## L'appui des réseaux sociaux aux femmes migrant vers le travail urbain en Chine contemporaine

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*Résumé*

*Cet article examine la façon dont les femmes des zones rurales en Chine utilisent les réseaux sociaux dans leur migration vers les emplois urbains. S'appuyant sur des entrevues approfondies avec des migrantes, leurs familles et leurs concitoyens, aussi bien dans les lieux de départ que d'arrivée, l'auteur démontre qu'elles dépendent largement des réseaux guanxi pour trouver de l'emploi et pour réduire les risques et les coûts associés à la migration. Les employeurs se servent également de ces réseaux pour sélectionner des travailleuses. L'auteur affirme cependant que les réseaux guanxi présentent également des désavantages et des risques puisqu'ils dirigent les migrantes des zones rurales vers les emplois peu lucratifs réservés aux femmes. Les migrantes courent aussi le risque d'être confinées dans un réseau basé sur les liens familiaux et d'être impuissantes à se créer de nouveaux réseaux. Elles risquent aussi de perdre leurs réseaux sociaux dans leur village parce qu'il leur est difficile de les entretenir pendant leurs séjours en ville.*

# Social Networks and Women's Rural-urban Migration in Contemporary China

Nana Zhang[1]

*Abstract*

*This article examines the way in which women migrants use social networks in their migration from rural areas to urban employment in China. Through the use of in-depth interviews with women migrants, their families and fellow villagers, in both sending and receiving areas, the author demonstrates their heavy reliance on guanxi networks in their job search, and in the reduction of both risks and costs associated with migration. Employers also use these networks to select workers. The author argues, however, that there are drawbacks and added risks as guanxi networks channel rural women into low-paid gender specific jobs. Women migrants are more likely to be encased in a network based on kinship, unable to build new networks and thereby gain upward mobility. Yet they also risk losing their networks in their home village because of the difficulty in maintaining them during their sojourns in the city.*

**Introduction**

Women migrants occupy a significant role in rural-urban migration in China. It is estimated that nationally, the number of rural-urban migrant workers in cities is over 120 million (Chan, 2006: 20) and about half of them are women (Women of China, 2006). In the Special Economic Zones in the southern part of China, female migrants comprise more than 70 per cent of the migrant workforce (Chan, 2006: 20). In cities, male migrants from the countryside now dominate the construction industry across China, whilst rural migrant women form the backbone of the workforce in the textile and manufacturing industries and also dominate in the service sector.

As more and more married, as well as unmarried, women migrate to work in the cities against tradition, understanding the role of rural migrant women in the gender-selective migration process in China is a challenging task because rural women migrants do not only have a "dual-position" both as women and mi-

grants (Piper, 2003: 22), but also live as peasants in a dual society where peasants are treated as second class. With more scholars emphasizing the importance of gender in researching women's migration, more studies focusing on women in rural-urban migration in China have appeared recently (Chan, 2002; Davin, 1996, 1999; Fan, 2003, 2004; Murphy, 2004; Pun, 1999; Yang and Guo, 1999; Zhang, 2001). The role of social networks in facilitating rural women migration has also been highlighted (Solinger, 1999; Murphy, 2002, Jacka & Gaetano, 2004). However, to date, detailed qualitative studies on female migrants' networks in internal migration in China are still scarce.

Social networks play a significant role in facilitating migration (e.g. Boyd, 1989; Curran et al., 2005, Guilmoto and Sandron, 2001; Massey et al., 1993) and they are also found to be the major information channel helping rural migrants negotiate the process of migration in China (Cai, 1999; Zhang and Guo, 2003; Zhao, 2003). Migrant networks are normally understood as "sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin" (Massey et al., 1993: 448). The use of social networks can be regarded as one way in which migrants can reduce the high costs and risks of migration and increase the expected returns. I will argue that in the case of China, rural migrants' networks are *guanxi* networks, or social networks in the context of China. The characteristics of *guanxi* and its culture shape the networks that peasants use in their migration and make them distinctive from migrant networks in other countries.

