Return Urban-Rural Labor Migration in China: The Male Migrant Returnees’ Perspectives

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In China, “floating population” (liudong renkou) has increased from only 11 million in 1982 to the current 160 million⁴ and this amount would triple by 2025 (Jacka, 2006; Xinhua, 2011). The implications of internal labor migration on the “floating population” are complicated yet enormous. The flow mostly commented on is the rural-urban migration (Davin, 1996). However, equally important to China’s development is the other direction, the return migration, where labor migrants bring remittances and human capitals in the forms of new skills and ideas back to the countryside (Murphy, 2002). The purpose of this literature review is thus to first establish the importance of studying return migration within China and research typologies surrounding it. Next, I will critically explore the significance for us to study male migrant returnees and its relationships with return migration in China. I do so by reviewing literatures on the public discourse of male migrants in China by analyzing how male identities are constructed historically among male peasant workers. Also, I will analyze the conflict between how social institutions expect rural males to act and the discourses of masculinity in China with respect to state’s expectations. Lastly, I seek to identify gaps and further studies to be made within the current literatures on the ways return migration affects masculinity wherein the arguments could be seen throughout the paper.

**Return urban-rural migration in China**

Return migration is a relatively recent phenomenon and research on this area is scant since large-scale rural-urban migration did not begin in China until the mid-1980s (Wang & Fan, 2006) but its significance should not be underestimated. Researchers doing historical periodization, quantitative and qualitative studies on China’s internal migration have mostly agreed that the recent post-Mao economic reforms in the 1970s and the *Hukou* (Household Registration) system reforms since the 1980s paved ways for rural residents to migrate to the cities to escape poverty, in search of jobs and “better” lives (Jacka, 2006; Fan, 2007; Lin, 2013). The “reform and opening up” was a key historical moment which shaped the route for a new market economy where rural-urban

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⁴ This statistics refer only to temporary rural migrant workers.
migration was seen as the main source of urban growth and played an important role in shaping the economic and demographic landscape in Chinese cities (Duan, 2003; Lu & Wang, 2006; Lin, 2013). Population census shows that from year 1995 to 2005, the number of rural-to-urban migrants in China increased from 40 million to approximately 130 million (Meng & Manning, 2011). As a result of this type of public available migration statistics in China for the past decades, much of the research has been done on the rural-to-urban aspect of labor migration which accounts for the reasons and impacts of migrations (Davin, 1996; Bai & He, 2002; Murphy, 2002). This side of the research ignores the possible implications of return migration on the migrants’ lives back at the countryside which could affect their overall well-being and the development of the countryside. I argue that researchers in China should also focus on the impacts of return migration on the countryside. This is because urban-rural gap/divide is expanding in China with many migrants refusing to return homecoming where the children and older parents reside (Murphy, 2002). A better understanding of how and what returnees migrants feel about the whole migration process and their lives back at the countryside after migration will help the government to improve its policies, infrastructures and facilities available to encourage more migrants to return and contribute to the development of the countryside to help lessen the rural-urban divide.

Although return migration rate is comparatively lower in the total internal migration rate, depending on different regions and counties, it is still statistically prevalent (Liang, Chunyu, & Wu, 2011). Murphy (2002) found that around 36% of rural migrants from the inland provinces of Jiangxi and Sichuan have returned to their county of Yudu and Xinfeng. Also, Liang and Wu’s (2003) research at Guangdong outlined one third of the migrants have returned from Sichuan province. Furthermore, Wang and Fan (2006) observed that “more than 28% of migrants from rural Sichuan and Anhui have returned, after working in urban areas for an average of 2.9 years” (Bai & Song, 2002). Although statistically important, the main issue now is that these statistics are likely to decrease in the near future and this reduction will have further negative impacts on both
the cities and the countryside (Wang & Fan, 2006). For instance, crowding out effects might be a problem for provincial governance when rural-urban migration rate increases (Bloomberg News, 2012). Also, it is recently reported that the urban population in China has for the first time exceeded the rural population and this is a worrying course of labor movements due to the rising rural-urban social and economic inequalities (Bloomberg News, 2012). All these problems show us the need to explore return migration further so as to improve the current migrants’ situation to increase their willingness to return and contribute back to the China’s countryside development and prevent further problems from arising in the cities due to overcrowding.

