

Educated Return Migrants in Rural China

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Xibei Wang declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Science at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Table of Contents

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP	i
Acknowledgement	ii
Table of Contents	iv
Glossary	viii
Abstract	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction: Why return migrants?	1
From ‘return migrant’ to ‘return youth’: the transformation of terminology	2
1.2 Recounting studies on migration and return migration	6
Selectivity of return migrants	6
Return migrants and rural development	14
The gender dimension of return migration	14
Return migrants’ adaptation to rural society	16
1.3 Research Contribution	17
1.4 Methodology	20
Theoretical nodes that help to conceptualise the research	20
Research objectives and questions.....	36
The fieldwork	38
Data collecting, processing and analysing	42
Chapter 2	45
Setting the stage: the political, economic and social landscape of Rural China	45
2.1 Social, structural and economic background of rural return migrants in China since the 1980s	46
Stage 1: Economic growth dominated by the state government.....	46
Stage 2: Alternative development agencies and their rural development experiments	48
Stage 3: The unbridled modernisation period	56
Statistics of the current wave of return migrants	66
2.2 Suzhi and the rural population: the return entrepreneur discourse	67
<i>Suzhi</i> in shaping rural identity.....	67
Constructing return entrepreneur discourse.....	70
2.3 Understanding the rural family and society	74
Rural Family: The Contractual Principle.....	74
Rural Society: Society of Familiarity.....	79
Familial and social relations: the totality of practicality and sentimentality	80

Chapter 3	82
Trajectories of return: individual, family and career	82
3.1 Educated returnees’ career choices: an overview	86
Self-employment.....	86
Employed by others	88
Case 1: ZHL	90
Case 2: WYL	93
Case 3: CLL	96
Case 4: GHL and HSM	98
Case 5: HXF	99
Case 6: LLL	102
3.2 Gaobucheng, dibujiu: striving to find a ‘suitable’ job	103
<i>Suzhi</i> discourse.....	103
Household livelihood strategy	105
Gender Norms.....	109
3.3 Return entrepreneurship: a solution that fits all	111
3.4 Return entrepreneurs: bringing more job opportunities to the local market?	113
3.5 Return: A choice of one’s own?	115
Chapter 4	117
Translocal practice: constructing return migrants’ everyday lives	117
4.1 Physical mobility of return migrants	119
Rural households on the move: multi-dwelling arrangements in the countryside.....	119
Maintain connectivity between the city and the countryside.....	122
4.2 Narrative of Mobility	125
4.3 Technomobility: Mobility online	128
Communication via smartphone: multimedia messages	130
4.4 Mobility in daily life: shopping, jogging, and browsing social media	135
WYL’s Dormitory	135
Y’s tea shop	137
LLL’s Office	138
Two migrations in parallel	138
Constructing a cosmopolitan lifestyle in the countryside	139
Embodied modernity: negotiating scales through daily practice.....	141
It’s all about sense a ritual	142
Taking photos and posting them: Return migrants’ self-expression.....	146
4.5 From ‘leave the fields without leaving the countryside’ to ‘leaving the city without giving up the urban life’?	147
Chapter 5	149

Social relation, social capital and social identity	149
5.1 Return entrepreneurs’ social life	153
Social connection: key in return entrepreneurs’ work	153
Three components of return migrants’ social life	155
Means of making new connections	156
Using social media to expand connections	158
Cultivating new social circles	160
Return entrepreneurs’ translocal network: shared experience as ‘pioneers’	162
Social media’s role in socialising	163
Doing business on WeChat	167
CNC’s social life: a continuum of private, work and social life	168
Life-planning as a project: neoliberal ethos	170
5.2 The other side of return migrants’ social life.....	173
5.3 Rethinking social relation, social capital and social identity.....	176
Chapter 6.....	179
Return migrants and rural development	179
6.1 How do return migrants’ jobs define their roles in rural development?	180
Return village cadres.....	180
Return entrepreneurs	183
Employed returnees.....	184
6.2 Rural development practice	185
Rural tourism in CYJ’s and LLL’s villages	185
Specialised cooperatives of CNC and XXR.....	189
Alternative development approach in HXF’s village.....	190
6.3 Relationship with villagers	194
CYJ’s story.....	195
LLL’s story.....	198
CNC’s story	202
6.4 “Finding rural characteristics, bringing up the whole industry”	206
Conclusion	211
7.1 Constructing social identity.....	211
7.2 Shifting values and forms in the rural family.....	215
7.3 The place entrepreneur in the rural discourse	217
Appendix – 1.....	221
An overview of the research sites and provinces	221
Fujian Province	221
Field sites.....	221
Jiangxi Province	222
Field Site	223
Guangdong Province	223

