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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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.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction: Why return migrants?

The focus of this study is the experience of educated rural migrants who return to the countryside. Though seemingly self-explanatory, the term 'return migrant' is more ambiguous than may be expected. The following story illustrates this ambiguity. WYL is a 26-year-old return migrant in Jiangxi Province. I got to know her before beginning this project, and she is the first return migrant I met. I was working in an environmental non-government organisation (NGO) in Guangzhou, China. WYL was an intern in one of the social enterprises that my organisation collaborated with. After she finished her internship, she returned to university to complete her degree and we lost contact. But since we remained WeChat [1] friends, I would see her updated posts on Friends Circle [2] (*pengyouquan*). From a newspaper report she posted; I saw that she eventually returned to her hometown in the countryside.

When I was recruiting participants for my research, WYL came to mind and I immediately contacted her. Educated return migrants in China are now referred to as *fanxiang qingnian* (literally translated as 'return youth'). My question to WYL was: "I am doing research on return youth; would you like to participate?" She was surprised by my invitation because she did not think of herself as a return youth. I asked her why she felt this way, and she said: "Because I didn't do anything (*wo meizuo shenme*)". This suggests that there is a belief that in order to be seen as a 'return youth', one is required to 'do something'.

WYL's reaction is telling in many ways. It suggests that a 'return youth' differs from a 'return migrant', which generally refers to rural migrants returning to the countryside. It is thus not clear who exactly fits the description of 'return youth'. Investigating the social construct of the term 'return youth' might tell us more about the formation of this new social group in contemporary rural China and about the discourses and practices of governance in China generally.

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[1] The most widely used social media in China. There will be more discussion of WeChat in Chapters 4 and 5.

[2] One function of WeChat, similar to Instagram.

From 'return migrant' to 'return youth': the transformation of terminology

Before being classified as return youth (*fanxiang qingnian*), return migrants were known by other names. Demographers and economists once referred to this group with the more neutral term 'retrieved population' (*huiqian renkou, huiliu renkou, or huixiang renkou*) (Bai & He, 2002; S. Zhang & Yang, 1996). When they were known by this term, social attention to this group of people was very scarce. That situation changed slowly in the mid-2000s. In 2006, Xinhua News Agency, the biggest state news agency, published a report titled "*Xinnongcun jianshe shiyong rencai ziyuan kaifa duice cuoshi fenxi*" (Strategy analysis of developing human capital for new rural village construction), which stated the need to "provide village cadre, agricultural large holders (*dahu*), and return youths opportunity of training, developing and visiting other examples" (Guo, 2006, translated by Xibei Wang). This was one of the earliest publications in which the new term *fanxiang qingnian* (return youth) appeared. In 2008, the State Council issued No.1 Policy (*zhongyang yihao wenjian*), which mentioned return migrants for the first time, referring to them as *fanxiang nongmingong* (State Council, 2008)[3]. The No.1 Policy is seen as the barometer of the state government's focus in rural areas for the coming year (J. C. Chen, Zinda, & Yeh, 2017). In this policy, while return migrants was not referred to as *fanxiang qingnian,* namely return youth yet, the term 'return' replaces 'retrieved'[4], indicating the introduction of a new term for return migrants. Gradually, the term 'return youth' or *fanxiang qingnian* began to be used instead of 'retrieved population' (*huiqian/huixiang/huiliu renkou*) as the generic term for return migrants in China.

The term *fanxiang qingnian*, which translates literally as 'youth who return to their hometown/countryside', denotes three layers of meaning that are not explicit in the English expression of 'return youth'. First, *fanxiang* means returning to a hometown that is located in a rural setting. The Chinese *xiang* includes meanings of both hometown and countryside. Apart from signifying the movement from urban to rural, the term also conveys the sentiment of being attached to the hometown; it is thus usually paired with the word *qingjie* (meaning 'complex'), as in *fanxiang qingjie* (return complex)[5]. Second,

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[3] Since its first issue in 1982, No. 1 Policy has been issued every year on January 1 and is dedicated to rural development.

[4] In Chinese, as from '*huiqian*' to '*fanxiang*'.

[5] The return complex is related to the hometown complex, or the nostalgic romanticism of the hometown.

qingnian (translated as 'youth') entails more than just an age range. The term has its origins in 1919, when young Chinese students questioned the diplomatic strategy of the reigning government and initiated protests known as the May 4th Youth Movement (*Wusi Qingnian Yundong*) (Clark, 2012; Jia'en Pan & Du, 2011; Rosen, 2009). From then on, youth or *qingnian* were often seen as having prospects of high achievement.

These shifts in terminology and attitude also demonstrate the Western influence of the youth culture (Clark, 2012; De Kloet & Fung, 2016; Rosen, 2009; Schmalzer, 2016). Being young in China carries with it many social connotations. Youth can be revolutionary (Rosen, 2009), troublesome (M. Li, Tan, & Yang, 2019; Yunxiang Yan, 1999), innovative (Clark, 2012) or naive (De Kloet & Fung, 2016). Nevertheless, the word *qingnian* is always viewed as positive[6]. Thus, pairing *fanxiang* with *qingnian* means that the term exhibits two distinctions from the one used before. *Fanxiang qingnian* refers exclusively to migrants who have returned to the countryside, and it sends a strong message of positivity about how these youth fit into society.

Endowed with a new name, return migrants became the focal point of the state's rural development scheme. Apart from the central government, rural scholars and key government think tanks also showed support for the group, despite their disagreements about rural development strategies. The central government initiated a campaign that facilitated not only the increase of return migrants, but also their ability to open businesses of their own. Return migrants became the face of rural revitalisation and have since gained even more popularity and media exposure. As will be discussed in the next section, English- and Chinese-language academic papers on return migration in China increased in frequency after 2007, which coincides with the time when the government began paying attention to this group.

The heightened social image that return migrants enjoy is worth more scrutiny. This is not the first time in China's history that a massive population movement from urban to rural has taken place. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a political movement called 'Intellectual Youth Sent Down to the Countryside' (or *zhiqing xiaxiang*, 'sent-down' for short) compulsorily relocated millions[7] of middle and high school students to the so-

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[6] Q*ingnian* is often paired with positive words, such as *dahao qingnian* (prospective youth).

[7] The actual number of individuals sent in the movement is debatable. Schmalzer (2016) estimated the number to be 12 million in her book *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China.*

called 'remote countryside.', such as Yunnan, Guizhou, Hunan, and Sichuan Province. The term 'youth' (*qingnian*) was also used in this movement. According to Schmalzer (2016), not only urban students but also rural youth attending county-level secondary schools were sent back to their hometowns as part of the movement. These rural youths could be the first group of return migrants after the foundation of People's Republic of China. Nor is return migration a new phenomenon. Ever since rural-urban migration commenced in the 1980s, the reverse of migration occurred who were referred to in Chinese as the 'retrieved population'. There is also circular migration (C.Chen & Fan, 2018), which consists of both migration and return migration and is a common practice in the majority of rural households due to the constraint of the *hukou* system[8]. Return migration is thus a recurring pattern of movement that tends to follow migration.

This study aims to answer the following questions concerning the experience of return migrants: what social connotations does the new term – return youth – have? Why don't return migrants such as WYL consider themselves 'return youth'? How have attitudes differed during other return migrant movements, including the 'sent-down' (*zhiqing*) and return migrants in circular migration? What does the concept 'youth' bring to the term that sets it apart from 'return migrant'? And for those who have enjoyed the glory and fame of being one of the 'return youth', how are their return lives different than those of other return migrants?

The increased focus on return migrants in rural China cannot be viewed in isolation. It has recently emerged amid China's economic transition and has close ties with the state's development of both urban and rural areas. The origin of the term 'return youth' (*fanxiang qingnian*) is closely connected to international NGOs that specialise in community development and organic farming[9]. This raises the question of how return

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[8] Chinese population administrative system. It will be elaborated in the next section.

[9] Although there is no systematic research on the etymology of the new term 'return youth', my observation is that its origin is closely related to the community development work in Taiwan called 'cultivating the community' (*shequ yingzao*). Figure 1 shows that Taiwan is the region that uses the term the most. I first heard the term from a Hongkong-based NGO, Partnership for Community Development (PCD), which collaborated with community colleges (*shequ daxue*) and other community organisations in Taiwan. Return migrants, who are referred to as return youth (*fanxiang qingnian*), are very active in community development in rural Taiwan and serve to connect the local community with external support. NGOs like PCD started to create projects in mainland China that followed Taiwan' model, aimed at bringing back more youth to the countryside. PCD's Youth Internship Program (*shixisheng xiangmu*), for instance, was one of its most successful projects. It provided financial assistance and other resources such as collaboration opportunities, training and workshops to its participants based in the countryside – many of whom are return migrants. The role of return migrants is thus an important part of community development.

migrants are situated in the state's development agenda. If the rural to urban migration is still a major trend, then what brings migrants back to the countryside? What does this countermovement of migration mean for the rural populations? And how do we perceive this countermovement within the larger context of rapid urbanisation in China?
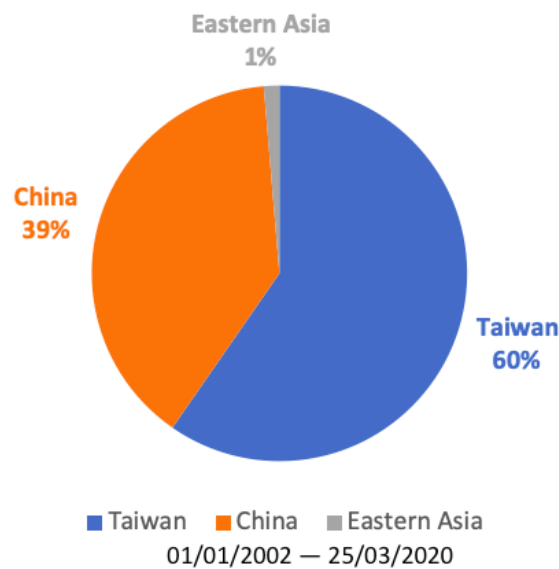
Figure 1 Regions use the term 'return youth' the most

(data source: Factiva)

In this study I examine the formation of a new kind of subjectivity that is needed for viewing contemporary rural China through the lens of return migrants. Drawing on an array of theories of translocality, subjectivity, agency and decision-making, I analyse how return migrants' identities are shaped, how they adhere to these new identities, and the consequences for their decision-making and life planning. By viewing each return migrant as a nexus of multiple subjectivities, I work from a unique focal point to examine the negotiations between the different powers in the rural sphere. Investigating contemporary rural China through the lens of return migrants also allows attention to be paid to not only the moved but also the unmoved rural population that remains in the countryside as a peripheral, marginalised group (de Haas, 2014). I also explore the struggles faced by this unmoved population by learning about the relationships they have with return migrants.

In this chapter, I commence by examining the quantitative and qualitative research literature on return migration to provide context for how this group has previously been studied. I focus particularly on two factors – education level and age – and how they

influence migration and return migration. I then provide an overview of my methodology, including theoretical concepts that have helped to develop my research framework and the methods I used for data gathering and analysing. I conclude this chapter by introducing the structure of the thesis and the key contributions of each chapter.

For the remainder of the thesis, I use the English term 'return migrants' or 'returnees' (instead of 'return youth') to refer to rural migrants who have returned. The adjective 'educated' is added sometimes to emphasise their education background. Though many participants identify themselves as return youth (*fanxiang qingnian*), the social connotations of the term are complicated and would require further analysis before it could be used in this context. Moreover, there are also return migrants, like WYL, who are confused about the term and don't identify with it. Thus, to avoid confusion, I use 'return migrants' as a generic term. Other terms such as 'return youth' and 'return entrepreneurs' are used when relevant.

1.2 Recounting studies on migration and return migration

As noted by Abreu (2012), migration is by nature both a "multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary" topic[10] (p. 47). It draws the attention of economists, demographists, geographers, sociologists and anthropologists, to name a few. Return migration, on the other hand, has still been inadequately studied in comparison to migration, despite the growing attention it has received from academia (Zhou & Liang, 2006). Existing research on return migration is largely just an extension of the quantitative approach of migration studies. However, rural scholars have examined returnees' contributions to rural development and discussed issues regarding gender and adaptability; these studies tend to use a more qualitative approach. I will review these topics in the following sections.

Selectivity of return migrants

Economics and sociology scholars have emphasised the economic impact of return migrants to the areas that receive them. Drawing on neoclassical economics and the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) framework, the return migration literature includes debates about whether migration/return migration is a cost-effective – or rational – behaviour (Abreu, 2012; C. Chen & Fan, 2018; X. Shi, Heerink, & Qu, 2007; Zicheng Wang & Yang, 2013). NELM is frequently referenced in Chinese migration studies for

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[10] See also de Haas, 2014.

its emphasis of not only the individuals but also the whole household, particularly in rural China (X. Shi et al., 2007; H. Zhou & Liang, 2006). Return migration studies are mainly focused on finding out whether migration and return migration are economically beneficial to the individual, their households and their natal places.

The focus on rational economic decision-making is due to the question of selectivity of return migration. Scholars define migration as either positively or negatively selected (Chunyu, Liang, & Wu, 2013; Liang & Cheng, 2016; Ma, 2001; Wang & Fan, 2006; Wu, Fu, Gu, & Shi, 2018; Zhou & Liang, 2006). For return migration scholars, positive selectivity is a measurement tool to describe successful migration experience – and where the return is usually the choice of migrants themselves. For example, migrants voluntarily choose to return if they find that they would be more competitive in their hometowns. Negative selectivity, on the other hand, is the result of unsuccessful or failed migration to urban locations. Return migrants who are negatively selected are usually deemed as 'unsuitable' in the receiving places, and the return of these migrants is usually not voluntary.

There are three main categories for defining the selectivity of return migrants: their reasons to return, their occupations after return, and the impact of their migration experience.

Reasons for returning

Returnees' motivations and reasons for returning, summarised as push and pull factors, have always been controversial topics in migration studies (de Haas, 2014). Reasons for return migration in China can be classified into four categories: family needs, adaptability in the city, life cycle, and incentivisation in the home place (Chunyu et al., 2013; Seeberg & Luo, 2018; Wang & Long, 2009; Wang & Fan, 2006; Wang & Yang, 2013; Xu, Liu, & Liu, 2017; Zhang, 2013; Zhao, 2002; Zhou & Liang, 2006). Of the four reasons, family is reported to be the most frequently credited (W. Wang & Long, 2009; Xu et al., 2017; N. Zhang, 2013; Y. Zhao, 2002). Family obligations, such as childcare or caring for elders, account for the main reason behind migrants' return. Spousal separation ranks as a noted but less common reason.

There are usually more than just one reason for migrants' return (Chunyu et al., 2013; Zhang, 2013; Zhao, 2002). Nevertheless, the prevalence of multiple reasons is overlooked in the discussion of selectivity. Of the four reasons listed here, adaptability in the city and

the incentive policy have been singled out and magnified more than the other reasons. If migrants return as a result of finding themselves unsuited to the city, this is supposed to be an indication of negative selection, as they have been rejected by the urban market. Conversely, if they are drawn back by more opportunities in the countryside, they are positively selected. However, classifying their return into such simple terms does not account for the influence of the other reasons that may have equal influence on their decisions.

Choices of Occupation

Researchers are curious about return migrants' career preferences, as these dictate their selectivity ((Bai & He, 2002; Du, 2014). The majority of studies have set out to investigate two things: whether returnees are more inclined to choose non-farm or farm work, and whether or not returnees are more likely to become self-employed. In general, returnees are reported to have a higher tendency to choose off-farm occupations(C. Chen & Fan, 2018; Chunyu et al., 2013; Liang & Cheng, 2016; Z. Ma, 2001; Zicheng Wang & Yang, 2013; Xu et al., 2017), as well as become self-employed (Démurger & Shi, 2012; Liang & Cheng, 2016; Z. Ma, 2001; Wu et al., 2018; Yu, Yin, Zheng, & Li, 2017; Zhou, Tan, & Li, 2017).

Education plays a positive role in returnees' career choices (Ma, 2001; Zhao, 2002). The higher the education levels the return migrants obtain, the more likely they are to choose non-farm work when they return (Murakami, 2011; Zhao, 2002). There is also a positive correlation between degree of education and likelihood of self-employment (Murakami, 2011; G. Zhou et al., 2017). However, amount of education is considered to be a less important factor than migration experience, which will be discussed in the following section.

While much of the literature divides returnees' work into either farm or non-farm work, clarification is lacking regarding the difference between the two. As I will introduce in Chapter 2, there are mainly two modes of farming in rural China: corporate farming and traditional subsistence farming. Except for a few studies (Démurger & Xu, 2011; Xu et al., 2017; Y. Zhao, 2002), the majority of research fails to make a distinction between these. Zhao's (2002) research showed that slightly over half of returnees return to farming, which contrasts with the majority of research findings. However, he points out that many returnees "farm differently" (p. 391) than non-migrants; their use of more machines is

closer to modernised corporate farming. In terms of defining self-employment, there is a presumption that self-employment automatically falls into the category of non-agricultural work. However, this is not always true; Démurger and Xu (2011) suggest that one quarter of self-employed return migrants still engage in the agricultural sector, but mostly within the corporate farming category.

Most of the existing research was published after 2006, and thus are likely to have been influenced by state government policies. As will be introduced in Chapter 2, the year 2006 marks the unleashing of the central government's policy of agricultural modernisation in China. During this time, replacing traditional subsistence farming with corporate farming became one of the key features of rural policy. Two years later, as discussed earlier, the publish of No.1 Policy in 2008 (State Council, 2008) signalled the government's shift of focus towards return migrants in rural development. This suggests that what researchers are really interested in is whether migration has enabled returnees to leave traditional farming, which is an important indicator of the modern agriculture.

Impact of migration experience

Returnees' migration experience is evaluated by analysing several important factors in both their migration and return migration. In the study of migration, scholars analyse how migration impacts the sending areas. For example, how does migration remittance change the migrants' rural household livelihood (Nguyen & Locke, 2014)? And how do migrants influence their hometown with new ideas (Levitt, 1998)? These issues are also relevant in return migration study.

Financial Capital

The migration experience is categorised into three types: financial capital, human capital, and social capital. Financial capital refers to money and other things of value accumulated during migration that includes but is not limited to the migration remittance (Yu et al., 2017). This financial capital is a financial asset that return migrants have at their disposal. Démurger and Xu (2011) report that due to return migrants' financial capacity, they are more likely to become self-employed, largely because of financial assets gained during migration. In addition, social capital or human capital gained from migration can also be helpful in accessing financial credits (Zhou et al., 2017). Migration also increases the chances of gaining financial support from informal sources such as their social network (Peng & Du, 2018). However, earlier research suggested the opposite; for

example, in their analysis of 1999 data, Bai and He (2002) found that return migrants' financial capital did not differ from those who stayed.

Human Capital

Return migrants' human capital is defined by their working skills, innovative ideas, educational qualifications and ages. Studies on human capital have examined whether migration has enhanced returnees' human capital sufficiently to gain an upper hand in the rural job market. Stronger professional skills, higher education degrees, and a younger ages give them an advantage in the job market and thus positive selectivity (Zhou et al., 2017).

Many researchers have indicated a positive link between migration experience and entrepreneurship. Ma (2001) stated that managerial experiences and new ideas learned from migration are the most valuable assets for returnees. Démurger and Xu (2011), on the other hand, found that the constant changing of careers during migration is most helpful in returnees' work when they return home, particularly those who are self-employed. Murakami and Sun's (2016) work in Henan Province shows that new ideas gained from migration experience are the biggest influence on returnees' self-employment. Other gains, such as technical skills, are considered minor compared to new ideas, which are seen as more important than even accumulated financial capital. These findings differ from those in the 1990s (e.g. Bai & He, 2002), which showed that it was very difficult to apply the migration experience to the rural market.

Research on human capital also disagree about the roles of return migrants' education level and age. Using the selectivity logic, migration is seen as positively selected; those who have higher education qualifications and are of younger ages have better resources to support their migration. Many scholars thus argue that return migration, as the reverse movement of migration, is usually negatively selected. Return migrants are generally believed to be less educated and older. An analysis of interprovincial return migration of 1995 by Chunyu et al. (2013) found that return migrants had relatively low levels of education; nearly 50% had only a primary school qualification (their later research findings vary, as will be discussed later). Ma (2001) used data from a national retrospective survey of 119 villages in 1997 that was conducted by the Department of Rural Development from the Development Research Centre of the State Council (DRCSC). He found that only 14.5 % of the villagers had a high school or equivalent qualification, and 21.5% were illiterate or of primary school level. Other researchers have

also found that returnees are less educated (Liang & Cheng, 2016; W. W. Wang & Fan, 2006; H. Zhou & Liang, 2006). Returnees in general tend to have lower levels of education, which suggests negative selectivity.

Nevertheless, there is mounting evidence showing a more complex side to this matter. Liang and Cheng (2016) suggest that if returnees are interprovincial (they migrate between two provinces), they tend to be more skilled and have higher human capital than intra-provincial migrants (those who migrate within the province). Zhao's (2002) widely cited 1999 research has provided even more fascinating details. He found that those with higher education levels are more inclined to return. He drew a comparison between migrants with different education degrees and found that the possibility of return for graduates of primary, middle, high and technical schools were 33.9%, 37.4%, 40.2% and 33.2% respectively, whereas the possibility of return for illiterate migrants was only 4.1%. The average age of returnees was 36.5 years, which is seen as a 'primary productive age' (p. 392).

According to Zhao (2002), better educated migrants are more likely to return for several reasons. They have higher standards for their employment, and since they and their families have invested more in their education, they also expect larger returns. And with a higher education qualification, it is easier to find a job in their hometown. If the job market in the city becomes too competitive, they have the option to return to rural areas for better opportunities.

Chunyu et al. (2013) have compared return migrants who returned at the beginning and the end of the 1990s; the experiences of these two groups were significantly different. As mentioned already, the education levels of return migrants were relatively low in the early 1990s, but this situation had shifted rapidly by the end of 1990s, at which time the better educated returnees started to return. This shift is related to the social context of the 1990s. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, the 1990s had an initial stage of economic growth followed by the layoffs of State-Owned Enterprises' (SOE) staff in the city. Following their job losses, previously known as the 'iron bowl', former SOE staff had to enter the job market and compete with rural migrants who were at a disadvantaged position compared to their urban *hukou*. As a result, educated migrants with higher career qualifications chose to return home. Zhao's (2002) and Chunyu et al.'s (2013) research speak to an important point that it is crucial to take social context into account in discussing migration or return migrant.

Some researchers have noticed a positive correlation between education and professional skills. Ma (2001) devised a comprehensive model with a 'matching zone', which refers to the optimal outcome of migration. His analysis suggests that education is essential for entering the matching zone. Return migrants who obtain a middle or higher school education are able to enter the matching zone, and the working skills they gain in the city can be valuable once they return. Those below the middle school educational threshold do not share the same prospects.

While the above statistics show how education can influence migration, there is almost no published research that shows how migration changes migrants' education levels. Particularly in the case of the rural population going to the city for education, individuals who migrate for educational purposes are rarely considered in migration studies.

The role of migrants' age is less influential; usually included in demographic descriptions, findings on age also vary between research undertaken in various contexts. In general, return migrants are found to be younger than non-migrants but older than the active migrants who are still migrating (Chunyu et al., 2013; W. W. Wang & Fan, 2006). Recent studies by Xu et al. (2017) and Liang & Cheng (2016) indicate that the age of return migrants is trending towards being younger. A younger generation is thus forming the new wave of return migration.

Social capital

Social capital, or *guanxi,* refers to resources generated within the interpersonal social network. Scholars agree that the social network is important in Chinese society – especially rural society – as it generates other forms of capital (Peng & Du, 2018). Social relations are key to the acquisition of financial credit, financial capital, market information and land (Ma, 2002; Murakami & Sun, 2016). Murakami (2011) and Zhou et al. (2017) found that return migrants generally have weak social networks, as their social contacts are mainly established in the city, and are unlikely to be useful when they return to the countryside. These studies show that migration can negatively impact social capital, and the proximity of their destination is crucial.

Migrants' job choices and migration experience are interlinked, and this link relates to the issue of selectivity. If migration experience is applicable, returnees are more likely to find non-farm work, as the work experience they gained from migration is unlikely

related to farm work (understood specifically as traditional farming). Those who manage to find non-farm work (including either self-employed or employed) have positive selectivity. Selectivity analysis of rural migrants in China can explain how migration draws the rural population away from traditional farming.

Selectivity analyses of rural Chinese migrants reveal a strong trend towards developmentalism (de Haas, 2014; S. Fan, Zhang, & Zhang, 2004). The success of migration or of return migration is defined by whether or not returnees are able to leave the farm work and take up employment other than subsistence farming. Economic factors, especially whether or not migrants manage to maximise their investment, are key indicators for whether the migration or return migration process is successful. If return migrants' economic gain surpasses their cost, then migration and the subsequent return migration are considered successful.

There is often an urban-centred point of view when assessing the success of migration and return migration. The value of human capital is judged by job skills – such as managerial skills – in non-agricultural sectors. The ability to obtain non-agricultural jobs is viewed as positive selectivity, as it brings higher economic gains. Positive selectivity is defined by an individual's adaptability to the receiving area, namely the urban areas. Following this logic, in the study of return migration, positive selectivity should be their adaptability to the rural area, which becomes the receiving area. However, emphasis is placed on return migrants' abilities to bring more urban influence into rural settings. To some extent, it is their inability to adapt back to the rural settings that contributes to positive selectivity.

The role of returnees to the countryside is thus often determined by their ability to promote urbanisation. This includes their impact on diversifying the local economy by creating more non-agricultural jobs, absorbing rural surplus labour 'free' from subsistence farming and capitalising on agriculture. As summarised by Liu (2015), "Rural returnees are promoting rural revitalisation and rural modernisation. They bring back new lifestyles and concepts from the city, creating a positive impact on changing rural presentations and its spirit" (p. 17, translated by Xibei Wang).

To summarise, migration studies tend to emphasise the success of return entrepreneurs. A functionalist approach to defining return migration links returnees' migration with their return migration (de Haas, 2014). But the success-failure dichotomy is too linear and simplistic to account for such a complicated matter as migration and

return migration. Binary assumptions should be avoided, as they place the blame on migrants' inability to match urban criteria as the reason for their return. Migrants and return migrants are treated as passive agents.

Return migrants and rural development

The discussion of return migrants' roles in transferring migration experiences is closely linked with their roles in rural development. In recent years, how return migrants – particularly return entrepreneurs – facilitate rural development has been a heated topic among rural scholars such as He and Xue (2013). Rachel Murphy's (1999, 2000) articles on return entrepreneurs in Jiangxi Province are two of the earliest of these publications. She examined in detail four ways in which return entrepreneurs might be of help and concluded that return entrepreneurs can increase the flow of information and diversify the local economy. However, she also questioned their ability to strengthen the household livelihood. He and Xue (2013) showed that return entrepreneurs have an innate 'home complex' (*xiangtu qingjie*) that ensures their devotion to rural development and will make them the 'rural elite' once they return. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, return entrepreneurs are situated as the key implementers in the state government's rural development blueprint (X. Pan, Zhang, Xu, Huang, & Zhao, 2009; S. Zhang & Yang, 1996). However, these studies are all from a macro point of view; there is still very little data from a close investigation of what return migrants actually do for rural development.

The gender dimension of return migration

The gender factor in migration studies, like the age factor, is only mentioned but not explored quantitatively. Scholars agree that female migrants have a higher likelihood of returning and a lower chance of becoming entrepreneurs (C. Chen & Fan, 2018). Zhao (2002) suggests that, compared to males, female returnees are more likely to take up traditional farm work. Migration is generally believed to benefit rural women, as it brings them freedom that is not available in the patriarchal rural society (Davin, 2005). During their period of migration, they are able to have partial control over their financial situation. Some research has also found that migration postpones women's marriage age, giving them more power in choosing partners (Gaetano, 2014).

Migration does not necessarily have a positive impact on their return life (Chuang, 2015; Ge, Resurreccion, & Elmhirst, 2011; N. Zhang, 2013). Female migrants have been

found to have very little financial capital when they return. Zhang's study (2013) suggests that women usually send their remittances home during migration. When they return, it is unlikely that they can bring much back with them. Their wages are also generally lower than those of their male counterparts, and they are barely able to save much after paying for their living costs in the city (Chuang, 2015).

Women's work experiences, viewed in this case as human capital, are also unlikely to be of much use in the countryside. Women's length of migration is often fragmented by their family's needs, such as giving birth, childcare and so on. Chen and Fan's (2018) longitudinal study on circular migration suggests that the migration term for male migrants is three years longer than that of females. Employers often use this instability as an excuse to lower salaries for female migrants. Women are also more likely to settle for low-skilled work, and their ability to learn skills is therefore very limited (Chuang, 2015).

The chances of female returnees going back to work after they return is also reported to be much lower (Chuang, 2015; Arianne M Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Murphy, 2004; Y. Zhao, 2002). Zhao (2002) estimated that the chance of males working in off-farm work after their return is 38% higher than that of females. Since most women return upon the demand of their family, it is not guaranteed that they can find formal work outside the household; they are therefore less likely to use their human capital.

How and whether migration generates social capital for women is a morally fraught question, as having a wide social network is seen to be incompatible with women's moral standards. In Zhang's (2013) article about the return of female factory workers, she detailed how social capital can be a two-edged sword for return women. On one hand, it's easier for them to get access to resources such as financial credit because of contacts they developed in the city. On the other hand, they are judged for being too socially 'active', and this goes against gender norms. There is also a held belief of the corrupted city life; it is believed to transform a 'pure good girl to be more complicated'. The assumption that the city turns a 'good girl' into a bad one is quite dominant among the rural population. However, if male returnees come back with strong social capital, they are usually praised for being well connected. Zhang's quantitative research adds to the scholarship of social capital summarised above by reiterating the importance of taking into consideration the constraints of return migrants' gender and social norms.

While some of these studies have provided a detailed picture of rural women's situations, the effect of education is mostly neglected in the research. Judging from the

descriptions, we can only presume that the research subjects here are under-educated. The level of education of rural women is generally quite low (Davis, Landry, Peng, & Xiao, 2007; Hannum & Adams, 2007). For instance, in 2014, there was a calculation of one million primary school dropout numbers in rural regions, 70% of them were girls (W. Li & Wu, 2003). However, due to Higher Education Expansion[11] (HEE) (Luo, 2011) and poverty alleviation policies (J. Chen, 2019), there is a steady increase of the female education attainment. The number of rural women who receive higher education is also climbing. According to a National Bureau of Statistics, United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) and UNICEF's youth report based on the 2015 1% National Population Sample (2018), the percentage of rural female who received higher education[12] is 48%, which was almost half of the total number of rural youths who gained higher education degrees. This means there will also be more educated female migrants who return to the countryside. Questions arise: what is their situation in the countryside? Does their education level change their well-being? If yes, in what way? Hugo (2000) claimed that the most influential way to empower rural women is to displace them from their original place. According to this argument, only migration away from the patriarchal society can change a rural woman's social position. So how should we perceive the return of educated female migrants? How do they adapt back into the patriarchal society? These questions remain unanswered in the available studies of female return migrants.

There is insufficient research examining how both genders adhere to their respective gender roles. While female return migrants are constrained by their gender's supposedly inferior role, how do male return migrants conform to their gender's high expectations? Just as Choi & Peng (2016) pointed out in *Masculine Compromise,* male migrants craft their own techniques to mitigate failure in meeting the gender norms ascribed to them. A comparative study examining both female and male gender roles is needed to draw a comprehensive picture of return migrants as a social group.

Return migrants' adaptation to rural society

Both qualitative and quantitative research is needed for an investigation into return migrants' adaptability to rural society. Difficulty reintegrating into rural society seems to be a universal predicament that return migrants experience even in other countries (King,

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[11] 大学扩招.
[12] Higher education means college students and above.

2015; Rhoades, 1979). This is particularly the case with female return migrants in China. Both Zhang's (2013) and Ge et al.'s (2011) research indicates that female returnees are often seen as outcasts by other women in the village when they return. They don't identify with those who have not had migration experience. Often, they suffer from "double alienation": "On the one hand, they are no longer accepted by the urban world; on the other hand, they often feel alienated from village life and identify themselves differently from their fellow villagers" (Zhang, 2013, p. 183). Ultimately, return migrants feel like strangers at home. This double alienation is also discussed by He and Qu (2015) and Pan (2014).

Quantitative research shows a similar trend in young return migrants born in the 1980s (Liu, 2015; J. Shi & Hu, 2009; L. Zhao & Lu, 2014):

> We noticed that many new generation migrants wear the same clothes
> as the youth urbanites. They wear jeans, dye their hair yellow. This is
> a showcase of them relating themselves as urbanites. Therefore, after
> they return, they experience a huge contrast and feel the imbalance.
> (Fu, 2007, p. 11, translated by Xibei Wang)

It is necessary to point out that some of these studies apply stereotypical standards in their descriptions without critically analysing them. For example, Fu (2007) uses the evidence that women returnees don't know how to do housework after they return to suggest their lack of adaptability. In general, in contrast to their positive economic impact when they return, return migrants are found to suffer from inadaptability in the countryside.

1.3 Research Contribution

This cross-disciplinary research aims to contribute to the current migration literature in a number of ways. This thesis is one of only a few academic studies written in English that examines the rural, educated, young return migrants' life in China. As stated by many return migration scholars such as Chunyu et al. (2013), Murakami (2011), Wu et al. (2018), and Zhou and Lian (2006), an overwhelmingly large and growing number of studies examine the experience of migrants, but the study of return migration is comparatively lacking. The details of their return lives – both public and private – are even more rarely studied. My research takes an ethnographic approach and presents

abundant details of returnees' daily practices, working experiences, public participation and social adjustments.

In the existing migration literature, education and age are frequently mentioned as factors but not given much attention. A systematic analysis of educated, young return migrants is largely absent, particularly in the barely existent literature on educated female return migrants. While education levels are presumed to be low due to rural households' economic status, there has been a steady increase in the number of rural university graduates since the Higher Education Expansion (HEE) in 1998. Statistics show that the rural-urban gap in the university enrolment rate has been reduced to almost even between the two demographics (Qiao, 2008). In some regions, the rural university enrolment rate exceeds that of the urban (Yang & Xie, 2017). Consequently, the number of educated rural youths who return to their countryside after graduation is also increasing. In order to fully explore how education shapes the decision-making process and return life, my research centres around rural graduates who are the 'beneficiaries' of HEE. Moreover, by bringing social, political and economic factors into consideration, I investigate how education construct their return life.

My research paints a more nuanced picture of rural youth that will hopefully help to shape their social image in future academic discussions. Rural youth are seldom studied in terms of their role in the production of youth culture (Clark, 2012). They are more closely associated with juvenile delinquency, which is understood as the centre of social tensions (Li et al., 2019; Thogersen, 2003; Yan, 1999). The majority of youth culture studies have been limited to the urban scope, which means that they examine either youth living in the city or rural youth who migrated to the city. Very few studies are aimed at youth in the countryside without classifying them as social troublemakers. That being said, there are some interesting studies showing how rural youth have created a unique hybrid of urban and rural cultural activities in the countryside (A. Y. Chau, 2019). However, the centre of youth culture remains in the urban areas. My research scrutinises the everyday practices of rural youth. It is not the focus of this thesis to define youth, but to see how the youth identity affects their social subjectivity. As Anagnost (2013) asks, "To what extent [does] the new regime of capital accumulation [rely] on the energy of youth and its optimism and resilience in the face of life's challenges" (p. 2)? While youth can carry many social labels – the pioneer, the future, the rebel, the pre-mature, the heavy

consumer – they tend to be viewed only as valuable human capital, and this can reduce their experience to self-exploitation.

Accounting for the roles of both education and youth can provide new insights into how the neoliberal discourse (known as *suzhi* in China) harnesses the rural youth's self-image in contemporary China. There is much discussion about *suzhi* in the literature (Anagnost, 2013; Jacka, 2009; Kipnis, 2006; Sun, 2013; Yan, 2008). Again, as with youth culture, *suzhi* is almost exclusively happening in the urban territory. There is a large amount of research in the literature about how the *suzhi* discourse mitigates against rural migrants in the city and subjects them to exploitation (Sun, 2013; Wallis, 2013; H. Yan, 2008), and how the urban elite and youth internalise *suzhi* discourse in their decision-making (Fong, 2004; Hizi, 2019; Hoffman, 2008). Later in this thesis, I will continue the discussion of *suzhi* in the urban context and add a new and distinct dimension by examining *suzhi* in the rural population and in rural settings. Rather than looking at how *suzhi* operates as a means of asserting and justifying the superiority of urban residents over rural migrants in the city, I am mostly concerned with how *suzhi* works to assert and justify the superiority of rural return migrants over those who remain the village.

My research will also contribute new ideas to the discussion of return migrants' role in rural development. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, return migrants – especially return entrepreneurs – are seen as the cornerstone of rural development in China. However, since there is insufficient descriptive data to present a detailed picture of their return life, the question of how they participate in rural development remains unclear. A goal of my research is to contribute to this discussion. By examining a number of different individual cases, my research explores the inspiration, devotion and struggles of return migrants.

Lastly, I examine the role of smartphones and social media. China now has a rapidly growing number of mobile phones and internet users (CNNIC, 2020), including in the countryside. While there is considerable research into social media use in the countryside, return migration is not included in this literature. As I will discuss in this thesis, social media and digital access play a fundamental role in return migrants' decision to return and are indispensable to them after returning. How does the popularity of smartphones and social media facilitate migrants' return? Could smartphones and social media be factors in the increasing number of return migrants? No previous research has explored these links.

In summary, my research takes a multi-disciplinary approach, relying on geo-politics, political economics, international development and communications studies to examine the multi-dimensional experience of return migrants.

1.4 Methodology

The goal of my research is to use a holistic and integrative lens to understand return migrants and their decisions. As social beings, individuals make decisions based on their social appraisal; they evaluate their positions and take into consideration the social constraints and consequences of their decisions. As a result, each decision reflects the social context in which an individual is situated.

Unlike most of the existing research that focuses on one aspect of a returnees' life, be it work or personal life, in this thesis I consider how these issues are linked and attempt to draw a more complex and well-rounded picture of the returnees. As will be demonstrated in my findings, a returnees' work life and personal life are so closely connected that they are impossible to separate.

Theoretical nodes that help to conceptualise the research

Mobility and translocality

This thesis includes a study of how individuals make decisions about mobility. As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, mobility in different forms has reached an unprecedented scale[13]. Since the launch of economic reform in China in the late 1970s, migration from rural to urban, from inland to coastal areas, and from the west to the east and south has taken place frequently and repeatedly. It is impossible to think of any social issues in China without considering mobility as a factor in them. As Schein (2006) remarked: "It has become a banal commonplace to note that people in China are on the move" (p. 214). While this is not only applicable to China, it is a particularly relevant point to keep in mind when discussing China's rural return migrants.

Translocal studies is helpful in conceptualising this research examining mobility in terms of relationality, as translocality takes into account mobilities in multiple forms not limited to movement of the human body. This is similar to the new paradigm of mobilities

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[13] This had been true until the outburst of COVID-19 in 2020, which is when this thesis was being composed.

proposed by Sheller and Urry (2006), which has provided a revolutionary lens for understanding mobility in the 21st century. Both translocality and this new paradigm of mobilities emphasise the power dynamic in mobility. As Massey (2012) stated:

> Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway
> differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others;
> some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the
> receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.
> (p. 61)

It is helpful to perceive mobility not just as physical movement, but also as a means of appropriating social space, negotiating scale and reproducing social stratification.

Body, place and mobility

The analysis of return migration hinges on two basic components: the body – which is mobile and the place – which accommodates the body. While seemingly straightforward, the body is complicated, as it is full of connections, mediations, and confrontations on multiple levels. On a spatial level, the body moves from one place to another and brings traces of the place along with it (Sheller & Urry, 2006). On a social level, it reflects social subjectivity through its behaviour patterns, decisions, desires and imaginations (Conradson & McKay, 2007; Feuchtwang, 2004; Oakes & Schein, 2006; Schein, 2006). On a personal level, it cultivates the human mind and inhabits the self. As Cassey (1997) says, the "most self-enclosed and intimate thing[s] [people] experience" are in their body, such as sensations of feeling happy, sad or satisfied (p. 241, quoted by Oakes & Schein, 2006). The body can also be viewed both horizontally and vertically. Apart from its mobility from one place to another, the body also stores memories from the past that are continually effective in the present (Schein, 2006).

In this way, the body is not static but disruptive (Casey, 1993). It is constantly changing and reconfiguring (Clark, 2012), evolving and adapting. The bodies that dwell inside a place are microcosms that constantly shape the place, and any discussion of place cannot be separate from one of the body (Feuchtwang, 2004). While the place both embraces and constrains the body, the body also reconstructs the place.

There are several points about place that are key to my study and will appear throughout this thesis. First, place is relational in the sense that it is socially constructed

(Chio, 2011; Conradson & McKay, 2007; Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Rao & Walton, 2004). Place should not be viewed as a singular unit that stands alone. Places are connected as bodies travel from one to another. They are also connected in ways that go beyond the physical body. There is more than one form of mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006); these range from physical movement to more innovative forms, such as information mobility through telephones; verbal mobility through speeches; virtual mobility through the internet; and imaginative mobility through mass media such as TV, magazines and tabloids, social media platforms. With the advance of new technologies, mobility is taking place both online and offline (Miller et al., 2016).

Second, place is constantly evolving. This school of thought is what Massey (2012) refers to as a "progressive understanding of place" (p. 61). In her argument, apart from noting the relationality of place, she pinpoints the importance of reviewing place from a progressive perspective. She criticises the 'inward-looking' philosophy that interprets place based solely on history, omitting the fact that place is constantly being redefined and reformed. She argues:

> The uniqueness of place is out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, processes, experiences and understandings, in a situation of co-presence, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are actually constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, i.e. a street, region. (p. 66)

Place can also be viewed to have character, known as its identity. Given that place is relational and progressive, the identity of a place is also fluid, changeable and socially constructed. Cultural anthropologists Gupta and Ferguson (1997) point out that identity is not discovered, but is constitutive; it is "something that one 'has' and can manipulate, that one can 'choose'; or inversely, it is something that acts as a source of 'constraint' on the individual, as an ascribed rather than a chosen feature of life" (p. 12). Thus, it is important to be aware that the identities or characteristics of a place are not fixed and can be manipulated and redefined. The construction of a place's identity should thus always be under intense scrutiny.

Moreover, there is a causal connection between identity and mobility: identity is derived from mobility. Scholars who have investigated tourism in China, such as Oakes

(2006) and Chio (2012), have found that the features of a place, as well as the body that dwells in it, become distinct only in the process of mobility. The separation from one place to another is necessary for people from that place to feel grounded. To some extent, identity construction can only be understood through separation.

In attempting to understand place, it is also important to integrate an understanding of a temporal dimension. As just mentioned, the body carries past memory and experience into the current place. With the development of technology and popularity of computers and smartphones, it is also possible for one person to 'be' at more than one place at a time, also known as technomobility – techno-social practice – according to Wallis (2013). Such a literal time–space compression[14] further complicates the current mobility network (Schein, 2006). The body can essentially have multiple dwellings at the same time, and the nexus of body and place can be the joint space of multiple networks (Casey, 1997). Furthermore, advances in modern technology now enable gadgets such as smartphones to become extensions of the body (Miller et al., 2016; Sheller & Urry, 2006). This artificial intelligence of the body carries even more memories than one's mind. It also enables mobility to be expanded to an even larger scope (Boyd, 2010; Li, et al., 2019; Yue, et al., 2019).

Hence, mobility should be understood as a network (Coe & Bunnell, 2003; Murdoch & Murdoch, 2000; G. Wang, 2006), or a "fluid, even gel like" (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 216), so that places interact with each other. Place itself is mobile. The leaving of one place does not mean the termination of interacting with it. On the contrary, leaving a place enables more intense interaction (changes) between place and place, body and place, as well as body and body as representations of social groups. Bodies are also not constrained to only one place.

The above discussion articulates a key principle in my research: both the body and place are relational and fluid, constantly reconstructed. Mobility takes more than one form. The character (or identity) of a place is socially constructed, and understanding it requires differentiation and distinction.

