Subjective Factors that Make Female Migration Successful: A Proposal for Further Research

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Subjective Factors that Make Female Migration Successful: A Proposal for Further Research

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Abstract: As China embarks in a new wave of mass urbanization to promote economic development, further research is needed on what constitutes a successful migration from the subjective standpoint of the migrants, with special attention paid to an heretofore understudied group: women.

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In an earlier literature review, I examined the factors behind the decision to migrate to the city from the countryside, and I looked for evidence that the process is different for men and women based on sociological and cultural factors. After reviewing books, journals, oral histories and newspaper articles, I concluded that there is indeed a difference in how men and women approach the decision to migrate, based on several factors. These factors include push and pull factors along the model developed by Denise Hare (Hare, 1999)\(^1\), but they differ between men and women. Overall, I found 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 do 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.

Based on these factors, I have concluded tentatively that a very real difference between may also lie in intent to return, with men having a higher level of intent than women,\(^2\) and in how men and women gauge migration success. Further research is necessary to identify the factors behind the decision to stay in the locus of immigration or return to the locus of emigration as well as how to gauge the success of a migration experience, especially as they pertain to women. None of the studies of mental health and rural to urban migration I have reviewed have had a specific focus on women, and yet one must assume that there could be important differences between what constitutes successful migration between the genders.

*Why now?*

A better understanding of the factors behind the subjective aspects of the migration phenomenon is crucial to enable the Chinese government\(^3\) to craft appropriate policy responses
to reduce failed migrations and their attendant individual and social costs. The need to understand what constitutes a successful migration in the eyes of the migrants themselves has recently become more pressing. Last month, the Chinese government announced a new plan to move an additional 100 million rural dwellers into cities by 2020. The plan is accompanied by a campaign to improve access to social services for the soon-to-be newcomers and for the 100 million former peasants that are already living in urban areas, often in precarious conditions.\footnote{The government sees this move as essential to the economic development of the country. It notes that every developed country is urbanized and industrialized. The government believes that “urbanization is an inevitable requirement for promoting social progress” and necessary to shift the economy from an export-based model to a more domestic consumption one, because urban dwellers tend to consume more than rural inhabitants. The shift is important because export-based growth makes China dependent on other countries, while development of internal consumption will create more self-sustaining growth not subject to the whims and machinations of international markets.}

And yet the premise that urbanization will lead to the greater common good and a more harmonious society is based on an assumption: that the newly-urbanized are, if not happy, at least content, and that they consider their migration a success, however objectively and subjectively defined by them. History has shown that large groups of people who feel disenfranchised and dissatisfied are a catalyst for social unrest and economic turmoil.

The Chinese government’s stated goal is to recruit these new urban transplants into a new class of satisfied citizen-consumers. To achieve this, it plans to spend on infrastructure (roads,
rails, airports, schools, hospitals, housing). However, unless serious attention is also paid to the “soft” (i.e., subjective) aspects of the migration experience, the push for development risks creating vast pockets of resentment and marginality that will ultimately defeat the government’s good intentions. Thus, it is necessary to understand what motivates migrants to stay in the urban area where they have migrated or, conversely, to return to their country roots. Only by understanding the subjective experience of a “successful migration” versus a “failed migration” will the government be able to put mechanisms and infrastructure in place to minimize failure and alienation.

The community challenge -- a word on anomie

The social and psychological problems posed by mass urbanization are not new. In his book Suicide, the nineteenth century French sociologist Emile Durkheim developed the concept of anomie to describe the alienation that individuals in Europe felt in making the transition from rural, family-centered and community-based life to a more independent and inchoate existence as inputs of labor in the city. Durkheim and his followers identified two forms of communities based on the concept of solidarity. According to them, in rural areas, people experience “mechanical solidarity,” understood as a sense of belonging based on the fact that each individual conducts essentially the same tasks as every other individual in full view of each other and at the same time. However, moving to an urban environment with all its diversity and isolation, shatters an individual’s sense of mechanic solidarity. In complex social environments such as cities, the sense of belonging and community must somehow be recreated on another basis. A new sense of mutual interdependence with people who perform very different tasks that are understood as necessary for the collective well-being staves off anomie by creating “organic
solidarity” (Durkheim, 1897). Thus, because humans have an innate need for belonging, removing an individual’s social frame of reference without offering an alternative can result in him/her losing his/her social bearings and becoming frustrated and disruptive.