Chinese society is based on personal ties where one is connected to others by various relations (Fei, 1991 [1947]). In such a society, everyone is embedded in a web of relationships of various strengths, namely, *guanxi*. Based on obligations and trusts, *guanxi* networks are webs of social ties that facilitate the exchange of favours between different parties (Bian & Ang, 1997; Fan, 2002). As a form of social capital, they can be developed and they need to be cultivated and maintained (Yan, 1996; Yang, 1994; Yueh, 2006). *Guanxi* networks are also gendered networks. Yang (1994) finds that women are disadvantaged in acquiring *guanxi*. Social norms regulating women's proper behaviour restrict women from cultivating *guanxi* effectively with men who tend to hold more influential positions. *Guanxi* enhanc-

ing activities such as attending banquets and drinking alcohol and socializing with men may cause women to have a bad reputation.

*Guanxi* networks not only influence migration decision-making and migration behaviour, but also greatly influence migrants' work and life in the cities. Studies have shown that *guanxi* networks play a significant role in helping rural inhabitants obtain urban jobs (Bian, 1994; Giles et al., 2006). Possessing a position at the bottom of the social hierarchy and having limited financial as well as social capital, peasants in China are greatly disadvantaged from the outset. In the city, where peasants and rural migrants are labelled an underclass, it is not easy for them to break through the invisible wall and cultivate *guanxi* networks with urbanites. Many peasants' *guanxi* networks are therefore greatly restricted to kin and fellow villagers. Rural women migrants are even further constrained due to their position as a peasant, a migrant and a woman.

Gender identity plays an important role in the shaping of migrant network ties and migrant networks, in turn, have an impact on gender (Curran and Saguy, 2001). Fan suggests that women migrants play a central role in the gendered networks and are channeled to gendered jobs (Fan, 2004). How does gender, however, shape rural women's networks in their migration process and how do *guanxi* networks operate, facilitate, support and influence rural-urban women migrants and their migration in China? Who are the networkers and how do rural women choose and maintain their networks in a *guanxi* society before, during and after their migration? I attempt to answer these questions in this paper and demonstrate how rural women are channeled into low-paid jobs in the city and how they are underprivileged and constrained from migrating upwards through their gendered *guanxi* networks.

Evidence for this paper has been drawn from a qualitative study of women rural-urban migrants in two cities, Shantou and Beijing, and two sending provinces, Henan and Hebei, conducted between 2003 and 2005. In the fieldwork, I acted as a "tracer" following women migrants through their migratory journey from their home village to the city and collected data following the migrating circle. I was able to gather data from a dynamic process and build up a link between the sending and receiving places. The youngest woman migrant in the sample was 16 years old and the oldest 56 years old, at the time of the interview. The women came

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from 30 villages in 24 townships or counties across eight provinces working as vendors, factory workers, shoe menders, cleaners, nannies, shop assistants, secretaries, accountants, entrepreneurs (etc.) in Shantou and Beijing. Their migration experience ranged from one month to 14 years. Altogether, 60 in-depth interviews were conducted with rural women migrants, their parents, husbands, male colleagues, bosses, relatives and fellow villagers, among which, 33 interviews were taken with rural migrant women, 13 interviews with their parents (including parents-in-law) and two with their fellow villagers were transcribed and translated into English and were analyzed by Atlas/ti.

## Social Networks in Women's Rural-urban Migration in China

### Heavy reliance on guanxi networks

Due to the long period of rural-urban division in China, information from the city is far from the reach of many peasants. Social stratification and institutions which disadvantage peasants, such as the *hukou* (household registration) system, further impede potential migrants and lengthen the social distance between peasants and the city. Rural women are more restricted because of gender inequality in the countryside (Jacka, 1997). The persistent gender gap in education and the heavily gender-divided labour market also force many rural women to depend on social networks to secure jobs in cities.

Consistent with recent studies, my field data also shows that female migrants rely heavily on the assistance of *guanxi* networks in their migration process. All of the 33 women migrants were assisted by *guanxi* connections in their first migration. The importance of "knowing somebody" (*you ren* – having connections) was repeatedly emphasized in the interviews. The field data also shows that potential women migrants not only use *guanxi* networks to get information about jobs in the city, but also use them to secure specific jobs. Twenty three interviewees (out of 33) had secured a job through their *guanxi* networks even before they migrated to the cities. In fact, many interviewees did not migrate immediately, although their decision to migrate had already been made and they had sufficient information about their preferred destination city and the job they wanted to do. Instead, they turned to the help of a "right" *guanxi* connection and waited for months until their *guanxi* connection secured the job for them.