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[14] This expression is used by both Cartier (2013) and Schein (2006) and gives a more complicated indication of how the regions lagging behind are categorised by scale. I use this term to refer to a simpler meaning – the status of being in more than one place at the same time, thanks to modern technology such as mobile phones.

Scales

Mobility takes place because multiple scales exist. People move in the hope of 'scale jumping' to raise their social and economic status (Sun, 2006). This certainly seems to be the case with China's rural migrants in the city. Scale is a comprehensive term and can be defined on macro, meso and micro levels (Schein, 2006).

On the macro level, scale can mean the distinction between global and national. It also refers to institutional boundaries set by authoritative governments. In China, the most influential scale is that set between rural and urban people through the state government's implementation of the household registration system, known as the *hukou* policy. Introduced in the 1950s (J. Fan, Heberer, & Taubmann, 2005; Nguyen & Locke, 2014), the *hukou* system was devised to monitor, control and regulate population movement in China; it did so between rural and urban regions, as well as between inland and coastal regions. The *hukou* system divides geographical locations into rural and urban areas, which consequently classifies the population into rural (*nongcun hukou*) and urban (*chengshi hukou*) *hukou*. Under this same system, the government's administrative management also differs between rural and urban units and is organised in a top-down hierarchy, with the central government issuing and deciding the policy as the "principals" and local officials carrying them out as "agents" (Göbel, 2010, p. 9). The state government holds the highest authority of issuing policies; below it is the prefecture level of region, then the provinces (*sheng*) (Cartier, 2016). Each province consists of both rural and urban administrative units. Below the province in hierarchy are city (*shi*) and county (*xian*). City is the urban unit. County often refers to regions where the rural *hukou* holders reside ("Counties of China," n.d.). Below city and county, there are district (*qu*) and township (*xiang*). These regions have similar size, with the former being an urban unit and the latter a rural one. Within a township, there is the town centre, where the township government is located. Town centre is defined as having more urban *hukou* residents, despite it being within a rural unit. Below township and town centre, there is village (*cun*) as the bottom rural unit. The urban units, such as city and town, are the areas where the regional governments are located, including the capital cities. Urban units thus have jurisdiction over the rural units.

The *Hukou* system and the administrative hierarchy set the political economic scales of the geographical regions. This is known as the dual-structure (*shuanguizhi*) in China and it is the foundation for the implementation of all the other policies, including

economic reform, resource allocation, social provision and so on (Wilczak, 2017). This is a living example of what Swyngedouw (2000) called a "political strategy" (p. 66) that allocates resources in a specific way through reordering geographies. Resources allocated to the rural areas, including basic provisions such as medical care and education, are far from adequate compared to those given to urban units (Nguyen & Locke, 2014). In other words, the dual-structure institutionalises unequal development throughout China.

Based on the *hukou* system, public common sense forms the concept of 'tiered cities', which indicates how institutionalised scale can be integrated and reinforced through place imagination. In China, urban areas are ranked into different tiers, from tier-1 (*yixian chengshi*) to tier-4 and -5 cities (*wuxian chengshi*)[15]. The tier level is roughly defined by the city's size, population and economic development. Tier-1 cities are the large, highly populated metropolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. In tier-4 or -5 cities, the line between cities, towns, and counties can be blurry. There is an obvious overlap between this scale setting and the state nominated administrative ranking. The tier-1 city is equivalent to the 'prefecture-level city' (*dijishi*) in the government's administrative system, which prescribes more privilege and autonomy to the city than the province that the city belongs to (Cartier, 2015, 2016). Interestingly, this ranking does not come from the government but is more like a commonly established concept of the public discourse, strongly promoted by mass media through TV and newspapers (Lewis, Martin, & Sun, 2016; Sun, 2013). Once established, these rankings have become common terms people use in their daily language. This acceptance of tiered cities and use of such terms show how scales set by those in authority can be received and inherently built into public culture.

The above discussion might suggest that scale is an abstract term that can only be produced by official government entities or the population collectively influenced by the media. But this is not necessarily the case. As shown by Herod and Wright (2008), the action of scaling can be a way of exercising – as well as resisting and negotiating – power. In her article 'Miao women negotiating scale', Louisa Schein (2006) set out to examine, from a micro perspective, the various ways that Miao women constitute scales. This process of scaling includes their body practice, which can be both materialistic and symbolic and include their clothes and hair choices, the cuisines they make, the languages

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[15] Low ranking cities like tier-4 or tier-5 cities are now often referred in public narratives as tier-18 (*shibaxian*).

they choose to use, their businesses and even their memories. Compared to scale creation from either an official source or the public media, scale making on the individual level occurs more through negotiation that challenges the existing scales and tries to reframe them. This refers back to the discussion of the 'body-place nexus' being a site of power struggles. Scale contestation is also a power struggle (Herod & Wright, 2008; Schein, 2006).

While its definition might vary, we can establish that scale is a socially, economically and politically constructed notion (Rao & Walton, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2000). An investigation of scale requires a "critical reflection" of its formation (Herod & Wright, 2008, p. 10). In the same vein, we should also consider how mobility impacts scalar change; mobility is a social action that produces and reproduces scales (Schein, 2006). Both material and symbolic scales include power dynamics (Massey, 2012). As all places and bodies are connected and affected, scales will eventually lead to unequal power distribution, as one's ability to be mobile might take that ability away from another.

Critical development discourse: who is the ultimate beneficiary?

In a discussion of scale, we must first question the establishment of scale in China and identify how it has been and continues to be fabricated. The idea of scale sheds light on the imbalance of regional development in China, especially between rural and urban areas. It must be taken into account for further investigation into the current development scheme in rural – the so called 'under-developed' – regions.

The inequality between rural and urban China resembles how "geographical inequality is embedded in assumptions about core-periphery relations and 'advanced' and 'backward' conditions" (Cartier, 2013, p. 81). The constant binary proposition can appear contradictory, as it draws on ideas such as core–periphery, rural–urban, advanced–backward, developed–undeveloped, and so on. Drawing on Wallerstein's (1974) modern world system theory and Massey's (2012) progressive view of scale, it is fair to assume that this binary exists so that the politically and economically advantaged group is justified in further exploiting the less advantaged group. The binary thus normalises this injustice and inequality by placing the peripheral group further along the peripheral scale.

The discourse of development, which aims to promote the political, economic and social status of the disadvantaged group, also requires closer examination, as it is often proposed by the socioeconomic elites. A critical approach to deconstructing the discourse,

including a questioning of the fundamental basis of development and modernisation, is in order (Crush, 1995; Escobar, 1995; McMichael, 2017). This critical approach must also challenge the goal of development and question the ultimate beneficiary of it. As the concept of 'underdevelopment of development' suggests, many "such discourses reinscribe regional development problems as much as they contribute to solving them – even reproducing the need to continually develop and redevelop" (Cartier, 2014, p. 78).

Nancy Fraser's category of development approaches is also helpful in understanding the rural development (Fraser, 2003; Jacka, 2013), which are 'affirmative' and 'transformative' strategies. The former strategy seeks to solve the development issue by not questioning the existing social structure, which might be the root cause of the issues. Transformative strategies, on the other hand, aims at more fundamental changes to the system. In that sense, only transformative strategy is possible to actually cease the 'underdevelopment'.

Governmentality, neoliberal subjectivities and suzhi discourse

While the existence of scale asserts inequality among different social groups, the translocal imagination helps to maintain social stability by offering the possibility of transcending scales. For example, the rural population maintains the hope that they will one day live in the city, and thus improve their socio-economic status. Ideological and nationalistic notions also present a translocal imagination that links people to a larger entity and eliminates scale differences. Translocal imagination enables individuals to establish direct connections with the state, under the belief of scale jumping (Herod & Wright, 2008; Oakes & Schein, 2006). For example, when China replaced Japan to become the country whose GDP ranked second worldwide in 2011(McCurry & Kollewe, 2011), every individual in China felt that they had a share of this achievement. Netizens posted on forums in great ecstasy, conveying the translocal connection that links each individual to China as a nation. Another more quotidian example is in cultural products such as TV series, posters, advertisements and viral short videos broadcasted by multiple forms of media (Cartier, 2006; T. Lewis et al., 2016; W. Sun, 2013). By displaying a modern lifestyle, they serve as modernisation tokens that show what can be reached through scale jumping. On the one hand, the translocal imagination eases anxiety and doubts about unequal development, but on the other hand, it motivates people to be more willing to subject themselves to the development discourse. The *suzhi* discourse, which

coheres with Foucault's (1991) ideas about governmentality and 'conduct of conduct', is an essential part of this kind of translocal imagination and its practice.

Governmentality and 'conduct of conduct'

According to Wallis (2013),

> The concept of governmentality focuses not on the exercise of power by the state for the sake of control, but on "the diversity of forces and knowledge involved in efforts to regulate the lives of individuals, and the conditions within particular national territories, in pursuit of various goals". (p. 9)

She continues by defining 'conduct of conduct' as the

> [the] underlying rationalities, tactics, and actions of various actors and institutions for the purpose of improving the prosperity, security, and well-being of both the state and the individual, as well as how individuals are integrated into and comply with these rationalities. (p. 9)

In other words, 'conduct of conduct' is a "modern technique that governs not through disciplines or oppression but by regulating the behaviour of newly freed subjects" (Zhang & Ong, 2008, p. 7).

Apart from official enforcement by the states, governance is also held by a wide range of interrelated powers, from the individual level to the public level. While governance certainly consists of state power, it also represents more hidden forms, such as prescribed social norms. While taking action, an individual is also constantly renegotiating and redefining the social boundaries that have been put upon him or her. Wallis (2013) categorises governance in two dimensions: an 'authoritarian' dimension (state power) and a 'facilitative' dimension, the latter being the more hidden form that facilitates "the notion of free individuals pursuing their own interest" (p. 10).

'Authoritarian' power is quite straightforward and includes the government's enforcement of laws, policies and regulations. The 'facilitative' dimension, on the other hand, encompasses a more extensive range of power. It corresponds to the different forms of scale shaping discussed earlier, from the public level to the individual level. This

facilitative dimension of governance also permeates the "cultural politics" that Sun (2013, p. 28) refers to in 'Inequality and culture: A new pathway to understanding social inequality'. In this text, Sun recounts various cultural forms, from formal to informal, such as "dramas, films, documents, news and current affairs" (p. 34), as well as "jokes circulated via mobile phone text messaging services to impromptu tales relayed by people over dinner tables at social gatherings" (p. 31). These facilitative channels attribute to the formation of a "meta-language" (p. 35) that integrates the government's propaganda into the people's common sense. This differs from the socialist era propaganda that was more explicit. The construction of *suzhi* discourse is iconic in illustrating how the post-socialist ideology is interwoven into individuals' life-making processes.

Neoliberal self, *suzhi* discourse and the urge to realise dreams

Post-socialist China has been governed by a state that adopts a 'governance from afar' technique to regulate its citizens (Zhang & Ong, 2008). Unlike the socialist era, when the country took responsibility for providing almost all social welfare (for example, education, employment, care for the elderly) and basic provisions like food supply, in the post-socialist era it has taken a neoliberal turn (Hoffman, 2008). As this new era is built on marketisation and modernisation, it demands values of self-governance like self-discipline, individualism and self-improvement. But the socialist collectivism of the past is still at play in the background. Patriotism, or the combined benefit of the nation and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is still of utmost importance. The current system demands that people be responsible for their own value in the marketisation process; they are consequently responsible for and faithful to the country as a collective entity. This is deemed 'filial nationalism' (Fong, 2004; Hoffman, 2006). The implications of this system are that individuals are expected to arrange their personal decision-making and life planning so that they comply with the country's development. In doing so, individuals maintain their personal values while proving their loyalty to the China and the CCP, thus achieving personal happiness.

Suzhi system: an empty basket?

The *suzhi* system, introduced in the 1980s, has served as an underlying guideline in every aspect of Chinese society since it became more prominent in the 1990s (Jacka, 2009; Kipnis, 2006; H. Yan, 2008). Initially implemented as part of education reform, the *suzhi* principles adhere to the post-socialist structural reform that has successfully reshaped China's ideological structure. The *suzhi* hegemony permeates into people's everyday life,

shaping people's value systems and lifestyles, and ultimately affecting their decision-making. As indicated by Kipnis (2006), *suzhi* has become "central to contemporary Chinese governance" (p. 295).

Literally translated as 'quality', *suzhi* prescribes the criteria an individual should have, such as 'hardware' (the physical aspects of an individual); 'software' (intellectual aspects, such as education level); and 'psychological quality' and 'thinking quality' (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2005). However, the term's exact definition remains vague and unclear. It has been argued by scholars such as Hairong Yan (2008) that it was strategically made unclear so that it could be applied to many different situations, a 'fit-to-all' practice that the Chinese government frequently uses. Yan (2008) borrowed the metaphor of a common Chinese saying in the 1990s that referred to *suzhi* as an 'empty basket': "*Suzhi* education is a basket; anything can be placed in it" (p.118).

In the 1990s, *suzhi* justifies China's transformation as a socialist country into the market economy, avoiding the potential criticism for becoming 'capitalised'. As economic reform continued, the criteria of *suzhi* shifted to more entrepreneurial aspects, such as risk-taking and self-reliance. It also places more emphasis on globalisation, such as being international, obeying contractual agreements (*you qiyue jingshen*), being more corporate, being punctual, and having a consumerist lifestyle. As Hoffman (2006) observed, *suzhi* serves the government's interests in cultivating "enterprising professionals" (p. 122). Moreover, it also establishes the imperative of being self-responsible for one's life path. If an individual cannot find a job or is laid off, it is because of his or her low *suzhi*, which is the individual's responsibility.

As observed by scholars such as Yan (2008), Kipnis (2006) and Jacka (2009), *suzhi* has become like a comprehensive guidebook that constantly codes and re-codes different values, depending on the government's strategy. But it is more than a guidebook. It also has inherent moral rankings. On one hand, it affirms that people with higher *suzhi* have higher morality (Chan & Enticott, 2019; Jacka, 2009). It is "part of the biopolitics that differentiates between good and bad subjects" (Nguyen & Lock, 2014, p. 862). People who are more competitive in the market economy, such as those having a well-paid job or earning more money, are considered 'good'. The logic is that they contribute to the country's modernisation construction (*xiandaihua jianshe*). Likewise, those who fail in the market competition are deemed as 'bad' since they lack motivation to make themselves valuable. *Suzhi* thus links one's economic capability with their morality,

casting strong pressure on individuals and especially those who are deemed as having low *suzhi*. What results is a homogeneous value system placed on the general public. High *suzhi* is not only demanded of individuals for the sake of the nation's modernisation development; it is also applied to individuals' everyday behaviour as social beings, or what Anagnost (2013) calls a 'life-making' project.

China Dream

The criteria of *suzhi* also conform to patriotism and nationalism (Kipnis, 2012; Sun, 2014; Fong, 2004). In China, this means being faithful to the CCP, regardless of whether one is a party member or not. Along with the logic that having high *suzhi* means being 'good', being good also entails being faithful to the nation. In this way, striving for self-improvement is seen as synonymous with being faithful to one's nation. This belief is heavily interwoven into the government's propaganda of fulfilling the 'China Dream' (*zhongguomeng*).

The China Dream was proposed by Chinese president Xi Jinping. He first used the term in a 2012 speech, not long after he was appointed as the new General Secretary of CCP and President of China, in an event called The Road of Revitalisation (*fuxin zhilu*) (Hizi, 2019; Zheng Wang, 2014). China Dream has since become one of Xi's iconic theories, just as did former president Jiang Zeming's 'three represents' (*sange daibiao*) ("Three Represents ," n.d.) and Hu Jingtao's 'scientific development worldview' (*kexue fazhanguan*) (Schmalzer, 2016). Like the definition of *suzhi*, China Dream is also constantly evolving. However, revitalising the great culture of China remains at its centre.

The term 'China' preceding the term 'dream' calls forth Chinese citizens' loyalty to their country. Revitalising hinges on the well-known history of the 'humiliated history of 100 years' between the Qing Dynasty and the founding of People's Republic of China, what is referred to as "humiliation discourse" (Z. Wang, 2014, p. 2). Each Chinese citizen is taught this history at school. China Dream urges people to remember the humiliation, and this cultivates a strong sense of nationalism. On the other hand, the emphasis on 'dream' stresses the individuals' personal pursuit and makes room for emotions, inspirations and desires (Anagnost, 2013; Anderson, 2006). It is a figure of speech used by the state to intervene in individuals' personal choices so that they stay in line with the nation's development strategy. China Dream is an extension of *suzhi*, as it shares the same logic and imperatives included in *suzhi* discourse. The state's demands of its citizens to

be self-responsible fall under the umbrella of China Dream, which calls for individuals' choices to align with patriotism and the nations' values.

The trinity of improving one's *suzhi,* being a good person, and being faithful to one's nation forms a hegemony that regulates individuals' seemingly private life and personal pursuits; it is also closely connected to one's definition of happiness and desire. In this way, the *suzhi* discourse has created a neoliberal logic with strong implications of social collectivism. It is a powerful tool that transforms individuals into 'good' neoliberal subjects. Foucault's (1991) analysis of governmentality regulating people's conduct and decision-making through a hegemonic ideology, echoes the effects of *suzhi*. Both are inherently quite contradictory; while individuals are held accountable for their own lives, there is limited flexibility to exercise individualism, as only those behaviours that conform to the nation's development discourse are perceived as valuable and good.

Nevertheless, pursuing *suzhi* has become a way of life in China. The nationalism and patriotism of *suzhi* have also created a strong moral faithfulness in the regime. As summarised by Hairong Yan, *suzhi* is more than a policy or just an assessment tool in China, it is a 'key political-cultural-economic operator in the process of development' (Yan, 2008, p. 113). It supervises people's decisions and behaviour in one sense, and it screens them according to their value as human capital in another (Nguyen & Locke, 2014; Sun, 2013). People who are perceived as having low *suzhi* will inevitably be marginalised. *Suzhi* also rationalises the exploitation of people as low-value labour, which can include payment under the minimum wage, no social provisions, and so on. By coding and re-coding values, *suzhi* justifies the process of turning individuals into cheap labour in the name of constructing the nation.

The fetish of self-improvement

'Improving one's *suzhi*' has become a universal cliche that everyone in China talks about religiously. It applies to all social classes, regardless of age, gender and socio-economic status[16]. There are both official and unofficial ways of improving one's *suzhi*. Receiving higher education is seen as the most official way. The *suzhi* education reform carried out ever since the 1980s is a key channel for formalising the *suzhi* system (Kipnis,

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[16] Though it is a universal rule in China, disadvantaged social groups are more affected by it. This will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

2004). HEE reform initiated in the late 1990s (X. Han & Li, 2017) is another official means of boosting one's *suzhi*.

HEE aims at enlarging the number of citizens who receive tertiary education degrees, including university and college degrees. Before HEE, entering higher education was infamously competitive due to the very limited educational resources. Similar to the regional rankings discussed above, universities in China are also sorted in a hierarchical order, from tier-1 to tier-3. Tier-1 universities are key universities (*zhongdian daxue*) or branded universities (*mingpai daxue*) by the public. Most universities in this tier are enlisted in the state's key university projects, such as '211' and '985' projects[17]. These universities gain the most attention from the Ministry of Education and offer the best educational resources. Tier-3 universities are more often locally based institutions with far fewer resources allocated to them; they do not have the same reputations as the key universities.

In order to increase the enrolment rate of higher education institutions, HEE has taken two approaches. One has been to upgrade the previous vocational institutions or colleges into tier-3 universities; and the other to increase the number of private colleges and universities. These two types of tertiary educational institutes are much more accessible with their lower entrance requirements. Many of former vocational colleges (*dazhuan*) have now been upgraded to tier-3 universities.

As a result, there has been a significant boost in the number of university graduates since the reform. Enrolment is seven times higher than it was before the reform (Han & Li, 2015). Rural university enrolment has also increased; however, rural enrolment to key universities, specifically tier-1 universities, is reported to be dropping following HEE (Luo, 2011).

While education suggests a direct connection with *suzhi* improvement, its high cost means it is not available to everyone. Thus, mass media and public culture attempt to produce alternative ways to achieve higher *suzhi.* As noted by scholars such as Hairong Yan (2008) and Wallis (2013), popular ways of achieving higher *suzhi* include body movement (such as migrating from a rural area to the city), adopting a modern lifestyle by embracing consumerism, and being willing to take on more strenuous work for less

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[17] Two projects that circle out key universities. '211' system includes 112 universities ("Project 211," n.d.), whereas '985' system includes 39 ones ("Project 985 ," n.d.).

money as a means of self-training (*duanlian ziji*). Migrating to the city is also believed to improve *suzhi* because the city represents modernity (Oakes & Schein, 2006). Consumerism too is subject to the self-improvement discourse. Rural female migrants are keen to make urban purchases of mobile phones, cosmetic products or clothes in order to show their modernisation as a person with *suzhi* (Wallis, 2013; H. Zhu, 2008). More recently, news reports have shown how common it is for university graduates to work overtime; seen as a way for them to pursue their dreams, this is also an indication of high *suzhi*[18]. *Suzhi* is a powerful biopolitical tool that imposes self-governance on multiple levels, from major issues of life planning such as schooling and migration to the most trivial matters of daily practice.

However, the actual outcome of improving *suzhi* through these methods remains unclear. As the very definition of *suzhi* remains ambiguous, the means to achieve it are also unclear. Why, for example, does going to the city or buying modern appliances and gadgets such as smartphones, make-up or clothes improve one's *sushi*? Or does obtaining a higher education degree a guarantee of high *suzhi*? As much effort as is made to improve one's *suzhi*, the actual result doesn't seem to be the most important matter. Rather, the processes and behaviours used in this improvement are crucial, as they indicate one's effort to improve *suzhi*. Such is the power of the *suzhi* discourse. And vague as it is, it can be used to both inspire or denigrate.

Capability approach, agency and choice making: aspiration to return?

In Migration Theory, de Haas (2014) proposes the capability theory (Kabeer, 2000; Murphy, 2004; Sen, 1999) as a way to escape the rigid framework of the push-and-pull factor. According to de Haas, apart from economic factors, there are other reasons that attribute residents to leave or return, such as education resources, aspiration for life (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Schewel, 2015), and so on. He thus argues that "aspirations and capabilities" (de Haas, 2014, p.22) is conducive for analysing reasons for migration beyond economic factors. In that sense, the 'capability and aspiration' analytical framework is also helpful in understanding rural migrants who return to the countryside, from a more economically developed region to less developed one. Moreover, capability

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[18] The best example is IT workers in internet industry such as Alibaba, known as '996' workers, whose work time is from 9am to 9 pm, from Monday to Saturday (Q. Lin & Zhong, 2019).

approach also draws attention to the social well-being of the household in understanding one's decision to migrate or return.

The capability approach proposes that individuals' well-being is dependent on two things: their households' functioning and their capabilities. Functioning refers to the households' 'doing and being', namely its basic livelihood as well as the possibility of making 'free choice' (personal decisions regarding marriage, migration, schooling and so on). Capabilities are the resources that maintain 'functioning' and include money, land and social network. Capability is important as it is directly linked to available choices. More capability means more liberty to make choices. Kabeer (2000) summarises this concept as follows: "Resources and agency together constitute what Sen(1985) refers to as capabilities: the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of 'being and doing'" (p. 438).

An individuals' capability is closely related to the households' capability. It is very common for rural Chinese households to have a strategy for enhancing capability; this is known as the household livelihood plan and will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

The agency of choice making

Choice making is at the centre of understanding ones' agency as well as their political and social liberty. As Murphy (2004) and Stromquist (2015) point out, one's choices not only reflect individual ability but also the possible prescribed choices based on one's social status. Choice making reflects the material, social and human resources that individuals are entitled to and illuminates the social norms that allow them to be entitled to these resources. The more resources people accumulate, the less constrained they are and the more social mobility they enjoy. Therefore, choice making is a parameter of one's political, economic and social entitlement.

Choice making also alludes to agency in negotiating one's social positions. The agency to obtain stronger capability leads to the ability to change social constellations. Many techniques are used to obtain stronger capability, such as compromising, internalising, manoeuvring, and challenging social constraints (Kabeer, 1999). The social impact of these techniques can either reproduce social norms or renegotiate social boundaries. Thus, interrogating the process of choice making will not only shed light to the social actors' social structure, but also how they will make change to the social structure that they are situated in. This also relates to the classification of 'affirmative'

and 'transformative' development strategies mentioned above (Fraser, 2003; Jacka, 2013). The agency which doesn't challenge the social inequality structure will probably lead to the affirmative change, which is able to solve the issues partially and temporarily. Alternatively, the agency that negotiate the social boundaries will result in making transformative changes to the rural landscape.

In this section, I have established the key theoretical and conceptual tools of my study. The concepts of fluid mobility and translocality provide a conceptual lens through which to interpret social movement in a relational and dynamic way. The analysis of scale and development discourse provides a political economic lens for understanding how inequality is created and maintained. The discussion of governmentality and 'conduct of conduct' sheds light on how different forms of power are imposed on individuals, and how these determine the individuals' decision-making power. The nuanced analysis of the *suzhi* discourse shows how the modernisation hegemony is proliferated in China. The discussion of capability, agency and social mobilisation takes into account Sen's capability approach and generates a normative framework that provides criteria and milestones by which to evaluate the impact of return migrants' agency in the rural context.

Research objectives and questions

Drawing on the theoretical framework presented above, I propose three research objectives. First, I aim to present an ethnographic picture of the return migrants' life; this includes their personal, family, work and social life. I examine their conformity to modernity in private and public life, which includes both work and social activities, as well as everyday behaviours. I seek to answer the question of how return migrants – now referred to as return youth (*fanxiang qingnian*) – in China differ from previous return migrants. By analysing in detail their personal, work and public life, I intend to delineate the social construction process of the term 'return youth' (*fanxiang qingnian*) and 'return entrepreneur' (*fanxiang chuangye*). Moreover, I discuss how return migrants' neoliberal subjectivity has formed through the making of decisions about their mobility and careers and the adoption of strategies for adapting back into rural society. I aim to provide solid data regarding returnees' rural lives, which have rarely been documented. Apart from the important scholarly purpose of this study, it also fulfils a personal curiosity about the experiences of return migrants, which was my initial motivation for this PhD project.

Second, I inquire into return migrants' capacity to be agents of social change, and their adjustment to the social expectation of them to be the ultimate solution to rural struggles, which include the decline of rural society, incompetency of the rural market, low economic income, corruption of moral standards and the disappearance of traditional culture. My research provides insights into their perceptions of their own identity, as well as their agency to manipulate, reinforce, and challenge this identity. I also examine their agency in enhancing the capability of the rural livelihood. My research will provide insight as to whether returnees' negotiation methods are carried out to reproduce social inequality or to redefine it.

Last, I aim to contribute to the discussion of rural–urban relations from the perspective of return migrants. I consider return migrants to be the "place entrepreneurs" (Oakes & Schein, 2006, p. 22) situated in the rural–urban dynamic; through their daily practices, they connect both places and scales. I seek to reveal the spatial subjectivities of return migrants and analyse and deconstruct their place-making process. I also pay particular attention to returnees' negotiation techniques, as these provide insight into the conflicts within – and struggles of – the rural population. Because the state government claims that reducing the rural-urban distinction is its highest priority (see Chapter 2), I intend to explore the impacts of this claim on the rural population. In summary, in this thesis I explores the political, economic, social and cultural changes in the Chinese countryside through the lens of return migrants.

I have four sets of research questions. I start by inquiring into return migrants' decisions to return. What factors contribute to their final decision? What are they aiming for when they decide to return? If the city is the symbol of modernity (Oakes & Schein, 2006), how do we understand their decisions to return?

The second set of questions focuses on return migrants' translocal practices. What does return mean to them? Do they maintain contact with the city? If they do, how do they do so? How does the urban experience affect their daily life after they return? Are they actually leaving the city life behind and giving up the abundant opportunities as implied by the media[19]? If rural–urban migration is the rural residents' attempt to

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[19] Refer to news articles such as "Dream seeker in a remote mountain area: Labor Model Zhang Mingfu's story of being return entrepreneurs" (Xia Huang & Xie, 2019) or "Three return migrants' dream of entrepreneurship" (Xinghua Huang & Yu, 2009), among many similar reports which emphasise their sacrifice.

negotiate social status, what about its reverse movements? How do return migrants negotiate their place in rural-urban mobility?

Third, I ask questions about return migrants' families and social lives. How often do they spend time with their families? How is their social life in the countryside? If they feel lonely or bored, how do they deal with these feelings? How do they make new friends? Since social networks (*guanxi*) are known to be crucial in the countryside (see Chapter 2), how do return migrants accumulate social capital in the countryside? What do they think of the public's opinions of return migrants? Do they adhere to or try to break these stereotypes?

Last, I attempt to explore the extent to which return migrants contribute to rural development. What are the developmental schemes in the countryside? How do return migrants engage in them? How do they mitigate the conflicts from different stakeholders? What is their relationship with the local villagers? Is their effort in rural development well received? Are they making affirmative or transformative changes in the countryside?

The fieldwork

Setting criteria

The most essential part of my fieldwork was to narrow down the criteria used for recruiting participants. As discussed above, the term 'return migrant' has a range of meanings in China. I intend to specifically focus on the young educated ones. However, even this term is vague and hard to define. For one thing, what is the criteria that determines 'being young'? Does it refer to age? The definition of 'youth' is ambiguous and fluctuates between social circumstances. In China, the general understanding of youth is between 18 and 29 years of age[20]. However, the age range of return migrants who claim to be return youth seems to be much wider. I use the word 'seems' because there are no written criteria defining it. For example, I asked my contact in China, the director of a local non-government organisation (NGO), to recommend return youths (*fanxiang qingnian*) for the project. He sent me a list of returnees whose ages ranged between 25 to 46 years, which is far beyond what is commonly understood as 'being young' in China. This suggests that the actual age is not very important in defining this cohort. Rather than

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[20] For instance, the Chinese Youth League defines youth as between 14-30 ("Qingnian [Youth]," n.d.). However, people below 18 are usually considered as adolescence. So, the common understanding should be 18-30.

a description of age, the term is used to distinguish them from previous returnees. Contrary to the negative selectivity of previous returnees, return youths are believed to be more promising with a strong competitive edge in the job market. In this sense, the term is "a strategic site for action" (Yan, 2008, p. 48). The term itself conveys social subjectivities.

It was a unique challenge for me to locate such participants. I used the criteria that I believed to be most relevant. First, they needed to possess an education qualification higher than a high school or equivalent certificate. This criterion is essential, as the education system serves as an important mechanism in forging neoliberal subjectivities and the self-improvement discourse. Higher education is also an important factor used by the government to distinguish 'new farmers' from traditional farmers (see Chapter 2). The criterion of education also distinguishes my research from other migration studies, which pay more attention to the less educated group. Therefore, more than age, education is an essential factor in defining the participants of this research.

Second, I wanted to address and clarify the definition of the term 'return'. In the Chinese context, 'return migrant' is primarily used for those who return to their villages. It can also mean those who return to the rural area but not their hometown. It can even mean urban *hukou* holders who decide to live in the countryside[21]. For the purposes of my research, I narrowed the group to just the rural population. Furthermore, I only focussed on those who returned to their own hometown. My intention is to outline the identity construction of returnees, and it is easier to examine this process if a returnee has gone back to his or her hometown. However, 'hometown' also has an ambiguous definition. It does not necessarily refer to the exact village where the returnee used to live. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the returnees' life in the countryside is not limited to one village or one location. Thus, those who returned to the township where their hometown is located were counted as valid participants in my research.

Last, there is no universal standard regarding the length of return, so I set a minimum of one year as the time frame to distinguish from temporary returnees who might plan to stay home only for a short period of time. My observation was that one year should be a sufficient length of time for them to form opinions and feelings about the return life.

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[21] These group of people are relatively fewer. They are usually urbanites who are sick of the city life and drawn by the country lifestyle. Refer to Pan Jiaojiao's article (2016) or PCD's book *Touching the Heart, Taking Root* (Chau, Lam, Tang, & May, 2014) for reference.

Recruiting participants

Thanks to my previous work, I was able to reach out to contacts in the rural development sector and ask them to circulate a fact sheet I had prepared that explained my research project and the intention of recruiting participants. This is the main method I used for recruiting participants. Those who were interested could sign up online by filling out a form I created to collect their basic data, such as educational qualifications, age, years of return, etc. I would pre-screen the information and contact those that fit the participant criteria mentioned above.

My ethnographic fieldwork started in 2018. I conducted three months of on-site fieldwork in both 2018 and 2019. I also used the social media tool WeChat to follow up with participants once I established contact with them, which lasted for two years. In total, I visited 15 villages and towns (not all of them become research sites) in three neighbouring provinces of Fujian, Jiangxi and Guangdong, which are located in southern China; Fujian and Guangdong are coastal provinces (refer to Appendix 1 for a geographical, political and economic background of the three provinces).

While I could only spend a very short amount of time in some villages, I managed to have a relatively long stay of three weeks in several areas; these I chose as the main research sites. I took an ordinary ethnographic approach by walking around and meeting people. In this way, I managed to gather a cohort of data on several return migrants from the same place. For example, Village X in Guangzhou and Town S in Fujian had both attracted more than one return migrant for different reasons. As I wandered around the sites every day, I also talked to returnees with relatively low education qualifications. This helped me to draw a comparison between my participants and examine differences and similarities within the same group. Participants and their varying education experiences will be discussed in this thesis whenever appropriate. I used a coding system to distinguish between the educated and less educated participants.

Altogether there are 38 return migrants being interviewed in my research; 21 of them are educated; they are my main participants. Among the educated return migrants, there are 12 females and nine males. I followed three female participants closely and visited them twice in two years. I also spent half of my fieldwork time in their villages. These three participants are my focus subjects in this thesis (Refer to Appendix 2 for a list of participants).

All participants are identified by pseudonyms I created for them. Those recruited as research participants (which means they suited the three criteria outlined above) are named with three capital letters, such as WYL, LLL and CYJ. Those who do not fit the criteria but are also return migrants were given names starting with 'Xiao' for females and 'A' for males, as these are the most conventional prefixes of Chinese nicknames. For example, Xiaolian is a female returnee, and A'lang refers to a male returnee. There are also non-returnees mentioned in my research, such as the family members, friends and colleagues of participants. They are named with a single letter, such as A, B and so on. To avoid confusion, these single letters are used at minimum level, namely, only when it is necessary for narrating purpose. I also use pseudonyms to refer to organisations and NGOs. It should be noted that when the age of an individual is mentioned, this refers to his or her age in 2018 (the year during which my first field trip was conducted).

Village, county, city and provinces are the four place types most commonly mentioned in my research. The naming system of regions is as follows: For village and county level regions, I use codes such as Village A, B, C. I use the actual name of regions at the city and provincial level, such as Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Fujian, etc. As discussed previously, the differences among cities vary drastically on their economic, cultural and social levels. Using original city names thus provides a better understanding of the context.

My research sites – especially those chosen as main sites – vary significantly in terms of economic levels, village features, etc. These sites have quite a wide range of diverse features found in the southern villages in China. Some, like Town S and Village W, have a very strong emphasis on tourist development. Others, like Village K, still maintain small household farms. Village X, on the other hand, has had very strong intervention from external development agencies; a local NGO, Organisation Green (OG), has been carrying out a development project here for 10 years. Due to the economic development of some areas, more returnees have been attracted back home. These differences between the various sites provided a good cohort of data that has afforded me the ability to form a comprehensive view of participants' lives within a relatively limited time frame.

There are two limitations in the fieldwork. Due to limited time and energy, I did not get a chance to visit villages in northern China and draw comparisons to create an even more comprehensive set of data for my research. Nevertheless, it is my intention to expand my research to a larger scale for a longer period of time. Hopefully, this PhD project is just a starting point.

The second limitation is the dialect barrier in some of the research sites. I am eloquent in both Mandarin and Cantonese. Cantonese is the main dialect used in Village X, the research site in Guangzhou, Guangdong. However, I am not familiar with the dialects used in Jiangxi and Fujian. So, I was not able to comprehend fully their daily conversations, when they spoke to villagers or their family members. I mitigated this negative influence by asking participants later about the content of their conversations. In their narratives, they would also convey to me their opinions about the conversation, which I think is more important for my research than the actual content. I also tried to observe their expressions and tones in the conversations.

Data collecting, processing and analysing

For this research, the data from individuals come from interviews, casual conversations and their posts on social media. My field trips to several research sites also provided valuable ethnography data. I took the conventional approach of interviewing and participatory observation in order to collect data (Bryman, 2012). Interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview had a semi-structured to non-structured form and usually lasted two hours. While I had prepared a list of questions, I often did not follow it exactly. I would start with one question and then just go with the flow of conversation. I recorded all interviews and later transcribed them in Chinese. I also kept a fieldwork journal to mark down as many things as possible that I saw and heard. This has proven to be particularly useful, in some ways even more so than the interviews. Much of what I jotted down without thinking it would be relevant has proven to be very valuable data.

Another source of data I found to be helpful was the casual chats I had with participants. This was when they just talked to me about random topics that had come to mind. Even though the interview was very un-structured, it sometimes still gave participants a sense of the need to be formal. The casual conversations thus captured information that was unattainable in the interviews. I paid attention to participants' narratives of their own and others' stories. For researchers studying mobility decisions, knowing how research subjects talk about and make judgements about other individuals is just as empirically important as how they talk about and judge their own mobility choices. All the interviews and conversations are in Chinese. When I use their quotes in

this thesis, I translate them into English. Their original quotes are also provided as a reference.

Participants' social media accounts proved to be another useful source of data. These helped me to keep track of any significant changes in their lives, such as marriages, giving birth, etc. Some individuals also posted their reflections of the day on WeChat, and these revealed their emotions. In this sense, I also applied techniques of online or social media ethnography (Caliandro, 2018; Postill & Pink, 2012; Skågeby, 2011); thus transferring the field research phase from one chunk of time to a more prolonged and subtle process. I learned more about my participants' thoughts by using this method.

The inductive approach of the grounded theory was influential in shaping my analysis process. Although I did not strictly follow the grounded theory procedure (Hammersley, 1999; Punch, 1998), I adhered to its core principle of identifying patterns and models from the data. As the researcher, I avoided having any hypothesis or placing assumptions on the analysis. Rather, I let the data take the lead.

For data processing, in order to set up categories for coding I first chose very general research questions, such as: How did they end up migrating? How did they find their current job? and What does their social life look like? I then went through the interview transcript and my research notes for coding. I applied the method of 'open coding' in order to generate more nuanced details for my analysis. I then categorised and summarised the data into a more abstract concept. I also drew frequent comparisons between different categories to exhaust the properties of different categories. Using interrelated connections between different the research questions, I was able to present a holistic picture of the research participants.

The rest of the thesis is arranged as follows: Chapter 2 lays out the economic, political and social context of rural China since the 1970s. It gives a detailed summary of the two disparate schools of rural development that are most influential in China. I also discuss the formation of return entrepreneur discourse, which follows the same logic as *suzhi* discourse. This discussion shows that the return entrepreneur discourse plays a crucial role in shaping the current wave of return migrants' identity. I arrange the empirical findings of this thesis into four categories, which cover each returnee's career, personal, public life, as well as their engagement in rural development. Chapter 3 mainly focuses on recounting the return migrants' decisions to return, as these strongly influenced their career choices. By examining different factors that attributed to their career choices, I was

able to create a comprehensive picture of the main constraints of return migrants' decision-making. This also provided insight into their agency. Chapter 4 analyses the translocal practices return migrants took in daily life to maintain the connection with the city as well as with their family members. It presents quite a contrasting picture to the media showcases of return migrants and I argue that return migrants obtain higher mobility in multiple forms after they return. Chapter 5 discusses the social life of return migrants and revisits some core tenets of rural society, such as the society of familiarity and the importance of common connections. I examine how a translocal practice facilitated by social media and smartphones is integrated into the traditional social network. Chapter 5 also attempts to draw connections between return migrants' social lives and their social identity. It provides fascinating results regarding how return migrants' career choices affect their social life. Chapter 6 is dedicated to exploring return migrants' participation in rural development. It presents the main approaches of rural development, which are a combination of two schools of development strategy. A discussion of their relationship with villagers is also particularly insightful in revealing the embedded disconnection between the rural and the urban. The last chapter will be a concluding chapter which consolidates the findings of this research.

Chapter 2

Setting the stage: the political, economic and social landscape of Rural China

It is impossible to unravel the phenomenon of current return migration without sketching out the political, economic, and social landscape of rural China. Adopting a perspective that is at once temporal and spatial, this chapter aims at presenting the political, economic and social forces shaping the decisions of the return migrants who participated in this study, who are young, educated with migration experience. While its main focus remains in the countryside, it will also allude to urban changes in order to showcase how the two are intensively interlinked.

To begin, I will summarise the consecutive phases of rural reforms since the 1970s, when economic reform took place in China generally. This is also the time when rural residents started their migrations, initiating "the greatest peacetime internal migration on the planet" (Wallis, 2013, p. 4). Day and Schneider (2017) have classified the rural reform after the decollectivization into four periods: 1991-1996 the economic growth period, 1996-2003 the stagnation period, 2003-2007 the experimental period, and 2008 to the present the "unbridled modernisation" (p.10) period. I find this categorisation useful as it matches the waves of rural migration: the current wave of return migration overlaps with the unbridled modernisation. However, what preceded this period, especially the experimental period, has also played a fundamental role in cultivating return migration and forming the rural-urban dichotomy.

Drawing on Day and Schneider's classification, I outline three rather than four stages that reflect the rise and fall of emigration and return migration: the initial economic reform stage from 1979 to 2000; the pro-peasant discourse and civil society development stage from 2000 to mid-2000s; and the agriculture modernisation and rural marketisation stage from mid-2000s to the present. I will go through each period in chronological order. I will also analyse the migration from the perspective of classic push and pull factors (de Haas, 2014) against the backdrop of economic, political and social changes in China.

The second section of this chapter analyses the mainstreaming of the return entrepreneur discourse, which, as I shall show, plays a significant role in the current wave

of return migration. I examine the connection between *suzhi* discourse, neoliberal subject formation, and the inequality of development discourse. I demonstrate how the latter discourse fabricates the rural-urban dichotomy and rationalises rural-urban inequality.

In the last section, I will turn to the rural familial and social dimensions by analysing traditional familial tenets such as filial piety in the framework of household livelihood plan. To conclude the chapter, I will also recount the key principles of rural society and how it operates.

2.1 Social, structural and economic background of rural return migrants in China since the 1980s

Stage 1: Economic growth dominated by the state government

Following the collapse of the commune system in 1983 in China, the introduction of the Household Responsibility System[22] (HRS) later in the 1980s marked the start of rural reform that is also known as rural decollectivization (Day & Schneider, 2017; W. Wang & Long, 2009; Wilczak, 2017). This was in parallel with the Open Door policy and other economic reforms that took place throughout China but mainly in the urban regions (Hoffman, 2008). In the early stage of the reform, as argued by Tiejun Wen (1999) – a prominent rural economist and expert – the reform was considered relatively successful. Rural households significantly increased their economic income due to several factors. In the early 1990s, as China transitioned from the planned economy to the market economy, state control over commercial prices was gradually removed and the prices of agricultural products, especially rice, started to rise, thus increasing the incomes of rural households (Day, 2008). At the same time, the expansion of township and village enterprises (TVE) also brought more diversity to the rural economy (J. Fan et al., 2005; Z. Ma, 2001; X. Shi et al., 2007).

Along with the economic reform, the strict restriction of population mobility was also removed, due to the ease of the household registration system, also known as *hukou* (Fan et al., 2005; Wang & Fan, 2006). Before that, movement was prohibited in socialist China. In this period, the rural population started to migrate to the city without changing their

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[22] Household Responsibility System (HRS) is considered to be the 'basis of rural reform' (Day & Schneider, 2017). It contrasts to the collective commune system by holding individual household accountable for its economic profit or loss. See also Ma (2001) and Day and Schneider (2017).

hukou status (Hoffman, 2008; Nguyen & Locke, 2014; N. Zhang, 2013; Y. Zhao, 2002). Migration remittance became another important factor that increased households' economic status (Démurger & Shi, 2012; Z. Ma, 2001; Murphy, 1999; Nguyen & Locke, 2014).