Three typologies of research done on return migration in China

There are generally three types of research revolving around return migration. Firstly, push and pull factors are the most commonly used theory to account for the reasons rural migrants in the cities decide homecoming. Murphy (2002) found that the push factors for China’s return migration mainly involve the miserable experiences migrants encounter in the urban areas which drive them away from the cities such as poor working conditions, injury and discriminations. Whereas, Wang & Fan (2006) contended that the pull factors mainly include the attractions of migrants’ hometown such as improvements in the natal economies and for women, the need for marriage, pregnancy and childcare or the support of kin for both gender. Although both authors did not classify the factors into gender differences, I see a need to categorize the push and pull factors into both male and female experiences. These studies tend to treat gender as an independent variable that explain migration differentials, when in reality return migration affect male and female returnees differently (Shen & Tong, 1992; Fan, 2006; Huang & Fan, 2010; Lin, 2011).

Secondly, most researchers highlight the success stories, especially returnees who have gone on to become entrepreneurs and open businesses on their own, which inevitably leave out the failure returnees which constitute the majority. Hare’s (1999) research in Henan province shows
that failure at the host destination is not a crucial explanation for return to the countryside. Also, most of the return migrants from Ma’s (2002) research reveal that they play key roles in “diversifying the economy and promoting entrepreneurial activities in their home communities”.

Furthermore, Wang & Fan (2006) observe that returnees are a significant pool of business developers in rural areas. These researches integrate the experiences of female and male returnees which in the process failed to analyze why there is 7male:3female ration of return rate in China with female returnees making up the majority of the success returnees (Murphy, 2002). Murphy’s ethnographic fieldwork findings in southern Jiangxi reveal that there are gender differences in the success-failure dichotomy of return migration which will be examined further in the next typology.

The next and burgeoning typology looks at the impacts of return migration on gender. Murphy’s (2002) acknowledges that as more women participate in migration, the number of women entrepreneur returnees’ increases which help to establish their social and financial autonomy within and outside household. Also, gender affects the outcomes of return migration due to the differential level of education received. Education reflects the migrants’ socioeconomic background and experiences which leads to preferential access to resources that privilege entrepreneurship at home. For instance, males have higher probability to complete the mandatory eight years of schooling whereas, the traditional patterns of marriage mean that parents view investing in the education of a girl as “sprinkling water on someone’s else’s garden” (Murphy, 2002). As a result, daughters are expected to help more with farming and household chores than are sons but this trend are likely to change (next section). These stereotypical views continue to affect female returnees. Fan (2004) reveals that although female migrants have a significant change in their lifestyles and outlook as a result of migrating to the cities, they continue to be constrained by the deep-rooted socio-cultural traditions as well as an inferior institutional status when they return to the village which is theorized by Adkins (2000) as retraditionalization of gender. Therefore, as a result of getting used to the modernized lifestyles in the cities, most women
find it hard to adjust/accommodate when they return home. Hence, gender does influence the nature of family obligations and generate different experiences among migrants after the return.

**Male migrant returnees in China**

*The need for male accounts of urban-rural labor migration*

China’s migration impacts on men have been underrepresented in the past few decades due to the overemphasis on female migrants in migration studies (Lin, 2013). There are more variances for the impacts of internal migration on male migrants than was commonly assumed in the feminist studies where male migrants are largely privileged in the migration process as discussed above. Although it is mostly found that men enjoy relatively more economic benefits as compared to women in the migration process, their health and identity are often negatively affected (Murphy, 2002). Furthermore, Lin’s (2013) research on male rural migrants in Shantou unveils how current research deploys structuralist accounts of patriarchy in the contemporary Chinese context which resulted in an unintended effect of “emphasizing wider social structures of oppression that determine the position of men which tends to marginalize men’s subjectivities” (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003). This inevitably affects their health as they face high level of stress internally and externally (Lin, 2013). As Kimmel (1987) argues, “gender is socially constructed within a historical context of gender relations, with definitions of masculinity responding relationally to changing definitions of femininity”, there is a thus a need for us to (re)construct male identity/masculinity among Chinese male rural migrants using historical analysis and gender relations to expose possible power relations embedded which might affect their overall wellbeing.

As crucially pointed out by Lin (2011) there is a conflict between what the male rural migrants “are expected to do by the state as ‘modern’ political subjects (state expectations) and how they manage to live out their new identity within traditional familial society (social

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2 In anthropologist Gmelch’s (1980) studies, he referred this findings as “reverse culture shock”.

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expectations at a local level, within specific households and workplaces)”. This is more apparent in the current context where male returnees are facing “crisis in masculinities” with the female counterparts gaining more financial and social autonomy as discussed. Current literatures fail to address these tensions which are important to critically understand how male migrant returnees’ construct their maleness/masculinities in response to different institutions in contemporary China.

