people to change the ways in which they contribute to the economy with their labor. Most of the social unrest in recent years has originated in the countryside, where people are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the advances in their standards of living. A thorough understanding of the motivations for migration is essential to ensure the mass movement of people and transformation of the labor force is successful and further social problems are avoided. In so doing, we must be mindful of the differences in motivation of each of the genders that holds up half the sky.
REFERENCES AND NOTES

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4 Because the time lag required by peer review and publication is very high for scholarly articles
5 Hare, Denise, “Push and “Pull” Factors in Migration Outflows and Returns: Determinants of Migration Status and Spell Duration Among China’s Rural Population, Journal of Development Studies (1999) 35:3, 45-72
6 Hare concluded that push factors are lower in China than in other countries because of the ownership of rural land. Cited in Naughton p. 131
8 Yan, Hairong, New Masters, New Servants, Migration, Development and Women Workers in China, Duke University Press (2008), Chapter I
10 Fei, Xiatong (1992) p.38
11 In Analects 4:19, Confucius said “while his parents are alive, a son should not travel far away”
12 see, inter alia, Naughton (2006), chapt. 6 and 8, p. 200
13 Naughton (2006), Hare (1999)
16 It is also possible to “buy” an urban hukou by moving to a city and investing a set amount of money, but the study of the motivations of wealthy would-be migrants is beyond the scope of this paper
19 Naughton (2006)
20 Sojournment is a series of series of medium or long-term stays rather than a permanent relocation
21 Naughton (2006) p.200
22 Yan (2008) p. 37
23 Yan (2008) p. 46
25 One of Chang’s interviewees, Chunming, poignantly writes home: Mother, sometimes I think: I would rather be Mother’s obedient daughter, a filial daughter, and even through away those books I want so much to read. (Chang, 2008p. 53)
26 Fan and Huang p. 230 and quoting Lavery on p. 234 to say that women achieve spatial hypergamy by this means, see also Qian, Yue, quoted in The Economist 14 July 2013 The Hypergamous Chinese
29 Qian, Yue, quoted in The Economist 14 July 2013 The Hypergamous Chinese