After this period of rapid economic growth, which lasted approximately throughout the 1990s, issues such as economic stagnation began to emerge (Day & Schneider, 2017; Wen, 1999, 2001). These were categorised by Wen (1999, 2001) as the iconic 'three rural issues' (*sannongwenti*) – rural people, rural society and rural production. Wen was also the main promoter of an alternative development scheme, the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM), which will be discussed later.

According to Wen and other rural activists (Pan & Wen, 2016), as China was stepping into the rapid economic growth period in the late 1990s and mid-2000s, most of its resources were distributed to the urban areas for industrial development, including financial support and cheap rural labour. Meanwhile, the rural economy remained under-developed and the large numbers of State Owned Enterprises (SOE) staff laid off engendered social instability in the cities (Day & Schneider, 2017). As a result, a policy named grain bag responsibility system was issued in 1995 to curb an increase in the price of price (Hou & Liu, 2010). While this generated social stability nationwide, it caused economic damage to rural peasants. The withdrawal of government financial input to TVEs exacerbated the situation further and also started the decline of TVEs (Jacka, 2013; Xu et al., 2017).

In parallel to the harsh economic status in the rural countryside, the rural social order was also collapsing (Xuefeng He, 2006; Tiejun Wen, 1999, 2001). Wen (1999) and He (2006) argue that HRS atomises the rural society, tearing the formerly united rural society apart. With people migrating to the city and rural household economic status declining, the social cohesion in rural society was also withering. While China's economic development progress was gaining global attention – what is called 'china speed' – the rural society is in peril.

Overall, Wen (1999, 2001)and his supporters have pointed out that in this period of economic development, rural China served as the shock-absorbing cushion that took on the economic risks and social unrest. Furthermore, it also generated the cheap surplus labour that made 'china speed' possible. As He (1995) has pointed out, cheap rural labour is the secret ingredient for China to gain an upper hand in globalization. The nation's

rapid economic development is at the cost of the rural population's welfare. The three rural issues encapsulate the declining situation of peasants, rural society, and rural livelihoods.

As migration numbers climbed in the mid-1990s, the first return migration wave followed the economic transformation and the layoff of SOE staff (Chunyu et al., 2013; Solinger, 2002; Xu et al., 2017), as briefly mentioned in Chapter 1. By contrast, as early as the late 1990s some rural local governments, for example Wuwei County in Anhui, had already initiated incentive policies to attract return entrepreneurs (Murphy, 2000; Z. Wang & Yang, 2013). Nevertheless, emigration numbers still far exceeded those of return migration (Y. Zhao, 2002).

Stage 2: Alternative development agencies and their rural development experiments

In the first decade of this century, China witnessed a relatively liberal political environment. NGOs and civil organisations were increasing their involvement in community governance, social service, and environmental protection (Ho, 2001). This was also the period when access to the internet became prominent and online censorship was still loose (G. Yang, 2003). Online forums such as Computer Bulletin Board Service (BBS) enabled a virtual space for public discussion. The Great Fire Wall of China (GFW) had not yet been fully established (Economy, 2018), allowing public access to foreign websites such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter. Media led by the *Southern Weekly* (*nanfang zhoumo*), known as the school of southern journalists (*nanfang baoye*), were also actively questioning the state's governance and promoting democracy and civil society, thus initiating public discussions on matters such as Milk Powder Scandal (Branigan, 2008). In this period, the Chinese government was relatively loose in censoring public opinions, rendering more space for civil society to grow.

In rural China, academic scholars and international NGOs have been actively carrying out alternative development experiments. Wen's three rural issues have been widely received by policymakers, policy think tanks, and academia; in other words, by the political elites in China. Despite their disagreements in interpreting the three rural issues, Wen's term has since become generic. It is also agreed among the political elites that addressing the three rural issues is the primary goal of rural development (Day, 2008; Y. Lin, 2003).

However, significant discrepancies in the interpretation of three rural issues, have set the foundations for two varying development strategies. The state government contend that rural production, namely agriculture, lies at the centre of three rural issues (S. Fan et al., 2004; Y. Lin, 2003). They intensively promote the idea of economic development, agriculture modernisation and rural marketisation, believing that increasing rural households' incomes is the ultimate solution to rural issues. As argued in Yifu Lin's (2003) report, 'Financial Reform and Rural Economy Development', the fundamental solution is to increase the rural income by implementing agriculture at a large scale. This incurs heavy capital investment in agriculture. This principle is believed to have been strongly influenced by international development agencies such as the World Bank (Xuefeng He, 2006). Yifu Lin, as a matter of fact, worked as the former Chief Economist of World Bank (Hale, 2013; Xuefeng He, 2006). Since the strategy is supported by the state government, it is labelled as the mainstream developmentalist strategy.

The academia, on the other hand, represented by Tiejun Wen, Changping Li, and Xuefeng He, holds a divergent interpretation of the three rural issues. They believe the main goal of rural development should be not only the focusing on the economic aspects, but also reconstructing the cohesiveness of rural society. In other words, the peasant should be at the core of three rural issues. This school of thought is called the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM, *xin xiangcun jianshe yundong*, also shortened as *xinxiangjian*) (Day, 2008; Day & Schneider, 2017; Jacka, 2013; Jia'en Pan & Du, 2011). Named after the Rural Reconstruction Movement (RRM) of the 1930s and 1940s, NRRM mainly consists of intellectuals and scholars, as did its predecessor (Jia'en Pan & Du, 2011; Si & Scott, 2016).

Apart from the NRRM scholars, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil organisations are also implementing the alternative approach. Environmental NGOs, in particular, overlap largely with NRRM's strategy. These two groups found their shared interest through organic farming and a new food network, the Alternative Food Network (AFN) (Si, Schumilas, & Scott, 2015; Si & Scott, 2016). International influences, such as the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil and the degrowth movement (C. Xue, 2015) have also inspired and overlap with the alternative approach. NRRM, civil organisations and international NGOs have thus formed a joint force in rural experimentation. Since they divert from the mainstream

affirmative strategy, they are also labelled as part of the alternative development approach (Jacka, 2013).

Main Canons of the Alternative Approach

The alternative approach has formulated a pro-peasant discourse that advocates for social, cultural and environmental diversity. Its goal is to maintain small household farming[23], rebuild rural social relations, and reconstruct the collective rural society. Its supporters place high value on small household farming, which they argue is more than just a farming style, it is the foundation of rural social life (Tiejun Wen, 1999, 2001, 2017). They also point out that traditional farming is more holistic than modern agriculture in terms of maintaining environmental sustainability, as it requires less fertilizer and pesticide, and local seeds, as opposed to GMO seeds, are also more suitable to the soil and natural system (Schmalzer, 2016).

The alternative approach challenges the marketisation reform that marshals more capital into the rural sphere. The reform overshadows the entitlements of the individual peasants, namely, the small household farmers, which further exacerbates the peasants' inferior position in the rural-urban relationship due to their low economic status. The rural population ends up further being exploited. By accentuating the value of rural society, the alternative approach also argues for a bottom-up movement in rural reform, in contrast to the prominent top-down order(Cartier, 2016; J. C. Chen et al., 2017; Q. F. Zhang & Wu, 2017). It advocates for development projects that address peasants' real issues.

This participatory approach is widely applied to almost all alternative development projects (Jacka, 2013). It also reveals a hidden democratic agenda (Alcock, 2019). Democracy is a highly sensitive word in an authoritarian country like China. Although it was listed in the Communist Party's 'Socialist Society's 16 Core values'[24], the word is still prohibited from being mentioned in non-official narratives. However, it is worth mentioning that in 2011, the former Director of Guangdong Province, Yang Wang, proposed the concept of 'democratic environmental governance' (*minzhu huanbao*) (A.

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[23] Small household farming: the term has two meanings. First, it represents the traditional farming style, which means an 'irrigation intensive agriculture' in small scale farmland (Wen, 2001). Second, it refers to the small peasant economy (*xiaonong jingji*) which is a subsistence economy (Jacka, 2013). Small household farmers (*xiaonong*) are said to have small peasant notions (*xiaonong sixiang*) that are narrow-minded and short-sighted.

[24] 16 core Socialist values are 'prosperity', 'democracy', 'civility', 'harmony', 'freedom', 'equality', 'justice', 'rule of law', 'patriotism', 'dedication', 'integrity' and 'friendship' (Gow, 2017).

Sun, Jiang, & Hu, 2012), calling for more civil organisations to contribute to environmental protection. For a short period after that, the word 'democracy' was frequently mentioned together with environmental protection among the NGO sectors[25]. This speaks to the fact that environmental protection has relatively more freedom in discussions about civil society and democratic governance. It is also the reason the rural alternative approach and environmental NGOs collaborate jointly.

In summary, the alternative approach asserts that small household farming is the backbone of rural society. It seeks to find "an alternative to mainstream modernisation, capitalism, and the Western development model" (Pan & Du, 2011, p. 452). It aims at recreating rural society and its traditional values, thus restoring the rural population's dignity in the rural-urban dichotomy. The alternative approach aligns with the anti-capitalist and alternative movements happening outside China that adhere to the principle of social, cultural, economic, and environmental diversity (Alcock, 2019).

Two mechanisms of the alternative approach: comprehensive cooperatives and the AFN

The main strategy of the alternative approach can be reflected in two types of mechanisms: the rural cooperatives and the AFN. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the complicated topic of the rural cooperative movement in China. Cooperatives date back to the collectivisation of the socialist era and overlap with the socialist and the post-socialist periods (Lammer, 2012; Tiejiun Wen, 1999, 2000). Their organisational structures have varied in the different periods. Even now, rural cooperatives still take multiple forms and structures. According to Xiaofeng Zhao (2015), a scholar specialising in cooperative organisations, cooperatives can be categorised into different types based on their development origins (initiators), operational patterns, and organisation missions. Zhao and Peng (2014) give a brief picture of the constitution of rural cooperatives, which are classified into six types:

- agriculture companies,
- local elites – individual farmers with no commercial or governmental background,
- quasi-public sector – local governments and enterprises,

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[25] This observation is mainly based on my personal experience. I was working in an environmental NGO from 2009 to 2015. The openness of the government was a main topic discussed at that time in various events in NGO sectors.

- farmers in collectivity,
- village communities – village leaders, and
- NGOs.

Alternatively, cooperatives can be classified based on two purposes: a pragmatic purpose or a value purpose. The former mainly aims at gaining more economic profit, while the latter seeks both community development and value restoration. Day and Schneider (2017) have proposed another typology of cooperatives, which can be viewed as a further generalisation of Zhao and Peng's (2014). They categorise rural cooperatives as either specialised (*zhuanye hezuoshe*) or comprehensive (*zonghe hezuoshe*). Specialised cooperatives are formed by agriculture entities that are growing the same crops or providing the same services (Xuefeng He, 2012; L. Zhao & Peng, 2014). They target economic benefits by drawing these entities together to streamline production and avoid unhealthy competition. Comprehensive cooperatives, on the other hand, integrate "different forms of production (in some cases both agricultural and industrial), as well as social and cultural activities" (Day & Schneider, 2017, p. 9). In addition to economic gains, they pay attention to cultural diversity and community development (Xuefeng He, 2006). Members enjoy equal rights as the founders do, who are usually NGOs, in comprehensive cooperatives.

NRRM scholars are more in favour of the comprehensive cooperatives for several reasons. From the economic aspect, comprehensive cooperatives are believed to protect small households' rights as a collective in the market economy, shielding them from being taken advantage of due to their marginalised positions and defending their interests (Tiejun Wen, 1999; T. Yang, 2017). Furthermore, the uniting of individual peasants into a collective entity also increases their chances of applying for loans from financing agencies, which is beyond the individual peasants' accessibility (Day, 2008). Farmers who apply for loans and microcredit through comprehensive cooperatives can also reduce their associated risks[26].

From a social point of view, the comprehensive cooperative serves as an inclusive platform for a wide variety of social activities, such as restoring traditional festivals, preserving traditional artwork and skills, and even promoting democracy. For example,

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[26] These financial benefits are not exclusive to comprehensive cooperative. Specialised cooperative members enjoy them as well.

the Puhan Cooperative in Shanxi, a well-known comprehensive cooperative among NRRM activists in China, was initially established out of a local older women's dancing group (Du, 2014; T. Yang, 2017). Paying much attention to social equality and cohesiveness, this cooperative's goal is to build up the members' ownership of their organisations and the self-governance mechanisms (L. Zhao & Peng, 2014). It should also be noted that while the alternative development approach promotes comprehensive cooperatives, they don't oppose the establishment of specialised cooperatives, which currently outnumber the comprehensive ones disproportionately. I will revisit this point later when discussing the mainstream development approach.

Just as comprehensive cooperatives empower individual farmers and recreate traditional rural culture and society, the AFN challenges the capitalist logic of production and consumerism. Its goal is to reconnect human beings with the land, renegotiate the relations between producers and customers, and restore more values to rural farming and lifestyles. It also advocates for exchanging products that are organic and handmade, as a protest to mass production. In line with this, the AFN also advocates for traditional rural lifestyles, culture and houses, all of which are considered to support more sustainable ways of living (Alcock, 2019; Si et al., 2015; Si & Scott, 2016).

The AFN in China has been largely influenced by international NGOs and the global counter-urbanisation movement (Alcock, 2019). This is reflected in the four major categories of AFN in China: Community Support Agriculture (CSA), buyers' clubs, farmers' markets, and recreational garden plot rentals (Si et al., 2015). These forms vary in multiple ways in terms of membership and operational modes but they have several similarities. They propose a direct connection between customers and producers. For example, originating in Japan and becoming popular in North America, CSA is the most prominent form of AFN in China. It proposes a new model where organic farmers and customers are locked in long-term contractual relationships, usually a minimum of six months. The logic is that the long-term contract binds customers and producers together in taking the risk; they share the extra cost of organic farming, as the customers' payment to the producers does not vary, regardless of the quantity and quality of the produce.

Moreover, there is no intermediate party that takes part of the profit, which is often the case in the market economy. The largest profit thus goes to the food producers, namely, the small household farmers. This model also enables more personal communication between customers and producers, so that the customers are well informed of the

producing process. The idea is that such communication about organic farming will also educate the customers, who will pay more respect to the producers. The AFN was established out of criticism of capitalism, which is said to 'alienate' individual players in the market. Customers who do all of their purchasing in supermarkets expect producers to be like machines that deliver identical products of equivalent quality. The direct links the AFN establishes redefine the relationships between customers and producers and bring more value to the latter.

The AFN also reflects the principles of the comprehensive cooperative, which include community building. To some extent, the AFN is another form of comprehensive cooperative in that it includes urban customers, NGOs and civil agencies as members. It can be a powerful tool that integrates multiple players and alternative development discourses.

The AFN was introduced into China at the beginning of the 21st century by NRRM scholars and NGOs (C. Chau, Lam, Tang, & May, 2014; H. He, 2014). During this period, public concern about environmental contamination and food safety escalated. The reports of the Milk Powder Scandal in 2007 (Chan, 2015), soil contamination[27], and toxic chemical residue found in daily consumed vegetables and fruits (Grammaticas, 2011) sparked heated discussion over food safety and environmental protection. Urban residents, especially those who have a relatively high socioeconomic status, commonly referred to as middle-class, began to seek sources of healthier food. This enabled the AFN and organic farming to be more accepted by the public.

The first two decades of the 21st century have witnessed the fast growth of the AFN and the organic food market in China. In 2008, Little Donkey Farm, the iconic CSA Farm of China, was established under the auspices of Partnership for Community Development (PCD) and the Renmin University Rural Reconstruction Centre, where Tiejun Wen worked (H. He, 2014). In 2009, Little Donkey Farm, the PCD, and the Rural Reconstruction Centre of Renmin University founded the National CSA Alliance (Z. Huang, 2017), which became a key driver for the spread of the alternative development model. Membership of the alliance increased rapidly. When it held its 11th Conference in 2019, it calculated that there were altogether 359 members of the Alliance ("Data Overview of 11th Eco Agricultural Conference," n.d.). Many major cities in China, such

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[27] See for instance He (2014) and the Report on nationwide soil contamination (MEP & MLR, 2014).

as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou have also established farmers' markets where the consumers and producers convene regularly.

Return migrants and the alternative development approach

Comprehensive cooperatives and the AFN have been the main pillars of alternative development schemes to advance the different approaches to rural development. Return migrants have been at the centre of both schemes. Alternative development believe that the return migrants have the advantage of having gained both urban experience as well as familiarity with the local rural villagers. For instance, the Puhan Cooperative in Shanxi[28] deliberately strategised to attract more return migrants to its operation team. Reflecting on the organisation's bottle neck period at its growing stage, they found that the reduced number of return migrants is the main reason (Du, 2014). By the end of 2014, there were 39 return migrants in Puhan Coop, making up 61.9% of the operation team. Likewise, the PCD's Youth Internship Program[29] also aims at assisting youths in rural development, many of whom are return migrants, with five-year financial and technical support to work in any AFN organisations (Q. Xue, 2012). The book on this project, *Let the Dream Take Roots*[30], is one of the earliest and probably the only book in Chinese I have found that details the stories of return migrants (L. Gao, Zhang, Xue, & Zhou, 2012).

In 2010, initiated by rural scholars as well as NRRM activists such as Jia'en Pan, Jiansheng Qiu, Zhiyou Huang, who are also the founders of the former Yan Yangchu Rural Reconstruction Centre[31], a network called Devotion to Homeland (*aiguxiang*) was formed with the funding support of a civil foundation in Fujian. This network aims at re-cultivating rural society by revitalising traditional culture (Z. Huang, 2015). Since its foundation, the network keeps recruiting local villagers who are devoted to cultural reconstruction projects, such as building a rural exhibition of previous farm tools and recording traditional local folk songs. They are titled 'figures who devoted to the homeland' (*aiguxiang renwu*). Again, many of those enlisted in this network are return

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[28] A province in North China.

[29] 青年实习生项目.

[30] 《让梦想扎根》

[31] Yan Yangchu Rural Reconstruction Academy is one of the two NRRM experimental research centres in the countryside. It launched the New Zhaicheng Experiment in Zhaicheng Village, Dingzhou County, Hebei Province in 2004 by helping the villagers to establish the Zhaicheng Cooperative. Unfortunately, the research centre was suspended in 2008 (Weng, 2014).

migrants. Devotion to Homeland also holds annual conferences and has organised intensive seminars and study tours for these 'figures', as a component of capacity building.

This stage of rural experimentation is crucial for two reasons. First of all, it proposes an alternative development strategy which offers the different solutions from the mainstream strategy to rural issues, despite its less powerful political force. Some of the approaches, such as organic farming and food, are integrated into the mainstream strategy, as will be seen below. Second, it also raises the governments' and public attention to the group of return migrants as a potential solution to rural development.

Stage 3: The unbridled modernisation period

After the stage of experimental rural reform, rural China entered a rapid modernisation period. Several policies indicate the start of this period. In 2006, the 11th Five Year Plan (2006–2010) issued the New Socialist Countryside (*shehuizhuyi xinnongcun*, NSC) policy, which signalled the state's intention of intensifying its intervention in rural areas (Day & Schneider, 2017). It served as an overarching policy framework for a set of policies, such as infrastructure building, village beautification, and economic development. It also sets the foundation for policies in more specific areas, such as the Specialised Cooperative Law in 2007 and the 'red lines' policy in 2006. The NSC persisted through the 12th Five Year Plan (2011–2016) (Chan & Enticott, 2019; L. Zhao & Peng, 2014) and continues to be effective in 2020.

In the meantime, the abolishment of agricultural tax in 2006 changed the political landscape in the countryside (Day, 2013a; J. Fan et al., 2005). There are numerous papers regarding this controversial policy. In general, rural scholars criticise it (e,g. J. C. Chen et al., 2017; Day & Schneider, 2017), arguing that it brought more negative impacts to rural societies. While it released the burdens of the rural households, it brought enormous pressure to local – township and village-level – governments (J. C. Chen et al., 2017; Day & Schneider, 2017; J. Fan et al., 2005). Attracting business investment and capital (*zhaoshang yinzi*) has become the task of every local government. This is said to turn some of them into a "predatory behaviour" (Day & Schneider, 2017, p.5) against the villagers, exacerbating the relationship between local governments and villagers. This also incurred the so-called "capital from below" (H. Yan & Chen, 2015, p. 270) whereby village elites and leaders make alliances to attract more capital into the village. Rural

critics see this as a way of privatising village property, with more capital directly injected into the rural sites.

At the 16th CCP Conference in 2002, the plan of Coordinating rural-urban development (*chengxiang tongchou*) (CURD) was put forward for the first time (Wilczak, 2017). As can be seen from the name, the plan gives guidance to rural and urban space planning and aims to coordinate rural-urban development in ways that eventually eliminate the rural-urban gap. In this plan, the *hukou* reform was the most prominent component.

The government adopted developmentalist theory since it was proposing economic growth and a market economy (S. Fan et al., 2004). The central government calls for structural reform of agriculture to change the production mode from small household farming to large-scale farming (Hinton, 1990; Q. F. Zhang, 2015). Overall, the mainstream developmentalist strategy consists of four main components: agriculture modernisation; economy diversification; land consolidation and spatial concentration; and infrastructure construction. In contrast to the alternative approach, the scheme aims to dismantle the small household farming system, transform the subsistence 'small peasant economy' (*xiaonong jingji*) to a market economy, and replace small household farmers with corporate professional ones.

In the following section, I will review of each of these four components to elaborate on how modernisation and capitalisation is integrated into rural development and how rural households, especially those of the return migrants, are affected by them.

Agricultural Modernisation

Developmentalists such as Yifu Lin (2003) have argued that traditional agriculture, namely small household farming, has reached its limit for producing marginal profit and can no longer strengthen the economic gain of peasants. As a result, what is needed is agricultural reform that transfers people from agricultural to non-agricultural careers. It is believed that larger agricultural entities with modern technology and equipment will be the main players in the sector because they can optimise the land's economic output through higher efficiency and larger scale.

To this end, the central government intensively advocates for a 'new-style agriculture' (*xinxing nongye*) with new-style agriculture entities (*xinxing nongye jingying tixi*) such as family farms (*jiating nongchang*), corporate farms (or enterprise farms), 'dragon-head'

enterprises (*longtou qiye*), and specialised cooperatives. Family farms can be understood as capitalising on the traditional farming model (Day & Schneider, 2017). Rural households still are the main managers of these farms. Family farms differ from small household farming in that they operate in the market economy. It is the same with corporate farms, which operate as commercial companies. Hired staff on these farms are paid a fixed wage that is not affected by the sales of the produce. Corporate farms are also able to attract more funds in the form of joint stock enterprises.

Dragon-head enterprises (*longtou qiye*) are deemed the leading entities of local agriculture, which is why it is called the dragon-head, "typically seen as acting as the dragon's head, which pulls the rural households (the dragon's tail) along the value chains" (Lingohr-Wolf, 2011, p. 38). State capital is usually behind these enterprises. Dragon-head enterprises are influential in the local agriculture sector; they practice out modern agricultural standards (Chan & Enticott, 2019), introduce new technology, contract with small household farmers, and implement vertical integration (J. C. Chen et al., 2017). They are given more subsidies and financial incentives compared to other entities.

Specialised cooperatives are the prominent collective entities that are intended to pull together the new-style agriculture entities and small household farmers. In 2007, the state issued Specialised Cooperative Law, which sought to boost the number of specialised cooperatives in rural China (X. Zhao, 2015). The specialised cooperatives were to differ from the comprehensive cooperatives. As I mentioned in the previous section, the design of a comprehensive cooperative is meant to be more than just an economic entity. Rather, it cultivates a micro-rural society and thus contains a hybrid of economic, social and cultural activities. Specialised cooperatives, on the other hand, are established among "farmers producing the same product or using the same agricultural services" (H.Yan & Chen, 2015, p. 955). They mainly centre on agriculture-related activities.

In many cases, specialised cooperatives are established by dragon-head enterprises or other new-style agriculture entities. Individual farmers are invited to join. Specialised cooperatives are expected to be the communicative platforms between new-style agriculture entities and the small household farmers, where the former pass on the modern agriculture techniques (such as genetic modified seeds of economic crops) to the latter (Lammer, 2012; L. Zhao & Peng, 2014; X. Zhao, 2015).

However, since there are no clear protective mechanisms to ensure the equality among members of specialised cooperatives, the power distribution in them is often

imbalanced (X. Zhao, 2015). As predicted by NRRM scholars (Xuefeng He, 2006; Tiejun Wen, 1999), small household farmers are at the risk of being exploited in the cooperatives. Research in this area also suggests that instead of being a platform for collaboration, some specialised cooperatives cause further segregation between the new-style agriculture entities and small household farmers, as well as conflicts among the small household farmers themselves (L. Zhao & Peng, 2014).

Small household farmers are gradually marginalised in the course of agriculture modernisation. For instance, Chan and Enticott's paper (2019) on the local pig-raising business in Congming Island, a peri-urban area attached to Shanghai, has demonstrated how the dragon-head enterprises set up hygienic ad safety in pig raising which singles out individual farmers who do not have sufficient capital to meet the new standards. Small household farmers with very limited capital find it impossible to compete against the new-style agriculture entities in the market economy. Consequently, the number of small household farmers has decreased significantly. Many rural householders have either taken non-agricultural work or migrate out (X. Shi et al., 2007). Those who remain in farming either work in the new-style agriculture entities as employees or bind themselves contractually through the specialised cooperatives.

Economy Diversification: the emergence of rural tourism

Agriculture modernisation has released more rural labour from farming. For those who remain in the countryside, rural tourism has become the main industry that rural householders can still engage in. The central government is also in favour of this idea. In 2002, the 16th Party Congress first proposed the Beautiful Countryside (*meili xiangcun*) policy (Chan & Enticott, 2019; Chio, 2014), which encourages villages to promote rural tourism as a livelihood. In 2018, State No 1. Policy brought forward the term Rural Complex (*tianyuan zongheti*), which is explained as: "Create a complex entity that combines modern agriculture, leisure tourism and garden community. Its goal is to stimulate rural industry through tourism, so as to integrate three industries for a sustainable model" (State Council, 2016). It sets the strategy of rural tourism by identifying the rural characteristics (*fazhan xiangcun tese*).

The proposition of rural tourism is intended to solve several issues. Apart from diversifying the rural economy, it also makes a balance between the environmental logic and developmental logic (J. C. Chen et al., 2017). As the fast development unfolds in the

countryside, the state government is also facing enormous environmental challenges. Infrastructure construction and large-scale farming have caused environment deterioration. The need to grow economic crops can also result in destruction to the soil through intensive fertilisation and pesticides. For example, the plantation of man-made forests such as eucalyptus is said to absorb a disproportionate amount of water from the soil, which can be a trigger to natural disasters such as landslides (Y. Yang, 2010). At the same time, the waste issue in the countryside is also flaming[32]. Garbage bags and daily waste are found everywhere in the villages.

The 'red lines' policy was issued partly to meet the need for environmental protection (Q. F. Zhang & Wu, 2017)[33]. It sets the minimum quota of each type of land, which further consolidates the land's function, such as farming, conservation, forestry, and housing. This is to protect farmland and conservation land from being converted to non-agricultural use, such as real estate or industrial development. It speaks for the environment logic of the policy makers (J. C. Chen et al., 2017; Tiejun Wen, 2017), which is to reserve the natural resource and environmental protection so as to sustain the economic development to its maximum. The 'red lines' policy reflects the Chinese government's principle of governance (T Oakes & Schein, 2006a; X. Zhao, 2015; Zinda, 2017). It is a combination of top-down planning and goal setting with quantifiable targets, in the hope of maximising economic gain and maintaining balance among food security, environmental protection and economic development.

Rural tourism policy thus offers a solution that is aligned with the 'red lines' policy yet continues to extract economic benefit from natural resources through commercialising them in the market economy. Equally importantly, it further facilitates the process of converting the rural countryside into an auxiliary to the city, which is an important goal of urbanisation. It serves the function of entertainment and relaxation, by showcasing its rural characteristics.

Land Consolidation and Spatial Concentration

Land consolidation and spatial concentration seek to optimise the economic value of rural land, release farmland from individual households, and redistribute the rural population. These are to be achieved by regional planning, land transfer, and urbanisation

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[32] See report such as 'Environmental problems in the countryside and agriculture are severe' (2012).
[33] A more important goal of 'red lines' policy is to secure the country's food security.

policies. Nationally, the central government issued the Regional Spatialisation Plan (2015-2030), which prescribed the guidelines for agricultural development in the provinces. In this plan, the state categorised five "optimal regions for agriculture", namely, "northeast, Huang-huai region, middle and lower reaches of Yangtze river, southern China" (Day & Schneider, 2017, p.12). The plan has two functions. First, it aims at having an optimal agricultural outcome. To that end, each region has its designated farm crops. For example, southern China rural areas such as Jiangxi are allocated with the task of rice growing. Also, mono-crops, rather than multi-crops, with higher economic value are incentivised (H. Yan & Chen, 2015).

Second, at the local level, village and township governments are actively promoting land transfer to meet their yearly financial targets (Day, 2013a; J. Fan et al., 2005). In rural China, land is classified into three types: farmland (*nongye yongdi*), rural family construction land (*zhaijidi*), and rural construction land (*shequ yongdi*). While the first strictly applies to farming, the latter two are non-agricultural. While the use of rural family construction land (*zhaijidi*) is up to each household, the land itself is collectively owned. In 1998, to curb the land trading activities in place since the 1980s, the central government issued the Land Management Law (Q. F. Zhang & Wu, 2017), which forbids converting farmland to non-agricultural land. Since then, farmland has been under strict protection, although farmland usage rights can still able to be rented out for the purpose of farming. This is called land transfer (*tudi liuzhuan*) in the rural land market. Since land transfer only shifts the right to land use, it became fairly common practice. Individual rural households that no longer farm can rent out their farmland to others, such as the local village committee, which will then rent it to new-style agriculture entities. At the same time, through land acquisition (*zhengdi*), the local governments are also actively making use of non-agricultural land, namely rural household construction land and rural construction land, for economic activities such as rural tourism. This is an effective way to make use of the large areas of unused rural land caused by rural depopulation.

Meanwhile, rural populations are being relocated away from rural areas. The New-type urbanisation plan (2014–2020) set out to achieve the goal or turning 100 million rural *hukou* into urban ones by 2020 (State Council, 2014). There are key strategies such as *hukou* reform and real estate construction in the new urban areas. Policy like '*chexian gaishi*' transforms county to city level (Schein, 2006; Wilczak, 2017). Consequently,

people who hold *hukou* in these areas also automatically change their *hukou* from rural to urban.

This policy also boosts the rural real estate market by constructing large numbers of commercial buildings. The private housing market in China also differs in the urban and rural areas. Rural *hukou* holders are entitled to build their own houses on the house construction land (*zhaijidi*). Commercial house construction mainly takes place in town centres of the county, which belong to the urban units. Rural populations are encouraged to buy house properties in these areas. It often comes with a complimentary *hukou* transfer from rural to urban. This attracts more rural people to the urban areas. Another benefit of this policy is that it enables more rural land to be freed for village governments to use.

While individual householders' farmlands are being merged for large-scale farming, the usage rights of their non-farmland are also transferred to other entities with more capital. The rural population, as a result, is becoming disconnected from their land, what Tiejun Wen (2001) refers to as "peasants' survival [means] and not merely a factor of productivity [means]" (p. 294).

Infrastructure development and building up the rural consumer market

In 2006, the NSC initiated the series of 'five accessible' (*wutong*), 'seven accessible' (*qitong*), or even 'nine accessible' (*jiutong*) plans in rural China (Tiejun Wen, 2013). The goals of these plans were to enhance rural residents' accessibility to roads, electricity, water supply, cable TV, and telecommunication, etc. The construction of high-speed railway (HSR) networks and national highways, as well as the extension of mobile data coverage to remote rural areas, have since reduced both physical and virtual distances between the city and countryside. Since 2008, the central government has dedicated vast amounts of funding to HSR construction. According to the calculation of the Environmental and Energy Study Institution (EESI), the investment on the HSR network increased from $14 billion in 2004 to $88 billion in 2009. The HSR system in China is believed to be the longest worldwide, with a total length of 19,960 km in 2017 ("China relaunches world's fastest train - BBC News," 2017). It covers 29 of the 33 provinces in China. It was built on the existing railway networks that go through most of the rural and urban areas (Nunno, 2018).

The number of internet users in rural areas has also escalated. Through the projects Extending Radio and TV Broadcasting Coverage to Every Village Project (*cuncuntong*)

in 2004 and ICT Coverage Pilot Project (*dianxin pubian shidian gongcheng*) in 2015, the government has reached 100% rural coverage of landline and 98% rural coverage of ADSL and 4G broadband (Z. Zhao, Zhao, & Yangyu, 2019). Rural internet usage has increased from 106 million in 2009 to 255 million in 2019, which is 28.2% of all internet users in China (CNNIC, 2020).

This infrastructure development has brought several changes. First, it contributes to the diversification of rural job markets. Apart from traditional job choices brought by the increased accessibility to the countryside, it also incubates the booming of e-commerce and internet businesses. Online retail platforms such as Taobao, JD and the WeChat commercial platform (*weishang*) all extend to the rural areas, bringing new business opportunities to the villages (WeChat, CAICT, & DCRC, 2019). New forms of TVEs are growing because of the increasing popularity of online trading. Villages are thus transformed into hubs for individual Taobao entrepreneurs. There are even Taobao villages that specialise in certain products, such as shoes, hardware, and so on (Xing & Zhou, 2014). Apart from selling manufactured products, some rural Taobao stores also sell local agricultural and handicraft products. It is also an important selling channel for farms, especially the new-style agriculture entities (Alizila Staff, 2016).

Second, infrastructure instalment also stimulates the rural consumer market (H. Yu & Cui, 2019). While Taobao and JD bring business opportunities to the rural residents, they also introduce them to massive commercial market for shopping that is easier and cheaper than going to local retail stores. Since the Global Finance Crisis (GFC) in 2008, the Chinese government has been transforming the export-oriented economy to a consumption-based one (Day, 2013b). The large number of residents in the rural areas is the untapped consumer market that the policy makers target (Day & Schneider, 2017). Thus, infrastructure development sets the stage for mobilising rural consumption and increasing domestic purchasing power.

Alternative development: convergence with mainstream development discourse

Alternative development is still practiced, even though it continues to face challenges. With the acceleration of the modernisation of agriculture, the two platforms, comprehensive cooperation and AFN, are more or less marginalised. In addition, the state government has tightened its control of civil organisations. In 2017, it issued a new regulation that harnesses oversea NGOs in China ("China passes new laws on foreign

NGOs amid international criticism - BBC News," 2016) and has significantly increased the criteria for international NGOs to be registered (C. Feng, 2017). Amid such constraints, the alternative development movement has shifted its focus to environmental protection and cultural preservation (H. He & Qiu, 2012). As a result, rural tourism now seems to overlap with many of the initiatives of alternative development. In order to identify the village characteristics, villages often resort to bringing out the local cuisine, agricultural products, and traditional handicrafts. Organic food without pesticides and fertilisers is also promoted as the characteristics. Some villages also revitalise traditional cultural events, such as the harvest celebration (*fengnianqing*). Alternative networks such as the CSA alliance and Devotion to Homeland continue to expand under the umbrella of rural tourism. Due to the government's encouragement of rural tourism, they even seem to receive more public acknowledgement and attention.

However, the problem is that within the capitalist hegemony, these networks are compelled to reduce their activities to merely commercial ones. The goal of negotiating rural value has become increasingly impossible. The AFN, for instance, is losing its objective of finding alternative markets and becoming a sales platform for organic products (Si et al., 2015). The original aim of challenging the capitalist logic and reshaping customers and producers' relationship is being suppressed. Moreover, as it has become more entrenched in these capitalist relationships, it has changed its emphasis to satisfying its customers, the urban residents. It is at risk of exposing the producers, namely the farmers, to the same exploitative relationships they would have in the capitalist market (Si & Scott, 2016). Moreover, the AFN faces the challenge of gaining an upper hand in the market. As organic food generates higher profits, large corporate agriculture entities are also investing in organic agriculture but using more modern techniques. They are also able to obtain organic certificates that are usually too expensive for small household farmers to get. Therefore, the AFN is losing the customers to these new-style agriculture entities.

This is also the case with other projects of alternative strategy. Cultural revitalisation projects can easily be turned into a purely tourist businesses that commodify the rural culture. Comprehensive cooperatives are also being replaced by specialised ones, due to the incentives the latter enjoy. Under the Specialised Cooperatives Law, only specialised cooperatives can register legally (X. Zhao, 2015). Therefore, specialised cooperatives are first established to gain a legal position. While some might wish the more comprehensive

model could be practiced, this is unlikely under the present circumstances. In addition, in the current political situation it is highly sensitive to mention rural collectivism and democracy.

The alternative development strategy is thus being forced into more fragmented sectors. Its impact is severely constrained, due to the power imbalance between alternative development and mainstream development. While its influence can still be found in mainstream discourses, such as the issue of cooperative law and rural tourism, it lacks both the political and social power to actually stand up to the mainstream discourses on an equal basis.

Return migrants and the mainstream development discourse

Return migration slowly gained its second momentum after the 2008 GFC (Doig, 2016; Y. Shi, 2013; Xu et al., 2017; H. Zhao, 2017). Due to low product demands globally, a large number of manufacturers had to close down in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) and the Yangtze River Delta (YRD). Rural migrants found themselves jobless. It is estimated that in 2009, 20 million migrant workers had to return home due to lack of job opportunities (Liang & Cheng, 2016). However, as China undertook an economic transition that aimed at developing its domestic consumer market, the impact of GFC on migrants' employment was not too prolonged. This was in addition to the state government's strong fiscal stimulus of 4,000 billion RMB (Barboza, 2008). One year after the GFC, many factories had reopened in the coastal regions (Xu et al., 2017).

At the same time as the unbridled modernisation was being unpacked in rural China, the pull factors drawing migrants back to the rural areas were becoming more powerful (Day & Schneider, 2017). There were now more off-farm job opportunities available in the rural sites. Policies like Open up to the West have diverted more investment to the western part of China (Cartier, 2013; Chio, 2014), which is considered more economically disadvantaged. Western China is also where the majority of rural migrants come from. Meanwhile, manufacturers that used to have their businesses in PRD and YRD began to relocate their factory sites to the west (Xu et al., 2017). Large numbers of migrants then started to return to their home provinces to work in these factories. These are also counted as return migrants in a broader sense.

Concurrently, the central government was actively promoting return entrepreneurship to encourage migrants to return and start their own business. In compliance with this,

local governments lowered their requirements for small business registration. Incentives included a loan discount policy, tax exemptions, a tax return policy, as well as other small funding (B. Hu, 2011; Murphy, 1999; Zicheng Wang & Yang, 2013; Xu et al., 2017). They also organised workshops and training for capacity building. However, there are specific requirements for businesses that enjoy these benefits. Most incentives go to the new agriculture entities mentioned earlier. Individuals who are engaged in new-style agriculture entities are called new farmers (*xinxing nongmin*). New farmers are the main beneficiaries of incentives.

Moreover, the NSC's infrastructure development, such as telecommunication instalment and road construction, makes rural areas more attractive to start-ups and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs). The emergence of e-businesses has become a key driver for the employment of great numbers of return migrants (C. Ma, 2017; H. Zhao, 2017). Furthermore, the widespread expansion of 4G coverage has ensured that return migrants are able to access familiar online platforms, regardless of their physical locations.

While the push and pull factors are helpful for understanding the waves of return migration in China, it should be noted that the government's power on both authoritarian and facilitative level, which I discussed in Chapter 1, is decisive in directing more migrants to return. A nationwide campaign that seeks to attract more return entrepreneurs was carried out, as will be explained in the next section. Taking up the title of return entrepreneurs, return migrants who are young and educated actively participate in the new sectors such as the modern agriculture, rural tourism, and specialised cooperatives.

Statistics of the current wave of return migrants

It is almost impossible to estimate the precise number of return migrants. While the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) keeps track of rural migration yearly, return migration is not assessed. This is understandable given that there are many types of return migrants. Circular migrants who returned temporarily are very hard to differentiate from other return migrants. Also, some return migrants return to the town centre but not their hometown. I will now summarise in chronological order the estimations of their return rates published in the return migration literature.

Most statistics only reflect the regional return rates. Chunyu et al.'s (2013) research in 1995 shows that the interprovincial return rate from Guangdong to Sichuan was 28%. Meanwhile, there was another 10% return rate from other provinces to Sichuan. Zhao's

(2002) study in 1999 has a 38% return rate in each of six provinces: Hebei, Shaanxi, Anhui, Hunan, Sichuan, and Zhejiang[34]. Wang and Fan (2006) assessed that return migrants in Sichuan and Anhui in 1999 took up to 28% of the whole migrant population. The national survey done by Gao and Jia (2007) indicated that the return rate between 1997 to 2001 was 39.9%, with an inclination of steady growth. Ma's (2001) analysis from 1990 to 1995 was that there were 4 million migrants returning to rural areas during that time. Thus, it is possible to estimate that return rates since the 1990s have been between 25% and 40%.

News reports also reveal the total number of return entrepreneurs in more recent years without indicating the sources of their data. The number of return entrepreneurs in 2015 and 2016 were 4.8 million and 4.5 million respectively (Xiaojun Wang, 2016). In 2018, the Ministry of Agriculture announced that the number of return entrepreneurs had reached 7.4 million (Cheng, 2018). By 2019, the number had climbed to 8.5 million (Ji, 2019). However, these statistics do not help with understanding the overall picture, as only the numbers of return entrepreneurs are reported. There are no available statistics regarding the numbers of return migrants. What is certain, however, is that both academia and public media stress the steady climbing of the number (Guo & Jia, 2007; Hu & Wu, 2012; Xu et al., 2017).

2.2 *Suzhi* and the rural population: the return entrepreneur discourse

Suzhi in shaping rural identity

As discussed in Chapter 1, the *suzhi* hegemony matches the neoliberal logic with one's morality, nationalism and patriotism, and thus institutionalises and justifies a screening system that naturally puts a marginalised group in a disadvantaged position. The rural population, along with other peripheral groups, such as females and ethnic groups other than Han ethnicity, face more severe judgement of having a low *suzhi* (Schneider, 2015). *Suzhi*'s evaluation criteria have demonstrated a very clear urban/modern preference. Rural populations thus become the representatives of low *suzhi*, as they are portrayed as being 'backward', 'ignorant', 'uncivilised' and 'primitive' (Chan & Enticott, 2019; Thomason, 2017; H. Yan, 2008).

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[34] These provinces, especially Sichuan and Anhui, are the biggest migrant-sending areas in China.

Among the rural populations, small household farmers, who are usually relatively old and still practice the traditional farming styles, are considered at the bottom of the *suzhi* hierarchy. The term *tu*, literally translated as 'soil', is a description associated with them, referring to their under-development and inability to catch up with the avant-garde. In popular culture, *tu* also refers to anything that's outdated, unfashionable, or lacking in refined taste. I previously mentioned Chan and Enticott's (2019) study of the modernisation of pig raising business. *Suzhi* discourse is taking a crucial role in asserting the dragon-head enterprises' authoritative role and diminishing the small household farmers. Farmers who still practice traditional husbandry are named as *tuyang* (literally translated as soil raiser), whereas farmers in dragon-head enterprises or those who received training from them are referred as modern farmers (*xiandai nongmin*) or Dr. farmer (*buoshi nong*).

Also related to *tu* (soil), the rural environment is considered to be 'dirty' and 'unhygienic' (W. Sun, 2013). Rural houses are deemed run-down, with dim lights, dusty floors, and toilets without modern flushing devices. Other modern icons, such as shopping malls, cars, electronic appliances, are absent in rural spaces, adding to their image of being low *suzhi*. This is in contrast to the tidy concrete roads and tall skyscrapers in the city. *Suzhi* discourse has structured an evaluation system that justifies the rural-urban dichotomy (Jacka, 2009; Kipnis, 2006; W. Sun, 2013; H. Yan, 2008). In this narrative, the urban has been purposefully portrayed as opposite to the rural, representing the 'good' features that the rural lacks. The rural, on the other hand, is cast as the 'problem' that needs to be addressed (Cartier, 2016; Schneider, 2015). In this way, *suzhi* discourse vindicates the state government's strategy of urbanisation and modernisation. More specifically, it justifies the means to transform the rural population by cultivating urban features.