**Masculine identities of male peasant workers**

After establishing the context of analysis, there is a need to review literatures done since the Mao’s era on male peasant workers in the rural areas to better understand why there is a “crisis in masculinity” among the male migrants’ returnees in contemporary China in the next section.

During the Maoist era (1949-1977), notably the Cultural Revolution, there were representations that emphasize the privileged and high social and political status of peasants where they were portrayed as “masters of the country” (Bernstein, 1977; Zhou & Hou, 1999). As a result, male peasant in particular are accorded positive images which benefit them in totality. The narratives continued but with a change in meaning during the post-Mao era and reforms era where the state emphasized male peasant workers as both paradoxically “heroic” and socially subordinated at the same time (Louie, 2002; Lin, 2013). Ideal Chinese masculinities at that time were theorized as either wen(cultural and intellectual) or wu(martial, military and physical) (Louie, 2002). Although public representations of male peasant worker was seen to be “macho/heroic” who possess wu, the economic rationality that benefits the ones with wen eventually outweighed the hard laboring and sweat associated with male peasant workers and marginalized them in the process (Lin, 2013). In contemporary China, the subordinated status of the peasant workers’ in rural areas has an added dimension with low sushi which was due to their low cultural capital (eg. educational qualifications level) as compared to city dwellers (Lin, 2013). As such, masculinities among male peasant workers are threatened and worrying issues begin to emerge after migration.
**Issues in the current context and the impacts on male returnees**

Apart from the historical analysis of male peasant workers’ masculinities at a macro level, there are issues within relations of gender and male subjectivities as a result of return migration that prompt the needs for us to examine this micro perspective.

It is a commonplace that most male migrants returnees are considered failed returnees where they are forced to return to the countryside as they could not find work or “health” accounts for the reason to return due to injury or health problems (Murphy, 2002; Wang & Fan, 2004). This is revealed in Murphy’s (2002) qualitative research that most male returnees find it hard to stay longer in the cities due to workplace related injuries. Murphy missed out on the importance of this trend. I argue that the health problems the male migrants have both in the cities and later on when they come back to the countryside affect their image of peasant worker migrants who was once constructed as “macho” and strong in the public gaze during the post-Mao’s era. The fact that they could not maintain good health is in reality due to the poor living conditions, workplace abuse and the discriminations they face in the provinces as a result of different hukou status (Lin, 2013).

However, society largely ignores the impacts on their masculinity when they return. This is seen by how failed returnee men from Guangzhou continue to “suffer from a sense of inferiority” as their identity of breadwinner of the household is jeopardized when they did not bring any financial gains back to their villages (Murphy, 2002). This shows the social pressures they face being men in the family where the assessments of their performance as a dutiful son/competent husband relies on their capacity and ability to earn money for the betterment of the family. Apart from this, the greater influence of young female returnees back at the rural areas in terms of greater social and financial autonomy (Wang & Fan, 2006) in turn affect how men sees themselves in relations to their counterparts in being the breadwinner of the family. As a result, male returnees might feel a need to (re)migrate to the cities after return which leads to their family uncared for once again.
There is also a breakdown of sexual division of labor in the countryside as a result of migration. Davin (1996) found that male returnees are doing more child-care work than in the past after migration. Furthermore, Wang & Fan (2004) found that male returnees are engaging more in women’s roles household chores as a result of the experiences of double migration where both parents migrate to work and return back together. Although the authors did not continue to examine the further implications of the masculinities on returnees, I argue that when sexual division of labor is equalized as a result of return migration (shared domestic labor), male returnees might find it harder to fit into the patriarchal society as their identity is now in conflict with social expectations of what a male should do or perhaps they actually enjoy the egalitarian gender relations which needs further investigations by doing more research on this area. All these issues not only affect the construction of masculinities normally expected of a man in patriarchal China, it also (re)construct masculinities in the gender ideologies and relations among the male returnees.

**Conclusion – areas for further study**

Throughout this literature review, I have established the significance to study return migration due to the lack of studies available which impedes potential policy-making for the development of the countryside. Also, more findings in this area could help prevent possible problems from arising in cities due to the increasing rural-urban migration rate where more migrants are residing in the cities. Most importantly, I review the needs to close the gap between the impacts of return migration and masculinities among male returnees in China to help researchers and Chinese government to adopt a more nuance attitude towards the narratives of male returnees as their experiences are varied and rich which differs from the common assumptions made in the feminist studies. It is thus crucial to challenge the current discursive practices that suggest male migrant returnees in China as a singular and distinct category that is largely privileged by migration. We should encourage studies to move away from the essentialist views of the masculinity constructed socially and acquire a more critical outlook on the issues discussed in this literature review.
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