Measures of subjective success

Since anomie is not a scientifically quantifiable characteristic, mental and physical health can be used as proxies of satisfaction and integration and thus, of migration success. Several studies have considered psychological distress, physical health and social exclusion in Chinese migrant populations. However, while at least one study (Chen, 2011) differentiated between urban-to-urban and rural-to-urban subjects, none have focused specifically on women. In addition, none of the researchers have identified lack of gender-specific data as a weakness of their studies.

Qiu et al. examined the correlation between physical health and mental health and found that lower physical health correlates positively with depression. In addition, the Qiu study found depression to be more prevalent among the rural-to-urban population than in the general population, correlated with low self-rated health, low self-reported economic status and lack of adaptation to the social milieu (Qiu et al., 2011). Juan Chen also found high levels of psychological distress among rural-to-urban migrants and concluded that both social services targeting mental health and a reform of the hukou system are needed to promote integration (Chen, 2011). Moreover, Chen found that mental health correlates negatively with perception of lack of the option to return to the locus of emigration, again without differentiating his
findings by gender. Chen’s avowed research limitations include the fact that his study was circumscribed to inhabitants of Beijing, the inherent difficulty in making the jump form correlation to causation, lack of longitudinal data that would indicate or corroborate changes in mental health status over time, and the methodological weakness of self-report of physical and especially mental health because they are subjective and highly influenced by cultural factors (such that depression, for example, may be underreported).

Wang et al. built on previous studies that did not focus on internal Chinese migration. They examined the impact of discrimination and social stigma on mental health and quality of life among rural-to-urban migrants and concluded that the gap between expectations and reality of the migration experience and coping skills are key to a successful migration in terms of quality of life and lack of psychological distress (Wang et al., 2010). These authors also acknowledge the methodological limitations of their study in terms of the sample size, lack of longitudinal research and internal consistency.

Thus, additional, female-focused investigation is needed, with larger sample sizes and longer time periods to assess the correlation between the factors identified so far by various authors and the presumed outcomes, with additional instruments to establish causation. Further study is also warranted to determine what other factors, if any (for example, age at the time of emigration, or education), contribute to the same outcomes.

Wang et al. recommend the adoption of a government campaign to reduce social stigma by valuing the contributions of migrants, pre-migration training and social support services,
including mental health counseling for individuals at risk or those having a history of mental illness. However, the last part of their recommendation fails to take into account the difficulties associated with the stigmatization of the mentally ill in Chinese society, which will likely result in poor uptake of these services. Further study is therefore desirable to enable the government to establish culturally acceptable forms of intervention that accomplish the same goals.

**Intent to return**

Significantly, only one of the studies (Chen, 2011) focused on intent to return as a factor, albeit indirectly and not focusing on females. Given the inevitable evolution of Chinese society towards more aperture and less coerciveness, before embarking on a mass urbanization movement, it is imperative to understand the motivations behind the individual decisions and their relationship with intent to remain urban. Moreover, no government can ignore the needs of half of its population, and therefore studying the particular characteristics of female migrants is crucial.

Intent to return is best gauged by conducting surveys, as intent is a factor that it is very difficult to identify by means other than self-reporting. The surveys should be conducted nationally, with a large sample size. However, to be more accurate, the responses should then be correlated on an individual basis with certain proxies for intent to return, such as leaving sweethearts, spouses and/or children at the locus of emigration, and amount and purposes of remittances. Leaving one’s nearest and dearest behind and use of remittances to build a new family house or improve the existing one would be indicators of intent to return. As the hukou system is relaxed, efforts to change one’s hukou from rural to urban can also constitute a proxy for intent to return.
In addition, the factors affecting the empowerment or disenfranchisement of urban women need to be carefully studied. For example, women, unlike men, have the additional options to marry or work as domestic servants. In doing so, they are more likely to encounter other sectors of society and be exposed to, on the one extreme, abuse, and on the other, new opportunities for education. In her book *New Masters, New Servants, Migration, Development and Women in China*, Yan Zairong focuses on this subset of migrant women, mainly though a review of news stories, films and oral histories. While a useful starting point, her study is anecdotal. Arianne Gaetano and Tamara Jacka’s work, *On the Move, Women in Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China* focuses on migrant women in general rather than a subset of that group, but suffers from some of the same limitation. A comprehensive study based on a statistically significant large sample size and follow-up for a number of years would help determine what unique factors contribute to women migrants’ perceived success. Particular attention should be paid to the effectiveness of groupings that can provide informal mental health services in a culturally appropriate manner, i.e., associations, such as religious groupings and nongovernmental organizations, that seek to fight alienation and create a community. In addition to official and home churches, some examples of these associations are the Migrant Women’s Club and the Rural Women’s collective. Their role and success in fostering successful integration into the locus of immigration by creating a sense of community needs to be understood.