The strategy of transformation was devised by the political and economic elites in China without the participation of the rural population (Schneider, 2015). The argument that the rural population has low *suzhi* also conveniently justifies disengaging the rural peasants from the discussion. While the mainstream development and alternative development discourse theorists debate the methods that are more applicable to rural revitalisation, rural opinions are neither asked for being nor heard.

Opinions regarding the rural population are shared by the alternative discourse and the mainstream discourse, despite their differences in rural strategy. The pro-peasant

development discourse also holds that rural peasants do not have enough capacity to decide for themselves. As Xuefeng He (2011b) argues, peasants as individuals are not capable of making the right decisions for themselves, thus suggesting they are short-sighted. Others such as Wei Pan (2006) have also expressed similar concerns. Development projects carried out by the alternative approach often rely heavily on university scholars, volunteers, and so called 'rural experts', but rural residents are the ones they need to motivate and guide. As a result, rural populations' opinions are profoundly silenced in both the mainstream and alternative approaches[35].

This configuration of the rural population conforms to what Cartier (2016) calls the discursive narrative of development. She argues that the rural population is deemed to be in need of development because of the qualities that they lack. The prescribed qualities accounting for development are determined by the elite class. In other words, the rural population is disempowered in this process, as they are merely recipients of, rather than participants in, the construction of such narratives. As the group who have the most at stake, they are deprived of the right to decide for themselves.

In that sense, it is very questionable whether the rural population is at the centre of both development discourses. Who actually benefits from rural development and modernisation? As the rural population has little say in the development discussions, could the current development discourses, both mainstream and alternative, simply reproduce the central/periphery division? *Suzhi* discourse legitimises the marginalisation of the rural population, deepens the rural-urban dichotomy and further reduces the rural population to a disposable situation (McMichael, 2006). In the meantime, it imposes self-governance as a general mentality that holds individuals accountable for their disposability. By that logic, it seems quite reasonable that what the central government means by developing the countryside is actually a euphemism for reducing, eliminating and eventually eradicating the rural population (Schneider, 2015). Similarly, the interpretation of reducing the rural-urban gap is to accelerate urban assimilation. I will explore how such unequal dynamics were played out in the context of my study.

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[35] This seems to be contradictory to the participatory approach that is almost a default setting of all the NGO projects. As remarked by Jacka (2013), the widely practiced participatory approach has become more like a tactic to secure funding. Its actual effect, on the other hand, is compromised as it does not challenge the local power structure.

Constructing return entrepreneur discourse

To some extent, the increase of return entrepreneurs is the main force that forms up the current wave of return migrants. In other words, while the return migration phenomenon is neither particularly new nor unusual in the migration pattern in rural China, the advocacy for return entrepreneurs has transformed the social image of this group through increasingly positive connotations. This suggests that the surge of return entrepreneurs is not simply due to the governments' incentive policies. The acute imperative to improve their *suzhi* is the main force that drives migrants to come home in the first place. The construction of the return entrepreneur discourse denotes the formation of "neoliberal governmentality that has rearticulated the relationship between the state, the market, and subjectivity in Development" (Yan, 2008, p.137).

The narrative of return entrepreneurship is very much yoked to the *suzhi* discourse. Built upon the neoliberal subject of the 'enterprising-self' (Hoffman, 2008; L. Zhang & Ong, 2008), the return entrepreneur ticks all the boxes of having high *suzhi.* Above all, entrepreneurship indicates independence and individualism, to be an entrepreneur means willing to take risks and be a pioneer, which is a strong indicator of having high *suzhi.* Being a return entrepreneur in the countryside is also associated with a high sense of social responsibility and a deep compassion for rural China. This is particularly appealing to return migrants, especially those managed to receive a tertiary degree.

The public and social media play an integral role in enhancing the state government's advocacy for the entrepreneurial discourse. It is well known that public media groups in China work under instruction from the Chinese government (T. Lewis et al., 2016). They work almost as a window for the public as well as academic institutions to understand the government's policies. Although social media seems to have more freedom in content publishing, it is heavily influenced by public media, with the censorship system on social media constraining its publications. A close look at the publications on these platforms gives us a vivid example of how the state manipulates the terms to produce the 'meta-language' (W. Sun, 2013) that turns the image of return migrants and fabricates the return entrepreneur discourse.

As discussed earlier, the actual statistics of return migration remains very ambiguous in academic discussion. Nevertheless, it is almost a universal claim from the newspapers that the number of return migrants is increasing. This argument is often made without indicating the date source. For example, in the article titled 'Steady increase of rural

migrants and rural university students who return to start their own business' (Jinliang Qiao, 2016), published on Economic Daily on August 1st, 2016, the vice director of Agriculture Ministry, Xiaohua Chen, disclosed to the press that the increase rate of return entrepreneurs remain steadily to be above 10%. However, the vice director didn't specify the rate, which could range between 10% to 99%[36]. Nevertheless, a common message conveyed in this report, as well as other ones by state-owned newspapers, is that the number of return migrants, especially return entrepreneurs, is hiking (see also Wang, 2016; Cheng, 2018; Ji, 2019).

The current term return entrepreneur (*fanxiang chuangye*) consists of two words: *fanxiang* (returning home), and *chuangye* (creating a business, namely entrepreneurship). I discussed in Chapter 1 how returning home was rephrased in the mid-2000s with an additional connotation of social responsibility. The term *chuangye* went through a similar process at an earlier stage. In the 1980s, as China was undertaking economic reform, the private business began to appear as an alternative economic entity. The public then held a sceptical attitude towards these businesses, referring to them as individual vendors (*getihu*), which holds a neutral but slightly diminishing tone in the Chinese context. Engagement in private business is called *gao* (do) *getihu* (private business), indicating a casual and informal status. This is opposed to the 'iron bowl' jobs of state-owned units (*danwei*).

Gradually, the term *chuangye* (*chuang* as creating and *ye* as careers), was introduced to replace *gao getihu*, as a means to encourage enterprises. *Chuangye* bears the significance of being adventurous, bold, and not being afraid of risks. In combination, *fanxiang chuangye* (return entrepreneur) represents the new social interpretation that is capable and adventurous, not afraid of failure, with a high sense of social responsibility.

This is also reflected from the expression used by the news reports. The key themes of these reports are 'return entrepreneur' became a 'leader' of his/her (usually his) village, bringing prosperity to their fellow countrymen by 'pursuing their dreams'. Other repeatedly occurring words are mission (*shiming*), meaningful (*youyiyi*), and innovation (*chuangxin*). Articles with titles such as Dream seeker in a remote mountain area: Labor Model Zhang Mingfu's story of being return entrepreneurs (Xia Huang & Xie, 2019), Three return migrants' dream of entrepreneurship (Xinghua Huang & Yu, 2009), and

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[36] The original term he used was *liangweishu*, which means above 10, between 10 to 99.

Motivated youth return to countryside, practice out China Dream (Y. Zhu et al., 2019) are a few examples of the reports on return entrepreneurs. Words like 'dream seeker' and 'pursuit of one's dream' are very common in the newspapers of state propaganda. In that sense, the entrepreneur discourse is also embedded into the advocacy of the China Dream. It has laid out a framework in which personal achievement and self-realisation is in line with satisfying one's social responsibility, expressing compassion and loyalty to their hometown, as well as realising the China Dream.

In addition to the state and public media, social media assists in changing the image of return migrants. The social media public accounts echo the themes discussed already, but in a more narrative way. The Huxiu's[37] article *Stories of return youth entrepreneur: outmigration is experience, returning is meaningful* is a typical example; it composes the title in a less dominant way, mimicking the tone of one telling a story (L. Lin, 2019). Online streaming and video sharing, as the newest transmission forms, also shape the return entrepreneurs' social image as Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) in the social media era. KOLs such as Liziqi[38] and Xudasao[39] post their country life stories online and have gained enormous numbers of followers. Centring on topics such as making and eating food, self-making of products, nature exploration, and so on, these posts invoke the stereotypical images of the countryside being 'backward' and 'dirty'. Compared to authoritarian propaganda, social media figures have a more infiltrating effect, as their stories or videos are widely forwarded on popular social platforms such as Kuaishou, Tiktok, and Bilibili[40]. These videos enjoy high rates of browsing and commenting, which are effective transmission channels.

Therefore, by tweaking the terms used for return migrants and return entrepreneurs, the dual approaches of top-down and bottom-up advocacy has mainstreamed the return entrepreneur discourse. One impact is that this manages to partially shift the social image of return migrants from being the failures of migration to the pioneers in rural development. I use the adverb 'partially' because it only applies to return entrepreneurs.

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[37] A social media platform that specialises in sharing scientific and innovative technology. Web site: www.huxiu.com

[38] A Chinese food and country-life female blogger with more than 7 million followers. Blog site: https://space.bilibili.com/19577966

[39] Chinese food and country-life male blogger with more than 4 million followers. Blog site: https://space.bilibili.com/390461123

[40] These three are popular social media platforms. Users share and forward videos and do live streaming. Kuaishou and Tiktok are mobile applications while Bilibili has a web page as well as a mobile version.

While being return migrants still bears the old connotation of being 'failure in selectivity', the choice of becoming a return entrepreneur allows an exemption from it. Such portrayals serve as the most powerful 'pulling' factor for rural migrants to return.

One thing needs to be pointed out is that apart from return entrepreneurs, return village cadres (*cunganbu*) also enjoy an equally positive social image. Village cadres play the role as a general manager in the village, from mediating conflicts among village members to village governance. They are the leaders in the village committee, which usually consists of three to seven people. Village cadres are elected by villagers who hold rural *hukou* of the same village. Their service term lasts from three to five years. In parallel with advocacy of return entrepreneurs, there is a similar campaign that motivated educated youth, both with urban and rural *hukou*, to take on the responsibility of village cadres in the countryside. In 2010, the central government issued a policy to recruit university graduates to become village cadres; they are known as 'university village cadres' (*daxuesheng cunguan*) (F. Hu & Wu, 2012)[41]. Like the return entrepreneurs, return village cadres are also depicted in public media as self-sacrificing and self-motivated social beings with high *suzhi*. They also enjoy occasional media coverage. Both career types are believed to contribute to the rural revitalisation. Therefore, we could understand the return entrepreneur discourse in a broader sense, which not only includes return entrepreneurs but also return cadres. In other words, those who are involved themselves in rural development one way or another. The majority of return migrants portrayed in the media as positive public figures are educated rural migrants, just like the research participants of this thesis. They own a higher education degree. They usually work as non-labour workers, such as office staff, which differs them from other migrants who work in manufacturing or construction sectors. Only very occasionally, cases of return migrants who take up labour work when they are in the city are reported (Xinghua Huang & Yu, 2009).

By contrast, return migrants who take up occupations other than these two, such as factory workers, civil servants, and so on are seldom mentioned in any kind of media coverage. For one thing, the selectivity in reporting about return migrants projects a partial image of their work experience in the countryside, which suggests return migrants

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[41] Unlike the return entrepreneur campaign, recruited university graduates are not necessarily from the village to which they are assigned. Also, they usually stay for one or two terms before leaving for a higher position. Being university village cadres is their steppingstone to a higher political career.

are equivalent to return entrepreneurs. It also conveys the hegemony of entrepreneurs, setting up a social hierarchy in which return entrepreneurship is rated higher than other careers. This explains why when I invited WYL to participate in this research, she was surprised, claiming that she was not a return migrant. Her response reflects the common misunderstanding established by the mass media that only return entrepreneurs are counted as return migrants (*fanxiang qingnian*) these days.

2.3 Understanding the rural family and society

Chinese society is known for not being an individual-centred society (Fei, 1992; Hamilton & Zheng, 1992). Households are the basic social units. Therefore, it is critical to examine the return migrants' behaviours and decision-making within the context of the rural family and social structure. Rural family and rural society have been studied by generations of social scientists. It is not my intention here to exhaust the literature on these matters. Rather, this research is interested in capturing the tenets that are interrelated with migration and return migration. Drawing on studies by scholars such as Wu (2017), Yan (1996), He (2011a), Yang (1994), and Fei (Fei, 1992; Hamilton & Zheng, 1992), to name a few, I will summarise features that are most acute for understanding the impacts of family and society on return migrants. Apart from that, I also identify changes in family and social structures in the era of migration.

Rural Family: The Contractual Principle

I derive the contractual principle from the three overarching canons of the rural family: it is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal (Whyte, 2003). These canons speak to the four characteristics of a family's dwelling plans, intergenerational relationships and power dynamics. First, a traditional household bears the feature of the cohabiting arrangement; generations share the same living space. The rural family usually consists of three or four generations, from the elder parents (grandparents or great-grandparents generation) to their adult sons (the parents' generation), and then the children of the adult sons (grand-children), as well as their children (great-grand-children). This arrangement is called 'four generations in one household' (*sishi tongtang*). Traditional family follows the rule of filial piety, a core value of Chinese society (Yunxiang Yan, 1999, 2016). Traditional filial piety requires the lower generations have to pay their respect and loyalty to the upper generations. That is to say, the grandparents' generation enjoys the absolute authority and respect in the whole family.

Second, the traditional household operates on the principle of reciprocity. Filial piety means the younger adult generation to provide both financial and emotional care to the older generations that raised them when they are young. This equates to paying back what they owe to the older generation. Similarly, they raise their children in the understanding that they will also be looked after in the future. This speaks to a contractual relationship based on reciprocity (M. Guo, Chi, & Silverstein, 2013).

Third, this contractual feature is also reflected in the patrilocal character of the traditional rural family. When female members get married, they move out of their natal family and become members of their husbands' households. This is referred as 'married out' (*jia chuqu*), which differs from the term used when sons are married, which is 'marry into' (*qu jinlai*). Since the marriage enables the husband's household to have an extra member, it is expected to pay the wife's family a lump sum, called the marriage money (*caili,* literal translation as colourful gift). The amount of the marriage money varies in different regions and ranges from tens of thousands to even millions of RMB (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012). It is a symbolic and practical gesture that 'buys off' the care provision from the wife's natal family. This fundamentally exhibits the feature of trading between two households, which also corresponds to the contractual relationship. In some extremely poor families, their strategy of getting their son in wedlock is to marry their daughters in exchange for the money needed for the son's marriage. It is also due to this reason, daughters are in the least favoured position, as they will not be providing care to their aging parents in the future.

This speaks to the fourth characteristics of the rural family, which is its patriarchal power structure. Traditional gender norms expect female members to be obedient to their partners, who are either current or future heads of the family. Apart from the reason that women are to be married out or into the family, which makes their position unstable, it is also decided by the division of labour in the domestic and outer spheres (Choi & Peng, 2016; Jacka, 2013; Murphy, 2004; Seeberg & Luo, 2018; Stromquist, 2015). The domestic sphere is related to the more private arena within the household premises, whereas the outer sphere refers to the public realm outside the household.

Female members are responsible for household responsibilities, such as housework and care for minors, which belong to the domestic sphere. In the Chinese language, the wife is called 'domestic person' (*neiren*). In a more conservative time, wives were even forbidden to be present in the public sphere, namely outside the household. This

prevented them from being engaged in activities such as going to school, seeking formal jobs, or participating in public discussion. For example, Ge et al.'s (2011) study of the public participation in building a reservoir in a remote rural village in Yunnan province indicates women are still prevented from discussing village affairs. Jacka (2013), Murphy (2004) and Judd (2010) point out that division of labour is the fundamental cause of the imbalance between male and female members of a rural household. As women are constrained from having a job, their contribution to the household is undermined, as the work they have done cannot be transferred to a financial contribution. This results in their inferior position. This again points to the contractual relationships in rural households, which involves their capability of supporting the livelihoods of family members.

Household livelihood mechanism

These contractual relationships constitute the livelihood mechanism that lies at the centre of each rural household, as well as the whole of rural society. It requires household members to respect the reciprocal rule: they pay or invest their part of the contribution in exchange for equivalent support and help from other members.

The rural household livelihood strategy is another topic that is under intense scrutiny by academics from different disciplines (J. Gao & Wu, 2017; Xuefeng He, 2012; Z. Ma, 2001; Murphy, 1999; Nguyen & Locke, 2014; X. Shi et al., 2007; W. W. Wang & Fan, 2006). In Chapter 1, I introduced the capability approach, which untangled the robustness of livelihood into two components: capability and functioning (Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 1999). The household livelihood plan strategises by magnifying functioning and capability to enhance its fallback position (Murphy, 1999). Its goal remains the strengthening of the household's resilience to risks by building up a strong livelihood safety net (X. Wu, 2017). This is crucial to the household as well as its individual members. In the case of individuals who are socially marginalised, they rely more heavily on their family as a means to pull together more resources. Therefore, the socially and economically disadvantaged household members are incorporated more into its household livelihood plan. They are also more likely to lack individual resources. For these households, the family members' human capital is the biggest asset that they can make use of. As a result, these households are also more dependent on their members' life plans, such as schooling, migration, marriage, and so on.

The shifting concept of familial values

Rural populations in China were reliant on their households, as well as network of households, namely, kinship, as safety-net guarantees long before the rural reform took place (Xuefeng He, 2011a). In the present, Chinese rural populations are even more contingent on the assistant network weaved by household members. As observed by Nguyen et al. (2014), Jacka (2012), and Wu (2017) the rural household has become the primary unit of production and welfare provision. Consequently, rural households have taken a more flexible form to fulfil multiple goals of economic gain, reproduction, and family care. Household members now need to collaborate more closely with each other.

Migration to the city is a key strategy for households to diversify their economic incomes. Young capable members migrate out for non-agriculture jobs, while their parents continue farming in order to get the food subsidies as well as extra income. Households whose members all migrate out or find off-farm work can gain additional income by transferring their land to others. Migration and return migration take turns whenever a household has significant changes, with family reproduction and childcare often the deciding factors. Translocal households or those with split living arrangements thus seem to be common in the countryside. Chen and Fan (2018) point out that both migration and return migration form a circular migration pattern that is integral to household livelihood plans showing their active agency of making the best out of both rural and urban. Other scholars, meanwhile, are less positive, pointing out that circular migration is unstable and full of internal contradictions (e.g. Nguyen & Locke, 2014).

Along with household living arrangements, other family values are also transforming. For example, the meaning of filial piety has somewhat changed. The literature on filial piety in migration families suggests that as split living has become common, the requirement that family members should stay together to show filial piety no longer applies. Conversely, many senior parents consider their children migrating and settling in the city as still demonstrating filial piety (Choi & Peng, 2016). Compared to them being physically present, the monetary support from the distance, namely, their migration remittance, is a more vital demonstration of the younger generations' filial piety.

Moreover, both the *suzhi* discourse and modern hegemony reverse the original ascendant order in rural families, namely the junior's generation as inferior to their senior's (Cui & Jin, 2015; Yunxiang Yan, 2003, 2016). Since the knowledge and skills that the senior generation has, such as farming, are no longer sufficient enough to make

a living, the younger generation's urban experience enables them to be more modern and developed compared to their elders, under the influence of *suzhi* discourse.

The younger generations, that is, the younger adults and the children, are taking a more crucial role in ensuring their households' functioning. Young adults are the main economic source of the family, and children bear a future prospect of uplifting the household's socioeconomic status. These two generations are capable of bringing fundamental changes to the family. As a result, the older generation has lost its authoritative role in the family.

In order to receive care from their juniors, elders now have to continue working even when they reach old age (F. Chen, 2014; Gruijters, 2016). Childcare and agricultural work, if available, have become major responsibilities. As a result, the skipped generation, meaning households in which the middle generation – the parents of the youngest generation – is missing, has appeared (X. Shi et al., 2007; Thomason, 2017). Rural children are brought up with their parents absent for most of the time and are thus referred to as the 'left-behind children'. It is worth mentioning here that the skipped generation is not a phenomenon exclusive to rural China. It is also a common practice among urban families to entrust the elder parents with childcare (C. Zhang et al., 2019). However, the 'left-behind children' are only referred to by the rural population. The public discourse strongly criticizes rural parents for them being absent when their children are growing up (Tang, 2012; D. Yang, Qin, & Wei, 2017).

In addition, there is evidence suggesting that the expectation of daughters taking care of their natal parents is increasing (Cui & Jin, 2015; M. Guo, Chi, & Silverstein, 2012; Yang Shen, 2016; W. Sun, 2019; N. Zhang, 2013). Split-living arrangements and a descendent integrational order has resulted in less patrilineal emphasis in rural families. Living arrangements of married couples have become quite flexible (Wu, 2017). More practical factors such as which side of the couple's parents is able to take care of their children, or which side is in need of assistance, are now more crucial. There are cases where a couple lives closer to the wife's parents, which enables her to take better care of her parents. Also, it is now customary for a married daughter to send money and gifts to her natal parents as a token of her filial piety (Shen, 2016).

It should be pointed out that the household livelihood strategy is a two-edged sword. It is the fallback position that individuals can count on; by collaborating with other family members as a whole, they are also able to maximise their resources. At the same time,

there can be a conflict between an individual's choices and their household's choices. In other words, an individual's functioning is not always in consistent with that of their household. From the family member's perspective, while they are obliged by family responsibility to contribute to the livelihood strategy, they are also struggling against the conflicts between their own will and that of the household (Nguyen & Lock, 2014; Jacka, 2012). From the household livelihood point of view, the household's decision-making power supersedes that of the individuals. An individual's own agency can easily be compromised based on their value as human capital. The household can also veto a decision if it doesn't seem to add to the capability of the household. Conversely, if the household enjoys sufficient capability, that is, entitlement to resources, it is more likely to allow additional freedom to individual members. In that sense, how much flexibility an individual acquires to make their own decision is reflective of not only their own capability, but also the whole household's.

Rural Society: Society of Familiarity

Rural society, as the aggregation of multiple rural households, has values similarities to theirs. As a collective social compound established on the kinship of the male family members, the reciprocal contractual relation still applies in rural society. Thus, rural social relations, also known as *guanxi*, abide by the rule of familiarity (*shuren shehui*), which differentiates the 'self/inside' (*zijiren*) from 'other/outside' (*wairen/moshengren*) circles (Xuefeng He, 2011a; Yunxiang Yan, 1996; M. M. Yang, 1994).

A common connection is essential get into the 'inside' circle. The term that refers to the inside and outside circle explains the process of becoming familiarised in Chinese society. People from the outside are referred to as 'uncooked' or 'raw' people (*shengren*), meaning 'strangers', while people in the inside circle as 'cooked' people, meaning people one already knows. Moving from uncooked to cooked requires time-consuming repetitive interactions that abide by the reciprocal rule (McDonald, 2016; Wallis, 2013; M. M. Yang, 1994).

This common connection used to be defined by the social actors' inbuilt characteristics, such as blood connection, kinship, or geographical locations. As more movement has occurred due to migration, the definition of common connection has expanded. Sharing the same experiences, such as education or work, also constitute legitimate criteria for getting into an inside circle. This means the inside circle is no longer

restricted to relatives. Friends and business contacts can also form inside circles if they enjoy a trusting relationship. One's social relations consist of multiple inside circles, which vary in their degrees of closeness. The cultivation of such relationships requires long-term repeated social interactions based on the principle of reciprocity.

Familial and social relations: the totality of practicality and sentimentality

The above analysis of rural households' emphases on the livelihood plan is not to suggest that familial relations in Chinese households are purely practical. Rather, the emotional relationship is embedded in the contractual relationship. This is indicative of another feature of rural families, as well as the rural society, which is a totality of functionality and emotional sentiment. Scholars who study rural familial relations note that emotional expression is often covert among family members (Kipnis, 1997; Wallis, 2013). It is not common for them to express their feelings outwardly; these are more likely to be conveyed in the actions they take[42]. Having filial piety to their parents, for instance, is the strongest manifestation of their love. That is to say, rendering their parents support, being compliant to the families' choices, and putting the families' needs ahead of their own are interpreted as showing their emotional attachment.

This is also the case with social relations in rural society. As Kipnis (1997) puts it, "In *guanxi*, feeling and instrumentality are totality" (p. 23). In rural society, the practical function also conveys the sentiments and emotional attachments of members through adherence to social protocols. For example, it is a custom in many rural places (even urban places as well) that guests bring 'gift money' to weddings. It is an expression of congratulations as well as a practical support to help the newlyweds start their family[43]. However, this social activity is not completely practical; it also bears the meaning of welcoming a new member into the family (Xuefeng He, 2011a). Thus, in analysing rural Chinese relationships, it is important not to view instrumental factors as separate from feelings and emotions.

The following chapters will demonstrate how these four features about the rural family and society, which are the contractual relationship, the principle of reciprocity, the differentiation of inside and outside world, as well as totality of functionality and

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[42] 用行动来表示.

[43] In many regions, weddings have become so profitable that people earn money from it.

sentimentality, are important in understanding return migrants' life in private and public dimensions. They will show that while the constitutions and values of the family and society can vary, their core tenets remain unchanged.

Chapter 3

Trajectories of return: individual, family and career

如果你看到他们衣冠楚楚从不出现在田边地头，你就大致可以猜出他们的身份：大多是中专、大专、本科毕业的乡村知识分子。他们耗费了家人大量钱财，包括金榜题名时热热闹闹的大摆宴席，但毕业后没有找到工作，正承担着巨大的社会舆论压力和自我心理压力，过着受刑一般的日子，但他们苦着一张脸，不知道如何逃离这种困境，似乎从没有想到跟着父辈下地干活正是突围的出路，正是读书人自救和人间正道。他们因为受过更多教育，所以必须守住自己衣冠楚楚的怀才不遇。 正如晏阳初在 1934 年的感慨："我们初到乡间，看见农民失学，慨叹中国教育不普及，后来在乡间久住，才知道幸而今日中国的教育不普及，否则真非亡国不可。这并非愤激之谈，因为农村青年，未入学校之前，尚能帮助他的父母，拾柴捡粪，看牛耕田，不失为一个生产者，可是一旦入了学校，受了一些都市文明的教育，他简直变成一个在乡村不安、到城市无能、不文不武的无业游民。

Translation:

If you see well-dressed young lads in the countryside but never working in the field, you can probably guess who they are: they are the 'country intellectuals' who graduated from vocational colleges and universities. They used up enormous amounts of money from their family, including celebration banquets when they were admitted by higher education institutions. However, after they graduate, they can't find any jobs. They are facing enormous pressure from society and themselves. They experience torture like being in prison. But they

don't know how to escape such a trap. It never occurs to them to follow their fathers' path and go back to farming, which is actually one way out for them. Farming is the only way out and the righteous thing [for the intellectuals] to do. Exactly because they have received more education, they feel obliged to maintain their identity as well-dressed gentlemen who can't find someone who appreciates them. This is what Yangchu Yan[44] claimed in 1934: "When we first came to the countryside, we saw farmers with low education. We felt ashamed that so many people in our nation are not able to be educated. However, as we stayed here longer, we began to feel it's a fortune that so many people are not educated. Otherwise, our country will be over. I don't say this out of rage. It's because youth today in the countryside are still able to help their parents with farm work, picking up woods and faeces of animals, herding the cows and ploughing the land. They can be qualified as a productive person. Once they enter school, receiving civilised education, they completely turn into a jobless wanderer who can be settled down neither in the city nor in the countryside. (Han, 2008, translated by Xibei Wang)

In Han's (2008) essay *Youth in the Mountain* (*shanzhong shaonian*[45]), he depicts a troublesome image of rural youths, whom he sarcastically calls 'country intellectuals' (*xiangcun zhishi fenzi*); they are loitering in the countryside, jobless and aimless. In his partly worried, partly critical tone, he expresses concern about the future of these educated youths. The main concern is about whether or not they can make themselves useful when they finish their education and return. He quotes Yangchu Yan (1934): "Once they entered school, receiving civilised education, they completely turned into a jobless loiterer who is able to settle down neither in the city nor in the countryside" (p. 299). By quoting one of the founders of the 1930s Rural Construction Movement (RRM), Han seems to blame education for making the rural youths 'useless'. In fact, both Han and Yan express pity that the educated youth or 'country intellectuals' were not willing to resume farming. In the opinion of these scholars, "farming is the only way out and the

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[44] Also known as James Yen, a Christian educator and one of the founders of RRM in the 1930s.

[45] Though it is not explicit, *shaonian* in Chinese usually means male youth.

righteous thing [for the intellectuals] to do"[46]; they thus equate farming to having high morality. Han's concern aligns with the testimonies of the two female participants in this research, ZHL and HSM, who are caught up in a dilemma of *gaobucheng, dibujiu*[47]:

> There are not many [work] choices for people like us. We are *gaobucheng, dibujiu*. If you ask me to work for others here in the countryside, I don't think I can do it, unless it is for the government. If I can't do that, I have no other choice but to work for myself. (ZHL, female research participant, retail shop owner)

> The countryside now is much better. Life quality here is also improved. Less educated migrants are inclined to return after being in the city for several years. They can always find jobs like construction work or retail sales. However, for us, unless there are better job opportunities than we had in the city, most people are not willing to come back. (HSM, female research participant, founder of a social media company)

In her thesis *I Want to Improve*, Stornes (2012) paints a vivid picture of rural university graduates' journeys of self-improvement and 'dream chasing' (*zhuimeng*) in one of the urban villages (*chengzhongcun*) [48] of Beijing. As college or university graduates, they started their careers in Beijing – one of the biggest metropolitan cities in China – and dreamed of finding proper jobs in office buildings in the CBD that provided social insurance and housing fund[49]. But in reality, very few of them could actually realise such a dream. Their living environments in the urban village were usually appalling, with poor hygiene and no guarantee of safety in the case of fire or other emergencies. Sharing accommodation with a handful of others in a densely populated area on the outskirts of

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[46] 读书人的自救和正道.

[47] Chinese idiom, meaning a dangling situation, not able to reach the high-hanging fruits but not willing to settle for low-hanging fruits. It is often used to refer to the dilemma of career seeking or marriage matching.

[48] 城中村: densely populated living blocks in China. Many of them used to be villages on the outskirts of the city. As the city expands in size, more villages are converted to urban units.

[49] Formal jobs in China offer social service insurances known as five insurances and one fund (*wuxian yijin*): these include job insurance, pension, medical insurance, work injury insurance and maternity insurance and housing fund for house purchasing.

the city, these rural graduates relentlessly searched for jobs. If they were lucky enough to find a job, their lives would involve excessively long working hours, little rest and long commutes between work and home. Furthermore, there would be no guarantee of how long they could keep the job. They attributed their disillusionment to their lack of *suzhi*. They wanted to improve themselves and be more capable in the urban job market, and they had accepted that poor living conditions and high uncertainty of jobs in the city would be proof of their efforts.

The educated return migrants interviewed for this research are the worried youths that Han (2008) refers to. They used to be the strenuous rural university graduates described in Stornes' (2012) thesis. This chapter engages with but goes beyond the above description to look at educated return migrants' journey of home returning. Is it true that most of them are just wandering around jobless as depicted by Han? If yes, what are the causes? If not, how do they find jobs in the countryside? How do their experiences in the city affect their decisions? What are their job preferences? What are the factors that shape their career choices? In this chapter, I will seek answers to these questions by carefully unravelling these country intellectuals' decision-making processes and explore the external and internal factors informing their career choices. I will also identify the constraints in their decision-making, their coping mechanisms and their agency to negotiate.

I examine the return entrepreneur discourse that has created modern neoliberal subjectivity in return entrepreneurs. I argue that the burden carried by return entrepreneurs reflects the hegemonic self-development discourse imposed on educated rural migrants who are more prone to guilt for lacking *suzhi*. The return entrepreneur discourse was carefully devised by the central government to cope with the expanding surplus labour force in China's modernisation and urbanisation sectors. As noted by Fan et al. (2005), in the 1990s, small business evolved in the countryside when the economic crisis resulted in 150-200 million redundant rural workers. With this as their history, is becoming entrepreneurial another way for current educated returnees to cope with unemployment? The joblessness not only occurs in the countryside but also in urban areas, which is the major reason why these return migrants choose to return. Thus, by investigating their career choices, I hope to shed light on their marginalised experiences in the city. Drawing on the Foucauldian theory conduct of conduct (Wallis, 2013), this chapter will discuss the "rationalities, tactics and actions" (p.9) of some individuals, as

well as how they are "integrated into and comply with" (p.9) the desires of their families, the public society and the state.

3.1 Educated returnees' career choices: an overview

All the participants in this research have full-time jobs that can be categorised into two types: self-employed or employed by others[50]. In the category of self-employed, there are two sub-divisions: agricultural industries and non-agricultural industries. For those who are employed by others, there are also two types: occupations within the institutional system[51] (*tizhinei*) and village cadres. I will discuss each job type to depict a general picture of these careers.

Self-employment

In Chapter 2, I explained how two farming modes coexist in rural China: subsistence farming, also known as traditional or small household farming, and modern agriculture implemented by 'new-style agricultural entities' (*xinxing nongye*). This clarification is important, as the two farming types are remarkably different.

Of those interviewed for this research, 37 of the 38 participants (both educated and less educated) had given up traditional farming. Many claimed that even before they migrated, they had not participated in subsistence farming; they were more occupied by their study or other activities. Some of their parents' and grandparents' generations had also quit farming completely. In the return migrants' opinion, farm labour is very tiring, and the outcome is not significant; it's not worth the effort. Some of their parents still retained the habit of farming on small pieces of land, even if just in their backyard. In this case, the harvest is usually just for household consumption and not for sale. ZHL, whose mother is one of these, told me: "the older generation is still used to farming. It's part of their life. If they don't farm, they feel insecure." Older people also farm to maintain a secondary income. Nevertheless, traditional farming is no longer financially sufficient for rural households. It has become a side activity for sentimental purposes.

For young educated return migrants who are eager to prove themselves (*zhengming ziji*), farming is not an option. However, almost half of my study participants worked in

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[50] Refer to Appendix 2 for a full list of participants' careers
[51] 体制内.

the agricultural sector. FQ[52] is one of three co-founders of a corporate farm. Their farm grows a diversity of produce and also offers rural leisure tourist services, such as 'peasant family happiness' (*nongjiale*) [53]. HBZ[54] runs a family farm (*jiating nongchang*) after spending more than 10 years in the city. He has diplomas from three different colleges in tea plantation management, microbiology agriculture, and aquaculture. He is the ideal candidate for the term 'new farmers' (*xinxing nongmin*). His farm collaborates with the research institute in Fujian Province on experiments of vertical farming (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 HBZ's Farm

HBZ's experimental green house: in the left photo, there is an illustration board which explains the experiment of fish and vegetable co-cultivating.

Ten of the male return migrants I interviewed had taken up the new agricultural role of managing either a corporate or family farm. These 'new' farms enjoy incentives from the central government such as no taxation and small grants. They hire local people to do the farm work on fixed salaries while they focus on research, marketing and public outreach. Only one male return migrant, 27-year-old HXF, resumed traditional farming alongside those in his household. The reason that HXF is still practising traditional farming is largely due to the support of Organisation Green (OG), an NGO which will be discussed in HXF's case study and in Chapter 6.

Although there is not enough statistically significant data from this research to show that traditional farming is gradually disappearing in the countryside, my observations show this to be true at least in southern China. The economic changes in rural China will

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[52] A male returnee who is 27 years old from Village B, County T, Longyan, Fujian.

[53] A popular rural tourism form which offers leisure activities such as fishing, fruits plucking, eating local cuisine. Refer to Note 140 for more details.

[54] A 39 years old male returnee from Village C, County C, Zhangzhou, Fujian.

inevitably cause changes in the cultural and social lives of rural residents (J. Fan et al., 2005).

An intriguing finding in my research emerged from a comparison between educated and less educated return migrants. The latter group is generally less likely to be involved in any agricultural business. As a traditional/organic farmer, HXF is part of an online network that connects many return migrants who are involved in organic farming. Most members of this network hold a bachelor's or even a master's degree. Less educated return migrants, however, are more likely to be in non-agriculture industries such as courier delivery, transportation, construction and retail.

The scarcity of return migrants choosing traditional farming reflects its decline in the countryside. At the same time, the 'new agriculture' are not necessarily more promising. While HXF's traditional/organic farming career is strongly supported by external NGOs, others who take up new-style agriculture entities, such as HBZ, also rely heavily on the government. As HBZ said, "It is impossible to do agriculture these days without the government support." I will continue the discussion of new forms of agriculture in the section on return entrepreneurs.

Other returnees chose to become their own bosses in the non-agricultural sector, such as in hospitality and retail businesses. As villages are now developing rural tourism under the NSC policy, many migrants are taking the opportunity to return and open hostels and diners. In my research, I found that less educated participants favoured this option. Five of the less educated returnees I interviewed started businesses in retail, printing or advertising. Two educated returnees, ZHL and HSM, also have their own business. I will discuss their work in more detail in the case study below.

Employed by others

Employment within the institutional system (*you bianzhi*) is one of the most popular job choices among the female educated return migrants that I interviewed. These jobs can be classified into two types: civil servants (*gongwuyuan*) or official staff in government-affiliated institutions (*shiye danwei*) such as schools, hospitals and prosecutors' offices. Both types are equivalent to state-owned staff in socialist China who had the 'iron bowl'. Exams must be passed in order to obtain a permanent position within the system[55]. Unlike

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[55] Civil servants must pass the civil servants' exam, whereas teachers need to pass the teachers' exam.

contract workers in the same institutions who have to renew their contracts periodically, permanent employees in the institutional system have a stable salary and a lifelong job guarantee. Due to the stability and good social reputation, female returnees interviewed for this research were particularly in favour of permanent positions. They would also enjoy social benefits with this position that are rare in the countryside, such as full reimbursement of health care, fixed retirement subsidies and other annual allowances.

A few returnees I interviewed had been nominated as village cadres (*cunguan*). Village cadres differ from civil servants in that they earn their positions through election, whereas civil servants do so through exam. Village cadres are also not paid full-time. They receive subsidies that compensate for their work in the village, and this is usually less than 3,000 yuan[56] per month. The payment is far from enough to support a whole family even in the countryside. Most village cadres thus have other sources of income, such as a full-time job or financial support in the form of migrant remittances from other family members.

Generally speaking, returnees are dubious about being village cadres. Even though they are often invited by the township government to run for election, very few actually do. Apart from the meagre payment, returnees are also concerned about getting caught up in complicated rural relations. HSM expressed that she was afraid to 'meddle in the dirty water' (*tang hunshui*). HSM's thoughts align with the majority of participants' opinions on village matters, which they consider to be highly convoluted. FQ's comment is also representative of this sentiment: "Matters in the village are very hard to deal with. I don't want to waste my youth on it." As a result, only two educated returnees – both of them female – were village cadres at the time of this research. One of these female returnees is CYJ from Village W, County M of Fujian, who is 33 years old and has been on the village committee for 10 years. The other, LLL, is much younger; she was only 26 years old when she was elected as the party secretary of Village G, County Y of Fujian.

Although all return migrants in my study had managed to secure a career, their journeys to find these careers were not easy. I will now discuss the experiences of seven return migrants – male and female – who are either self-employed or employed by others and whose careers are in both agriculture and non-agriculture. This discussion also

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[56] Equivalent to roughly 600 Australian dollars.

includes their work experiences prior to return, as these are closely interlinked with their career choices after returning.

Case 1: ZHL

"The most important thing is to have happiness"

ZHL, who is 31 years old, owns a shop in Village D, a mountainous village in County H, in Ji'an of Jiangxi Province. Her shop sells baby products, such as formula and clothes. On the second floor of her shop, she also runs a small beauty salon where she provides facial massages, eyebrow implants and other beautification services.

When she first returned to be united with her fiancé – O, ZHL did not plan to become a shop owner. She set her sights on being a schoolteacher. She wanted a secure job and a stable income. As the couple was planning to have children very soon, ZHL thought being a teacher would allow her more time to focus on her family. In order to become a schoolteacher within the institution (*tizhinei*), ZHL would need to pass the provincial teachers' exam. She tried three times but failed. During her last attempt, she became pregnant and then gave up the idea when her daughter was born. She took other exams in addition to the teachers' exam, such as the exam for *sanzhi yifu*[57]. She did not have good results in any of these.

Opening a shop was initially O's idea. He works as a civil servant in the township government of their county. Since he had already gained a quite a stable position, he thought it would not be necessary for her to work within the institution as well. The problem with being a civil servant or working within the institution is that the payment is just average. So from the perspective of household strategy, O encouraged her to open her own business to diversify their income sources. Though she did not want to at first, he eventually managed to convince her. ZHL said: "He is always persuasive, clever with words (*huayan qiaoyu*). That was also how I agreed to return and marry him in the first place. I was fooled by his sweet words." Despite her seemingly complaintive tone, ZHL said this with affection, acknowledging her husband's love and support.

ZHL graduated from a college in Ganzhou, the second biggest city of Jiangxi, an inland province in southeast China. She majored in Business English. Like many of her

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[57] The exam to get into the rural supporting policy: three support (*sanzhi*) and one alleviation (*yifu*) – rural support, medical support, education support and poverty alleviation. Examinees who pass the exam can also become permanent teachers.

fellow migrants, ZHL stayed in Ganzhou after her graduation and worked for a trading company. Later she moved to Xiamen, a port city on the southeast coast, to work in a company that manufactures bags made of non-woven fabric. She also took beautician training sessions and obtained her certificate. It was during this time that she started the relationship with O, who at that time was in the army. After O returned from the army and secured work as a civil servant, he urged her to return so that they could get married. ZHL did not go into detail about how she was persuaded but just repeated that it was a long story and "too complicated to be finished in one word" (*yiyan nanjin*[58]). She also said several times that she was 'tricked' by him, adding that she was touched by his romantic but unrealistic promises (*huadabing*[59]). She explained that they were madly in love at the time, so it was easy for her to agree to the arrangement.

ZHL also mentioned that she was offered an opportunity to go abroad before she returned. This was through an agreement between her college and a company in Singapore. All graduates from her college were eligible to work in a shopping centre in Singapore under a four-year contract. She was very much attracted to the idea. However, she knew very well that if she took the offer, her relationship with O would be over. She eventually gave up the idea. She mentioned that two of her good female friends who were also from her county, H and J, took the offer and went to Singapore. This changed their lives completely.

H worked in Singapore for four years and saved up to 400,000 yuan[60]; this was sufficient for her whole family, including her parents and her future baby, to have a decent life. Like ZHL, H was also in a serious relationship before she went abroad. She later returned home to get married and have a baby. But she could not get used to country life and returned to Singapore, leaving her husband and baby in China. ZHL believes that H did not go back to Singapore just for the money, but to get away from her husband and the country life.

ZHL commented on H's situation as being 'awkward' (*gan'ga*). H suffered from the struggle of fulfilling her familial responsibilities as a mother and wife and also having the modern lifestyle she wanted. ZHL thought that it would not be wise of H to partially

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[58] A Chinese expression referring to complicated matters.
[59] A Chinese idiom, literally translated as 'drawing big pancake', referring to behaviours of picturing an unrealistic future.
[60] Equivalent to 80,000 Australian dollars.

abandon her husband, because she disagrees with H getting a divorce. ZHL's reason, however, is not because she thought H abandoning her husband was unfaithful, but that H could not find someone better than her husband. ZHL believes that Singaporeans will not be serious with H and are unlikely to marry a rural Chinese woman. "Maybe they are just playing with women like us," ZHL says. She thinks that 'grassroots girls' (*caogen de nvhaizi*) like H need to know what kind of life they should expect and what type of men are within their reach. She believes it is important to have a matching marriage, or what has been called 'matching doors and windows' (*mendang hudui*) (Gaetano, 2014).

The story of ZHL's friend J was even more extreme. J never came back after she went to Singapore. Even though she is over 30 years old, she remains single, which is controversial in rural China. ZHL refers to J as being 'completely wild' (*wanquan bian yele*). J's experience also verifies ZHL's worry that if she didn't return, she would lose the chance of getting married. I asked ZHL what she thought of her friends' choices. She said: "It would be completely different. But I honestly don't know which one is better." Later, she added: "It doesn't matter which route you take, as long as you are feeling happy (*xinfu*). I feel very happy (*xingfu*) now, so I think that's good enough."