Yan[2] wanted to work in Beijing after she quit middle school. Although she knew, in detail, about the work in a stamp company in Beijing from her friends and neighbours, she did not migrate. Instead, she turned to Ping, her relative, friend and former classmate from her village who was then working in the company, for help. She waited for several months until one day she was informed by Ping that there were vacancies available in the company and the boss agreed that she could come to take the job.

Relatives, friends and fellow villagers from home form a "reliable" information source for many rural women who have little knowledge about the "outside world". Besides job information, many networkers also give newcomers detailed instructions on how to prepare for the journey and the life in the city. Some also accompanied the potential women migrants to their work place. The physical as well as psychological risks and costs of migration are therefore reduced dramatically. Networkers are also found to provide accommodation, sometimes even money for the newcomers when they first arrive in the city. Li came to Shantou alone from Sichuan. With only a few *yuan* left on her arrival at Shantou, the first thing she did was to call a fellow villager for help: "She offered me clothes, food and accommodation. She also helped me with finding a job. She knew that I didn't have money and she didn't ask for a penny for all these. She's really kind. I could not imagine what I could do without her help" (Li, apprentice in a hair saloon in Shantou, age 30, migrated from Sichuan in 2003).

Many girls migrate at a very young age and lack experience of life in the city. This adds to their parents' concerns about their safety. A job secured through *guanxi* networks provides assurance of safety for both migrants and their parents. Many parents expressed their concerns about the safety of their migratory daughters and their trust in *guanxi* networks. For those who were fully aware of the unreliability of many employers, *guanxi* is equal to a guarantee of secured pay for their children's hard work. A father in a village in Hebei told me, "If they (my children) get the work through someone who has a close guanxi with us, they can get the pay every month. It will be very difficult if we don't know anybody there at all. They may be dismissed in the end without getting a penny."

It is interesting to note that none of the interviewees used employment agencies to locate a job. Some were deterred by the

relatively high agency fee (50 *yuan* as reported in one interview[3]) since migrants, especially first time migrants, usually have limited cash in hand. Some migrants fear they might be cheated because many of the existing agencies are illegal and unlawful conduct by the agencies is far from uncommon. Fan argues: "State and urban agencies are institutionally distant from rural migrants and are not their preferred source of information" (2003: 38). Recruitment agencies are, therefore, still shunned by many women migrants. Xia and her sister found their jobs from posters on a notice board: "We didn't have much money. What else could we do then? We didn't go to the agencies. We heard that some of them could be very deceitful, besides we also had to pay a fee. My sister and I went to read the advertisements in the streets to see whether there were vacancies" (Xia, garment factory worker, age 22, migrated from Jiangxi in 1996).

*Guanxi* networks carry not only mutual obligations of assistance and support, but also mutual trust. They give the potential migrants and their families a reassurance of their safety and reward from the migration; they give the networkers confidence in helping the newcomers settle in the cities; they also give the employers reassurance of the honesty, obedience as well as competence of their future employees.

### *Locating and selecting guanxi networks*

My research shows an excessive use of strong ties based on kinship, friendship and shared community origin by women migrants. All 33 women migrants had support from a *guanxi* network in the process of migration. Sixteen interviewees were facilitated by either family members or relatives; 13 found help from fellow villagers (*lao xiang or tong xiang*); four were aided by either friends of their own or friends of their family members. Many of these networkers in my sample are migrants working in the cities and they are the base of the network. I call them key networkers. In order for the network to function effectively, a group of networkers, other than the key networkers, are constantly weaving the web to facilitate the migration of potential migrants. However, the importance of their role in the operation of the network is not recognized.

Many migrants' as well as potential migrants' parents, neighbours and fellow villagers act as "go-betweens", spreading information about the success and failure of the migrants in the

city and the migration intention of the potential migrants in the village, encouraging migration and even directing the migration flow, and also helping to build up connections between potential migrants and key networkers. The success of the network is usually a collective effort of many networkers.

Migrants' parents who stay in the villages are usually the first information providers. Their pride of having a child working in the city is obvious in the interviews. Information about a migrant's work and success can easily be passed to other villagers by the parents. Nan, who worked as a shop assistant in Beijing told me: "My father, he is very proud of us. … He always boasts to others about us" (Nan, shop assistant, age 22, migrated from Hebei in 1998).