**Conclusion**

The mass rural-to-urban migration phenomenon is now both unstoppable and an official development policy of the Chinese government. Up to half of the urban workforce is thought to
be composed of rural migrants.\textsuperscript{13} Unless local governments find a way to enhance the economic opportunities in and increase the social appeal of, rural areas, young people will continue to migrate to the cities, with perhaps devastating effect to the countryside. Some of them will find roots and contentment. Many others will become “scattered sand”, the words used by academics and workers themselves to describe the large number of migrants who drift from city to city in search of a livelihood.\textsuperscript{14} If China wishes to enjoy a harmonious society and a peaceful rise, it must harness the talent and energy of its migrant workers to build a castle, and not let them continue to drift as scattered sand. A deep understanding the subjectivities of their experience and motivation will the key to integration and success. Long-term studies and surveys undertaken on a large scale and segregated by gender are a necessary tool in the process of acquiring this deep understanding.
Comments and References


2. Partly at least because, unlike men, women are not the keepers of the ancestral rites of their natal families, which are tied to the land. Thus, in the words of Leslie T. Chang, “unlike men, women [have] no home to go back to” … “Daughters, once grown, [will] never return home to live”. Chang, Leslie T. Factory Girls – Voices from the Heart of Modern China, Picador (2009), p. 57.

3. European thought discerns between the “state”, i.e., the national commons, and the “government”, i.e., the political party or coalition, or group of individuals that happens to be in power at any given time. US thought and Chinese thought confound the two. For American thinkers, there is only one entity referred to as “the government”, in contrast to “the people”, and the politicians in power in the executive branch at any time are referred to as “the administration”. For Chinese thinkers, the Communist Party is not only the government/administration in power, but the state as well.


5. Durkheim, Emile. Suicide. A Study on Sociology. (1897)

6. Qui, Peiyuan, Caine, Eric, Yang, Yang, Chen, Quan and Ma, Xiao. Depression and associated factors in internal migrant workers in China. Journal of Affective Disorders 134 (2011) 198-207. Their sample was 1180 subjects with rural hukous living in Chengdu. Roughly half of them were male. The significance of this study is that it was the first systematic study of the prevalence of depressive symptoms in Chinese migrants, and it sought to establish correlations with several other factors or variables (socio-economic status, city adaptation, and self-rated physical health. They found that the prevalence of clinically relevant depression symptoms was 23.7% in their sample, higher than the general Chinese population. One of their conclusions was that more “in-depth interviews should be conducted to understand what enhances or inhibits city adaptation.” p. 205

7. Chen, Juan. Internal migration and health: Re-examining the healthy migrant phenomenon in China. Social Science and Medicine 72 (2011) 1294-1301. Chen’s sample was 1474 subjects in Beijing. Chen found that mental health is not viewed as a priority, awareness of mental health issues is low, the stigma associated with mental illness is high and there are not adequate resources to deal with this potential public health crisis.

8. This was a particular issue for urban-to-urban migrants, who, unlike rural-to-urban migrants, tend not see returning to their natal city as an option. For additional comment on women’s perception of the option to return, based on anecdotal evidence, see note 2.

9. Wang, Bo, Li, Xiaoming, Stanton, Bonita and Fang, Xiaoyi. The influence of social stigma and discriminatory experience on psychological distress and quality of life among rural-to-urban migrants in China, Social Science and Medicine 71 (2010) 84-92. These researchers focused on perception of social stigma and discrimination rather than mental health as measured by depressive symptoms in migrants to Beijing. They concluded that pre-migration orientation, with a focus on developing appropriate expectations and coping skills and education of the host communities would improve outcomes.


12. These associations are described in Chapter 2 (Assembling Working Sisters) of Tamara Jacka’s book, Rural Women in Urban China, Gender, Migration and Social Change, East Gate (2006)
Because a large number of migrants are often on the move, they are referred to as the “floating population” and their presence is difficult to document and quantify.