In recent years, the pursuit of happiness has become popular rhetoric as the proposition of a lifestyle that is an alternative to the mainstream economic logic. While pursuing economic gains is seemingly a universal goal, the pursuit for happiness can revoke it. People in China use the pursuit of happiness as an excuse for their weak financial status. Because the definition of 'happiness' is arbitrary and subjective, much reasoning is involved in any decision one makes in pursuing it. In ZHL's case, the pursuit of happiness is also a convenient reasoning tool to erase her doubt or even fear that she made the wrong choice. In comparing her choice and that of her two friends, ZHL first expressed her confusion about which one was better, saying "I really don't know." But then the confusion cleared as she decided she was happy at the moment. Compared to going abroad, the choice of return was more predictable and safer; it was a guaranteed stable life, even at the cost of possibly more financial accumulation and a cosmopolitan life that she had never experienced. ZHL's rhetoric of happiness enables her to be comfortably situated and in line with social and familial expectations.

This case study allows us to not only see ZHL's life path of returning and career seeking but also her recounting of the stories of two friends who made other choices that consequently lead to divergent life paths. By learning about her and her friends'

experiences, I could better understand ZHL's agency in making a choice. For ZHL, as well as for many other return migrants, there is never a 'right' or 'wrong' answer; there are only choices that 'make sense' to the individuals caught between kinship, familial and marital circumstances, personal aspirations and capability, socio-economic considerations and the reality of having to juggle all these and negotiate the competing and conflicted expectations and interests of all involved.

Case 2: WYL

"If I were a little bit more independent, perhaps I wouldn't have returned"

WYL and ZHL live in different villages in County H, but they know each other because WYL's workplace is very close to ZHL's store. WYL told me that she returned because she couldn't find any jobs in the city. However, after listening to her story, I found her statement to be inaccurate. Contrary to what she claimed, she had actually been given three job offers when she decided to return.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I knew WYL before I started this research. When I first knew her, she was working as an intern in a social enterprise in Guangzhou. She was then in her fourth year of studying in a tier-3 university in the city of Ji'an in Jiangxi Province, and her hometown was only a 90-minute car ride away. Ji'an is one of the peri-urban areas transformed into a city in the last two decades. It falls into the category of a tier-4 or -5 city[61]. Working in Guangzhou, a tier-1 city, thus gave WYL her first opportunity to go to a big metropolitan city, which differs drastically from Ji'an. She said that in her first several weeks in Guangzhou, she experienced culture shock. She had never had a life that was so full of noise and so high speed – what she called 'real' city life. After working in the social enterprise for half a year, she returned to her university to finish her thesis.

After WYL graduated, the same organisation where she did her internship was willing to give her an official position. This was very appealing because it enabled her to finally work in the 'real' big city for long-term. Working in an NGO was also something that she was interested in doing. However, she eventually turned down the offer because her father said he could not stand the fact that his university graduate daughter would be "growing rice in a strange and faraway city"[62] beyond his imagination. He told her that if

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[61] See Chapter 1 for an explanation of tiered cities.

[62] The social organisation is part of AFN and sells organic rice to urban customers. The job is not technically growing rice. But since their work involves visiting the farmers and villages frequently, WYL's father and other family members understood it as growing rice.

she was to work as a farmer, she might as well go home and farm their own land. She thought her father's words were not completely unreasonable, so she gave up the idea of working in Guangzhou and pursued other job opportunities. She then got an offer from another NGO in Beijing. However, the salary was extremely low at only 3,500 YUAN per month. Foreseeing that she would not be able to support her living expenses in Beijing, she had to decline that job offer as well.

WYL also had a plan to continue studying for a postgraduate degree. She took part in the National Postgraduate Exam, applying for an anthropology major at Sun Yet-Sen University[63] (SYSU), but she did not get in. Apart from the fact that SYSU is a highly competitive institution, the resources available to postgraduates in the Department of Anthropology are limited, and there was only one postgraduate spot available in the year she applied. WYL also did not accept the adjustment to secondary choice (*tiaoji*), through which she could have been accepted by another less competitive university. She said her score in the exam was high enough to get into universities in Ganzhou. She blamed herself for not being outstanding enough and laughed at herself for being too idealistic and immature, dreaming about something that was beyond her reach.

WYL then found a teaching position in a private primary school[64] in Dongguan, another wealthy city in Guangdong Province. The school hired her as temporary staff to cover for a teacher within the institutional system who was on maternity leave, so she was not sure if she would be able to renew her contract the next semester when the teacher returned. For fear of losing her job at any time, WYL spent 10 to 12 hours every day working to keep up with the other teachers. Her salary was barely enough to cover expenses in a high-cost city like Dongguan. Luckily, her sister, G, was living in the same city, so she received financial support from her. However, WYL realised that she would never save enough money to buy an apartment there, which she saw as a prerequisite to the prospect of settling down. After working for one year and developing health issues due to tremendous stress and continuously working overtime, she finally decided to return home.

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[63] A tier-1 university in Guangzhou.

[64] Private schools, known as *minban xuexiao* in Chinese, are different from public schools (*gongban xuexiao*) that receive funding from the government. Private schools are funded by private entities. Generally speaking, the entry level of private schools is lower than that of public schools. Private schools are also for migrant workers' children who don't possess an urban *hukou* to get into public schools.

WYL's family's opinion also played a crucial role in her decision-making. Two years before her return, WYL's grandfather had a serious heart attack. Since then, her father – the only child of her grandfather – had been at home keeping his father company. Although he was capable of taking care of both of them, other family members felt uncomfortable leaving two male members at home alone. In WYL's words, "It's not so good to leave two men at home[65]." So they were in favour of WYL coming back. Her brother-in-law was very persuasive. He listed all the benefits of returning, such as a secure job, less stressful living conditions and more free time. He also pointed out that if she found that she could not adjust to rural life, she could always migrate again. Her sister G's words finally gave her more confidence. She said that since WYL was always eager to help others (based on her two attempts of working in an NGO), she could continue to do so as a schoolteacher in the countryside. WYL told me:

> My sister said if I like helping others so much, I can still do this in my
> hometown. I could change my students' lives here. Rather than
> working outside helping someone unknown, why not help our
> children here? This is the reason that actually convinced me to return.

A combination of no foreseeable future in her job and her family members' persuasion drew WYL to return home. But before she returned, she went to a job interview at another private primary school in Dongguan and received an offer there. In addition, the school she was working for at the time was willing to sign another one-year contract with her. This meant that if she wished, she could continue to stay in the city. Before she returned, she took part in the teachers' exam, as ZHL had done. She passed it the first time she took it, which is quite unusual. The teachers' exam in rural regions is still quite competitive, as it promises a stable income and permanent job. As mentioned earlier, ZHL tried three times without success. WYL referred to her own success as being lucky, but it still demonstrates that she is quite capable.

Thus, when WYL was about to return home, she had three job offers in hand: one from her old school; the second from a new private school in Dongguan; and the third from a rural school in her home county. However, despite all these choices, WYL did not feel that she had the liberty to choose: "Even though I have three job offers, I don't find

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[65] Her original words: liu liangge nanren zaijia yebuhao

any of them suitable (*meiyou yige heshi de*)." After being back for three years, she said with some regret, "Now that I think about it, if I were more independent, I would have been more persistent in staying in the city."

WYL's story is an example of understanding returnees' social mobility through their agency of making choices. As Kabeer (2000) points out, empowerment is not about what choices individuals make; it is about the capacity they have to make choices. Making choices is not just about the options available but also about the consequences of those choices and the ability to choose (Sen, 1985; Stromquist, 2015). In WYL's case, she seemed to have an array of choices. She could choose to either return or stay in the city. She also never faced a jobless situation. However, this doesn't mean she had freedom in her choices. By taking individual inspiration, family expectation and financial stability into consideration, WYL was confined to a limited range of choices. Thus, the seemingly abundant number of choices did not enhance her ability to choose.

Case 3: CLL

"The biggest challenge upon returning is there is no suitable job"

Compared to ZHL and WYL, 28-year-old CLL from Village E, County G, Fujian, had even less luck finding a suitable job. She studied Business Management in a private university in the city of Quanzhou, Fujian. After her graduation in 2013, she moved to Fuzhou, the capital city of Fujian, to work in a private company as an accountant. She later married her husband, C, who is from another village in the same county. Unlike other rural youths, C had never migrated to the city. After struggling to obtain a diploma from a vocational junior school, he stayed at home and helped his sister Y with the family tea business.

After she and C were married, CLL returned to County G. When I first met her, I asked her how she found life back home. Her difficulty in finding a suitable job was the first thing she mentioned. When she first returned, she worked in her Y's tea shop in the town centre. She said her work involved 'bagging tea leaves and admin work'. She was not interested in C and Y's family business, despite Y very much wanting her to be involved.

A year later, she found a temporary job she enjoyed as an employee in the township government. She was hired for a social service position (*gongyixing gangwei*)[66], which is a contractual position instead of that of a civil servant. In order to gain a permanent position in the government, CLL was preparing for the civil servants' exam when I met her. She told me:

> This is the only career path in County G. I am not the right material for doing business like my sister-in-law (*bushi nakuai liao*). So I am not interested in my husband's family business. His sisters and father are too dominant already. I like my current work. I enjoy the fixed work hour and the abundant off-work time.

I revisited CLL one year later, by which time she had failed the exam and was planning to retake it the next year. This is a normal practice. But C's family, especially his sister Y, protested against this decision, complaining that the cost of preparing for the exam was too high and that CLL was negligent in her duty as a wife to deliver a son to the family. Her mother-in-law had given birth to three daughters before C, the youngest child, was born. As C is the only son, he and his family are very keen to have a third generation of the family, even though his three older sisters already had children. With C's parents ageing and the oldest daughter Y thus the de facto head of the household, Y was anxious for CLL to have a son. Y also could not understand why CLL does not want to work in the family business. She complained to me that CLL was being unreasonable and did not know her place as a married woman. The conflict between these two was escalating during my second visit. CLL's case, as with the previous two, is dependent on having to make adjustments due to their marriages and familial lives.

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[66] 公益性岗位. It refers to contractual positions in the government which are open to the public. Candidates who apply for these positions are not required to pass the civil servants' exam. However, there is a time frame for their contracts.

Case 4: GHL and HSM

"Couple reunion is not a thing"

I met GHL through his wife, HSM, who is also a return migrant. HSM graduated from Jiangxi University of Science and Technology, majoring in Sociology of Sport. Like many of her classmates, she became a teacher in a private university in Nanchang, the capital city of Jiangxi. She taught herself photography through her work, and when she returned for the first time, she opened a photography studio for children that was quite successful. She then married GHL, who was working in a state-owned bank in Nanchang. GHL also holds a university degree. According to HSM, GHL was quite capable at his work and was promoted to director at a young age.

When her husband was promoted, HSM migrated again to join him in Nanchang. She worked in a travel agency and was responsible for maintaining its public social media account. When it occurred to her that there was no such account in her own county, HSM created what would become the county's first public social media account. To her surprise, the account began to gain popularity and gained over 100 thousand followers; in Chinese, this is referred to as '100 thousand plus' (*shiwanjia*)[67]. HSM quit her job in the travel agency and returned to her hometown for the second time. She said that she decided to return when she realised she could only monetise (*bianxian*) the increasing influence of her account in her hometown.

GHL and HSM were then in two different places. However, the couple could not bear a long-term separation, which seems to be a common practice in the countryside (they were actually the only couple to say explicitly that they believe couples should stay together). Since HSM's company was booming, GHL decided he would be the one to change locations this time. He was able to transfer from a city branch of the bank to a county branch, which meant he could work at a lower rank but still keep his job. His choice had two consequences: his salary was reduced, and he sensed that he was less respected by his former colleagues due to his demoted rank.

GHL's parents were not pleased with his return. Since every household has a similar story of couples living in different places, they did not accept couple separation as a legitimate reason for their son to come back. The most important thing for GHL and HSM

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[67] 十万加. It is a buzzword in the social media era and refers to social media accounts or articles that have followers or reviews of over 100 thousand. The account or article thus has very wide influence.

was to earn more money. HSM was also torn by her husband's dilemma. She wanted him to come back so they could be reunited, but she also agreed with her in-laws that his job opportunity in the city was much better. She told me: "It is enough that one of us is in the countryside. It's better that he stays in the city for more flexibility."

Despite the family's concerns, GHL was very determined to return. HSM was supportive of her husband's decision, and they spent a long time persuading his parents, who finally agreed to the idea. However, they decided not to mention the decrease in salary, which might have made getting his parent's approval more difficult. GHL claimed that even if his parents disagreed, he would have returned anyway. However, it was better to maintain harmony with them.

GHL found the work environment in the countryside uncomfortable. He complained to HSM a lot about the bank's lack of management. People there were not working as hard as his previous colleagues had. He felt as though he had been forced to step into retirement in advance (*tiqian tuixiu*). Since this did not suit his career goal, he started talking about quitting his job and doing something else. When I asked what he was planning to do, he said he could rent some land from villagers and conduct rural tourism for 'peasant family happiness'. In other words, his second career option was to become a return entrepreneur. However, unlike other male returnees, he was hesitant because he preferred to be employed by someone else. As a matter of fact, GHL is the only male educated returnee among all participants in my study who did not become self-employed.

This case is interesting for two reasons. There is intergenerational conflict between the younger generation, which sees marital intimacy to be more important – and is thus more modern in sensibility – and the older generation, which puts more emphasis on material considerations. Secondly, GHL is happy enough to return but has to make a "masculine compromise" (Choi & Peng, 2016, p. 152) with the lowering of his salary. This has emotional ramifications in terms of his masculine identity and conflicts with the perception that it is acceptable for women to earn less than they did before.

Case 5: HXF

"I want to try this out for once"

HXF from Village X, Guangzhou, is the only returnee who has resumed traditional farming with his parents. HXF is the oldest child in his family, and like many rural youths, neither he nor his sister were interested in farming as they were growing up. His parents

worked as security guards at the local dam during HXF's childhood, and this provided a stable income for the family. His grandfather continued farming as an alternative source of income. HXF said that his grandfather spent his whole life cultivating the hilly land next to their house, converting it from non-arable to arable land. When HXF grew up, he went to the nearby city Conghua[68] for college. He stayed there for several years before returning. In 2008, Village X was chosen as the project site of a local NGO called Organisation Green (OG). OG promotes alternative rural development projects in Village X, including organic farming. Initially it was HXF's father, T, who was engaged in the project, growing organic plums on the household farm and applying methods of 'natural farming'[69].

After graduating from Conghua Vocational Technical School, HXF changed between several jobs without finding his place in the city. He eventually found a job in a small company as an IT engineer. The money he earned was minimal, and he had no clear future. In the meantime, T's organic plum business seemed to be thriving with marketing and sales help from OG. Conghua is one-hour drive from Village X. HXF commuted quite frequently between the two places. He also got to know OG's project that T was involved. HXF then fell in love with one of OG's staff, M, who later became his wife in 2018. Influence from T and M changed HXF's mind about staying in the city. HXF said, "Rather than struggling in the city for a very meagre wage, I prefer to come back and start my own business[70]." HXF also became a passionate follower of 'natural farming'. He said that when M and T had been discussing project matters, he felt like he was left out. The idea of making an effort to do business with his family members motivated him to return.

Once he returned, HXF immediately became an entrepreneur. He took over T's position representing the family and became the main participant in OG's project. Along with other three return migrants who were less educated, he also formed an Eco-tour Group (*daoshang xiaozu*) with support from OG. As manager of both his organic farm and Eco-tour Group, HXF boasts that he runs two businesses. However, his definition of running a business differs from what is usually understood to include significant financial

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[68] Conghua is situated on the northeast outskirts of Guangzhou. It used to be a city affiliated to Guangzhou. In 2014, it became a district under the jurisdiction of Guangzhou.

[69] 自然农法. Natural farming refers to a particular school of farming techniques originated from Japan. It requires very low labour for farming, abiding the rule of nature. Refer to (Fukuoka, 2010).

[70] His original words: *xiang chuangye* 想创业

input and an extensive social network (Démurger & Xu, 2011). For HXF, there were no such requirements. Since neither of his businesses are registered, there is very little cost involved. In addition, OG provides financial and technical support to both businesses, which minimises the cost even more. By taking advantage of OG's rural development project and the return entrepreneur discourse, HXF has been able to shift his status of migrant worker in the city to self-employed entrepreneur in the countryside, without providing much input himself.

When I asked him why he returned, HXF explained his decision as follows:

> I know returning is a risky move. But, how should I put it, I still want
> to try this[71] out for once. If it were not successful, I will migrate out to
> the city again. If I have never tried, I know I will regret in the future.
> My character is bu'anfen, so I always wanted to do something new.

Bu'anfen can be roughly translated as not willing to settle down easily or not satisfied with what he already had. In Chinese, the term *bu'anfen* conveys a mixed message. Its social significance is also ambiguous in the migration era. On one hand, it points out a person's unreliability – the giving up of a stable life for something that is not predictable. On the other hand, it is linked to entrepreneurial characteristics such as ambition, boldness and courage. The meaning of the term also changes slightly when used with different sexes. The positive meaning is often related to a male; but for a female, it can bear more negative connotations, such as being unrealistic, selfish or not putting her family first.

HXF's case is an illustration of how return entrepreneur discourse offers a convenient path to return for migrants like HXF who are comparatively less competitive than other returnees. HXF shows his agency in making use of the discourse to craft out a new opportunity for himself. He is able to realise his dream of returning and reuniting with his family, while also taking on a decent job that he is satisfied with. Comparing HXF's story to GHL's sheds light on the fact that while the return entrepreneur discourse gives some migrants the opportunity to return, it can also be limiting to others.

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[71] 'This' here refers to 'creating his own business (*chuangye*)'.

Case 6: LLL

"My father says I am a shame to the family because my return leads the family to be 'dismantled in pieces[72]'"

LLL's career choice is an example of not putting her family first. Like ZHL, she studied Business English in a private university in Fujian, Fuzhou. And like WYL, she received an internship in her last year at university. She was hired as an intern for the Taiwanese consulting company Connection in her hometown, Town S, which is only a 40-minute drive from Fuzhou, the capital city of Fujian Province. The Fujian government invited Connection to conduct a rural tourism project, and Town S was picked for a pilot study. After she graduated, LLL formally joined the company staff without bothering to look for jobs in Fuzhou, as most educated migrants would have done.

Because of her immediate return to Town S, LLL faced severe pressure from her family, especially her father, who expressed his disappointment explicitly. She told me: "My father asks what I am doing in the countryside. I majored in English, so shouldn't I be doing something related to it?" She worked at Connection for one year before quitting. After a break, she considered migrating again. But then the Town S director, who thought very highly of her, asked LLL to be the manager of a new hostel that was part of the tourist project. She hesitated at first, wanting to stick to her original plan, but she was tempted by the excitement of a new job and took the offer. She and another three young females worked together to manage the hostel, which became an iconic tourist site for visitors. She also gained social recognition as a return migrant who was devoted to rural development. After working at the hostel for two years and establishing a strong connection with her work colleagues, she left the position.

When I visited LLL the first time, she was newly elected as party secretary in her village, Village G. The opponent she defeated for the position was her father. I will provide more details about this election in Chapter 6, when I discuss LLL's relationship with the villagers. For now, I will focus on her career path. As a party secretary, she was not be able to migrate for at least another five years. This resulted in her father's deep dissatisfaction with her. He felt that she was disobeying and disrespecting him. She also sent her younger brother to work in the city during this time, which was also against her

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[72] 四分五裂.

father's will. He explicitly told her that because of her return, the whole family was falling apart.

3.2 *Gaobucheng, dibujiu*: striving to find a 'suitable' job

The six cases outlined above show some of the struggles and conflicts educated returnees encounter both before and after they return, as well as their skills of mediation. The importance of securing a 'suitable' (*heshi*) job was mentioned repeatedly in the participants' narratives. The term '*gaobucheng, dibujiu*', which ZHL used, refers to the dilemma in finding a suitable job. While economic aspects are crucial in defining whether a job is suitable or not, the social status that the job brings is also an important factor. For example, while WYL had no trouble finding jobs in the city, she did not consider them suitable as both were unstable; in her words, "there's no future." The salary was also not sufficient enough for her to save money to buy an apartment, which is seen as the equivalent of settling down. She returned to the countryside because staying in the city would have meant being in an unstable position that she thought would have led her nowhere.

In contrast, ZHL's and CLL's stories indicate that it is equally challenging to live in the countryside. For one thing, there are far fewer job opportunities in the countryside than in the cities. Development policies such as Open up the West (Chio, 2014) and New Socialist Countryside (NSC) (Schneider, 2015) have created more job opportunities in rural areas. But as reflected by HSM's remark at the beginning of this chapter, most of these involve labouring work in construction, transportation and manufacturing and are not seen as suitable – or at least not socially acceptable – for educated return migrants. What then might be defined as a suitable job? I will address this question by looking at its three intertwined dimensions: the *suzhi* discourse, the household livelihood strategy and gender norms.

Suzhi discourse

Since they were born in the 1980s and 1990s, the educated return migrants in this study are deeply entrenched in the *suzhi* discourse. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, their rural background categorises them as lacking *suzhi* because the rural population is marginalised for being backward and primitive. These young, educated return migrants are eager to cast off the stereotype of peasants as their social image; they are keen to

prove that they are the opposite of low *suzhi* by distinguishing themselves from their parents' and grandparent's generations.

Return migrants' educational background influences their eagerness to improve their *suzhi* in order to become more neoliberal in outlook (Hizi, 2019; Hoffman, 2008). They blame themselves for their career or education failures. This is reflected in WYL's case. She thinks that the reason she could not stay in the city is that she is not capable enough. She failed in applying to SYSU because she was not 'outstanding', and her failure to be admitted into any postgraduate programs was because she was too 'idealistic' to make the right decision. The fact that she obtained three job offers and passed the teachers' exam for just once doesn't change her self-undermining. LLL, another return migrant who is the same age as WYL, made similar comments. She blamed herself for not getting into a better university, which would have given her better job options: "My biggest regret is that I didn't study hard enough when I was at high school. Otherwise, I could have gotten into a much better university. I missed so many good opportunities because I didn't have a good degree." Obtaining a tertiary degree but not being able to turn it into assets was a big source of anxiety for these educated migrants.

Chapter 1 introduced research showing the effects of Higher Education Expansion (HEE) on rural populations since the 1990s (Luo, 2011; Q. Yang & Xie, 2017). Rural students who do not have access to sufficient education resources get the opportunity to enrol in tertiary education institutes. Many of them go to vocational colleges, tier-3 universities or private universities. This was the case with all participants in this research. For example, ZHL, HBZ and FQ graduated from vocational colleges; LLL and CLL have bachelor's degrees from private universities; and WYL and CYJ graduated from tier-3 universities[73]. This aligns with Luo's (2011) analysis that while the rural population's enrolment rate has increased since the reform, their enrolment rate at prestigious universities has declined. The majority of rural students go to lower level colleges and universities.

Before the reform, rural students who managed to earn a university or college degree could easily find a well-paid job in the city and eventually settle down there. That is no longer the case. Graduation from tier-3 or lower level institutions does not add value in the urban job market, which is full of competitors from higher level universities and

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[73] Refer to Appendix 2 for a list of all participants' educational backgrounds.

overseas graduates. This leaves rural university students with few opportunities to gain an upper hand in the job market. Thus, even formal education is not a guarantee of strengthening one's *suzhi*, nor is it a reliable means for improving a household's socioeconomic status.

Stornes' (2012) thesis explains how, due to their belief in the importance of the 'neoliberal subject' and 'self-governance', rural migrants hold themselves accountable for the marginalised and precarious situations they face in the city. As graduates of higher education, they feel more pressure to excel and prove their value; this is commonly referred to as 'jumping outside the common people' (*churen toudi*)[74]. By repeatedly pronouncing their strong will to improve themselves, these educated migrants remain hopeful that they will fulfil their dreams one day as long as they stay in the city.

The return migrants in my study have the same mentality as those described by Stornes (2012), and they expressed identical experiences in terms of job hunting in the city. However, there is an obvious difference. While Stornes' research subjects remained in the city, mine chose to return to the countryside. Their return put more pressure on these migrants to make an effort to improve their *suzhi*.

The *suzhi* discourse denotes the urban as a symbol of high *suzhi*. Going to the city, therefore, represents an effort to improve one's *suzhi*. In Chapter 1, I briefly discussed the difference between making an effort toward *suzhi* improvement and actually improving it. While it is unclear what *suzhi* improvement actually looks like, the effort – or more precisely the indication of making an effort – becomes vital to the translocal imagination derived from *suzhi*. Although it is unlikely that rural migrants with a degree in higher education would improve their *suzhi* and social status by staying in the city, their persistence in staying shows that they are different from those who return. Returning is interpreted as giving up or having failed in the pursuit of *suzhi* and the realisation of dreams. As a result, educated return migrants are more obliged to confute social assumptions by relocating to a job that equates to high social esteem.

Household livelihood strategy

Family opinions also weigh heavily on returnees' career choices and decisions to return. Educated return migrants are essential resources for rural households, many of

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[74] A Chinese idiom means 'being distinguishable'.

which made a large effort to support the most capable family member at university and may have even sacrificed other family members' education opportunities. According to the contractual principle discussed in Chapter 2, the family is expected to gain rewards from this significant investment. Even though education has become less promising in improving their status, rural households still expect the best outcome from it.

Most stories described in this chapter showcase the role of the families' opinions and expectations in return migrants' decision-making. In particular, WYL's case shows how family expectations can narrow one's choices. WYL believes that she made the 'right' decision, though not the 'ideal' one. She said:

> My number one choice is, of course, to continue my study in SYSU, but I am not capable enough. Working in an NGO is also my dream, but that is too unsteady for me. I am just a normal young country girl[75]. My family's situation doesn't allow me to just do whatever I want. I need to make money. Though my parents don't need my support[76], I can't just be too selfish. Being a teacher here (in the countryside) is not bad. I can get a permanent job guarantee after five years. If I want to do something else after that, it is still possible. So, I will have more liberty to choose then[77].

Inspired by her internship in the social enterprise in Guangzhou, WYL wanted to pursue a career in the social service sector. This was opposed by her family. The negotiation process she had with them was particularly fascinating. Her father disapproved, as he did not want her job to be what he considered to be 'growing rice'. Civil organisations in China belong to a relatively unknown industry that does not have much social recognition. Terms such as 'NGO' and 'civil organisation' are still unfamiliar to the public, and WYL said that it was very difficult to explain to her family what an NGO was. When she first went to Guangzhou, her father thought it was some sort of

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[75] 普通的乡村女孩子.

[76] Both her older sister and brother had already settled down in the city with fairly good incomes. They are the main supporters of the household.

[77] According to her contract, WYL needs to work in her current school for five years to obtain the permanent position within the institution (*tizhinei*). After that, she could hold her position and then work somewhere else.

pyramid scheme organisation (*chuanxiao zuzhi*)[78]. Such unfamiliarity infers uncertainty of income and social instability, which the rural household cannot afford to risk.

The way G finally persuaded WYL to accept the idea of going home is also revealing in terms of family dynamics. G's understanding of helping others might be similar to how the public sees NGOs. Instead of dismissing WYL's choice immediately, G tried to think from her perspective. She integrated WYL's personal pursuit of helping others into the family's needs, which would require WYL to have a stable and socially recognised job. The result was WYL becoming a permanent schoolteacher. This also illustrates how rural households mitigate conflicts between personal choices and the household's plan.

The fact that WYL eventually agreed to her family's wishes does not mean that she 'caved in' completely to them. She not only thought her father's opinion about NGOs made sense; she was also not prepared to oppose mainstream thinking by taking employment in an NGO. She was not willing to accept the unknown consequences of not exhibiting filial piety. Also, if WYL were to choose the minimum income of the NGO job, she could put herself in a financially insecure position and endanger herself in the city if she were to lose that job. G's suggestion was a good compromise between her personal aspirations and the family's expectations.

The rural schoolteacher position also strengthened WYL's fallback position by enabling her to fulfil her roles as a daughter and a sister in the family; this eased other family members' anxiety about leaving her father and grandfather alone at home and provided her with job security. More importantly, WYL's employment contract states that once she holds the permanent position for five years, she can choose to leave her rural job and go to the city while still upholding her position within the institution. Thus, she would have more freedom of choice at that time.

In return, WYL was able to maintain a close relationship with her family, especially her mother, G and G's husband, who provide her with emotional support and other help. When she was not getting along with her colleagues at school, WYL talked to her brother-in-law, who patiently tried to find out the reasons. G also gave her substantial financial support by giving her a used car[79] so that she would not need to spend three hours each

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[78] 传销组织. It is a pyramid scheme very prevalent in China. It allures young people to a certain remote place, claiming that they are hired by a certain company. But these companies trap those who come and force them to bring more of their acquaintances.

[79] It was a used car that used to belong to G. G sells it to WYL at the price of 20,000 yuan (4000 AUD), which is basically giving her for free.

week on public transport. G also told her that if she found working in the countryside too unbearable, she could leave at any time; G promised to pay for the compensation incurred [80]. This shows G's appreciation and care for WYL. The family's support enhanced her fallback position and increased her resilience to unknown risks.

The cases of ZHL and GHL also suggest the importance of rural households' support in the fallback plan and the maintenance of harmony with family members. ZHLs' return was seen by her family and her husband's family as a sacrifice made for them. Even though she was devastated by her failure in the exams, her husband and his family were very supportive of her opening her own business. Her husband financially supported her while her mother-in-law took the responsibility of taking care of her daughter, which released her from the obligation to be the caretaker. In this sense, her likelihood of staying in the city and even going abroad has become a negotiation tool for her to gain more liberty in her married life.

GHL, who does not receive concrete support from his family, was also making an effort to gain their support in order to maintain harmony in the family. This illustrates that apart from the practical function of the household, it also has an emotional function that is demonstrated through filial piety. If GHL were to have returned without his parents' consent, he would not have shown enough filial piety. His wish to be reunited with his wife would also be seen as selfish, as he would not be living up to the family's expectation.

In contrast, CLL's and LLL's stories demonstrate how a family might react if the return migrant does not negotiate with family members and refuses to compromise his or her own aspirations by making decisions for the sake of the family. LLL, a young woman with a very high sense of social responsibility, realised her dream by joining the company Connection and contributing to rural development. She told me that she joined Connection because she believed it would contribute to the rebuilding of her hometown. The company director had said to her:

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[80] If she leaves before she finishes her first service term of five years, she will have to pay for the compensation money. She will also lose her permanent position within the institution.

We are going to do a lot of modifications to your hometown. This little pagoda that you used to play in when you were little, for instance, we might end up changing it. Do you want your childhood memory to be destroyed by some outsiders? If not, you should join us.

Paradoxically, while LLL physically returned to the countryside and devoted herself to rural reconstruction, her father felt a sense of betrayal. She was even accused of tearing the whole family apart. Her story verifies the point I made in Chapter 2 that filial piety is no longer defined as being physically close to the family. Individuals' cooperation with the households' livelihood plan is a more prominent indication. In LLL's case, it is her obedience to her father – the head of the family's opinions – that matters the most. This even overshadows her contribution to local development, which is otherwise seen as a behaviour with high morality.

Gender Norms

In their book *Masculine Compromise,* Choi and Peng (2016) examine in detail how males from a marginalised group make adjustments to adhere to social gender norms. Mainly focusing on male migrants in the city, Choi and Peng analyse the strategies these men used to carry out their obligations as fathers, sons and husbands while absent from their families. They experienced agonising anxiety and guilt for not being able to meet the traditional standards of family life. Similarly, the return migrants that participated in my study showed that compromises and coping strategies are not exclusive to migrants, nor to only males. Each returnee – whether female or male – experienced some sort of conflicts as they sought for a balance between their personal pursuits and gender prescription.

Choi and Peng also pointed out that the concept of gender norms is relational; it is evolving and shifting constantly. This relationality is also reflected in both CLL's and GHL's case. CLL's self-realisation was hindered by her in-law's demand that as the wife of their son, she must produce a child. While CLL's in-laws prioritised her role as a wife and mother, this was not the case for GHL, who wished to return and fulfil his familial role. The familial expectation for GHL differed not only from CLL's but also from that of most male members of a traditional rural family. In GHL's case, it seemed that having a formal job in the countryside was no longer a sufficient manifestation of masculinity.

Rather, for a capable, young, educated migrant like GHL, the ability to stay in the city is seen as more masculine. These differences suggest that gender norms are also subject to the modernity discourse. Both CLL's and GHL's case show that gender norms and family values are constantly readjusting and shifting according to the family's situation and the social context.

GHL's story also indicates that there is a shift in the scope of the domestic and outer sphere (Murphy, 2004; Seeberg & Luo, 2018). In Chapter 2, I discussed the gender division and the distinction between the domestic and outer sphere. The outer sphere refers to economic and social activities outside the household, whereas the domestic sphere is limited to the household. To show their masculinity, male members of a household are expected to be in the outer sphere. But in GHL's case, he had already done this by securing a job with a stable income that would continue even if he were to return. Thus, he showed that it is now possible for the realm of domestic sphere in rural society to extend to the whole rural space; the outer sphere has also shifted to outside the rural region, namely the urban region. This shift is due to two factors: 1) it was getting harder for the rural population to support the whole family by remaining in the countryside, and 2) the inferiority of the rural position in economic reform was downgrading the rural space. As Jacka (2018) has noted, traditional farming – an important activity that used to be considered a part of the outer sphere – has now become the responsibility of the domestic sphere. Consequently, farming becomes the obligation of elderly or females. As a result, the social norms now prescribe that to prove their masculinity, males need to demonstrate that they are capable of migration and can find their place in the society to which they migrate. It thus goes against social expectation for a capable male to return to the countryside.

Female returnees face less pressure when they want to return, as it is still socially encouraged for female migrants to eventually return to focus on their families (Choi, 2019). ZHL told me: "My family members are all looking forward to my return (*panzhewo huilai*)." This difference in gender norms seems to give more freedom to female returnees in terms of career choices. However, this also means it's harder for them to stay in the city if they wish to. The cases of ZHL, WYL and CLL are a vivid illustration of this dilemma. If women don't have a very promising future in the city, their family will urge them to return. Even if they have a better chance of obtaining a formal job in

the city, if it is in conflict with their familial responsibility – like in CLL's case – their career pursuit will become secondary.

ZHL's, WYL's, CLL's and GHL's stories point to the inherent connection between household livelihood strategies, filial piety and how gendered norms are configured in the modernity discourse (Wallis, 2013). The returnees' career choices reflect not only the power relations in rural society, but also the gender ideologies. As a result, returnees also have to adjust their negotiation strategies. GHL used lies to deceive his parents and gain their approval. ZHL sacrificed her chance of working abroad to become a loyal wife; in return, she gained positive support from her husband's family. This was also the case with WYL. These individuals' stories demonstrate how return migrants strive for the "combination of pragmatic adjustments and continued salience of male [and – as shown from this study – also female] gender identity and traditional ideology" (Choi & Peng, 2016, p. 152).

The educated return migrants that I interviewed were caught in a precarious situation as they sought for a suitable career. On one hand, they were confined in a scarcity of jobs in both the rural and urban career markets; on the other hand, they were driven by the motivation of self-improvement and self-realisation. In addition, familial obligations and gender expectations added more pressure to what defined a suitable career. They had very low confidence in the urban market as rural migrants; but an education from the city had also increased their employment standard, thus limiting possible options in a rural job market that already had scarce resources. Their stories also reveal their agency in moderating their social situations and making efforts to maintain balance in their lives.

HXF's story offers an example of a different strategy of educated returnees, which is that of becoming an entrepreneur. Choosing entrepreneurship mitigates the anxiety of educated migrants, especially males who wish to return. Compared to GHL's parents, HXF's parents appeared to be more in agreement with their son's return. While a difference in the parents' respective personalities is very likely a factor in determining their attitudes, HXF's changing role from migrant worker to entrepreneur also accounts for the difference.

3.3 Return entrepreneurship: a solution that fits all

Return entrepreneurship has emerged as a solution to the problem of educated returnees having a scarcity of eligible jobs. First and most importantly, choosing to be an

entrepreneur reflects an individual's motivation for self-improvement and striving for something higher, or 'surpassing oneself and realise the dream'[81]. Return entrepreneurship defies selectivity standards and the general stereotypes that equate returning with being a failure. It also distinguishes these individuals from return migrants who return for family reasons or because they are incapable of finding jobs in the city.

Mainstream media's support of return entrepreneurship also validates and elevates the social significance of the entrepreneurs' return, which in turn makes it easier for their families to accept. The media portrays them as the 'glory of the countryside' (e.g. Huang & Xie, 2019) and those who have strong social responsibility, capability and entrepreneurship. Especially for male return migrants who struggle to gain family's understanding, like GHL, this social acknowledgement serves as compensation for leaving the city. Many other male returnees had a similar experience. HBZ, a farm owner who have returned for 10 years, faced strong condemnation from his father at the beginning; but when a journalist from the local television company interviewed HBZ at his home, his father began to accept his return. Since then, HBZ has appeared frequently in local TV and newspapers as a representative (*dianxing*) of return entrepreneurs.

Surprising as it sounds, compared to other careers, such as civil servants, being an entrepreneur actually has fewer barriers. Working within the institution, as WYL did, requires passing government-organised exams that are highly competitive. It is much easier to become an entrepreneur because there are no specific requirements such as registration funds or employment numbers, not to mention the incentives provided by local governments at township level. HBZ, for example, returned and opened his family farm – one of these new-style agriculture entities – after reading in a newspaper about the fiscal incentives for family farms and how e-business development enables the online setup of businesses for little cost. HXF's case is also an example of the benefits of return entrepreneurship, as there is very little extra cost in maintaining his two businesses. The majority of return entrepreneurs I interviewed are small or medium business owners with no fixed working place or formal staff.

The entrepreneur discourse, media promotion and support from government and non-government agencies construct an arena or 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977) where return entrepreneurs are normalised. These processes work jointly to create a new way for

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[81] 超越自我，实现理想.

individuals to re-imagine themselves – an imagination that also addresses the issue of expanding surplus rural labour in China's modernisation and urbanisation process. The rural migrants in Stornes' thesis (2012), who were struggling to realise their dreams, could now find a more direct way to do so. And faced with a lack of suitable jobs in the countryside, return migrants can now create jobs that satisfy their personal, familial and gender expectations. Rather than a job being the goal of their return, it has become the means. Contrary to the assumption that migrants return to become entrepreneurs (H. Zhao, 2017), many of them now become entrepreneurs in order to return. For educated returnees, becoming an entrepreneur is not just their last resort; it is their first choice (Fan et al., 2005).

3.4 Return entrepreneurs: bringing more job opportunities to the local market?

From the local government's point of view, having more local businesses should mean more local job opportunities and more educated migrants willing to return. I have established that return entrepreneurship boosts the numbers of educated return migrants, but are the return enterprises capable of providing more job options to educated returnees?

An interesting point made by HSM addresses this question. Her social media business is doing relatively well. She hired three staff for content editing and website maintenance, all of them local youth who graduated from vocational high schools and remained in their hometown. She said she wanted to find employees who were of higher quality, such as return migrants, but it was almost impossible: "In today's countryside, even those who have minimum skills are all obsessed with having their own businesses. They don't want to work for others. Those who are willing to work for us are not employable." Her words are echoed by ZHL, whose commentary at the beginning of this chapter said that if she could not work for the government, then she had better work for herself.

Both HSM's and ZHL's comments speak to the conflicting situation returnees are in. While returnees strive to find suitable employment, those who have become entrepreneurs are also confronted with the challenge of not being able to find suitable employees. The social space available from which educated returnees can choose is restricted. While more and more returnees become employers themselves, there are not many qualified staff left to be employed. As Murphy (1999) points out, the issue with the rural labour market is not in its surplus labour, but in making the surplus labour qualified

for the modern market. Thus, even though return entrepreneurs create job opportunities, they are still unlikely to solve the problem of surplus labour in the countryside. At the same time, the qualified workers they are looking for are still largely drawn to the cities.

This leads to another question: what about those who do not want to be return entrepreneurs? This is particularly challenging for male return migrants, like GHL, who want to return but are not interested in becoming entrepreneurs. Even though he had a stable income, GHL was anxious about not being self-motivated enough. He was not interested in doing business on his own but was confronted by pressure from his parents and other social expectations. His wife, HSM, also said there were many times that he came home in low spirits, complaining to her about his work and that he felt there was nothing he could do. He was worried that he was wasting his youth and talent in the countryside. He was tormented by having an unfulfilling job and not pursuing his own values. However, the need for a stable income and reunion with his wife and children made it impossible for him to change. The only thing he could do was mention from time to time that he could quit his job if it was too much to take and become an entrepreneur himself. This rhetoric eased his dissatisfaction with not being able to find his place in rural society.

GHL was at least lucky enough to find a stable job. What about those who cannot find a stable job but still want to come back? There is not much space for educated return migrants of this sort, which explains the fact that the majority of male returnees in my study had become entrepreneurs. To deal with this dilemma, male returnees employ a new strategy of 'masculinity compromise' that was observed by Choi and Peng (2016). While the male migrants in their study were suffering from guilt for not fulfilling their role as fathers, they compensated for these feelings by acting as the family provider. Providing for the family – working outside the home as the 'breadwinner' of the family – was the most crucial criteria of masculinity for them. But the opposite was true for return male migrants in my study. Their returning symbolised a retreat from the outer to the domestic sphere, which shattered their masculinity. Entrepreneurship, therefore, served as a coping mechanism and reaffirmed their masculine need to be both a socially recognised figure and a pioneer of rural development.

Did those who became entrepreneurs want this career path in the first place? Would they still choose it if there were other options? Return migrants do have a higher chance of accumulating benefits and resources for their start-ups, but there appears to be no clear

relationship between their migration gains and their choice to become entrepreneurs. And while the cost of starting a business is reduced for many return entrepreneurs by government incentives or support from other agencies, significant financial input is still required. Not everyone is lucky enough to have generous support from their family or other sources. For example, XXR used all his savings from his previous job to rent a farm. Would he have invested all his money had he been able to find suitable employment when he returned? The answer might have been 'yes' for XXR, but it could be very different for someone else. For now, there is not much room for male return migrants to say 'no' to opportunities, even if those opportunities are not what they were hoping for in their return.

As my research will continue to discuss in the following chapters, being an entrepreneur is not only a career choice; it may also be a life pursuit that affects other aspects of return migrants' lives, such as their social life and family life. Possessing the equivalent education degrees and migration experience, the returnees who choose not to become entrepreneurs can be marginalised by the return entrepreneur discourse.

This raises an important question about return migrants' freedom of choice and their freedom or right to return (*fanxiangquan*). Do they have the freedom to return? At the moment, the freedom seems to under the condition of obtaining certain career types. The right to return, as with the right to migrate, reflects the social actors' social mobility. In understanding rural populations' mobility, it is not enough to only address their mobility of migration. As economic development continues, migration to the city becomes more accessible. Migrants' ability to return or stay needs to be examined further in order to paint a clear picture of their mobility.

3.5 Return: A choice of one's own?

An interesting similarity I found in my interviews was that when I asked returnees if it was their own decision to return, they all answered affirmatively. Even though it later became clear that they made the choice because of different forces and expectations placed upon them, they held themselves accountable for their decisions. Even WYL, who had regret about not being independent enough to stay in the city, stated that she was the one who decided to return. Her family was simply giving her advice. Her seemingly contradictory claim reveals the complexity of these returnees' subject formation. Deeply entrenched in the hegemony of *suzhi*, they internalise the constraints placed on them and

compromise by making choices that go against what they may actually want to do (Murphy, 2004). At the same time, their determination to be independent and individualistic compels them to own their decisions. The limited social space available to educated migrants speaks to how the rigid social structures of rural households are exposed, leaving them little wiggle room for making decisions that do not contribute to the family's livelihood or may face potential risks.

Chapter 4

Translocal practice: constructing return migrants' everyday lives

> Situated in a remote area in County M, Village W is in lack of basic facilities. Most of the young people migrate to the city. However, there is one female university student, who gave up her well-paid work in the city and returned. She is CYJ.
>
> – News report of CYJ from local TV station

This is a typical opening paragraph of media reports on educated return migrants. They are usually pictured as voluntarily giving up the high salary and glamorous lifestyle they could enjoy in the city. These reports have three implications. First, the migrants return out of the mission of rural revitalisation: the story usually assumes a disconnection between life in the countryside and the city, with the latter pictured as exciting and fun, or 'hot and noisy'[82] with a well-paid stable job as a given, and the former being boring and static with disheartening job futures. Second, the assumption is that migrants return so that they can be united with their families; what compensates for giving up their vibrant city life is being closely surrounded by family members. Last, once they return, they will remain in the countryside and not migrate out again; the action of return is often assumed as being one-off, thereby implying the end of their migration. What awaits is the peaceful country life surrounded by family members with little entertainment.