The channels in the network can never be in one direction only: those who want to migrate or who want their children to migrate spread news, too. In a village in Hebei, I met villagers who visited a migrant's home to get job information in the city for their children; villagers also spread news about their fellow villagers' children who had dropped out of school and were available for migration. Once on this "village waiting list", the potential migrants would not only get related information, sometimes they might also get a "job offer".

Many villagers are often "go-betweens" who spread information. In the village in Henan province, villagers still retained the custom of having their meals in front of the gate of their house, while they chatted with their neighbours, exchanging news in the village. Any news about the successful migrants was certainly an unavoidable topic. In the villages, "people talk". They talk whenever they meet; they talk over their mahjong table; they talk when they visit their fellow villagers' homes. News and information spread quickly among villagers. It greatly enhances the linkage between migrants and non-migrants and helps the network function effectively.

However, in the countryside where patriarchy still prevails and where the age-old social norms set for women that regulate women's "proper" behaviour and preserve their "chastity" still deeply influence people's minds, the involvement of these "go-betweens" also adds a patriarchal element to *guanxi* networks and consequently channels women to do gender specific jobs in the city. Having limited *guanxi* connections of their own, many rural women have to rely on their parents and relatives' networks to

migrate. Their parents, relatives and fellow villagers often take control of the network selecting process and even make migration decisions on behalf of potential women migrants. Rural women are, therefore, more likely to be channeled to do jobs which are considered "suitable for women" by their parents or relatives, even if the wage may not be good. The network which can help monitor and regulate women's "proper" behaviour is preferable for women's parents and relatives. Because many potential women migrants are very young, their parents are more likely to choose the network where the networkers can "keep an eye" on their daughters. Villager Wang told me:

> We cannot just send our daughter out… But she should get proper pay for the job, a proper accommodation and the person who introduces the job should be reliable. … As to my nieces, they are not allowed to work in the public bathrooms or saunas. They are allowed to work in places like supermarkets, garment factories, textile factories, or dyeing factories, anyway, places where there is a concentration of girls
> (Wang, age 55, migrant's fellow villager from Hebei).

But this does not necessarily mean that women are passive in the process of selecting networks. Some women did select the network themselves and the use of any network in their migration is always the result of carefully weighing up and balancing the advantages and drawbacks of the networks to which they have access, and a calculation and prediction of the possible risks, costs and returns from the use of different networks. They tend to choose a network which will channel them to a destination where they have stronger ties so that they are more likely to find help and support or where they are more likely to develop future networks which often means greater security and more job opportunities for them as they are strangers and outsiders in the city. Li's account about how she chose her network before she made the decision to migrate to Shantou is one such example:

> I thought a lot before I made the decision. I wanted to migrate to Shanghai at the very beginning. I have an acquaintance there… in fact I am not quite familiar with him and I have a much closer relationship with my home fellows (fellow villagers) here. … I heard about Shantou when I was in Sichuan. I have a lot of home fellows and former classmates who migrated here years ago and they

told me that it was not bad to work here. They told me that it was very easy to get a job in the factories because there were a lot of factories here since it was a Special Economic Zone. So I came here (Li, apprentice in a hair saloon in Shantou, age 30, migrated from Sichuan in 2003).

Once rural women have migrated and secured a job in the city, they themselves become potential key networkers who encourage and channel more migrants to the city, building up a chain of migration. Nearly one third of the interviewees in my sample indicated that they had helped their relatives, friends or fellow villagers find work in the city after their own migration. A similar phenomenon was also documented by Hondagneu-Sotelo in her study of Mexican women immigrants, who "encouraged other women, sometimes explicitly by urging them to migrate" or simply served as "role models" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 93). These chains are heavily gendered chains because they often introduce more migrants to do jobs similar to what they do, which are "suitable for women".

The relationship between key networkers and migrants after migration varied greatly depending on the strength of the tie and the familiarity between the networker and the actual migrant. Since the eventual migration may involve the operation of several *guanxi* networks, potential migrants who are aided by a network may not necessarily know the key networkers. Some may continue to cultivate *guanxi* if they are strongly tied to each other or if more exchanges of favours are involved. But in reality, few women actually maintain a long-term relationship with the key networkers.