Field Site	223
Appendix – 2.....	225
List of main research participants	225
Bibliography	227

TABLE OF FIGURE

FIGURE 1 REGIONS USE THE TERM 'RETURN YOUTH' THE MOST.....	5
FIGURE 2 HBZ'S FARM	87
FIGURE 3 ILLUSTRATION OF 'HAVING A PLACE WHENEVER CAN'.....	124
FIGURE 4 CLL'S SMARTPHONE SCREENSHOT	129
FIGURE 5 LLL'S COFFEE UTENSIL.....	138
FIGURE 6 ILLUSTRATION REPRESENTING SENSE OF RITUAL (CANVA, N.D.)	143
FIGURE 7 LLL POSTING HER BRUNCH ON WECHAT.....	147
FIGURE 8 CO-OP IN TOWN S WHERE LLL IS THE MANAGER.....	188
FIGURE 9 OG'S PROGRAM STRUCTURE	192
FIGURE 10 THE 10-MILLION-YUAN ROAD IN CYJ'S VILLAGE	197

Glossary

AFN: Alternative Food Network
CCP: Chinese Communist Party
CSA: Community Support Agriculture
GFC: Global Financial Crisis
GFW: Great Fire Wall
HEE: Higher Education Expansion
HSR: high-speed railway
Instant Messaging: IM
NBS: National Bureau of Statistics
NGO: Non-government organization
NRRM: New Rural Reconstruction Movement
PCD: Partnership for Community Development
PRD: Pearl River Delta
RRM: Rural Reconstruction Movement
SMS: Short Message Service
SOE: State-owned Enterprise
SYSU: Sun Yat-Sen University
TVE: township and village enterprise
YRD: Yangtze River Delta

Abstract

This research attempts to investigate the rural educated return migrants' mobility, translocal practice and scale negotiation in rural China through conducting an ethnographic inquiry. Return migrants, or *fanxiang qingnian* (youth who return to their hometown), in this research, refer to the rural students who graduated in tertiary institutions in the city and returned to their hometown in the countryside. The return migration in China is a counter-mainstream movement, as it is reverse against the dominant trend of rural to urban migration. Rural-urban migration is the most basic rural household livelihood strategy in contemporary China that diversifies the household income plan. Moreover, the modernisation hegemony projects the urban sphere as a symbol of being advanced. In tandem with the *suzhi* discourse that is a unique post-socialist China political-cultural tool, the rural population is motivated and even compelled to go to the city to receive the urban influence, once they reach a certain age. As a result, the number of rural migrants in the city has been increasing since the 1980s.

In that vein, the motivation and social context of the reverse migration in this research is particularly interesting to explore. In this research, return migrants are viewed as the nexus of body and place struggle. Drawing on a rubric of cross-disciplinary analysis tool, it examines the educated return migrants' decision of return, career seeking, family and social life. It also investigates their agency of mediating, negotiating and change-making amid the familial and social constraints. Furthermore, I inspect their contribution in the process of rural development. This research consists of two levels. On the individual level, I explore their personal, work and social life, which present their ambiguous position as the return migrants in a rural setting. On the contextual level, I also examine the formation of the social scale which rationales the current rural development discourse. By drawing an in-depth picture of the educated return migrants' translocal practice in daily life and their participation in rural development, I present their role as 'place entrepreneur' situated in the rural-urban dynamic. This thesis contributes to the academic discussion of how inequality in China impacts subjectivity.