In this narrative based on the assumption of drastic rural and urban differences, the returnees are portrayed as self-sacrificing. They put behind their personal interests for the sake of family reunion and rural development. Additionally, it suggests that it is a social downscaling for the returnees. As noted by Sun (2006), it is rational for people to seek higher social-spatial positions as much as possible, as manifested in the old Chinese

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[82] 热闹. which usually refers to a vibrant and crowded ambience with positive meaning.

saying, 'Humans move to the high place and streams go to the lower ground' [83]. In China or even outside China, migration is often accompanied with the aim of social upscaling, from the rural to the urban, from inland to coastal area, or from the global south to the north. As Oakes and Schein (2006) argue, due to the vertical social mobility becoming more difficult, horizontal mobility is increasing as an alternative form of scale jumping. This is the case with the rural migrants in China. In that sense, the reverse mobility or counter-mobility of return migrants cannot be explained rationally and their behaviour is attributed to heroic and altruistic reasons.

Does returning mean bidding farewell to the city? If not, how do they maintain connection with the city? Is it true that they are returning out of altruism? Do return migrants get to reunite with their family? Do they actually spend more time with their family members? How do they find country life? Do they find big differences between urban and rural life? If yes, how do they mitigate these? How do they negotiate the process of dropping from a higher to a lower scale? Do their negotiations reproduce the social scale or redefine its constellation?

Both this chapter and Chapter 5 are dedicated to answering these questions. This chapter focusses on the return migrants' agency in their mobility by investigating their private and family life, namely the domestic sphere[84] (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Murphy, 2004; Seeberg & Luo, 2018), whereas Chapter 5 moves to the public sphere. In particular, this chapter examines their translocal practices in scale negotiations and place making in the countryside. I will start by exploring their family lives, more specifically, their living arrangements, and reveal their interactions with family members after returning. Given the importance of rural households for return migrants, the household dynamic will set the tone of their mobility in general. I thus examine their multiple forms of mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Drawing on the experience of each individual, this chapter discusses mobility in the literal sense, while also paying attention to mobility on other levels, including how it is narrated in their speech and mediated by technology. Last, I will investigate their "spatial subjectivity" (Oakes & Schein, 2006, p. 9) in their quotidian lives, which constitutes trivial matters such as shopping, drinking, and eating. The role of the smartphone in mediating the various kinds of translocal practices will be important to my discussion of their social networks, both in this chapter and the one that follows.

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[83] 人往高处走，水往低处流.
[84] See also Chapter 2.

4.1 Physical mobility of return migrants

In their article *Translocal China,* Oakes and Schein (2006a) illustrate various techniques of scale negotiation; in addition to large institutions such as the national state, they emphasise the role of individuals' agency of reconfiguring scales in the course of movement and inhabit. Their findings align with the diverse forms of mobility pointed out by Sheller and Urry (2006). They list alternative ways, other than physical movements, that are important in creating a placeless space or translocal imagination (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Drawing on these authors' concepts, I examine return migrants' mobility in three forms: their physical movement, narrative of mobility, and their technomobility (Wallis, 2013). By illustrating these three forms of mobility, I hope to shed light on return migrants' agency to "confound and establish spatial orders" using their bodies as an embodied subjectivity (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 75). In the active process of "social production of scale" (Schein, 2006, p. 215), return migrants' spatial negotiation through multiple forms of mobility demonstrates that rescaling is full of struggle, resistance, concession, and compromise.

Rural households on the move: multi-dwelling arrangements in the countryside

Although she moved back to her hometown where her grandfather and father live, WYL does not really live with them in their home, as the school she works in is too far away from it. After she passed the teachers' exam, the county education office allocated her to a school according to her ranking. Those who rank higher get to teach in schools closer to the town centre, which is also closer to WYL's home[85]. Since WYL's ranking was quite low, she was dispatched to work in a remote central primary school[86] of Village D, situated in the mountainous area[87]. It takes almost a three-hour bus ride for WYL to commute between her home and her school. Hence, she usually stays in the teachers' dormitory with other teachers, going home on the weekend and returning to school on Sunday afternoon.

Most members of her family are still in the city. Both her brother – K and sister – G settled down respectively in Dongguan, Guangdong, and Guiyang, Guizhou, two cities

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[85] This again says about the unequal resource distribution.
[86] zhongxin xiaoxue.
[87] This village is also where ZHL's store is.

that are far from each other. Each is married and has two children. Her mom stays with K to take care of his children. Previously, her parents were at G's home looking after her children. Her father returned because her grandfather became ill. So even though WYL returned, she is still separated from her family.

This is also the case with return migrants who are married. Some of their spouses still work in the city, like HXF's wife, M and CYJ's husband. Even when both remain in the countryside, it is unlikely that they would live together. ZHL, for instance, lives separately from her husband, O and 2-year-old daughter, P. Instead, she opened her shop next to her own mother's home, so she practically lives with her natal family most of the time. O works in the town centre, which is far from where ZHL's shop in Village D, due to the winding mountain road. It takes too much time to commute every day, so he stays in the apartment they purchased during weekdays while P lives with ZHL's mother-in-law, who is 30 minutes' drive away from her shop. She said the reason she let P stay with her mother-in-law is because it's hard for her to run the shop if P is here. Therefore, the three members of ZHL's nuclear family are located in three different places in the countryside.

XXR's living arrangement is even more flexible. He is a 28-year-old return entrepreneur who owns a passionfruit farm in Village S, County Z, Zhangzhou, Fujian Province. He returned five years ago, while his wife, CLM – also an educated return migrant – remained to work in the city. She returned when their son was born. XXR's family is also split between two or three places, all in the countryside. After she returned, CLM lived with her own mother, who could take care of the baby. XXR, on the other hand, stayed at his farm, which is far from his wife. XXR's parents live in the village, which is a half-hour drive from the town centre. When XXR and CLM are busy with passionfruit harvesting and selling, they will send their son to XXR's parents' home. Otherwise, CLM takes care of their son at her own mother's home in the town. XXR commutes on daily basis between three places, his mother's home, his mother-in-law's home, and the farm. XXR's and ZHL's cases suggest a more fluid mobility status, which is not uncommon among returnees.

Additionally, in these two cases, we find that married women, ZHL and CLM, still live with their own natal family, which is quite controversial according to traditional patrilocal values. Another married female returnee who still live with her natal family is CLL. Her parents moved to town centre years ago. For the convenience of going to work

(CLL works in township government), she stays with her own parents while her husband, C, lives in the village with his parents.

WXM is a notable exception because her family consists of a complete set of three generations. WXM is also the youngest return migrant I met. She was 24, recently graduated from a normal university[88]. She and WYL are neighbours and remote relatives. She came over to visit when I was staying with WYL. She told me that she had only returned for one year. She also works as a teacher in the village school, but because her school is much closer to her home, she gets to live with her family. Her family consists of what is usually understood as a household with three generations living under the same roof: herself, her parents, brother, sister-in-law, and her brother's very young baby. However, both WYL and WXM claimed that this is very rare in rural villages nowadays. She commented her family was not 'normal' (*buzhengchang*).

The public discourse is under the impression that separate living within rural households is due to migration, and that when migrants return to the countryside, the separate living situation will stop. Therefore, the return migration narratives in public media are often accompanied by family reunions, giving the impression of adhering to the old family values.

However, I have found through this research that it is not necessarily the case. For many rural households, migration is not the end, but the means. As I discussed in Chapter 2, migration occurs as the rural households' main strategy to diversify family income and reduce risks. For those whose family members who are all in the countryside, where there are very limited resources, household members need to have more careful deployment. The return of migrants to the countryside might lead to new forms of translocal practices in families in order to maintain their household sustainability, just as the old Chinese says: 'Don't put all the eggs in one basket[89]'. One family member's return might spur other family member's migration. In some cases, the migrants are able to return precisely because of the migration of other family members, as in WYL's family. This indicates that the multi-dwelling arrangement is more deeply embedded in the contextual situations, which cannot be changed simply by individuals' reverse migration. Therefore, whether the migrant returns or not will not affect the multi-dwelling arrangement.

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[88] Normal universities are comprehensive universities whose graduates become schoolteachers.
[89] 不要把鸡蛋都放在同一篮子里. A Chinese idiom refers to strategic planning that aims for safety guarantee.

For many, returning to the countryside actually boosts their physical mobility on daily basis. For example, WYL had to commute over 200km every week, which would have been impractical if she worked in the city. People who live separately with their nuclear family members, like ZHL, travel even more frequently.

Possession of private vehicles enables physical travel to be more convenient. All the participants except for CLL owned either a motorbike or a car (13 out of 38 have a car). There has been an increase in private car ownership among the rural residents (Y. Li, Miao, Chen, & Hu, 2019). This is in line with the acceleration of private car ownership through China generally in the past decade. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the annual growth of private vehicle ownership was 21.4% from 2008 to 2018, with a total increase from 5.25 million to 207 million (NBS, 2019).

As car consumption is rising, their prices are dropping. A domestic brand, such as the Chery and Wuling[90] can be as little as 30,000 yuan[91]. More male than female returnees own cars. However, several female interviewees, for example, LLL, HSM and ZHL, are frequent drivers. It is possible to conceptualise return migrants' movement in the countryside as a web scattered with their familial and social nodes that they can move between frequently and swiftly using their vehicles. This achieves family reunion in a broader sense. This flexible arrangement echoes to Xiaoying Wu's (2017) identification of current living mode in China as "I live apart together" (p.92). As the following sections will explore, by applying multiple forms of mobility, return migrants transcend physical barriers and reunite with their family members in alternative ways.

Maintain connectivity between the city and the countryside

Return migrants' frequent visits to the city further reflect their high mobility. There are many reasons and opportunities for them to 'return' to the city. Above all, many need to go to the city for work purposes. For example, ZHL is at the designated retail end of several baby-product companies and needs to go to Ganzhou twice a month to stock up. Rural entrepreneurs also visit the city for business meetings, conferences and workshops, and they take opportunities to liaise with others. They also go to big cities for

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[90] Both Chery and Wuling are domestic automobile manufacturers in China. Their mini cars are popular for their low price. Chery QQ costs around 30,000 to 40,000 yuan. Wuling Hongguang Mini, also a mini car, costs around 35,000 yuan.
[91] Around 6,000 Australian dollars.

entertainment and sightseeing. Xiaolian, a return migrant who owns a souvenir shop in Town S, said that she had developed the habit of going somewhere every two months.

Another factor that has directly contributed to frequent commuting between the city and the countryside is the infrastructure that enables fast connection between them. As I introduced in Chapter 2, the construction of roads and the high-speed railway (HSR) has improved the accessibility of remote rural areas. As a result, the time spent on travelling from rural sites to other places has significantly reduced.

Owning a car also makes travelling to the city smoother and easier. LLL bought her car when she became the party secretary of Village G. Her dual title as the party secretary and general manager of a local co-op meant she is constantly travelling. She would also drive occasionally to nearby cities like Xiamen[92] or Fuzhou[93] to spend the weekend. She remembered one visit to a music festival in Xiamen as one of very few relaxing weekends she had had since returning. LLL spoke about the owning of a car this way: "Owning a car has expanded my scope of activity[94]. I feel much more liberated. Wherever I want to go, I can just take off immediately (*shuozou jiuzou*)." In the city she would have relied on public transport that is highly congested and more time consuming. Higher physical mobility has brought her the sense of having more control of her own life.

While owning a car itself symbolises an urban attitude, the freedom that the car brings is appealing to young educated returnees like LLL. Young urbanites, whose life is consumed by work, fantasise about the ability to take off immediately, as described in a trendy slogan, "Having a trip which enables you to take off whenever you want" (*shuozou jiuzou de lvxing*) (see Figure 3). This reflects their translocal imagination, in which they mentally escape from the confinement of office work to the seaside or mountain areas, in other words, the countryside. What the young urbanites imagine escaping from is what the educated returnees imagine themselves embracing. Owning a car allows this to be possible.

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92 A tourist coastal city in Fujian Province.
93 The capital city of Fujian Province.
94 LLL's original words:买了车后我的活动范围扩大了.

Figure 3 Illustration of 'having a place whenever can'

A typical illustration of the concept. The line reads: "Youth is a trip that can take place whenever you want" ("Rensheng zui huamei de shechi: shuozou jiuzou cuican ziyou [The most beautiful luxury: take a trip whenever you can]," n.d.)

However, not all return migrants have a car. Many of them commute with electric bicycles for local travelling. For these people, private carpooling becomes a convenient way to commute between the city and the countryside. Carpooling is prevalence in rural China these days, providing the most convenient way to travel to the city. It is a private business that belongs to the "informal sector" (Hart, 1985, p.54) and is borderline illegal. Before the use of carpooling with private cars, buses were the main means for villagers go to city. These are notoriously rare and unreliable. It can take half a day to arrive in the city. This led to typical scenes in movies where a villager gets up before dawn and waits by the road for hours for the bus to come[95]. There are also private minibuses, but they also lack reliability. Carpooling organised through WeChat[96] is gradually replacing both types of transportation because it is adaptable and frequent. For rural areas close to the city, carpooling is conveniently and cheaply available almost at any hour.

Carpooling has become so popular that drivers can make a living from it. This falls into the grey zone around safety issues because most drivers are not licensed to take customers. They are thus called 'black taxi drivers' (*heidi siji*) in China; 'black' here refers to their illegal status. Passengers also take a risk. Carpooling thus responds to need for high mobility between urban cities and rural towns. Its role in ensuring rural-urban physical connectivity should not be underestimated. There are no other formal

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[95] For example, see movie such as Blind Mountain (Y. Li, 2007), or The Story of Qiu Ju (Y. Zhang, 1992)

[96] The most popular social media app in China. Refer to Chapter 1, or the following section in this chapter for a more detailed introduction of WeChat.

transportation systems that can match its adaptability. The carpooling business between the rural and urban emerges as a replacement of the rigid bureaucratic transportation system provided by authorities. It signals the emergence of a new forms of mobility that derives from the 'informality of rural-urban dynamic'[97]. It is a reflection of how the mobility can be initiated from the bottom which proves to be more versatile and malleable.

4.2 Narrative of Mobility

In conversing with the returnees, I was frequently presented with two opposing views of rural life. On one hand, they would complain about the rural life as boring and unexciting, but on the other hand, they would undermine the contrast between the rural and urban by emphasising their proximity.

> Going to the city is easy. Just about a one-hour drive. But I don't go there that often. I don't want to. It's too crowded. (CYJ)

> I go to the city too often. I am supposed to go to Nanjing (the city in another province) for a trade affair next week. I turned it down. It's a long trip and I've got so much to do here. I simply don't have the time. (ZHL)

While they proclaimed the convenience of going to the city, they also stressed that they retained the right to choose not to go. In addition, they also justified their return by pointing out the negative aspects of the city, such as overcrowding. They were implying that their return was a result of rational consideration and a positive selectivity, thus disavowing the public assumption that returning to the countryside is self-sacrificing.

In addition, when asked for their understanding of rural-urban relation, return migrants' answers shows their efforts of scale renegotiation. LLL's comment is very representative: "If I have cravings for steak or want to go shopping, I will go to the city. City for me is a place for entertainment. Countryside is real life." In LLL's narrative, the configuration of rural-urban differences contrasts with the government's policy, which plans to turn rural sites into the affiliation of the cities. As discussed in Chapter 2, the

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[97] A significant amount of scholarship has paid attention to 'urban informality' (Hart, 1985; Schindler, 2014). As urbanisation progresses, I here propose a new form of informality which is positioned in the rural-urban dynamic. The power of such informal business and how it changes the rural-urban dynamic worth further investigation in the future.

government's urbanisation policy is to strategically relocate more rural residents to urban units (in the sense of administrative units). This means the living function of the rural units is declining.

Reversely, for LLL, the countryside is mainly where her work and life happen. In her interpretation, the urban and the rural have switched positions, with the former less salient than the latter. This calls into questioning the superiority the urban represents to rural youth who might dream about going to the big city one day – a view that is frequently assumed in news and television stories, and in fiction and nonfiction literature. In fact, LLL and many of the other return migrants I interviewed naturalise their trips to the city as recurring habitual events embedded in their daily lives. They use their narrative of mobility to detest the rural-urban binary projected by main discourse.

Other return migrants were explicitly opposed to the stereotype of the countryside. FQ, the 27-year-old farm owner, said that he was angry about the unfair image of the rural. Sadly, though he argued that the two are the same, the fact that he had to make the claim already speaks to the rural-urban dichotomy:

> What gives the city the right to feel so different? Without us countryside that provides them food and vegetables, can they live by themselves? What makes the urbanites look down upon us country pumpkins[98]? I really don't understand why there is such a strong stereotype against the countryside! Who does not have a family background originated from the countryside? I think the city and the countryside are the same.

The return migrants' narrative of mobility is also reflected in their future plans. When talking about future, the participating returnees did not completely rule out the possibility of re-migrating again. In fact, many of them mentioned uncertainty in their decision to stay and therefore migrating out again might be possible. When asked about her future plans, ZHL replied: "For the next five years I won't leave here because of the store I am running. But I am not sure after that. Maybe I will go to the city again." Others were even more certain about leaving. WYL was already planning to leave the countryside when she finishes her five-year service as primary school teacher so that she could continue

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[98] FQ used the term *xiangxialao,* literally translated as country pumpkin. His original quotes: 城里人凭什么看不起我们乡下佬?

studying as a postgraduate student (she was preparing for the National Postgraduate Recruitment Exam).

They could always change their mind too. When I first met LLL in 2018, she said she was inclined to not leave the countryside. However, a year later, she told me that maybe it would be a good idea to go somewhere else: "Don't get stuck in one place." There are exceptions, even among those who firmly believe they will not leave. HSM is very satisfied with her life in the countryside. She is quite sure that she would not re-migrate to a city, but said, "If one day my children go overseas and settle down there, we might go there to live with them."

Thus, in contrast to what the public assumes, return migrants are far from being disconnected from the city. This analysis points to how the participating return migrants sees mobility – either to leave home or return to the village – as an open-ended process. They argue against the dominant discourse that pictures them as heroes of their hometowns whose self-sacrifice is hinged on the intrinsic discrepancy between rural and urban, and that rural life is inferior to the urban. They downplay the heroic sentiment and make light of the physical distances between the city and the countryside, acknowledge the downside of the city, naturalise the habit of going to the city, and question urban superiority.

That said, it is worth noting that some returnees also justify their decisions to return by reinforcing the binary distinctions between the rural and urban, using words like 'leisure', 'living', 'noisy', 'quiet'. Their seemingly paradoxical claims suggest a consistent tenet in rural discourse: the rural space is socially, economically and politically produced as being eternally at the opposite side of the urban. Being opposite here does not simply mean the lack of development, it also refers to a more abstract bundle of rural traits that represents everything urban is not. This abstract bundle digests the uneven scalar formation and simplifies uneven resource distribution as symbolic tokens that contrast with each other. If the city means a promising career future, the countryside means the end of the career path; if the city means modernity with skyscrapers and wide roads, the countryside means backwardness with low buildings and muddy roads; if the city means a busy stressful life, the countryside means peaceful relaxation. Being subject to this rural–urban continuum, the return migrants are actively negotiating their place and redefining the rural on the one hand and reproducing their social differences on the other.

4.3 Technomobility: Mobility online

In their book *How the World Changed Social Media*, Daniel Miller and his colleagues (2016) compiled case studies from nine countries to learn how society has been reshaped by social media. They point out that in public discussions, the online world is often linked with the 'fake' or the 'unreal', whereas the offline world is regarded as the authentic one. Their findings contest this binary distinction. For many people, including rural migrant workers in China, the virtual spaces available through their phones and computers have become safe places to express their true feelings. For migrants in particular, online world is also the place where they can escape from their hardships in offline world. Miller et al. argue that both the online and offline worlds are equally real and significant, and thus draw attention to two types of migration taking place, not only in China but also internationally. The more noticeable is physical movement, such as migration from rural to urban or in reverse. The other, which is less visible but equally critical, is technological migration from the offline to the online world. The following discussion expands on this argument.

The development of new technologies such as phones, computers, and smartphones has enabled technological mobility to co-exist with physical mobility. People can access virtual online worlds that liberate them from their physical and even their social confines (G. Yang, 2003). The online arena enables people to communicate from far distances and explore new sorts of social relations that are unavailable offline. The 21st century is "organised around new 'machines' enabling people to be more individually mobile through space, forming small world connections 'on the go'" (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 221).

The discussion of return migrants' mobility won't be complete without including the online world that takes place simultaneously alongside the returnees' offline world. As introduced in Chapter 2, ICT infrastructure developments now equip even remote rural areas with low-cost 3G or 4G data. With the prices of smartphones also dropping in China, the rural population's smartphone usage is rising (Wallis, 2013), even surpassing landlines, mobile phones, and the once popular *xiaolingtong*[99]. Meanwhile, the rural population, especially the younger generation, has improved its digital literacy, with most

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[99] A type of portable phone that has only telephone function. It's popular among elders for its cheap prices and loud ring tone.

using their smartphones instead of computers to access the internet (Z. Shen, 2018). Returnees in this research are consistent with this finding. Many of them rarely use computer on daily basis. Contrarily, smartphone has become an indispensable part in their life.

The multiple functions of the smartphone are bringing the integration of machines and human beings to the next level, but not just for the communication purposes. Above all, its in-built camera and other apps now allow previously purely verbal or textual interactions to be sent in multimedia forms. As practically a portable computer at a cheaper price, it is also an assistive work tool. Smartphones have permeated into people's daily lives as recorders of conversations, photos and videos. They are literally become time-spatial compression devices implanted in the lives of modern people.

Figure 4 is a screenshot of CLL's most frequently used smartphone apps. As the translations show, these apps serve the purpose of making payments (*zhifubao*), ordering food (*meituan*), browsing the internet (UC *liulanqi*), recording life cycles such as menstruation (*meiyou*), online shopping (*taobao*), and even daily payments such as public transportation (*yunshanfu*). That these apps cover a comprehensive range of CLL's daily activities and suggest how the online world, more specifically the smartphone, has become dominant in her life.

Figure 4 CLL's smartphone screenshot

A screenshot of the most frequently used apps in CLL's smartphone.
From left up: Zhifubao (online payment), Meituan (food delivery), UC browser, meiyou (recording menstrual cycle), Taobao (online shopping), Yunshanfu (online payment)

We can divide the smartphones' function of facilitating mobility into two broad categories. The first is its original communication function as a phone, and the second is its assistive role in daily life through different apps. In next section I mainly discuss its first function, and the following section will focus on the use of smartphones in daily life.

Communication via smartphone: multimedia messages

It is clear that smartphones are imperative for return migrants to maintain contact with other family members and friends from afar. Communication can be conceived as fulfilling two purposes: communication as transmission, and communication as ritual (Carey, 2008). The former entails simply information transmission, while the latter functions to maintain the fabric of social relations by enacting rituals, thereby communicating emotions, feelings, and attitudes. There are also messages between lines. Before smartphones were widely used by the rural population, the rural migration had a long history of relying on other telecommunication devices, including landlines, IC card phones and mobile phones (Wallis, 2013). This sort of communication was 'dry', meaning that it could not convey too much emotional expression. And due to the high cost of phone calls, interlocutors had to limit the number of calls as well as the length of each call. Most calls were made for discussing crucial family matters, such as house construction, childcare, and so on.

From the rural households' end, they were not necessarily equipped with landlines (McDonald, 2016; Wallis, 2013). The public places where phone calls were made, such as IC card phone booths and convenient stores, further prevented the migrants from expressing their feelings and emotions in a phone call, as they were not socially comfortable with such behaviours. If households' separate living arrangements were hindering family reunions, the lack of communication was leading to the destruction of households. For instance, the massive number of left-behind children in the countryside who are reported to suffer from the absence of their parents' love is a result of the insufficient communication between the parents and the children [100] . Phone communication in these circumstances was merely communication as transmission.

While the separate dwelling situation has not changed with today's return migrants, the availability of smartphones and other digital devices gives more variety to their forms

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[100] This observation is based on my own thesis for master's degree (Wang, 2016). Also refer to Lixin Fan's film *The Last Train Home* (2009).

of communication. Both rural migrants and return migrants use WeChat, which is the most widely used social media among the Chinese. It is developed by Tencent, the same company of QQ, a more computer-based social media platform (Miller et al., 2016). The app can be understood as a combination of WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter, which captures social media's 'chat', 'posting' and 'forwarding' features. In this section, I mainly attend to WeChat's 'chat' function for individual messages and group chats[101]. This function enables messages to be exchanged in multiple forms, including texts, photos, voice mails, and video messages. It also allows making both video and audio calls. Apart from one-to-one chats, it also has a group chat function that huddles multiple numbers of people into one group to chat.

WeChat transforms the communication quality in two ways. First of all, communication through WeChat cultivates an ongoing conversation that doesn't need time and place constraints. People can send messages to others any time anywhere and wait for the other to reply in an indefinite timeline. Secondly, there are also no specific requirements of the conversations' contents. Apart from the practical issues, people can also share with their partner or friends daily trivial matters, such as a photo of the meal they had, the new clothes they bought, beautiful sceneries they saw, etc. In general, it fulfils the two functions of communication: the instrumental and ritual. The ongoing messages or calls on multiple forms have generated an immersive atmosphere for those who participate in. This is particularly vital for close family members, especially those in nuclear families, and for parents who live separately from their loved ones. For instance, when I asked ZHL if she missed her daughter, P, she replied yes, but she could visit her. In addition, with constant updates from her mother-in-law, she is able to keep a close track of P through the app: "It's like I see her all the time." She showed me messages exchanged with her mother-in-law, most of which are photos and videos of P being bathed and fed or dancing and playing with other kids. She also video chats regularly to have virtual face-to-face conversations with P. She said, "I am not worried about P at all. I can 'see' her every day."

For family members who are incapable of using WeChat, smartphones and other smart gadgets can also create immersive surroundings for them. Xiaoqiu is a 29-year-old female returnee who opened a small diner in Town S, Fuzhou, Fujian. She used to also

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[101] 微信群.

run a diner, *shaxian xiaochi*[102] in Shanghai with her husband, Q. When her father became ill two years prior to her interview, she returned with her daughter, R, leaving Q working alone in Shanghai. When I was doing my fieldwork, her diner became the cafeteria where I would hang out. R was in the first year of primary school. She came by every day after school and did homework while her mother prepared for the evening opening. One day she was again doing her homework, when her father called. Being only six years old, she did not have a smartphone, but she had a digital watch that she wears all the time so that Q could call her. She talked to her dad briefly, telling him about her school day and homework, also complaining that her mom was too strict on her. Xiaoqiu told me that Q talks to R several times a day. R also learned how to make phone calls, so she could call him as well. "The two of them are very close. Every morning they talk to each other even before she gets up. There are things that she only tells her father, not me!" Xiaoqiu jokingly complained. She also said that smart watches are very popular among young children whose parents work in the city. Almost all of her daughters' classmates have one, the price being affordable at around 400 yuan[103].

For adult family members, group chats strengthen their emotional bonds (Niu, 2018), as well as having both practical and symbolic meanings. WYL's family consists of her parents and siblings located in different places, so their WeChat group (*weixinqun*) saves the trouble of unnecessarily repetitive communication about, for example, the dates of family reunions during national holidays such as Chinese New Year. Also, daily messages contain photos of the third generation, namely, WYL's niece and nephews, who are the centre of the household. Sharing pictures in the group chat is a ritual function that cultivates the members' sense of belonging (Carey, 2008). It is not simply a transmission tool. While it conveys messages, it also constructs and sustains relationships. Family members are not just keeping contact with each other, they basically engage others in their daily lives using their smartphones. Compared to their physical locations, which constantly change, WeChat groups create stable virtual spaces where members can permanently gather. The online reunions compensate for a family's physical separation and further enhance household flexibility.

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[102] 沙县小吃. A popular diner in cosmopolitan cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou. It originates from Sanming, Fujian (W, 2020).
[103] Around 80 Australian dollars.

The return migrants participating in this study said they use online communication as a way of emphasising that household separation is their choice. WYL, for example, said that she prefers that family members don't live together, because her mom, sister and herself are all very short tempered. When they stay together for too long, they can easily get into heated fights. Also, having lived separately for a long time, her habits no longer are compatible with those of other family members, so it's better to keep a distance from each other. She finds communication over WeChat is no different from face-to-face communication; sometimes it's even better: "There are something that is easier to be expressed in written text than verbal language."

Other participants shared similar opinions, even those who are separated from their spouses and children. Most[104] tended to downplay the physical separation. For example, CYJ, a 33-year-old female village cadre, has been living apart from her husband for over 10 years. He works in a large private company in Shenzhen. She said:

> We call each other any time we want. We also do video calls. It's not
> a big deal. We are very flexible. If we need each other, we would
> make video calls. But if we are fine, we can stay out of contact for
> days.

> I prefer my husband to be working outside (of the countryside).
> Sometimes when he is home for a long time, I begin to grow
> impatient, wondering when he will start packing.

Her comments then were quickly echoed by other female villagers who were also there at the time: "It's more housework if they are home. So, it's too much trouble." ZHL also emphasised her freedom to see O and P when talking about the separate living arrangements:

> I really enjoy this living arrangement. We (she and O) make a lot of
> phone calls. Also, we can see each other all the time. If I miss him, or
> if he misses me, we will drive to each other. My daughter is also
> within reaching distance. We can do whatever we want.

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[104] HSM and her husband GHL are exceptional. They firmly expressed the necessity of being physically together. Apart from them, others are more flexible.

WeChat is also a platform that allows virtual gathering space for friends. Return migrants use WeChat groups to stay contact with their close friends, who are usually their childhood friends or schoolmates. Most of the return migrants' friends left the countryside and now live in the city. While individual messaging is also available, WeChat groups seem to be more favoured by friends who know each other well. ZHL has three close friends from high school, all of who are now settled in different cities. She is the only one who had returned. She told me:

> I have several besties (*guimi*) from my childhood. We are all from
> Village D. They now bought apartment in the city and settle down
> there. But we still stay very close. We have a group chat on WeChat.
> So communication is very convenient.

She also confessed that since her friends are busy with work and family, they don't find much time to talk, but "We talk whenever we find time." This indicates that group chats have symbolic meaning as being a sign of long-lasting friendships. The action of forming a group chat creates a sense of inclusiveness among members. It is a private online space that belongs to each group member. Even though they don't talk often, the existence of a WeChat group is the trope of their years-long friendships. Thus, 'having a WeChat group' has become a new standard by which people evaluate their relationships with others. The situation differs if the group members are still connected at work, which is related to extending social relations. This will be the topic for the next chapter.

In returnees' narratives, the participants often seemed to unconsciously neglect the fact that they were physically apart from their family and friends. For instance, WYL mentioned to me, "My mom said to me last night such and such." She omitted the part that this was in a WeChat conversation, which left me confused at first. I thought her mom had come back the day before. She frequently did this. Others also would often start with "My friend told me this and this", giving me an impression that this friend had told them something in person, which was not the case.

This is a subtle but interesting detail. In their speech, all of their friends and families seem to be surrounding them. Communication online has become so common that there is no need to point it out specifically. It is perhaps due to this reason that some of the return migrants did not even consider themselves as living separately from their families. The actual location where they lived did not matter much anymore. The most obvious

example is when I asked XXR where he lived. He looked quite confused and then said, "I live everywhere, it's hard to say." But he seemed confident that his family lived together. Physical separation had become less of an obstacle through the use of smartphone.

This suggests that 'mobility assisted by technology' can work in tandem with 'narrative of mobility'. Instead of suffering as a result of separation from family members, the return migrants stressed the benefits of multi-location living. At the same time, they also emphasised their agency to choose to do 'whatever and whenever I want'. Online communication allows them to be unconstrained by the conditions imposed on them and their rural households. They were actively redefining the new formalities of household structures and values, while also demonstrating their individual agency.

4.4 Mobility in daily life: shopping, jogging, and browsing social media

In this last section, I discuss the return migrants' mobility in their daily lives – a topic that has been largely neglected in the literature. An understanding of return migrants' translocal practices on a daily basis should offer clues to how they negotiate with scales of place. Several examples will be given of how this place-making process is crucial to their becoming 'place entrepreneurs' (Oakes & Schein, 2006).

WYL's Dormitory

WYL's dormitory is inside the primary school where she works. It is on the second floor of a building situated at the foot of a mountain. It is a single room with no private bathroom, so she shares the toilets and showers with other teachers and boarding students. The room itself lacks a personal touch, with standard furniture, such as a bed and a desk. The only distinctive feature is the books that WYL has piled up on the desk. Beneath the desk there are several cardboard boxes and plastic bags containing her online shopping.

On a Sunday afternoon, I went with WYL from her home to her school. As mentioned before, she spends her weekends at home and then has a three-hour bus ride back on Sunday[105]. After we got off the bus, we had to stop at the shop not far from her school.

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[105] Not long after my visit, WYL's sister gave her an old car of hers for commuting between school and home, which saves her much time.

She told me, "I have to pick up several parcels." These parcels contained things she had bought online and had been delivered to the shop and left there at no charge. Such free services are provided by online shopping platforms such as Taobao and JD[106]. WYL took out her smartphone to show the shopkeeper her designated parcel codes. Before picking up her own package, she also saw one belonging to a colleague. She first wanted to take the parcel for her colleague. In the end, she decided to send a WeChat message instead to remind her to collect it.

After we got to her room, she quickly unpacked the parcels and showed me black tights and a pink top, a popular style for exercises. She told me they were sportswear she bought on Taobao for morning jogging. She asked for my opinion on how they looked and said she was considering returning the top. The online store's policy allows customers a free return within seven days after they collect it.

That Sunday afternoon WYL had accomplished her shopping in her little dormitory room in Village D, at the foot of a mountain. It would have taken her three hours to get to the nearest town, but with her smartphone and the well-developed e-commerce system in both rural and urban regions, she was able to access products exactly as her urban counterparts do.

WYL's shopping practice is common among returnees. All the interviewees mentioned that online shopping is their main way of purchasing. It also reduces the sense of urban and rural difference. As HSM recounted:

> In terms of living standard, I don't see any differences [between the
> rural and urban]. It's even better, because we have a better
> environment here in the countryside. We all use online shopping now,
> my colleagues from work as well. Courier service is fast and efficient.
> I buy stuff on JD or Taobao, usually it will be delivered the next day.
> Very convenient.

This reveals a significant change in their perspectives on rural life. If returning to the countryside once meant the returnees giving up a modern lifestyle with many material possessions and wide purchasing choices, this is no longer the case. The ubiquitous smartphones, online shopping platform and courier services have fundamentally shifted

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[106] Biggest online shopping platforms in China.

the rural social and economic structures by connecting the massive rural population to the consumer market which used to be unavailable to them.

Y's tea shop

I knew CLL through her sister-in-law, Y, who is in charge of the family tea business and the de facto head of the household. One year after my first visit, I went back to their town. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, CLL was going through some hardship at the time. After a year of preparation, she had failed the civil servants' exam and her work in the township government would be ending soon. She was already preparing for the next year's exam despite the protests of her husband's family, who wanted her to have a baby first.

CLL and I agreed to meet at Y's tea shop after she finished visiting villages with her supervisor[107]. When I arrived at the tea shop, Y was sitting behind her tea table, chatting with her casual helpers in dialect while looking at her phone from time to time. CLL was sitting at the end of the tea table, looking at her phone as well. When I approached her, I happened to glance at her phone. To my surprise, she was looking at Instagram, a non-Chinese social media that is blocked by the Great Fire Wall[108] (GFW). When I asked her how she accessed Instagram she replied that she was actually browsing through Weibo, and some of the accounts that she followed would reblog Instagram posts about fashion or style of clothes.

Weibo is another popular form of social media China. Unlike WeChat which focuses more on communication among friends, Weibo is a platform where users relate to strangers, forwarding and re-blogging their comments. Thus, Weibo is a platform for acquiring information. Through subscribing to or following accounts, users get to choose the information that they are interested in. When CLL was browsing through Weibo on her smartphone, she didn't seem to be aware of her surroundings. Though she was physically in the room, her phone transported to her a different place. This scenario is similar to Wang's (2016) description of rural migrants in the city who transfer their life to the online world as an escape of the hardship in their offline world. CLL seemed to be

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[107] 巡村. Township government conducts regular inspections on villages. CLL was accompanying the supervisors to the villages.

[108] Known as the technologies that block the internet users in Mainland China from accessing foreign websites, such as Facebook, YouTube, twitter, etc.

disconnecting from her physical surroundings and immersing herself in her social media world.

LLL's Office

When I was staying at Town S, one afternoon, I went with LLL to her office which she does not use too often, as her work requires her to travel a lot. When we arrived there, she asked me if I would like a cup of coffee. I was surprised to see a set of pour-over coffee utensils on the table and asked where she had bought them (see Figure 5). Coffee is not such a popular drink in the countryside and pour-over coffee is relatively unknown in China. She said that she bought the utensils and beans online from Xiamen. She had learned about pour-over coffee online and got to know that there was actually an award-winning coffee roaster in Xiamen, whose shop she had also visited. She said when she is at her office, she makes herself a pour-over before starting work, "setting a fresh start of the day". Here the coffee takes on a meaning beyond its function as a beverage: it symbolises LLL's knowledge of, and her capacity to partake in an urban, even cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Figure 5 LLL's coffee utensil

Two migrations in parallel

The above three cases have several similarities. These return migrants are simultaneously occupying two parallel worlds: the offline and the online. The offline world is the one they have in the countryside. They connect to online world through their

smartphones. Being online does not just entail online socialising, it is also a comprehensive aggregation of entertaining, shopping, and acquiring information. It is what constitutes return migrants' personal leisure time. This further attests to Miller et al.'s (2016) point that migration also includes moving from offline to online worlds.

This partly explains why returning home had become an option for these migrants. Offline to online migration already existed before their physical return migration. As revealed by researchers (e.g. Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Stornes, 2012; Sun, 2013), migrant workers in the city have very little personal time, due to their high-intensity work schedules (Wallis, 2013). The educated rural migrants in this research might have more flexibility than factory workers, but offline activities are still quite luxurious for them due to high cost, congested public traffic, and so on. Thus, many would already have had parts of their lives online, even when they were still in the city. With apps like Taobao and JD, Weibo and WeChat, TikTok and Kuaishou[109], smartphones are essential parts of the 'mega media' (Xinyuan Wang, 2016) that satisfies multiple purposes, from daily basic needs to entertainment.

This can also explain why some migrants claimed their lives did not change drastically when they returned. For instance, CLL's life in the city was 'two dots and one line'[110] and remained that way when she returned. Even though their physical location might have changed, their online world remained the same. The smartphone was a prerequisite for their return. As LLL said, "Without the cell phone that enables me to connect to the world outside, I don't know how I can put up with things here." Connection with the online world fulfils both practical and symbolic purposes. It allows returnees to maintain the lifestyle they had back in the city and thus remain linked to urbanism and modernity.

Constructing a cosmopolitan lifestyle in the countryside

From these three cases, we also see returnees' agency, as 'place entrepreneurs', of bringing urbanism into the rural space and recreating the urban space in the countryside through both material and symbolic forms of communication (Oakes & Schein, 2006). When return migrants talk about their city life, entertainment activities such as shopping or singing Karaoke come first to their minds. This reflects their translocal imagination of

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[109] Both are mobile apps for short video clips. They are especially popular among rural populations.
[110] 两点一线.

the city, which is a collage of consumerist behaviours. Among these, shopping embodies what is quintessentially urban and modern, and unlike Karaoke or bars that are visited only occasionally, shopping can happen on a regular basis. As well, the experience of shopping does not only involve buying things, it is also a social event that entails gathering with friends, chatting and exchanging opinions. Furthermore, shopping usually takes place at shopping mall, the most essential urban symbol.

Shopping malls' multi-story building compounds are usually situated in busy city centres, their locations speaking for their central position in urbanism. In a sense, the existence of shopping malls has become the representation of urbanisation. It is also an indicator of a region's development level. For instance, in the advertising of real estates, accessibility to shopping malls is usually a selling point.

To some extent, malls are a manifestation of a region's level of urbanisation further drawing the contrast between rural and urban spaces. Comparatively speaking, there are fewer shopping malls in the rural administrative units[111]. In the counties (*xian*), shopping malls are often situated in towns (*zhen*), which is the urban units within the rural region. Moreover, shopping malls in towns are also far less glamorous compared to those in the city.

This distinction is very obvious to the return migrants and was repeatedly alluded to in returnees' comments. For example, WXM said, "I felt so hopeless when I first came back. It is so backward that it doesn't even have a proper shopping mall." Maintaining proximity to the shopping mall is more than having a place to go shopping, it is a symbolic gesture of the translocal embodied with urbanism and modernity.

Being able to shop online with smartphones has therefore become a crucial replacement for physically shopping in malls. As described in WYL's case, with the shopping app installed, she enjoyed browsing for clothes. This approximates to the experience of shopping with her friends in the mall. She also exchanges opinions and recommendations with her colleagues, who are also online customers. They often go together to the local store to pick up their parcels. On the way, they chat about their new purchases and recommend stores to each other. Even if they go there alone, they help out each other with parcel collection by either collecting for them or sending them a reminder

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111 Refer to Chapter 1 for administrative units in China.

message. The repetition of social interactions like collecting parcels together is helpful in fostering returnees' relationship with their colleagues.

Embodied modernity: negotiating scales through daily practice

In addition to the shopping experience, the wide variety of commercial products available online enables return migrants to bring urban traces to the rural and renegotiate their space in the countryside. In some cases, they used these both material and symbolic transmissions to defend against the rural influences.

The reason WYL bought a jogging outfit online was that she wanted to motivate herself resume the habit of jogging she developed in the city. This is expected to enrich her leisure time, which according to her, is quite boring:

> I don't have much to do after work. When I first came back, I played
> volleyball every day after work. Not anymore. My colleagues like
> playing Mah-jong after work. They also like drinking. Sometimes they
> play a whole night. These are totally not my thing. I like outdoor
> activities, such as sports or hiking. So, this semester I want to start
> jogging more.

Jogging, as a leisure activity, is particularly popular among middle-class urbanites who believe in having a healthy lifestyle. Like the shopping mall, it also bears a very distinct urban feature. Jogging is about improving the body, an embodied practice aiming at self-improvement. Practicing jogging requires time, persistence and repetition. Through forming the habit of jogging, WYL is flagging her desire for a modern lifestyle, which is uncommon in the countryside. It speaks to her embodied practice of negotiating her spatial subjectivity and using her body's repetitive movements to gradually carve out her own territory. This brings a translocal connection between the rural and urban.

In addition, it draws her apart from her colleagues who are fond of playing Mah-jong or drinking, both activities having social connotations opposite to self-motivation and connected to the urban perspective of the rural population being backward and lazy. WYL's alternative choice of jogging as leisure activity underscores her understanding of how a self-disciplined individual should manage herself, an outlook that is associated with the entrepreneurial subject within the neoliberal discourse. By claiming themselves as being unaccustomed to local rural habits, place entrepreneurs negotiate their own social

spaces in the countryside (Schein, 2006). LLL's pour-over coffee equipment serves the similar purpose.

CLL's case suggests that not just material objects can be the mediums of their negotiation, information can also do that. The image of CLL browsing foreign Instagram accounts that discuss the latest fashion, while physically being surrounded by rural women who spoke in local dialect, evokes the translocal practitioners' capacities to live with disjuncture. Despite the loud chatting voices around her, CLL did not react to what was happening. It is as though she was clinging to her smartphone as to a life vest in the ocean. The online world built on the smartphone and social media seemed to dislocate her from her surroundings. She was physically present in the tea shop, but not really there. Her smartphone had become an extension to her world, offering an escape route, however ephemeral.

It's all about sense a ritual

We now go back to WYL's dormitory. Something happened in her room that has not yet been completely clarified. When she and I were exchanging our opinions regarding the clothes, there was one question unasked: why did she need to buy a new fashionable jogging outfit when she had others? I didn't ask because it is quite obvious: she needed a 'proper' outfit. This reveals another characteristic of the returnees' rural life: by purchasing the latest fashion products online, they are able to install the so-called 'sense of ritual' (*yishigan*) to their daily lives. The term 'sense of ritual' was repeatedly mentioned in the returnees' narratives. More than one told me: "There needs to be sense of ritual in life. Otherwise, what is the point of life[112]?" In their narrative, 'sense of ritual' is equivalent to the meaning of life (see Figure 6).