Similar to rural-urban migrants in India where "[i]t is not possible for the migrant to abuse for too long the hospitality of his relatives or friends" (Guilmoto & Sandron, 2001: 146), migrants in China also show great awareness that they should become independent as soon as possible, for Chinese know better than anyone that "*renqing*" (human sentiment) is often very difficult to return. No one typically plans on relying on their networks for long, even if they were their kin. Han migrated to Shantou with the help of her brother. When we talked about his help, she told me: " They all have their own families and they all have to work hard to make a living. You can ask them for help once or twice, but you will feel it is difficult to ask for more, even if they

are your brother and sister" (Han, cleaner, age 50, migrated from Henan in 1998).

### *Being selected – from the other end of the network*

Many employers also prefer to recruit workers through *guanxi* networks, where they can find workers whom they can trust, especially if they are in a retailing business where cash transactions are involved. They can also maintain and strengthen their *guanxi* networks by giving job offers as favours to other net-workers. Sometimes, it can also be an obligatory favour to their relatives.

*Guanxi* networks are not only based on mutual obliga-tion, but also on mutual trust. A *guanxi* network which gives the potential migrants a sense of security also offers the employer an assurance of the reliability of the employee. Data collected in my fieldwork demonstrates that many networkers introduced the jobs to the potential migrants as a favour required by their bosses, since being "good employees" themselves, they were often trusted by the boss to bring a person with similar "good personal qualities". Many small business owners who were migrants themselves tended to find someone from their home village of whom they "know the roots" (*zhigen zhidi*).

Eighteen-year-old Yan secured a job in a big factory in Beijing with the help of a fellow villager who was a worker there as well. The "help" was also a need of the company: during busy seasons, the company recruited extra staff through its workers, asking them to spread recruitment information to their fellow vil-lagers, friends and relatives and to bring suitable migrants to work in the factory. This not only saved the company advertise-ment costs, it also channeled the desired workers to the company – young girls from the countryside.

Qin migrated to work as a nanny in an urban family from Hebei Province in 1998. Having earned the trust of her employer, she was asked to find a substitute when she quit her job. She told me she not only introduced a relative of hers to the family, but also trained the girl until she could do the work properly.

The influence of shared origin on employers' "hiring pref-erence" as found by Fawcett (Fawcett, 1989) was also found in my field work. Lan migrated to Shantou from Sichuan. She ran a restaurant which specialized in Sichuan cuisine in Shantou. Like many other Sichuan restaurants in China, its waiters and wait-

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resses were all Sichuan migrants. However, no employer will put obligation first when it is juxtaposed with his trust – the trust that the employee will be obedient and will help him make profits. Once the trust disappears, no matter how big the obligation is, there will not be any chance for the migrant to stay. Wei, the boss of a workwear shop in Beijing sacked his nephew because the sixteen-year-old boy "did not work properly": "He did not talk to people. It is crucial to talk to people in retail. No matter how I instructed him, he just did not do it. And he had his own idea but he wouldn't tell me. … He did not work properly. I have a business to run and I couldn't let him stay there although I am his uncle. So later on his father brought him back home" (Wei, age 56, migrant's father from Hebei).

However, disappointed by the migrants employed through their networks they may be, many employers still prefer to recruit workers through *guanxi*. After sacking his nephew, Wei found another substitute straight away – another nephew from the village.

### Building new networks in the city

Rural women's networks may be greatly restricted before migration due to the rural-urban divide. Once they migrate to the cities, some may find more opportunities to build up new networks. However, these networks are often heavily gendered networks that constrain migrant women. Because of the gender division of labour, the social stratification and the existence of institutions in the city which disadvantage rural women migrants, they are channeled to "specific types of jobs" in the city where "the urban labour market consists of segments specifically targeting their labour rather than a range of opportunities" (Fan, 2004: 192-193), which in turn force women migrants to forge gendered networks. These networks limit rural women's upward social mobility (e.g. non-manufacturing jobs with better pay and more security). During her three years' of migration, Yan changed jobs more than five times, all through the help of her female friends who were also her colleagues. She found herself working in various factories and shops in Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei, each one worse than the other. At last, she went back to the where she started – working in the same stamp company where she worked when she first arrived in Beijing.

As transients, it is hard for migrants to build up sufficient

social networks beyond their work place and integrate into the city, especially for women migrants who are largely confined to the "inside sphere" and are engaged in endless work. Many women do not go beyond their daily workplace even if they have been in the city for years. Song had been mending shoes and repairing bicycles beside an apartment building in a residential area in Shantou since her migration from Jiangsu in 1998. She told me she seldom visited anywhere else because she got lost easily and she had to rely on her husband to make contacts with the "outside world" including shopping for food for the family.

Confined to their work place, few migrant women socialize with people outside their small circle. Although some may occasionally meet up with fellow villagers, former classmates or relatives, many simply cannot afford the time. It is also difficult for them to cultivate and maintain *guanxi* due to women migrants' fluidity. Social norms regulating women's proper behaviour also restrict rural women from carrying out *guanxi* enhancing activities. Some women, if lucky, may find temporary company or consolation from their fellow migrant colleagues, but many find it difficult to make friends even with other migrants. Ping worked in a stamp album factory in Beijing. She told me: "Although there were a lot of girls (in the factory), they were not from this area (home village). Some of them came from northeast China, Chifeng, and Chengde and all over the country. It was impossible to make real friends with them… They might be your friends when you lived and worked in the same factory but they might not recognize you once you stepped out of the gate" (Ping, returnee, age 23, migrated from Hebei in 1999).

As strangers and underclass inhabitants of the city, few migrant women can make friends with city residents although they live and work amongst urbanites for years. According to the fieldwork data, except two interviewees who had urban fiancés, none of the other women made friends with urban residents during their migration. But even the two interviewees who had urban fiancés told me that they did not have any other friends who were local residents. For many migrant women, city residents are "sophisticated" and "unreliable" who cannot be real friends, and who will "address you when you are here today. (They) do not even recognise you when you leave. The tea gets cold immediately after the person who drinks it leaves" (Lan, restaurant owner, age 41, migrated from Sichuan in 1980).

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Fen sold eggs in Beijing with her husband for more than 10 years. She told me that it was impossible for a migrant to have a real friend in the city. Her experience was quite typical among many migrants.

> I can tell you that when you migrate and stay in the city, you will find that it is impossible to have a close friend. People are too opportunistic nowadays…
>
> Nowadays it is impossible for me to make friends in this society! I just address them and we are only acquaintances. And that's enough. … I should not go close to anybody except my family members and my relatives. I cannot count on anybody else but my family (Fen, egg seller, age 45, migrated from Hebei in 1990).

Isolated from social life in the city and having limited contacts with city residents who are in control of the networks in the city, also limit women's opportunities for upward migration. In the city where *guanxi* is more a means of survival than a mere culture or tradition, the lack of social networks could disadvantage women migrants dramatically. Unlike women living in the countryside who can seek support from their local social networks at the time of emergency, migrant women can be extremely vulnerable since they may risk losing their networks at home after years of migration. The situation can be worse for young migrant girls because after migrating at a very young age, they have not yet had enough time to build up strong networks in the countryside either, which may disadvantage them in the long run.

Some women, though, do negotiate ways to improve their situations. Ping gave up her job in the stamp album factory in Beijing after two years of hard work and re-migrated to a small city near her home village where she found more fellow villagers and friends. She told me: "I came back because I didn't have any friends in Beijing. All my friends were working here in this city. The boys and girls in my village and neighbourhood, all of them found jobs here and migrated here by and by. So I had more friends who were working here" (Ping, returnee, age 23, migrated from Hebei in 1999).

Lack of a social life and sufficient *guanxi* network support in the city also intensifies migrants' feeling of homesickness and pushes women to have closer contacts with their family in the home village. Telephone communication is widely used by mi-

grant women as a key method of contact. According to the field-work data, 25/33 (76 per cent) of women used the telephone to contact their family, and many made phone calls home regularly. Contrary to findings by Lou et al that "[s]trong ties to family and the land cause rural migrants to return home often" (Lou et. al., 2004: 228), more than 60 per cent (20/33) of the interviewees in my fieldwork said they could not visit home often. Some told me they had not been home for two to three years or even longer at the time of the interview. Those who can afford to go back home more often are usually young single women who are employed in the service sector or as clerical staff and whose home village is nearby and therefore easily accessible from the city. The reasons given by the interviewees for not visiting home were many, but mainly linked to women's limited control over their time and their concern over money.