To understand better the term, this explanation from Zhihu[113] is quite apt:

> The purpose of sense of ritual is to make yourself feel like you are living your life. The meaning of life lies in the way you live. Life without sense of ritual is really scary. There are 365 days a year, in addition to eating, drinking, and sleeping, it only consists of repetitive working day after day. Life repeats itself. Days are barely good, and

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[112]生活还有什么意义？
[113] A popular website similar to Quora, on which people seek answers of various types.

even life seems bleak. Life needs sense of ritual, so that it is not that boring.

Even we are alone, we should drink coffee with appreciation, eat with appreciation, sleep with appreciation[114]. With sense of ritual, our ordinary days come to have a poetic and artistic touch. Just like in the movie *Tiffany's Breakfast*, the character Holly is penniless. She always wears a little black dress and fake jewellery, and slowly eats her breakfast in front of Tiffany's exquisite store window. The most common tribute of croissant and hot coffee thus turn into a banquet (Canva, n.d.)."
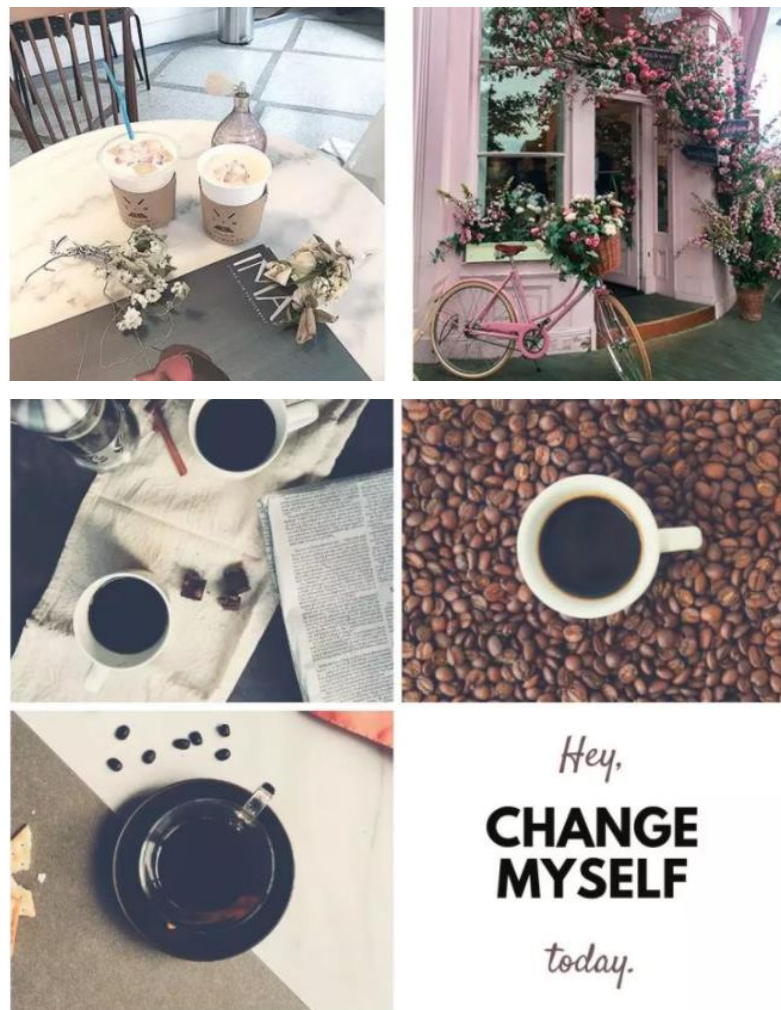

Figure 6 Illustration representing sense of ritual (Canva, n.d.)

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[114]一个人的时候，也能好好的喝咖啡，好好吃饭，好好睡觉.

The sense of ritual is thus an ambiance brought out through material objects such as coffee, flowers, and croissants; particular arrangements of these objects; and daily repetition. Hence, it is primarily related to a consumer behaviour, which materialises the human emotions in the process. Unlike the traditional tenet of consumerism that links personal achievement with expensive and luxurious products, the sense of ritual pays more attention to the appreciation of common material objects. The return migrants emphasised the necessity of having sense of ritual if they were to have meaning in their lives. The comparison between the sense of ritual and the boring life is particularly potent. Installing a sense of ritual changes an individual's quotidian life from being boring and colourless to exciting and meaningful. In doing so, this logic shifts the responsibility of having a meaningful life to the individuals; it is their obligation to create a sense of ritual.

A sense of ritual also emphasises the importance of repetition. As stated in the previous explanation, the main character from *Breakfast at Tiffany,* Holly repeatedly visits Tiffany, the jewellery store in New York, to eat breakfast, which is a symbol of having a sense of ritual. Holly's passion for life, as embodied by visiting this luxurious brand, is translated into repetitive behaviours. For the returnees, the pursuit of a sense of ritual indicates a certain degree of self-discipline. It emphasises the individuals' self-governance to adhere to the normativity of the urban style, namely, being passionate for life and active in self-improvement.

The infiltration of the sense of ritual into ordinary life is especially favoured by the return migrants. Creating a sense of ritual is an affective dimension of the translocal imagination that inspires, comforts, and reassures their self-identification as educated return migrants (Wallis, 2013). This is also their way of dealing with the rural culture they consider to be backward. In LLL's case, the coffee-making process served as a ritual for her to start her day afresh. As she made me a cup of coffee, she told me about the disputes she was dealing with at work. It was a tricky situation of land acquisition in her village, which could be full of swearing, accusation and confrontation from the local villagers[115]. I couldn't help feeling the concomitance of two places at the same time: one was the village-based conflicts she had to deal with and the other was the urban-based lifestyle. For LLL, these two worlds exist in parallel. Her experience is an example of how these return migrants straddle multiple places simultaneously. It appears to me that

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[115] We will come back to this dispute with more details in Chapter 6.

the coffee utensils that she purchased in the city either online or in person had built up a fortress she could use to defend against the frustrations she experienced in her work and daily life.

In addition, pursuing sense of ritual is also commensurate with the educated returnees' aesthetic preferences and the principle of spending money, which again is leaning more towards the urban middle-class elites. Scholars have found that rural populations tend to lack planning of financial expenses, particularly when their identities are threatened by the discourse of modernisation. For instance, Wallis (2013) depicted how rural migrants would buy mobile phones that were beyond their financial capability, what she calls "first big urban purchase" (p. 73). For some, a mobile phone might require up to three months' salary (in the early 2010s).

The educated returnees who detest such stereotypes argued that they believed it was not necessary to buy overly costly things to show off. For example, LLL said:

> I don't like spending too much money on clothes. Most of them are
> from Uniqlo[116]. I often buy the basic style, which lasts long and
> doesn't look out of fashion. I don't think it's necessary to spend too
> much money on clothes.

Being rational in spending money is an important criterion for being an educated urbanite with high quality *suzhi*. Thus, the returnees' purchasing choices indicate how distinct they are from the rural population in general. The sense of ritual thereafter becomes the ideal interpretation of the lifestyle they prefer.

Lastly, the sense of ritual used to have a more sacred connotation, exclusively used in formal events such as ancestor worship or family gatherings, all of which are phenomenal activities, not quotidian ones such as eating breakfast or doing exercise. However, the new connotation of rituality is embedded in daily routines and thus sets very low boundaries and is easy to access. Furthermore, it does not have a preferred location, so it can be either in the city or in the countryside. Its high accessibility and flexibility are the opposite of what rituality originally conveyed. This speaks to the intensification of consumerism in rural society, which enables materialism to exist everywhere. Unlike Wallis' (2013) "big urban purchase" (p. 73), materialism has now

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[116] A Japanese casual wear brand.

been dismantled into numerous small urban purchases whose material touch brightens up the return migrants' lives. While not exclusive to the countryside, the emphasis on sense of ritual is especially important to this group of educated return migrants and helps them cope with their country life. Moreover, it allows them to aspire to the translocal imagination of the educated urban middle-class life that they long for.

Through analysing the return migrants' pursuit of the sense of rituality, it is possible to see their philosophy of life and their consumerist behaviour. In his book *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Slater (1997) commented that consumption reflects one's desire of a particular kind of lifestyle and is connected to claims of entitlement. In this study, the educated returnees' preference for a sense of ritual is their way to "construct and contest" their identities (Schein, 2006, p. 225).

Taking photos and posting them: Return migrants' self-expression

The daily practice of creating a sense of ritual would be incomplete without the final step, which is taking photos and posting them on their Friends Circle (*pengyouquan*) on WeChat. For example, after having brunch with her friends, LLL posted a photo of them on WeChat with the caption "There should be a foreign taste even in a small town" (see Figure 7) WYL, too, after jogging, would often post a screenshot from a special app that tracks her jogging, displaying the length accomplished. This is not necessarily to show off. Recording their daily events with electronic gadgets has become an integrated part of their daily ritual. In the screenshot of CLL's phone, there is also an app that records her menstruation. The idea that there will be photo taken is an inherent part of the process. For return migrants it could also be a public statement of not giving up the urban lifestyle they still want. The smartphone's recording and broadcasting functions have further embedded it as an intrinsic component of the returnees' lives. On one hand, it is a lens that puts returnees' lives constantly under the scrutiny of their social media. On the other hand, it connects them with their wider online social arena, thus easing their anxiety about being alone in the countryside.

Figure 7 LLL posting her brunch on WeChat

LLL's WeChat post of her brunch. The line reads: "There should be a foreign taste even in a small town".

4.5 From 'leave the fields without leaving the countryside' to 'leaving the city without giving up the urban life'?

This chapter has discussed many forms of physical, verbal, and virtual mobility that are integrated into the return migrants' daily lives. It is quite clear that even though they returned, they do not want to leave the city. Instead, through the different techniques discussed here, it can be seen that they are trying to preserve an urban flavour to their lifestyles while in the countryside. In *A Landscape of Travel: The Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China*, Jenny Chio (2014) recounted that at the beginning of economic reform, the central government came up with the slogan 'Leave the fields without leaving the countryside' (*litu bulixiang*), which is an attempt to persuade rural citizens to replace traditional farming and embrace modernity while still staying in the countryside. This articulates the government's unequal development plan that puts rural populations in an inferior position by constraining their physical movement.

We then see the new practice of the return migrants, which might be called 'leaving the city without leaving urban life'. While they are no longer physically in the city, they manage to preserve their lifestyles through translocal practice. They are also striving to maintain cohesive family communication through social media, smartphones and other devices to compensate for their physical absence. The incredible adaption to these skills by rural household members in the migration era has quickly established new norms for

families having multi-dwelling plans. At the same time, while negotiating scale, these translocal practitioners are also inadvertently reproducing the inequality between urban and rural. I will continue to discuss this paradoxical process in the both Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

According to WYL, "Staying in the countryside, sometimes I feel like I am being sucked in by a black hole. You have to fight very hard to resist to it." This chapter has shown how educated returnees can struggle to create their identities through mediums, such as concrete material objects, social media, and hobbies, and thereby exert the agency of liberating themselves from their current situations. As nodes of the web of mobilities that bring traces of more than one place together, they use their smartphones to be extensions of themselves. Moreover, while they 'leave the city without leaving the urban life', they also continue to reshape the urban space through maintaining connection with the city. Drawing on Oakes and Schein's statement that I quote in Chapter 1, when the body leaves the place, it doesn't mean the place stop interacting with the body. While reinforcing this idea, I also add that it also doesn't mean body stops reconstructing the place. Return migrants' translocal practice is constantly reshaping and redefining both the rural and urban spaces. What is particularly worth mentioning is the collective power of individual in the process. The micro-level spatial negotiation by each migrant can reinforce or subvert the existing ranking and scale, which are socially produced (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Therefore, through the aggregation of each micro practice, however trivial it is, it is possible to renegotiate the social scales between rural and urban regions. This corresponds to Stromquist's (2015) argument about change making, in which she stresses the importance of collective movement. She claims that social changes can only be possible if individual agency works as a whole. In that sense, the fact whether return migration can actually make changes to social structure lies on whether the scale of movement could be expanded to a larger number. In other words, with more migrants return, the renegotiation of rural-urban scale can be possible.

Chapter 5

Social relation, social capital and social identity

I met CNC, a 39-year-old return entrepreneur, at his office building that he built 10 years ago for his orchid incubation company. The compound of office/incubator/temporary home is a two-story building. Next to the office is the orchid seedling room; he refers to this as the 'heart' of the compound. A glass door between the two rooms enables him to constantly monitor the seedling room from his office.

Rather than a standard workspace, the arrangement of the office bears more resemblance to a living room. Instead of an office desk at the centre of the room, there is a tea table with teacups, pots and other utensils for tea making. Around the tea table, there is a wooden sofa and a number of stools and chairs to accommodate more people. Whereas in a standard office the hosts and visitors are divided by an office desk, CNC's office provides a more relaxed and less formal atmosphere. The wall next to the tea table faces the sofa and is covered with certificates, medals and awards. At the centre of all these is a television. The TV is turned on all day with closed circuit footage of the seedling room, the greenhouse and other rooms, which reveals that this is not a real living room after all. At the very corner of the room, there is an office desk that looks to be rarely in use. I was not even sure that there was a desk in CNC's office until I checked the photos I had taken there.

The building that CNC built for his seedling room and office/meeting room also contains one bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom with a shower. These are also non-standard working spaces. This is because CNC's wife and two sons spend most of their time there. I made my visit here in the early afternoon. CNC told me his wife was taking a nap with their elder son in the bedroom. When I asked if that was where they live, he replied that their real home was not in this building but located not far away. However, he said that he and his family spent most of their time in his company building.

It was almost midnight when I finished my visit and returned to where I was staying for the night. I sent CNC a WeChat text, thanking him for meeting me in the afternoon and showing me around his orchid farm/company. He replied in less than a minute with a video message. In this video, he was showing me what was happening in his office at the moment. While he was shooting the video, he explained: "I am still drinking tea with

friends who just came to visit. They are all Senior Tea Evaluators at national level." I was surprised by his message not just because he stayed at the office so late, but also because he sent me a relatively personal message instead of a simple and standard text reply like 'You are welcome'. In the age of social media, general social protocol is that people who have just met for the first time tend to only exchange text messages; video messages are more personal and are shared among friends who are more familiar with one another. In response, I also changed my tone to a less formal one. I told him that it looked fun, and I wished I could be there.

My encounter with CNC suggests that his social life is robust and active, which is quite contrary to what is usually presumed by the public (as discussed at the beginning of Chapter 4). CNC appears to have two parallel lives: there is a juxtaposition of his work and social life as well as his online and offline life. This sentiment was echoed by the statements of some others I interviewed. ZHL, who owns a retail baby product store:

> I have many friends here; most of them are female, young mothers.
> When they come to the market, they will come to my store. As a
> businesswoman, I do not lack friends. Doing business really counts on
> having many friends.

HSM, a social media company owner:

> The first year when I came back, I didn't have many friends. But you
> can always find new ones. Especially doing business in social media, I
> get to know people from different social backgrounds. I become a
> public figure here. So, I don't feel a lack of social life now.

These feelings were echoed by CNC, whom we met earlier:

> When I first came back 10 years ago, I felt like a stranger, facing 'raw
> place and uncooked people'[117] (*rensheng dibushu*). Now I have
> established quite extensive social relations. Opening a business in the
> countryside, you have to have a good *guanxi* with local officials and
> villagers. But most of my friends are still fellows who graduated from

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[117] A Chinese idiom, referring to feeling completely unknown to a place.

the same school. We know each other's roots and history[118]
(*zhigenzhidi*).

But it would be misleading to deduce from these individuals' experience that all return migrants enjoy an active and fulfilling social life. In fact, statements from other individuals I talked to suggest the opposite. Just like I introduced in Chapter 4, WYL, a primary school teacher, complained about her boring leisure time. Her colleagues are enthusiastic about playing Mahjong which she is not interested at all. CLL, a temporary worker in the township government, said,

> I have some old friends here (in the countryside), but we don't talk too
> much. They are all married with children, we don't have much to talk
> about[119]. My best friends are still in Fuzhou (the city). We are very
> close. We talk about everything (on WeChat). We sometimes go
> travelling together.

As discussed in Chapter 2, social connection, also known as *guanxi* (Wallis, 2013; M. M. Yang, 1994), plays a significant role in traditional Chinese society. Two important features characterise traditional Chinese society, the first of which being the society of familiarity (Fei, 1992; Xuefeng He, 2011a; M. M. Yang, 1994). Chinese society, especially rural society, functions on the principle of familiarity. There is a distinction between the inside and outside circle, and common connections are needed to get into the inside circle (McDonald, 2016; Wallis, 2013; M. M. Yang, 1994). Different social circles vary in their closeness to the social actors, who are at the centre of many different circles. The second characterising feature of traditional Chinese society is the totality of emotional and practical purpose (Wallis, 2013). Social interactions exchanged within social circles bear the principle of reciprocity (Yan, 1996) by fulfilling both practical purpose and affectionate expression. The frequency of social exchange varies according to the closeness of the social group.

Bearing in mind these established features of traditional Chinese society, I attempt to understand what accounts for differences in these individuals' self-perception of their social life. What enables some return migrants to thrive socially but stands in the way of

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[118] A Chinese idiom, referring to a trustworthy relationship.
[119] CLL was just married with no children at the moment.

others achieving a similar outcome? To what extent does career choice impact social life? How does social media facilitate the socialising process?

Chapter 3 and especially Chapter 4 have established that return migrants remain highly mobile in multiple forms in their personal, familial and work arena. In this chapter, I shift my attention to their social life. Central to the discussion are three key concepts: social life, social capital and social identity. I use 'social life' to refer loosely to all social interactions and activities in general, and I follow Bourdieu's definition of 'social capital', which refers to resources generated through social relations and thus "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 248). Bourdieu also noted that

> the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilise and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected. (p.249)

Thus, the density and size of network (Peng & Du, 2018), as well as the socioeconomic status of the person, are all factors that decide the obtainment of social capital.

While the concepts of social life and social capital are relatively straightforward, the concept of social identity is complex. This is because the very notion of identity begs the question of who is constructing this identity. Identity formation involves myriad and complex factors that are both external and internal. One important question to ask regarding the social identity of individuals in my study is how the internal and external factors interact to shape the formation of their social identity. In particular, I am interested in the interplay between media and government discourses and the extent to which individuals identify with these discourses, as well as their own roles in challenging, reinforcing, maintaining or capitalising on this identity construction.

I explore the dynamic interactions of social life, social capital and social identity in return migrants' life. In my study, careers are divided into two general cohorts: 'return entrepreneur' and 'returnees employed by others'. As discussed in Chapter 3, return entrepreneurs and return village cadres receive public, media and government recognition.

In particular, return entrepreneurs have gained high momentum within the current return entrepreneur discourse. This contrasts with return migrants who choose other careers, such as teachers or civil servants. They return without such labels as 'return entrepreneur' (*fanxiang chuangye*) or even 'return youth' (*fanxiang qingnian,* refer to Chapter 1). I start by examining the return entrepreneurs' social life, as they account for the majority of individuals included in my research. The return village cadres are also included in this cohort. I then turn to the social life of other return migrants.

5.1 Return entrepreneurs' social life

Social connection: key in return entrepreneurs' work

The importance of social capital for return entrepreneurs in the countryside cannot be overstated. Compared to the cohorts in other career areas, return entrepreneurs devote much of their time to social networking. Cultivating social relation (*gao guanxi*) is still very prominent in rural society (Kipnis, 1997). As return migrants leave their hometown and are relocated to a new place, they consequently suffer from the loss of connection in the original place (Fu, 2007; L. Zhao & Lu, 2014), like CNC's experience when he just returned. It is acutely necessary to enter into the inside social circle. More than one return entrepreneur told me that in the countryside, social relations were the most important resource[120]. They believed an old saying 'with more friends, you have more choices'[121].

Scholars also agree that building up a strong social network is a matter of survival for small enterprises (L. Yu et al., 2017). In their analysis of the relationship between social capital and return entrepreneurs' work performance, Peng & Du attributed the success of the entrepreneurs' business to the size and intensity of the social network they are able to develop (2018). The establishment of an extensive social network is the main channel through which return entrepreneurs obtain information and learn new technologies (Chan & Enticott, 2019; Z. Ma, 2001; Peng & Du, 2018; X. Shi et al., 2007). Workshops, new policies, technologies and other resources for information are exchanged within social circles. Apart from formal knowledge, social circles are also the exclusive source for certain types of informal knowledge, such as experience in dealing with local government.

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[120] 人脉就是资源.
[121] 朋友多，路子广.

It is impossible to do business in the countryside without interacting with the local government. Return entrepreneurs inevitably need to deal with the local government for two reasons. First, they need to work with the government for administrative purposes, such as getting business licenses, obtaining official permission for certain land use, and so on. Numerous certificates and licenses are required for a business to operate. Secondly, local government is also the main resource hub that provides financial support and capacity building. Thus, maintaining a good relationship with local governments is essential to return entrepreneurs' work. Even if business owners choose not to enjoy any government resources in order to minimise their interactions with the government, it is compulsory that they at least obtain the necessary licenses and permissions. Two individuals' experiences discussed below show how a relationship with the government can have a huge impact on return entrepreneurs' business.

XMW is a 27-year-old capable return entrepreneur in Village F, Fujian Province. He returned to his hometown three years ago due to his father's illness. Having majored in architecture for his university studies, XMW used to work in Fujian Museum and specialised in historic building renovation. When he returned home, he started his own company in the same field. His business is growing every year. According to XMW, he has contributed seven million annual revenue to the local government for the past two years. However, he does not put too much effort into socialising with government officials, so he has not developed any close connections or 'cooked' relationships[122] (*shuren*) with government officials. Even though return entrepreneurs often enjoy policy incentives, he didn't get access to any of these. What's worse, government officials also gave him extra trouble through administrative matters. When he tried to apply to the local government for business registration, he was rejected several times due to lack of documents. It took him much longer than usual to obtain all the required documents. He said the procedure was unnecessarily redundant and wasted too much of his working time.

XXR had a similar experience. When I visited him, he was in a complicated situation. He wanted to get permission to build on a piece of land that he planned to rent from other villagers. He had been discussing this for some time with a government official. After getting verbal consent, he rented the land and prepared the necessary documents. But when he returned to the government official with the documents, the official changed his

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[122] See Chapter 2 for an explanation of 'cooked' relationships.

mind and denied the request. XXR was baffled because he didn't know what lead to the sudden change. He had already paid for the land, so he was facing the dilemma of either giving up the deposit he already put down on the land and trying to find a different building site or spending more time dealing with the local government to get their approval.

The above examples show that even though the central government expresses support for return entrepreneurs, the actual implementation of this support is left to the local governments. Their level of support is then determined by individuals, most of which are the supervisors (*lingdao*). Establishing a good relationship with supervisors is key to the success of return entrepreneurs' work. This involves a more hidden side of *guanxi*, which is notorious for its unreliability. Having a good *guanxi* with the supervisors (*lingdao*) is a complex issue that depends on a wide range of arbitrary factors, such as individuals' character, educational background or even integrity. There are also cases in which the local government is very supportive of return entrepreneurs, providing them with as many resources as possible.

In general, return entrepreneurs are reluctant to engage in corrupt relationships with local officials. Their self-esteem and social identity depend on their standing in opposition to the old rural stigma. Many of these individuals choose to keep distance between themselves and local officials. Therefore, an extensive social network is even more imperative. As rural society functions on the basis of familiarity, having widespread social connections can help to increase familiarity with government officials. Furthermore, it is also helpful to learn from close social contacts who have had more experience in dealing with government officials. In XXR's case, he eventually sought advice from close friends in a group chat of WeChat (*weixinqun*) who had returned home earlier; this will be discussed in the following section.

Apart from information sharing, the social network also brings return entrepreneurs companionship and a sense of belonging; these become an essential component of emotional support for them. However, this is not exclusive to entrepreneurs. All return migrants are in need of a cohesive community with which they identify.

Three components of return migrants' social life

Return migrants' social life can be divided into three components; the first of these is maintaining the relationships they had before they returned, such as former school mates

and colleagues (as discussed in Chapter 4). With the help of smartphones and social media, they are able to remain in this same circle despite the physical distance. Every return migrant faces the difficulty of not having many old friends when they return. Quotes from CLL and CNC reflect this challenge. At this initial stage of return, all return migrants experience a similar sense of unfamiliarity with the rural society.

The second component in return migrants' social life is the expansion of social relations in the countryside. Though online social interaction makes up a large part of return migrants' social life, they also need face-to-face interactions. This means that they also need to establish new relations in the countryside.

The last component is the enhancement of these newly established relations. In order to establish a good *guanxi*, return migrants must enhance their connections through repetitive and reciprocal interactions (Chan & Enticott, 2019). They must conform to the social principles of "reciprocity, mutuality, long-term cultivation, and group boundaries" (Wallis, 2013: P93). The process of enhancing social circles constitutes a large portion of the return migrants' social life. In the following section, I will examine how return entrepreneurs make and then improve new connections.

Means of making new connections

As discussed above, rural scholars point out that Chinese society is "relationship-based" (Wallis, 2013, p. 93)[123]. The key to establishing connections with other social members is to find commonality. The process of making new social relations consists of two main stages: making new contacts by identifying common connections and familiarising with these contacts.

For return entrepreneurs, there are several ways to make new contacts. The most popular choice is by participating in the numerous workshops and conferences organised by the local government, such as e-business training, new farmers' training, and so on. This type of training or conference usually lasts from several days to several weeks. Members refer to each other as learning partners or classmates (*tongxue*), just like when they were in school, and companionships are easy to develop during this process. CNC told me that he went to a four-day new farmers' training organised by the township government. When I asked him if he found it useful, he replied: 'The training was just

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[123] Cited by Wallis who cited Yang (1994).

average. You can't expect to learn anything useful in just four days. I went there to make friends. That's the real reason why everyone was there.' For CNC and others, getting to know other participants is more important than the training itself. These trainings also provide an opportunity for participants to get to know the organisers, who are either from local governments or non-government agencies. Both have the power to distribute resources and funding that they are in need of. CNC's comment corresponds to the findings in Chan & Enticott's analysis in Chongming, Shanghai, in which they find new farmers tend to use workshops as a venue to extend their social network (2019).

Competitions are another opportunity for return entrepreneurs to expand their social relationships. Competitions are similar to the workshops mentioned above. They are also held by provincial and county governments, as well as NGOs. Many return entrepreneurs devote much of their time to these events. Unlike workshops and conferences, competitions can boost social visibility and credibility in a very short period of time, while also affording them the opportunity to know more people. Winning a prize gives them more of a chance of being exposed to the media. HBZ, for instance, won the title of Beautiful Farmer (*zuimei nongmin*) in his province in 2019 (U. Huang, Du, & Wang, 2019). This has brought him free publicity from Zhangzhou Television, the local TV station. Moreover, it enables him to form a social circle with others who also won the title. Many of them are influential figures locally. For those who do not win, it is still a good opportunity to get to know other competitors. Thus, it can be a win-win situation. Some return entrepreneurs see competitions as a social activity from which they can develop very profound relationships.

In addition, taking part in conferences and competitions is also an affective activity that appeals to self-disciplinary discourse (Anagnost, 2013). Participating in these events perpetuates the self-motivation to always aim for a higher goal. Participants also gradually form their social identity in the course.

Return entrepreneurs are also not prevented from using their existing connections to generate new ones, which is a traditional practice frequently applied in Chinese society (M. M. Yang, 1994). For return entrepreneurs, whose social connections are mainly in the city, their work and especially education experience can still be valuable to them after they return. School connections hold a lot of weight in return migrants' social relationships. Among all social relations, shared educational relation (*tongxue*) has been

found to be the most important factor for establishing a social connection (McDonald, 2016; Wallis, 2013; Xinyuan Wang, 2016).

For example, to quickly establish a 'cooked' social circle, CNC made contacts with his former classmates from college: "Most of my friends here are my schoolmates. I might not know them back in school. That doesn't matter. As long as we graduated from the same college, we can easily become friends." CNC graduated from Zhangzhou Agricultural Technology College, a regional vocational college in Zhangzhou. Many graduates from this college became supervisors (*lingdao*) in their workplaces, such as township governments or research institutions, and these positions are valuable social capital for any return entrepreneur. As a fellow alumnus, CNC was accepted as an insider in their social circle. Shared education experience thus plays a particularly important role in social networking.

In the Chapter 1 discussion of the impact of migration on social capital, research showed that while migration enhances financial and human capital, it often has a negative influence on social capital (Murakami & Sun, 2016; G. Zhou et al., 2017). As migrants leave their social settings, their established connections are weakened. Moreover, social contacts generated from the city are not of much use in rural settings. In this case, return entrepreneurs' experiences differ slightly. For migrants who receive their education in the city and return as entrepreneurs, their education experience can be transformed into social capital that is still valid after leaving the city.

Return entrepreneurs are also more likely to take part in other opportunities, such as joining local business associations, meeting people through dinner parties and attending other social events to expand their social circles. Social media applications (apps) such as WeChat particularly multiply chances of meeting new connections by creating an online space that alleviates geographical constraints. WeChat groups set up a virtual society that mimics offline social interaction. The benefits of common connection apply in these online groups as well.

Using social media to expand connections

WeChat groups are established for many reasons, such as reuniting with old friends or classmates, family gatherings[124] and public announcements of an organisation (such as

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[124] As discussed in Chapter 4.

a company or school). These groups can be used temporarily or long-term. When the founders first form a group, they need to be WeChat contacts with all the members whom they want to include in the group. This is similar to the formation of social circles in that a shared contact is necessary. And once the group is formed, anyone who wishes to join is only required to be WeChat friends with at least one of the members. This one member can then pull the newcomers into the group[125]. As it is with social circles, WeChat outsiders get access to the inside circle only through common connections. Strangers who do not have a connection with members are not able to join.

HXF, who returned home to practice natural farming[126] with his parents, is a member of several group chats focused on organic farming. After taking part in workshops organised by Organization Green (OG) – the NGO that supports HXF and other return migrants in their farming ventures – he joined the WeChat group formed by the participants. He had already gotten to know many of the group members because they were in the workshops. He was then pulled into other groups with more members, many of whom he had never met. One of these groups, YL Farming School[127], was managed by another return entrepreneur, GL, who also owns an organic farm. Like HXF, GL is dedicated to natural farming as well. He returned much earlier than HXF did, so he has much more experience in operating an organic farm. His farm is also larger than HXF's. As a return entrepreneur, GL has established quite a reputation in the organic farming community. His chat group consists of approximately 250 members, which is quite a large number. The majority of members are organic farmers like HXF and GL. Some are return migrants, and others are not. The group also has members who are urban customers, NGO staff and even university scholars. These members either joined the group through their connection to GL[128] or were pulled in by one of the members like HXF was. In this way, HXF was introduced to a large pool of resources that is valuable to him as a beginning farmer. Group members exchange farming techniques, experiences and funding information. Through the group, members gain direct access to university scholars who are experts in farming or other areas. The group also provides a promotional channel for their own products, as many other members are potential buyers. Such a community and cohort of resources is impossible to acquire offline without the help of social media.

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[125] 拉进群. a term used to refer to bringing someone into the group chat.

[126] One form of organic farming. See Chapter 3 Note 67 for more detailed explanation.

[127] 田间学校. A popular, informal learning community/organisation for enthusiasts of farming.

[128] For example, after participating in activities hosted by GL's farm.

WeChat groups have become somewhat of a visual manifestation of traditional social relation, as they present each group member in a virtual space. Forming a WeChat group also sends out a symbolic message of the intention to develop a social circle. In China, it has almost become social protocol to add one another to WeChat after meeting for the first time. Instead of exchanging name cards, people now exchange WeChat QR codes[129]. It is also common for participants of the same workshop or conference to form a WeChat group. WeChat serves both practical and symbolic purposes. It makes future communication easier, because while people can change their phone numbers and addresses, they rarely change their WeChat accounts. It has thus become the most reliable source for contact information. A WeChat group also implies inclusiveness by expressing a willingness to prolong relationships even after conferences or workshops end. Thus, by forming a WeChat group, members develop a new inside circle for the long term.

Cultivating new social circles

As return entrepreneurs develop new relationships through the above ways, it is equally important to maintain these new relationships. This entails hidden rules such as giving gifts to show one's sincerity to another with higher social status; this can easily move the relationship from friendship into a zone of corruption and bribery. While these complications do exist in the cultivation period of relationships, we mainly focus on the exchange in interactions between people with more or less equivalent social status (and thus the common status of return entrepreneurs' social life). Since new social contacts are not necessarily located in the same place geographically, social interaction is a hybrid of online and offline social exchange, which relies heavily on WeChat's group chat Friends Circle (*pengyouquan*). WeChat contracts create a new social space where familiarity, reciprocity and mutuality are practiced fully online.

Just like in any social circles, the closeness of WeChat members depends on repetitive interaction (in this case, actively participating in group chats). I here use HXF and YL Farming Group as an example to illustrate. Once he entered YL Farming Group, HXF needed to join discussions in order to make himself visible and begin to familiarise himself with other members. In a large group like the YL Farming Group, it is necessary for members to change their name for easier recognition. For example, HXF would name

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[129] A QR code (abbreviated from Quick Response code) is a type of matrix barcode (or two-dimensional barcode) first designed in 1994 for the automotive industry in Japan. It uses four standardised encoding modes (numeric, alphanumeric, byte/binary and kanji) to store data efficiently ("QR code," n.d.).

himself 'Village X-HXF'. Some also use their farm's name. This is symbolic of wearing a name tag in a conference. The member who pulls HXF into the group will announce his entry. HXF can then introduce his farm, what he does for a living, and so on. Other members can then start interacting with him. In YL Farming Group, GL makes it very clear that despite its large number of group members, only topics related to organic farming should be discussed. No advertisements or other unrelated topics are allowed. If someone disobeys the rule, he or she will be warned first and then removed from the group should they do it again. This rule is agreed upon by each member. Other than this issue, GL does not hold a leadership position in the group chat. Other members enjoy the same rights that he does.

Conversations commonly start with a member posting a photo of his or her crops and asking for specific advice. Others who see it will try to address the issue. Sharing is common in this group. Members post photos of their crops when they are harvested, as well as when they are devastated by natural disasters like floods or typhoons. Other members offer emotional support by always congratulating or comforting them in a very warm-hearted way. Along with the online exchange, members also extend their connection into the offline world. They send each other produce from their farms or exchange seeds. They even visit others' farms. Experienced farmers like GL often go to other members' farms to give advice on how to manage an organic farm.

A WeChat Friends Circle also assists in extending and enhancing social relation through the reciprocity of 'liking' (*dianzan*) a post. When someone posts an update on WeChat, the viewers have the option to 'like' the post and/or leave comments. The 'liking' function became very popular among WeChat friends. It is a subtle and effortless means of social interaction. In most cases, it is not even about whether they actually like the post or not. Rather, it is a message saying that 'I have reviewed your posts' or 'I still have you in mind'. This can be a good way to initiate a new social relationship that lacks substantial common contacts[130]. Even though the two may not have direct communication, 'liking' can help to initiate more interactions in the future. HBZ said: "I just like all my friends' posts. It's polite to do so. Also, it doesn't cost anything from me." This sense of politeness is notable, as it indicates that 'liking' posts is a social expectation more than a genuine action. Even though it is completely voluntary for people to like the posts or not, they still

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[130] For example, people they only meet once at a dinner party.

feel more or less obliged if they also want their posts to have more 'likes'. This indicates that the act of 'liking' obeys the rule of reciprocity. Once a group member likes his or her friend's post, the friend is expected to like theirs in return. HBZ's opinion that "it doesn't cost anything" also indicates that the minimal effort involved in sending likes means that members follow through with this new online social protocol even if for no other reason than that it is easy to do.

Return entrepreneurs' translocal network: shared experience as 'pioneers'

The close bond forged between return entrepreneurs, including return village cadres, forms an essential part of their social networks. For example, XXR is a member of the group 'Rural Revitalisation', a capacity-building project he is part of. This project is funded by a local foundation that seeks to build the capacity of rural leaders[131] within Fujian. Once being accepted into the project, members receive both financial and technical support for three years; this includes 100,000 yuan[132] funding per year, intensive training and workshops, and strategising development plans for each member. There are 20 people selected to be in the project since its launch three years ago. Those selected go through two rounds of selections. Though it is not specified as a requirement, 90% of members are return migrants who became entrepreneurs or cadres.

Inspired by the prospect of rural development and country revitalisation, members share a strong sense of group identity and belonging. They share the same social identity as the 'pioneers' in the countryside. In their WeChat group, they call each other 'brothers' and 'sisters'. Since members are scattered throughout Fujian Province, their communication is mainly online. Unlike YL Farming Group that is restricted to only professional topics, Rural Revitalisation members share everything in their WeChat group, from technical information and knowledge to emotional feelings. They are not shy about conveying their sentimental sides in the group. They also have regular offline meetings in addition to the trainings scheduled by the foundation. They refer to these gatherings as 'family reunions'.

XXR spoke very emotionally about the group, claiming that it is the best thing that has happened to him since he returned. When he was having difficulty with government

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[131] The term used by the project is *xiangcun daitouren*, which can be translated as rural leaders.
[132] Around 20,000 Australian dollars.

officials, as mentioned above, he turned to the group's members for help. They gave their advice, shared previous experiences with local officials and comforted him. The fact that XXR called these members 'brothers' and 'sisters' shows that they have entered the centre of his social circle. Anthropologist Yunxiang Yan terms this the personal core that consists of family members and close friends (1996). This kind of relationship also breaks the boundary between private and public life.

This example of the connections made by members of the Rural Revitalisation group verifies the totality of emotion and practicality in social relations (Kipnis, 1997). Aside from information sharing, a strong social network also fosters mutual support among group members. The network of return entrepreneurs and return cadres therefore creates companionship between its members. FQ said when he was feeling frustration at his work, he would turn to his WeChat groups for comfort. There are several members in particular with whom he has a close bondage. FQ marks a heart symbol to their WeChat names, indicating their special meanings to him. These WeChat groups and the social networks they create fill the void of return entrepreneurs' lack of team support. This sentiment is expressed often in a popular Chinese idiom 'people who collect the firewood together are able to make the biggest fire'[133].

Social media's role in socialising

The above sections recount how return entrepreneurs create new social networks, enhance these networks and benefit from them. But how does social media – and more specifically, WeChat – influence this process? The above sections give examples of how social media has accelerated the socialising process to an unprecedented speed and scale. I attribute this acceleration to two reasons. Above all, the online world provides a continuous platform for people to interact and socialise, as it has no time and place constraints. Discussions in group chats can be carried out for days, with members joining in at different times.

Second, and more importantly, by acknowledging the privacy that WeChat enables and then disregarding it, WeChat users like return entrepreneurs can socialise with new social relations at a rapid pace. Contrary to some scholars' findings that social media has the potential to break existing social boundaries and norms of establishing connections

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[133] 众人拾柴火焰高.

(Xinyuan Wang, 2016), an analysis of return migrants' social networking suggests that the wide use of WeChat is evidence that social media actually reinforces traditional social protocols.

Social media and instant messaging software (SMS), such as Weibo, QQ, and WeChat, are prominent in China as they fulfil different social purposes. Before WeChat, QQ was once (and probably still is in certain social groups) the most frequently used SMS software. Scholars who follow users of QQ find that, unlike social interactions in the offline world, QQ enables strangers to make contacts directly. As Xinyuan Wang (2016) finds out, due to its high anonymity, QQ is often used to explore an unfamiliar world online. People without any common connections can also become QQ friends.

Weibo also provides a more overt arena for social exchange. A Chinese term meaning 'micro blog', Weibo was originally designed to post short texts (140 words limit) and pictures, similar to Twitter. But Weibo users began to use it as an information acquisition app. In other words, instead of posting their own life, they are more inclined to read contents created by others. For instance, In Y's teashop which I depicted in Chapter 4, CLL was browsing Weibo to learn about foreign fashion. As mass media, official organisations and public figures nowadays all have their official accounts, Weibo has become more like a news aggregator. Return migrants rarely post their photos on Weibo because its public visibility.

Compared to QQ and Weibo, WeChat is predominantly used for socialising within a covert social circle because it allows for more privacy. The social interactions on WeChat, from 'friending' someone to exchanging interactions, mimic the intimacy of inside social circles. As discussed above, WeChat users can only send friends' requests to others if they have the specific details, such as one's QR code or username. Members in the same group chat can also send out friends' requests, as they are already in the same social circle. This 'friending' process is analogous to the age-old social code of having a common connection. This difference sets WeChat apart from QQ and Weibo, both of which allow members to easily 'friend' or follow strangers without having a mutual connection[134].

Furthermore, depending on their closeness to a person, WeChat friends might see completely different Friends Circle contents for the same person. WeChat users can

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[134] WeChat also allows strangers to be added with settings such as 'Shake' (*yaoyiyao*) or 'People Nearby'(*fujinderen*), but return migrants rarely use these functions.

determine the audience of their Friends Circle (*pengyouquan*) posts; they can choose for their posts to be visible to the public (including those who are not their WeChat friends), to everyone on their friends' list or to a very exclusive number. The closer one is to the person who posts on Friends Circle, the more contents he or she can view. For example, if XXR posts an emotional entry about his frustration with the local government, he might choose for it to be viewed only by close friends (such as those from Rural Revitalisation). Alternatively, if he is posting an advertisement for his products, he would presumably make it public in an effort to gain more contacts.

The function of comments further promotes WeChat's exclusiveness. Viewers can only see the comments of those with whom they are already WeChat friends. For instance, if A and B are both WeChat friends with XXR but have not 'friended' each other on WeChat yet, then A cannot read B's comments on XXR's post, and vice versa. This function reinforces the extreme importance of being in the same inside circle. As pointed out by Fei (1992), in a concentric pattern, only those in the same social circles are visible to each other. Other functions of WeChat also suggest this kind of seclusion and inclusion, such as users can define the timeframe of how long their updates are visible to others.

Abiding a traditional social frame, group chats on WeChat also operate like numerous micro societies. Conversations in WeChat groups follow either explicit or implicit rules. In some cases, the group administrator spells out the rules, like how GL determined that the YL Farming Group was not open to private, emotional conversations. It is also common for members to adhere to unwritten rules that are constructed and defined through social interactions, just like in offline social relationships. While certain topics are completely acceptable in certain groups, they might be inappropriate in others. This is similar to what Goffman calls 'framing', during which social actors set boundaries and rules through interactions (Goffman, 1975; Miller et al., 2016). Due to its visibility as a social media app, the online social group has the same – or maybe even more of an elucidating – impact on creating social ambience with encrypted regulations and guidelines.

Under the premise that WeChat provides a more intimate and private space for social interaction, I argue that WeChat accelerates social interaction by affording its users the opportunity to deliberately breach social rules and boundaries in an unconventional manner that would be unacceptable in an offline relationship.

As mentioned earlier, the maintenance and enhancement of a social relationship requires repetitive interaction and reciprocity (Yan, 1996). In the offline world, an interaction between two individuals needs to be initiated and purposefully planned by at least one party. This is the case even with an activity requiring minimal effort, such as making phone calls or sending texts. With social media platforms like WeChat, this is not the case. Once the two 'friend' each other on WeChat, they carry out continual interactions both actively and passively. Active interactions include sending messages, replying to one's message in group chats and so on. This is similar to interactions in offline social circles. For example, in my WeChat exchange with CNC after we first met, he sent me the video message. This active reply slightly broke the social protocols of how to treat a newly established work contact. I was expecting a text message as a standard reply. Sending the video instead immediately familiarised our relationship and showed his willingness to share his private life.

Passive interaction includes the visibility of one's Friends Circle. If one's Friends Circle is highly visible to his or her contacts, it also shows his or her willingness to become more acquainted with them. If the contents are not just related to work but are also about one's personal life[135], this implies trust from the person who posted it. The viewer can thus also show the trust and appreciation by 'liking' the posts.