Having no legal contract, many migrant women who are employed in factories are denied paid holidays. Most workers are forced to accept a wage loss if they ask for leave because they work on a piece rate basis. Even if they venture to ask for leave, their requests will often be declined by their bosses, with the excuse that it is not safe for young girls to travel home alone. Because their wage is often delayed by their employers for months, those who will not obey might risk losing their unpaid wage or even their jobs. Expected to be docile and dedicated, migrant women are not expected to demand but to obey their employers and many women do obey "willingly". Shan told me:

> We had to report to our supervisor to ask for leave. But they usually didn't give us permission. The production would be delayed if the person who asked for leave was a 'swift hand'. Nobody asked for leave when there were many urgent orders. Another concern was our safety. Nobody could tell whether you would go back home or not when you asked for leave. We were all very young at that time and if they allowed us to go back home and we had some accident, it would be very difficult for them to face our parents. They did it out of good intentions anyway (Shan, factory worker, age 25, migrated from Henan in 1996).

Travel expenses are also one of the factors that hold migrant women back from visiting home because many women prefer to save every hard-earned penny to remit home. Some women

cannot go home simply because the payment of their wages is delayed by months by their employers and they do not have enough money for the trip. Li migrated from Sichuan and worked in a hair salon in Shantou. Although she was desperate to see the four-year-old son she had left in a boarding kindergarten in Sichuan, she could not afford it because her boss delayed her pay. She said: "I can't afford it. I don't have money to go back home now."

Tied to the "inside sphere" and exploiting themselves to the extreme, migrant wives who joined their husbands running small family business in the city had even less time to visit home. Although many migrant wives claimed that they could "arrange their time freely" because they were self-employed, they also contradicted themselves by telling me that they could not afford to leave the business behind to visit home. Besides their concern about their business, the cost of gifts they have to buy for their family, relatives and friends when they visit home also made migrant couples postpone their visit. It could range from several hundred *yuan* to several thousand *yuan* (the figure could be even larger if they visited home during Chinese New Year), for which they had to save for months or even years (see Zhang, 2006: 233-37; 267-71).

**Rethinking Women Migrants' Networks**

*Guanxi* networks help to reduce risks and costs of migration, providing various supports to both potential and current women out-migrants, but they also have drawbacks. Successful migrants can easily be viewed as role models for many rural women. The successful stories about certain migrants are broadcast through the networks, adding enormous pressure on rural women as they are often compared to those role models by the networkers. Many interviewees mentioned that their sisters, friends or neighbours who migrated to the city greatly influenced their migration. For many daughters in peasant families, being "a commodity that will lose money" is bad enough. The successful models in the neighbourhood can make them feel so ashamed of themselves, of being a daughter and a non-migrant who cannot bring money home, especially if the role model is from their own family.

*Guanxi* networks may also encourage the employment of child labour. Jobs in the city secured through *guanxi* give con-

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cerned parents reassurance of the safety of their young daughters – they can let their daughters migrate at a very young age. Network recruitment by the employers does not require any identification, which also allows the employment of child labour. Six of my interviewees migrated at the age of 17 or younger, and one of them migrated to work at the age of 15[4].

*Guanxi* networks may lower the authenticity of information. The job information transmission process often involves several networkers across different networks. Distortion of information is therefore unavoidable. Some networkers may exaggerate their success or the success of their family members or friends, which may mislead many potential migrants. Some interviewees told me that the information provided by the networker did not correspond to the reality they experienced after their migration. Meng, who worked in a garment factory when she first migrated, told me: "One of my elder sister's classmates was then working there. And she could earn a lot of money every month, so I also went to work in the factory. But after I got the job, I found out that actually the factory was near bankruptcy" (Meng, shop assistant, age 26, migrated from Hebei in 1995).

*Guanxi* networks allow the abuse of migrants' rights by the employers. The strong trust of women migrants in *guanxi* networks makes them more vulnerable to control by their employers. Because of this mutual trust, neither the employer nor the employee would initiate signing a contract, obviously to the benefit of the employers. The absence of a contract gives the employer the advantage of abusing his power and the workers' trust. Delayed payment of wages, long working hours, and unpaid extra work such as washing and cooking were not uncommon experiences of many interviewees.

Women migrants' heavy reliance on *guanxi* networks and their strong trust in the networks and networkers also make them more vulnerable to trafficking. Recent studies on trafficking and irregular migration from China have reported the use of village networks and social networks of potential victims by "snakeheads" (people smugglers) and traffickers in their "recruitment" (Chin, 2003; Lee, 2005). Traffickers who identify potential victims in the countries of origin "tend to belong to the same social network as the victims, either through family lines or other social groupings" (Lee, 2005: 180). These networks are often *guanxi* networks that women and their family trust.

*Guanxi* networks help "encase" women migrants. Although these networks greatly facilitate women's migration, which is supposed to open up more opportunities for women to meet more people and thus help them to expand their networks in the city, they also, in one way or another, restrict women' network expansion. Married women migrants, especially those who join their husbands in migration, are more likely to be confined to a restricted network which consists of only their family members, while their husbands may enjoy a broader range of networks because of the gender division of labour within the household. Single women, who are more likely to be channeled by their networks to work and live under the supervision of the networkers, have limited opportunities and time to expand their networks to people other than their workmates. Even if they have such an opportunity, they may be discouraged or disapproved of by the networker as it may be considered improper behaviour. The traditional and cultural influence of family and kinship based networks as well the unstable status of migrants also restricts migrants from developing new networks.

Migrant women's networks are heavily gendered networks. These networks channel women to specific gender-selective jobs in the city and in turn force women migrants to forge gendered networks. Because the network is heavily gendered and is restricted to a narrow scope of contacts, often within a certain sector of the economy, it offers women migrants few social connections and therefore limits their upward social mobility.

Migrant women's sojourns in the city may eventually lead them to a "network loss" in their home village. A *Guanxi* network needs to be cultivated and maintained. It needs time and contacts. Migrant women may lose their own networks in their home village easily since many of them migrate at a very young age with the help of other social networks before they build up sufficient networks at home. Even if they have some networks in their home village, they have limited time and capital to cultivate and maintain them. However, it is difficult for them to build up new networks in the cities for the above-mentioned reasons. There is, therefore, the danger of having undeveloped networks in both destination and sending places for women migrants. It may be, therefore, hard for the women to find immediate social support.

**Conclusion**

Based on kinship, friendship, as well as shared commu-

nity origin, social networks can dramatically lower the risks and costs of migration and thus greatly help with channeling potential migrants from the countryside to the city. In the case of China, the heavy reliance on networks by rural women migrants is not simply a migrant's strategy to reduce the risks and costs of migration; it is also a migrant's response to Chinese *guanxi* culture. Rural women migrants' networks are *guanxi* networks. They are not only based on mutual obligation, but also on mutual trust. It is not only a preferred source of information by migrants and their families, but also a preferred source of information by many employers, compared to the employment agencies.

In order for the *guanxi* network to function effectively, a pull of networkers are weaving the web all the time to facilitate the migration of the potential migrants. While much emphasis has been given to the networkers who are migrants working in the city, few studies on migrant networks emphasized the importance of the "nodes" other than migrants, potential migrants and returned migrants which link the migrants in the city with the potential migrants in the villages. My research highlights the importance of these less visible links such as the migrants' and non migrants' parents, relatives and fellow villagers and shows that these links play an important role in the network and helping the network to function effectively. This very nature of *guanxi* networks gives more control to the parents, relatives and fellow villagers over the migration decision-making process. Rural women are, therefore, more likely to be channeled into jobs which are considered "suitable for women" by their parents or relatives, even if the wage may not be good.

Rural women are not necessarily passive in the networking process. Some women migrants do select, construct and employ their own *guanxi* networks in the migration process and the employment of any network in their migration is always the result of carefully weighing and balancing the advantages and drawbacks of the networks they have access to, and a calculation and prediction of the possible risks, costs and returns from the use of different networks. Once migrating, they themselves become key networkers channeling more migrants to the city.

Although *guanxi* networks can help reduce the costs and risks of migration, they may also have drawbacks and added risks. Women migrants are more likely to be encased in a *guanxi* network based on kinship and unable to build up new networks.

The patriarchy of the *guanxi* network and its gendered nature help channel rural women into low-paid, gender specific jobs.

**Endnotes**

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[2] Pseudonyms are used for all the interviewees mentioned in this paper.

[3] According to my fieldwork data, the average monthly wage of a rural migrant who works in a factory is 400-500 *yuan*.

[4] According to Labour law of China, Article 15, "No employing units shall be allowed to recruit juveniles under the age of 16". Article 64, "No juvenile workers shall be arranged to engage in work down the pit of mines, work that is poisonous or harmful, work with Grade IV physical labour intensity as stipulated by the State, or other work that they should avoid". ('Juvenile workers' hereby refer to labourers aged 16 to 18).

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