I consider these kinds of interactions to be passive since the posts are not meant for one particular person. Nevertheless, this pertains to an ongoing interaction that is particularly valuable at the early stage of social relation. For instance, among the participants, WYL, ZHL and HSM are acquaintances. I actually knew ZHL and HSM through WYL. ZHL's baby/cosmetic product store is right next to WYL's school. WYL went once into ZHL's store for window shopping. They added each other on WeChat but barely talk online. Their friendship was boosted when ZHL saw WYL posting her jogging photos on Friends Circle. As an enthusiastic jogger herself, ZHL 'liked' the posts. This increased interaction between the two. Revealing one's Friends Circle can thus be a very effective way to 'break the ice' between two unfamiliar new acquaintances.

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[135] Such as their children's picture.

Doing business on WeChat

Owing to WeChat's function of trespassing the private and public boundary in a private channel, many return entrepreneurs use WeChat for advertising products and cultivating customer relationships. With its monetary function, WeChat allows for money transfer without a surcharge and has thus become an e-business hub like Taobao. Return entrepreneurs introduce their products on Friends Circle in an informal manner, just like telling their personal stories. Through Friends Circle, they develop a less intrusive advertising style. Some members also post transaction records from their WeChat account on Friends Circle. They do this as a way of showing gratitude to their customers, but it is also a demonstration of the popularity of their products and thus is a means of attracting more customers.

For return entrepreneurs, mediating relationships with their customers is also an important component of their social life. This again takes place both online and offline. Social media becomes a powerful tool in maintaining customer relations. For instance, ZHL's store is a meeting place for young mothers in the local area. The products sold at ZHL's store have a very clear urban style. Her customers are usually young females who return home to give birth to their babies. In other words, they are also return migrants in a broader sense. They temporarily stay at home for one year or longer after their children are born to take care of their babies. During this time, they are isolated from any social networks. As they feel bored at home with the stress from childcare and housework, they frequent ZHL's shop for a casual chat. They discuss the latest baby products, such as baby formula, outfits and so on. ZHL enjoys talking to them not only because they are her customers, but also because she is a mother herself.

Like many other return entrepreneurs, ZHL created a WeChat group with her customers. In the group chat, apart from advertising the latest products in her store, she also adds a personal touch by sharing pictures of her daughter. Though the purpose of the WeChat group is still mainly for selling products, members in the group chat also exchange ideas regarding babies. In ZHL's words: "We talk about anything, not just baby products." They also gain emotional support from other female returnees who share the same experience upon their return. Meanwhile, ZHL takes her social network with her customers to a more private level.

Except for ZHL, the majority of return entrepreneurs' WeChat customer groups consist of mostly urban buyers, as many farm entrepreneurs target the urban consuming

market for their products. WeChat groups solve the challenge of being physically far away from customers. Apart from promoting products, these return entrepreneurs also aim at cultivating strong bond with customers. The YL Farming Group, for example, has urban customers who are interested in organic farming. Joining the same group as farmers like HXF gives them a better understanding of the process of organic farming. They then develop more of an understanding of the challenges and hard work farm owners deal with every day, which makes them loyal customers. In return, farmers will be able to better understand customers' preferences. In this way, WeChat groups are very helpful in facilitating the CSA model that aims to facilitate conversation directly between producers and buyers.

As WeChat users, return entrepreneurs understand the privacy features of WeChat but choose to use it more publicly. There is a Chinese term for this, *siqi gongyong*[136], which translates to mean 'using the private tool for the public use' (Mizoguchi, 2011). The inverse of this is *gongqi siyong,* or 'using the public tool for the private use', and it is a term used to criticise the corruption of those in power using public property for personal purposes. 'Using the private tool for the public use' instead refers to making private property available for public use, which is viewed as generous, altruistic and honest; in contrast to the corrupted image of 'using the public tool for the private use'. Using a private communication tool like WeChat to establish social connections and public outreach goes along with the sentiment of 'using private tools for public use' and is therefore viewed as sincere and trustworthy.

CNC's social life: a continuum of private, work and social life

From the description of return entrepreneurs' social life at the beginning of this chapter, we find that in discussing social life, return entrepreneurs use the generic term 'friends' (*pengyou*) instead of specifying relationship types, such as colleagues or work friends. When HSM talked about her experience of making many new friends after she returned, she was referring to the people that she met through her work. Similarly, ZHL referred to her customers as friends. While 'friend' often refers to a personal relationship and especially those outside of work, such as childhood friends, return entrepreneurs do not seem to use such a distinction. Their friends can be clients, potential work partners, and peers. There is no clear distinction between personal and work relationships. The

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[136]公器私用.

only exception is when they refer to people with whom they attended school; in this case, they switch to the terms 'schoolmate' or 'classmate' (*tongxue*). As discussed, social relations in Chinese society have both practical and emotional significance. This is reflected from the fact that return entrepreneurs referr to both their personal and work relations as 'friends'. Given the importance of social networks in their work, it is undeniable that return entrepreneurs seek to gain more resources from social interactions. At the same time, being friends allow return entrepreneurs to gain emotional support as well.

Thus, return entrepreneurs' social networking for work constitutes a large portion of their social life, and this is reinforced even further by an integration of their private and work life. This is very clear in CNC's case, which was discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The use of space in CNC's workplace reveals a lot about the integration of his work and social life. He practically turned his office into a meeting room, and this speaks to the importance of social networking at his work. The office was always full of visitors during my visit, and these included a mixed bunch of his social relations, such as his childhood friends, his colleagues, his cousins and later his wife and children. Moreover, compared to how meeting rooms are typically arranged, CNC's space with its tea table and TV bears more resemblance to a living room; this suggests his intention to blur the distinction between work and private space. Because he spends so much time in this space, his family also spends much of their day there. Daily activities such as eating, sleeping and showering all take place there. Thus, CNC's office serves as an integrated space of working, socialising and spending time with family. This speaks to the return entrepreneurs' life in general as a mixture of personal, work and social life.

The activity held in this space, namely the midnight tea-drinking gathering that CNC took videos of further demonstrates how social activities serve both personal and work purposes. In his video, he calls his guests 'friends who are Senior Tea Evaluators', indicating their work relations, otherwise there would be no need to highlight their work titles. Similarly, the gathering is both formal and informal. As it took place in his office, it was not a strictly personal meeting. The late hour of the meeting suggests that it was also not a work meeting. In addition, the video shows a relaxed vibe at the scene. Everyone seems to be enjoying it. This tea meeting is representative of return entrepreneurs' social activities, as it has all the varying functions of entertaining, social networking and keeping accompany.

Moreover, the tea gathering did not only take place in CNC's office. With the use of his smartphone's video function and the social media app WeChat, CNC was engaging even more people – including me – in this gathering. As I received the message, I more or less felt like I was present at the tea table with CNC and his friends. Thus, he has expanded his living/office/social space to the online world, which includes more participants from multiple places. Furthermore, if CNC posts the video on his Friends Circle, his acquaintances who review it can either press the 'like' button or comment on it. This can spur future social activities, such as another tea drinking gathering.

Life-planning as a project: neoliberal ethos

By investigating return entrepreneurs' social life, we can construct a more comprehensive picture of their life after return. Working accounts for a large portion of their time. The majority of the return entrepreneurs and return cadres claim that they don't have free time for themselves. As self-employed workers, they do not have clear working hours nor a set workday. For example, FQ said that he did not have weekends or holidays. "My employees do, but I don't. I work 24 hours and 7 days." This seemingly exaggerated expression is actually the reality of many return entrepreneurs' and return cadres' work situations. CYJ, the village cadre, said that her work fully occupied her life. She barely has any time to take care of her son. XXR said he has not had a weekend for the several years since his return.

This lack of balance between work and off work time reveals that while return entrepreneurs enjoy a high social reputation, they are also at high risk of being self-exploited. They internalise the social expectations into the need for constant self-development in their daily life. Their extended working hours are a clear indicator of this constant effort to advance and do better.

Nevertheless, while return entrepreneurs admit that they barely have any leisure time, they do not necessarily think of this as a negative thing. On the contrary, they believe they have better control of their time because they are self-employed – even if that means working almost all the time. XXR compared his current life to that before he returned, when he was working in an advertisement company in Xiamen[137]:

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[137] Xiamen is a coastal city in Fujian Province.

I think I like my current lifestyle better. I can have better control over my own time. Before I didn't have my free time. My time was consumed by work. Now it is all under my control. If I want to go visit my friends during weekdays, I just do so.

Even though XXR's time is still taken up by work now, he feels he has more independence and freedom because he believes he arranges his time in this way.

So what can we make out of the seemingly paradox that return entrepreneurs spend majority of their time at work while still feel more freedom than they would be if they were not self-employed? Perhaps we can understand it in this way, return entrepreneurs spend most of their time at work and do not have much leisure time. However, their work time is not only what is commonly understood to be 'work' but also includes other activities that normally belong in the category of 'leisure' time, such as drinking tea and having dinner. Social networking is thus a significant part of their 'work'. As they consider work contacts to be their friends, the boundary between work and personal life is blurry. By bringing together their family, social life and work life, they craft a lifestyle that satisfies both the neoliberal ethos of self-discipline and hard work as well as social and family needs.

Return entrepreneurs generally enjoy a busy life, and this is seen as a reflection of their work ability. A busy schedule reifies their social image as the high *suzhi* new farmers. This idea reflects an old Chinese saying that states 'whoever is more capable has more tasks' (*nengzhe duolao*). Being busy is thus seen as equivalent to being socially needed and validates their value in their society and/or community. When referring to their busy life occupied by work and social activities, return entrepreneurs often conveyed a sense of pride. CYJ told me that "my life is so busy. There are meetings that I really don't have time to go. But my supervisors (*lingdao*) requested that I have to be there. They even pointed out my name (*dianming*), so I can't refuse."

Return entrepreneurs also need such a busy work/social life in order to avoid feeling bored in the countryside; this dilemma will be presented in the following section with a discussion of other return migrants' social life. CNC, for instance, can relax during tea drinking with his work friends and socialise at the same time. And some social networks whose members are closer, like XXR's Rural Revitalisation, provide emotional support and companionship to the members and thus relieve their stress and sense of loneliness

in the countryside. Therefore, though return entrepreneurs give so much of their time to a very busy lifestyle, they also gain entertainment, comfort and company in return.

Social reputation is also important to return entrepreneurs for gaining acknowledgement from family members. As in HBZ's case discussed in Chapter 3, media publicity can change family members' attitudes toward their return. Similarly, having a strong social network and busy work life boosts a household's public image. A positive public image is called 'having face' (*youmianzi*), which is very important to the household's social status. Improving their social visibility in the outer sphere can also gain them approval from the domestic sphere (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Murphy, 2004). For return migrants who face stress from family members who are sceptical about their return, having a busy life and an extensive social network helps to prove their value. For this reason, extending social networks and maintaining a full schedule are necessary for maintaining their positions within their households. This is also why family members do not mind if the return migrants are not completely present in family life. Without complaining, CNC's wife said that her husband was always busy: "People come to him all the time. He is never free."

Continuing the discussion in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, this section illustrates further how the return entrepreneurship discourse is received and internalised in return entrepreneurs' social life. Public media, rural scholars and political elites perceive return migrants, who are represented by return entrepreneurs, as the salvation of rural China and those who will bring changes and revitalise the countryside. One strategy is showering them with praises and prizes in media publications. Enjoying a high publicity, return migrants, on one hand, as discussed in Chapter 4, express their resistance to the stereotype of them being self-sacrificing and try to rationalise their reasons to return. On the other hand, as shown in this section, an analysis of return entrepreneurs and return cadres' social life shows that they also concede to the identity presented by the media. They adopt a hybrid of work and personal life, which further demonstrates how *suzhi* discourse and neoliberal subjectivity intervene in life planning. This also delineates the process of 'human engineering', what Anagnost (2013) refers to as a 'life making' process. This process involves "investments in the self to ensure one's forward career progression as embodied human capital" (Anagnost, 2013, p.2). Return entrepreneurs' arrangement of their time around both working and socialising is a profound diffusion of the neoliberal

ethos that motivates a never-ending drive toward self-improving, self-investing and self-exploiting.

5.2 The other side of return migrants' social life

While return entrepreneurs seem to have a lively and vibrant social life, the story is different for those who choose a career path other than entrepreneurship. These individuals' social lives described their social life as 'dull', 'boring' and 'have no friends'. This is closer to what the public media predicts of return migrants' social life.

For this cohort of return migrants, many of them still rate school mates (*tongxue*) as their closest connections. WYL recounted her social connection:

> My best friends are high school mates and some university friends.
> They are all in the city. We can only meet when they come home for
> Chinese New Year or National Day. I don't have any friends here. I
> occasionally meet my cousin here who used to work in the city and
> then came back. Also, I ran into another high school friend the other
> day; she also came back. We sometimes go to the movies. But we are
> very far away, so that's not often. Weekends I am often at home, there
> are even fewer social activities, and I probably can only talk to the
> elders in our village.

WYL's neighbour, another primary schoolteacher WXM, said that the biggest challenge for her since returning is that she had no friends. I asked if she became friends with her colleagues. She said, "I talk to my colleagues only at school. Not after work. We don't have any interactions off work." CLL had a similar opinion: "Most of my friends are from my university. They remain in Fuzhou. I have no friends here."

Three distinctive features set the above narrative of return migrants apart from that of return entrepreneurs. First of all, migrants like WYL have a different interpretation of 'friend'. They refer to friends as only those with a personal connection. Colleagues or work relationships are not perceived as friends. Unlike return entrepreneurs, they use the term colleague (*tongshi*) more often, distinguishing them from being their friends. Secondly, they also seem to have a different definition of social life. A social life for these return migrants is oriented more toward entertainment and pleasure, such as watching movies. They do not pay much attention to networking, as return entrepreneurs do.

Thirdly, due to the aforementioned reasons, it is very difficult for them to establish new connections. So among the three components of social life listed above – which are maintaining the relationships they had before they returned; the expansion of social relations in the countryside; and the enhancement of these newly established relations – the employed return migrants can only enjoy the first one. They are not able to establish new contacts and reinforce these new relationships through both online and offline interactions.

As employees, return migrants do not have the obligation and need to extend their social network as return entrepreneurs do. While this relieves them of the pressure of socialising, it also does not force or even encourage them to make new connections. While social relations can generate social capital, the two do not have a direct causal link; there are social relations that incur no or very little social capital. Return entrepreneurs 'shoot two birds with one stone' by mixing their work and social life and integrating both so they work together. But migrants like WXM seem to separate their work from their social life. In WXM's case, she does not really talk to her colleagues after work. As mentioned in Chapter 4, WYL does not spend her free time with her colleagues because she does not want to play Mah-jong with them, even though this would probably be a way for her to strengthen new work relationships. But these return migrants prioritise the entertainment or emotional aspect of social life more than the practical purpose.

The social identity of return entrepreneurs and return cadres allows them to make more connections, but return migrants do not have this same identity or status. There are rarely chances for them to attend conferences and workshops. Unlike return entrepreneurs who spend a significant part of their work time creating new connections, employed returnees' work time is quite regular (often from 9 AM to 5 PM). Many of them are in favour of such a fixed working schedule. As CLL mentioned, she would rather be a civil servant than an entrepreneur because she can have abundant spare time. Having more spare time is probably one big reason that these return migrants choose not to be entrepreneurs.

The effect of social media which can accelerate the process of familiarity in return entrepreneurs' case also seems to be limiting for employed return migrants. There are some cases when other returnees make an effort to expand their social circles through social media. For instance, WYL is a socially active person and has a stronger willingness than others to establish her own social circle. She attempted to do so twice, but both

attempts failed. She joined a WeChat group led by a well-known return entrepreneur in her province. In order to join the WeChat group, WYL paid 100 YUAN. This is very rare, as it usually does not cost anything to join WeChat groups. WYL did not know anyone in the group, and once she'd joined, she gradually sensed that there were small circles within the group. For example, people only responded to specific members. Conversations were only carried out among certain members. The group administrator, who was the well-known entrepreneur, enjoyed popularity in the group. Those who were familiar with him were also widely welcomed. WYL sensed the marginalisation in the WeChat group. At one point, the well-known entrepreneur posted an article to the group that WYL disagreed with. She decided to voice her opinion, since she thought that group members had equal rights to express themselves. But she didn't receive any substantial feedback. Soon her messages are 'wiped'[138] off by later messages. After that, she forgot about the chat group. A couple months later, when she tried to look for it on her contact list, she could not find. She still does not know what happened – whether the group was dismissed, or she was kicked out.

The second time WYL tried to establish a social circle, she created a WeChat group herself. The group consists of female returnees whom she met on different occasions. It has only 11 participants, and only one person, HSM, is an entrepreneur. The others have regular jobs like WYL. WYL's idea was to create a platform for female return migrants to share their feelings and support each other. Since the members are all WYL's acquaintances, they were all happy to join the network in the first place. And when it was first formed, members exchanged greetings in the group. They introduced themselves and said something about their return. But then that was it. The group remains quiet most of the time from then on, and the exchange of messages is very occasional. The content is quite shallow and does not invite more discussion.

When I was interviewing HSM, I brought up this WeChat group when she said that she wished to know more female returnees (not just entrepreneurs) in her township. I suggested that this group chat would be a good starting point to do so. She agreed. But when I encouraged her to be more active in the group, she sighed and said: "I agree. But I am too busy. I don't have time for this. Unless it's related to my work, I barely read any

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[138] 刷掉了. A term used to refer to how, as new messages keep emerging, the old message will no longer be visible when the app is opened.

messages from WeChat group anymore." The group thus remains quiet. It was not long before this WeChat group disappeared again[139].

WYL's failure in building social connections is quite telling. In return entrepreneurs' socialising, we see a more horizontal structure in WeChat groups. Even though administrators like GL have more power in deciding who stay in the group[140], he and administrators in other WeChat groups hold an equal position to their members. They set up rules and regulations together. Group administrators also ask members about their opinions regarding management of the group. Their messages are also treated the same as other members' messages and are not given any more attention.

WYL's experience in the first WeChat group shows that the hierarchy actually exists. Members like WYL do not have the return entrepreneur title and are easily neglected or overshadowed by those who have already established abundant social relations both online and offline. Furthermore, WYL's identity as a schoolteacher does not afford her the same social status that return entrepreneurs enjoy.

The failure of WYL's female return migrants group shows the dominant position that social capital holds in social circles. The second WeChat group disappeared because it remained inactive. There were no meaningful conversations in the group. HSM gave an explanation of not having time for it, which could be interpreted to mean that she prefers to spend her time on something else. The reason could be that there is unlikely any social capital or resources generated from this group. Conversations in this group were purely for pleasure and would not lead anywhere professionally. This indicates that in rural society, social connection that has more practical value has a more prioritised position. While we should bear in mind the principle of emotional and practical totality, the failure of WYL's WeChat group suggests that the sustaining of social relations hinges largely on their practical aspect.

5.3 Rethinking social relation, social capital and social identity

In both Chapter 3 and now Chapter 5, I have demonstrated how career choices result in very contrasting experiences for return migrants. Though they share a similar

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[139] Group chats that are active will remain at the top of users' contact lists. The non-active chats will sink down, known as *chenxiaqu*.

[140] The group administrator is the only member who has the right to remove someone from the group, referred as 'kick out' (*tichuqu*).

educational background and migration experience, return entrepreneurs' social identity is an asset that gives them both material and symbolic resources that are not available to other return migrants. The artificially constructed barrier between return entrepreneurs and other return migrants is reinforced through differences in their socialising processes. This further reinforces that return entrepreneurship is not just a career, but also a life choice.

I propose the following points in regards to the differences between migrants' return experiences: 1) there is social division between return migrants and non-migrants; 2) there is also division between return entrepreneurs/return cadres and the rest of return migrants; 3) these two groups have different understandings of social life: return entrepreneurs/cadres focus more on practicality, and other return migrants focus more on entertainment; 4) social media and technology do not eliminate these differences; 5) thus, return entrepreneurs might be creating a new wave of social inequality.

The last two points will be expanded upon in the following section. Return entrepreneurs' social networking corresponds to observations from Wallis about "immobile mobility" (2013, p. 29). Despite their physical obstacles, return entrepreneurs are able to construct an extensive social network with the help of smartphones and social media. Her argument that technology is incapable of breaking through social divisions is also demonstrated by the challenges faced by return migrants who are not viewed as return entrepreneurs in the social networking arena. Interestingly, this barrier is not just contingent on socioeconomic positions but can exist within the same social group. This aligns with Chan & Enticott's findings that in rural China, *suzhi* and social capital are interrelated as symbolic capital (2019). High *suzhi* farmers use their privileged positions to exclude low *suzhi* farmers by claiming all social capital. These findings highlight the important yet previously overlooked fact that the inequality of resource distribution prevails within a group whose members are perceived as equally high *suzhi*.

To some extent, this division has created an imbalanced distribution of social resources. Return migrants like WYL, LLL and WXM are not integrating into local social circles, and neither are they being included in return entrepreneurs' social circles. As identified by migration scholars, these individuals fall into a category of return migrants that is unable to locate and fit into appropriate social identities (Fu, 2007; Liu, 2015; J. Shi & Hu, 2009; N. Zhang, 2013). These migrants may face the risk of being further marginalised and alienated as return migrants. While return entrepreneurs adhere to their

social identity by formulating strategies to create social circles in the countryside, they also reproduce the division between themselves and non-migrants, as well as the rest of return migrants. Social media can also be either inclusive or exclusive. Though technology may help to reduce the obstacles caused by physical distance and facilitate equitable socialisation, it can also reinforce social boundaries that separate those who have less social capital from those who have more.

Chapter 6

Return migrants and rural development

In this chapter, I investigate the question of return migrants' participation in rural development. In the literature review of Chapter 1, I outline three types of migration gains, namely, economic, human capital, and social capital (Chio, 2011; Démurger & Xu, 2011; Ge et al., 2011; Z. Ma, 2001; Zhongdong Ma, 2002; Murakami, 2011; Murakami & Sun, 2016; Peng & Du, 2018; L. Yu et al., 2017), that return migrants might transfer from the urban experience. In Chapter 2, I further introduce two development schemes– mainstream developmentalism and an alternative approach to development (Alcock, 2019; J. C. Chen et al., 2017; Day, 2008; Day & Schneider, 2017). Despite their profound disagreement in regard to development goals and approaches, both schemes agree that return migrants, particularly return entrepreneurs and return village cadres, are the primary implementers of their respective rural development plans.

This chapter explores how return migrants are caught up between competing visions for rural development as they strive to take a leadership role in it. By looking at the experiences of a few individuals, and a range of issues – rural tourism, a specialised cooperative, and organic farming – the chapter considers the ambiguous position that return migrants find themselves in when negotiating tensions between urban and rural sensibilities; mainstream and alternative development discourses and practices; the roles the public and the government expect them to play and their own individual aspirations; and their identities as both insiders and outsiders of rural society.

I will begin by summarising how various lines of employment enable return migrants to play different roles in rural development. Then, drawing on their lived experiences, I explore their participation in two main industries that are currently the most prominent pillars of rural development, namely tourism and agriculture. For the latter, I will examine their role in both modern agriculture, mainly through initiating specialised cooperatives; and traditional agriculture, which integrates with organic farming. I take a close look at the stories of individuals participating in two approaches – the mainstream and the alternative approach – paying particular attention to the return migrants' relationships with external agencies of the two development strategies. I then discuss four individual cases with a view to investigating their interactions with local villagers. In particular, I

ask about their dual identities as both outsiders (external agencies) and insiders (local villagers). Finally, I reveal a wider landscape of rural development that is marked with multiple paradoxes and I examine the roles individual return migrants play in negotiating these paradoxes.

This discussion has two aims. First, I am interested in answering a question that has intrigued many migration and rural scholars which I have elaborated in Section 1.2 in Chapter 1: How do return migrants, with their urban experience and resources, mediate relationships with local villagers, influence rural societies and contribute to rural development? In addition, I am attentive to less researched questions, such as how villagers perceive the return migrants, and whether they trust them. This empirical investigation also aims to shed new light on the conceptual question regarding the connection and interplay between governmental-level strategies and discourses of rural development and the formation of the mobile subject at the level of individual returnees.

6.1 How do return migrants' jobs define their roles in rural development?

In this section, I examine return migrants' participation in rural development. The individuals discussed here are employed in various jobs and have different roles in village life and in rural development. They include village cadres (*cunganbu*), return entrepreneurs and others employed return migrants. The former two are referred by the media and local government as 'entrepreneurs', whereas the latter is without such externally conferred positive accolades.

Return village cadres

There are two return village cadres in this research, CYJ – the village cadre of Village W, and LLL – the village party secretary of Village G[141]. As introduced in Chapter 3, not many return migrants are willing to become village cadres. The majority of village cadres in the villages that I visited are still male local villagers who are above 50.

The village cadre is the generic term of two titles: village director (*cunzhuren/cunzhang*) and village party secretary (*cunzhishu*). Although these village

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[141] LLL is also the general manager of a co-op. These two titles: village party secretary and general manager are her main source of income every month.

cadres are officially supposed to have different jurisdictions, in reality, their powers and responsibilities overlap. Due to this ambiguous definition of their separate roles, there can easily be conflicts between them that usually end up affecting the whole village. For instance, Ge et al.'s (2011) study of female return migrants unveiled the conflicts between a village director and a party secretary. Even in this research, LLL's father – N, the former party secretary of his village, had an enduring grudge against his counterpart, the village director. This eventually resulted in his failure in the election and being replaced by LLL, his daughter.

In other cases, people with these two titles have covered for each other when one of them is absent. Given that migration is still common, if an elected person migrates from the village, the remaining village cadre might then take over their responsibilities. Thus, the overlapping of the roles of village director and party secretary can be both beneficial and troublesome.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the implementation of rural policy is directed top-down (Day, 2008; J. Fan et al., 2005; Göbel, 2010). The higher the rank one embodies, the more power one has in decision-making, and vice versa. Therefore, village cadres have very little power. Being at the bottom level of the political system, village cadres don't have a say in setting these goals; their daily work is occupied by fulfilling the assigned tasks from the higher levels of government. CYJ summarised her daily work scope in this way: "Most of my time is busy receiving officials from above. Today there is this assignment, tomorrow another one." Her work schedule is full of meetings with officials who are visiting Village W. This is called 'supervising tasks' (*kaocha renwu*). These meetings are compulsory and directly linked to the village cadres' annual performance evaluations. They report to their township's government, referring to it as 'the above' (*shangmian*).

Village cadres mainly struggle to deal with conflicting orders from 'the above'. CYJ gave an example of such a confusing circumstance:

> Take planting trees in our village for example. The township
> workforce of Beautiful Countryside (*meili xiangcun*) requires us to
> plant the trees along the road, to present them in an orderly manner.
> The next day, the Office of Forestry came asking us to make sure that
> enough trees are planted to reach the target of green vegetation
> coverage index. Then the Environmental Office might come later,
> setting up more requirements for it.

As Chen et al. (2017) discussed, different government offices have their own "bureaucratic mandates, constituencies, and social networks" (p. 83). And such multiple arrangements are from top to bottom, with no agencies negotiating between them. Therefore, village cadres have to compromise themselves in order to pass the various inspections and examinations from multiple government agencies. This also illustrates the lack of autonomy on the part of the village-level governments in deciding village affairs.

Furthermore, as village cadres are elected by villagers, they are expected to speak on behalf of local residents. As mentioned earlier, village cadres are supposed to be responsible for village-related matters. They are the first officials to be contacted should anything happen in the villages or to the villagers. For example, Village W always has to live with the risk of landslides when there is heavy rain. CYJ mentioned that she once spent 24 hours standing by in her office when the rain was severe. The party secretary of CNC's village, E, also told me of an incident he needed to deal with when one of his villagers accidentally died in a neighbouring village. At first there was tension between the deceased person's family and the neighbouring village, but this very soon escalated to a confrontation between the two villages. E worked day and night to mitigate the tensions: "If there were any violence between the two villages, I will be the first one to be blamed by 'the above' (*shangmian*). I will be so heavily punished. It's beyond imagination." Both his and CYJ's stories reflect the boundlessness of their jurisdictions. It is not exaggerating to say that such village cadres are held accountable for everything that happens in their villages.

Sometimes village cadres are also the first ones to be blamed if their actions go against villagers' wishes, especially when there is a disagreement between the township government, which is the village cadres' supervising government, and the villagers. CYJ, for example, was verbally assaulted by villagers in regard to a dispute over land acquisition by the government. She was accused of being on the government's side. Village cadres play an important role as the buffer between villagers and 'the above' government. Township governments require village cadres to try their best to ease any discontent among the villagers, thus preventing the township government from getting involved directly. Thus, village cadres can find themselves in a delicate situation in which they constantly seek balance between the villagers' needs and high-above officials' order (Fan et al., 2005).

Village cadres not only assume administrative roles in their rural villages, they are also regarded both socially and culturally as the 'parents' of the village. Historically, village cadres have often been the head of a clan or a tribe (Xuefeng He, 2011a; F. Hu & Wu, 2012). So, while they enjoy high authority and have responsibilities within the village, they are also held accountable for all matters, good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate, big or small, and they can easily earn the mistrust and condemnation of the villagers.

Return entrepreneurs

Being at the centre of the rural development scheme, return entrepreneurs often feel an obligation to improve the local villagers' welfare, especially their economic status. This is reflected in many of the titles the government can bestow on them, for example, 'young pioneer who leads the villagers out of poverty' (*qingnian zhifu daitouren*) and 'leader of village' (*xiangcun daitouren*). These awards have the same theme as 'the leader' (*daitouren*), which speaks to their 'leading' role in increasing the economic income of their fellow villagers. My conversations with rural entrepreneurs suggest that they take their roles in rural development programs as an inbuilt responsibility.

Charity work, such as supporting children in school, is the most common initiative they take on. Both CNC and HBZ actively coordinate the education support program (*zhuxue*) in their respective villages, which is an enduring tradition in their hometown. HBZ said: "Our village has put a high value on education for decades. We also benefited from this, so now it's our term to give." Education support is a traditional practice that derives from the mutual help system in rural societies. In accord with the principle of reciprocity, those who receive the support are also morally obliged to help others when they are capable of doing so. CNC, for instance, was able to go to college thanks to villagers' financial assistance. Therefore, it is a social protocol for him to pay back now.

Compared to charity work, organising a cooperative is a more recent activity that return entrepreneurs take on in order to partake in rural development. As mentioned in Chapter 2, specialised cooperatives are widely promoted in rural areas through high incentives and strong government support. Therefore, the return entrepreneurs participating in this research were more likely to initiate specialised cooperatives.

Return entrepreneurs also actively take part in implementing developmental projects such as New Socialist Countryside (NSC), Targeted Poverty Alleviation (*jingzhun fupin*),

Beautiful Countryside (*meili xiangcun*), to name a few. They not only assist in the implementation processes of these projects; they also benefit from them. For example, as part of the Beautiful Countryside scheme, FQ, the general manager of a corporate farm that takes up 300 mu, has engaged in re-channelling the river in his village. He helped the village government draft a project proposal with a budget, which is unfamiliar to the local village cadres. He said that as a return migrant in the village, this was part of his obligation (*zeren*): "Besides, there is no one else who can do this. They[142] are old and don't know much. I am the only one who knows how to do this." In return, he will benefit from the project, as the cleaner river will go around his farm and improve its surroundings. This is important because his farm does not rely on farming, but the rural tourism called 'peasant family happiness[143].

Contributing to rural development also helps return entrepreneurs to establish good connections with township governments and village cadres, further expand their social networks, and reinforce their social image as a responsible 'leader' (*daitouren*) of rural development. Also, by bringing more projects to the village, they show their goodwill to the villagers, whose trust they must gain. However, this is not always the case. In some instances, as will be discussed later, engaging in public affairs can also generate hostility from villagers.

Employed returnees

Returnees who have jobs other than as village cadres and entrepreneurs don't have the obligation to take responsibility for rural construction. Nevertheless, their work inevitably contributes to rural development in one way or another and therefore warrants consideration. Despite the fact that she does not consider herself a 'real' return migrant (*fanxiang qingnian*) (see Chapter 1), WYL's work as a teacher in the village primary school overlaps with rural development in a broader sense. Along with her routine teaching job, she has brought new activities to the school. One is the reading club that she organises among higher grade students. She actively uses her connections with NGOs in the city to have them donate to the school hundreds of books as well as audio records of

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[142] This refers to the local villagers and village cadres.

[143] 'Peasant family happiness' is a popular rural tourist model in China. Rural families can easily transform their own houses into venues for tourists, providing entertainment, home cook food, and accommodation. Refer to Chio's book *A Landscape of Travel: the Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China* for further illustration (2014).

bedtime stories. She plays these stories to students who live on campus because they are said to improve the sleeping quality of the students, especially the young ones who miss their parents and homes.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, WYL recounted that a factor in her return was knowing that she might change the lives of rural children by becoming a teacher. While she felt frustrated that she couldn't manage to stay longer in the city, the satisfaction of positively influencing the children in her hometown compensated for the frustration. She said humbly: "If I stay in the city, I am not sure that my capacity can help the students there. But here in my hometown, I am confident that at least the students in my class will change because of me." The possibility of transforming children's lives by contributing as a young, motivated and self-driven social being allows her to get some comfort from her decision to return and spares her the fear of wasting her life in the countryside. This is despite the fact that WYL's contribution is not formally recognised, since she does not fall under the category of return entrepreneurs. Her example highlights the risk of subscribing to the dominant media discourse of rural entrepreneurship.

6.2 Rural development practice

Rural tourism in CYJ's and LLL's villages

Rural tourism, as discussed in Chapter 2, has become one of the main pillars of rural development in China. Answering to a cohort of rural policies such as NSC, Beautiful Countryside, Open up the West, and Coordinated Urban–Rural Development (CURD), rural tourism arises as a solution that can diversify rural livelihoods and enable considerable economic incomes while preserving natural resources and fulfilling the requirements of environmental protection. In theory, it is an industry that can be adopted by villagers. With agriculture becoming increasingly dominated by capitalist corporations, rural tourism will be more accessible to rural dwellers. Nevertheless, research shows that the capitalist and state powers have heavily intervened in some very famous tourist sites, such as Fenghuang Old Town, Zhangjiajie National Park in Hunan Province, and Pudacuo National Park in Yunnan Province (Chio, 2014; X. Feng, 2008; T Oakes, 2006; Zinda, 2017). Local villagers in these areas have been marginalised as stakeholders in the process.

The two cases that I am about to introduce, CYJ's Village W and LLL's Town S, differ slightly from the examples mentioned above. They represent the recently emerging rural tourist businesses that don't have the outstanding natural or cultural resources of places such as Zhangjiajie, Fenghuang and others that are recognised by World Cultural Heritage. In comparison, the two places have fewer distinctive features. They are representative of numerous Chinese villages that are at the initial stages of developing their tourism, in which the key component hinges on the strategy of finding rural characteristics (*xiangcun tese*).

Village W is a remote village in Fujian Province, near the city of Fuzhou. Village director CYJ is proud of two things in her village: its large number of plum blossom trees and its pristine environment. She claims that the unpolluted water from the mountain streams, the fresh air, the organic local produce and the well-preserved environment are side effects of being under-developed: "Because our village is very backward, so it's lack of factories and other business. As a result, we still have fresh air and drinkable river."

In 2017, CYJ received a grant from a local organisation, Harmony, which supports her village's rural development. The project is similar to Rural Revitalisation introduced in Chapter 5. The difference is that this project is only for women's capacity building and empowerment. CYJ, as a female village director, was a beneficiary because she proposed a strategy of developing tourism centring on plum blossoms, which was how tourism was emerging in Village W.

In the introduction to her strategy, CYJ emphasised the value of bringing out the village characteristics to attract more urban tourists. Her goal is to develop Village W into the 'rear garden' of Fuzhou[144], 'a place where the soul can rest'[145]. Rear garden is commonly used in China to refer to a rural space close to the city. CYJ emphasised the relaxation purpose of Village W to Fuzhou: "I want Village W to become a very peaceful place for the visitors, where they can take a time off from their busy city life." Specifically, her plan is to

> develop the boutique tourism[146] themed around plum blossoms, so as to bring
> up the local development. Designing plum blossom concept products, such as
> plum blossom cake, plum blossom wine, plum blossom sweets and plum

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[144] 福州的后花园.
[145] 一个心灵栖息的地方.
[146] 做精品旅游.

blossom soup, as a whole set of souvenirs. Otherwise, plum blossoms are just for viewing, which can't bring too much profit to the village.

Simultaneously, she also plans to arrange her village in a style that will appeal to the tourists who might want to stay overnight, for example, by renovating existing old houses and turning them into hostels, cafes, and bars. I went along with Harmony to the assessment tour in Village W. The purpose of the tour was to walk around the village to give advice to CYJ and her team to explore the village's characteristics. The feedback from Harmony was as follows:

> The village's layout is in a discrepant order. Houses have different styles, not consistent enough. They do not have enough rural characteristics. We suggest highlighting the village's rural characteristics, such as renovating old houses and reducing the number of new ones.

Compared to Village W, LLL's Town S – also in Fuzhou, Fujian – is more developed for rural tourism, having been a busy ferry port hundreds of years ago. It is one of the ancient towns (*guzhen*) that has become trendy in recent years since the successful spread of other ancient-town tourism throughout China, for example, Fenghuang Old Town (*fenghuang guzhen*) in Hunan, and Wuzhen in Zhejiang. Like these others, Town S is iconic with its historic buildings, several clusters of which are well preserved. In 2016, a Taiwanese consultancy company, Connection, chose Town S as its pilot site for a project of cultural revitalisation through rural tourism (Homeland, 2018). This is a collaborative project between the Fujian government and the Taiwan government. The town director at that time was very cooperative with the project, dedicating support to the company as needed. Since then, the town has established quite a reputation among ancient-town lovers. Even so, its reputation is still limited to nearby cities.

Town S had its tourist peak in 2016 and 2017, after a movie star came and posted it on her Weibo account[147]. Thanks to its easily accessible location, it becomes a convenient place for urbanites to spend weekends and other national holidays. The town also organised festivals such as Harvest Festival to attract tourists. At its peak time, it attracted 7,000 visitors during weekends (Y. Wang & Lin, 2017). As Town S began to attract increasing numbers of visitors from outside the province, nearby villages also started to

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[147] Chinese social media. See Chapter 5 for a detailed description.

explore the possibilities of this industry by identifying their own rural characteristics. However, during the time of my field trip, local villagers were complaining that the tourist business was declining[148]. During my stay, it was usually very quiet on the weekdays and there were only two or three tourist groups arranged through travel agents on weekends.

LLL takes part in the whole process of tourist development. She first worked for Connection for two years and then in a hostel designed by the same company. Later she became the party secretary of the neighbouring village, Village G, where she was born. In addition, she was assigned as the General Manager of the co-op[149] (Figure 8) that sells local produce and handcraft objects. She observed at first-hand how the tourist industry in her town gained its moment and then went downhill.

Figure 8 Co-op in Town S where LLL is the manager

LLL feels a high sense of responsibility for boosting the local economies of Town S and Village G. This is probably due to the fact that the company Connection deliberately recruited her in the hope that she would carry out the project for long term. They took a typical approach of building the capacity of the locals for a prolonged effect, which is a common practice of external NGOs and civil organisations. Also, due to her identity as a return entrepreneur, she receives high publicity and social attention. She is well known among the government officials of Town S and other towns in her region. She has also given numerous interviews to different institutions. She told me not long before my visit

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[148] Due to disputes with the newly appointed town director, Connection left Town S in 2018, which is a major reason of the decline.

[149] This co-op differs from the specialised cooperatives mentioned below, it is more like a co-op store, which sells local produces made by villagers.

that a documentary director had spent a month following her and recording her daily activities.

LLL said that her concept of tourism is building 'an ancient town that has a temperature'[150]. Temperature here refers to the warmth and hospitality of local people. She explained:

> I want Town S to become a warm place where outsiders can also feel
> at home. People from the city, they are very cold and indifferent. We
> are not like that; we are still maintaining the old tradition of being
> friendly to everyone.

She also invests her time and resources on finding special local produce for the co-op that she is in charge of, such as local homemade noodles, plum wine, and dried plums, which are a popular savory. She also developed a whole set of Town S Banquets that contain local cuisine. Like CYJ, LLL wants to bring out her town's local characteristics and develop them into an industry.

Specialised cooperatives of CNC and XXR

To match their title, 'young pioneer who leads the villagers out of poverty' (*qingnian zhifu daitouren*), return entrepreneurs often establish specialised cooperatives to engage villagers in their enterprises. Among the participants in this study, most have established a specialised cooperative in their industry. Here I take CNC and XXR as examples.

CNC founded his specialised cooperative of orchid farming. So far there are 65 members who are all local farmers, including his neighbours and relatives. The idea is to establish collaboration between his company and the members. The company gives the members newly developed orchid seedlings for free. The members can grow them on their balconies or in their backyards. Once the orchids reach a certain size, the farmers can sell them back to CNC's company. Since this system was still in its trial phase at the time of the study, it was not compulsory for the villagers to sell the grown orchids back to him. Therefore, to attract their sales he usually pays them at a price that is above the market price. However, CNC said that not many farmers were willing to participate in

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[150]有温度的古镇.

this collaboration, as they still doubted the economic benefits of growing orchids and were not convinced about such an innovative model of farming.

This collaborative mode of specialised cooperatives is commonly adopted. XXR applies the same approach with his passionfruit-specialised coop. He said the villagers participating in his cooperative can get the very valuable seedlings for free. They then grow the seedlings for him, which also solves the issue of a shortage of farmland. After harvesting, they can sell the harvest back to XXR.

In this study, most of the cooperatives researched seem to be at their initial stages, with membership numbers between 60 and 80. As well, they are at a very loosely organised stage when both the initiators and members did not know exactly what they should do. CNC said frankly that when he first started the cooperative, he didn't know too much about it. He did it because it was the idea of the officials from the township government. It is usually out of a combination of social responsibility of 'leading the villagers out of poverty', following the guidance from the higher government officials and policy incentives that the specialised cooperatives were started.

Another important factor is that the cooperative policy of 2007 promises incentives for specialised cooperatives, which turns out to be a main motivation for them. Zhao & Peng (2014) calculated that in 2012, the number of newly registered specialised cooperatives reached 14,000 per month. Return entrepreneurs often adopt the attitude of 'wait and see'[151]. Even though not knowing what will come next to the cooperative in the future, working in the countryside has developed their habit of taking the opportunity of incentives as early as possible. Return entrepreneurs focus mainly on developing the specialised cooperative. There are no one practicing out the comprehensive cooperative that is promoted by alternative development approach.

Alternative development approach in HXF's village

Organisation Green's (OG) initiative in Village X, where HXF is, is perhaps the closest example of what a comprehensive cooperative is. In Chapter 3, I have introduced HXF's entrepreneurship in natural farming and eco-tour. He is able to do this work because of strong support from Organisation Green (OG), which chose Village X as its project site 10 years earlier. OG takes an alternative development approach to building

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[151] 走一步，看一步.

up Village X's economy by promoting organic farming through the Community Support Agriculture (CSA) model (see Chapter 2). In addition, it initiates self-governance by forming multiple villager groups (*cunming xiaozu*).

OG set up a local office in Village X, sending three to four staff to base themselves there. They are responsible for facilitating the forming of villager groups and for establishing protocols to manage these groups. OG has brought numerous resources to Village X, including financial and technical support, and it also takes a leading role in advertising the village's products in their CSA network. Village X has now become a member of Guangzhou Farmers Market (*nongfu shiji*). Experts in organic farming, community engagement, and rural development have been invited to help the villagers set up their own villagers' groups.

HXF's father, T, was in the first wave of project beneficiaries. He became the member of Plum Group (*qingmei xiaozu*) and received a fixed amount of funding for his organic plum trees as well as help to develop organic products such as plum wine and other plum products that are sold at a much higher prices than mass produced ones.

Tourist visits to Village X are also organised by OG with the aim of educating the consumers. Apart from public tourists, NGOs in nearby cities that are recommended by OG also choose it as a venue for project activities such as workshops, team building events, and conferences. OG assists villagers to renovate unused temples into hostels to receive guests who stay overnight. The Women Group (*funv xiaozu*) is responsible for running the hostel, receiving guests, providing meals, and cleaning. Members of the villager group share the revenue among themselves. In Village X there are other villager groups such as Bean-curd Making Group (*doufu xiaozu*), and so on. Figure 8 illustrates the program structure of OG.

Figure 9 OG's program structure

Program structure of OG: bottom level are various villager groups; on the right side it states its goal to form a comprehensive cooperative (综合农民协会).

After HXF returned, he was very much devoted to experimenting with natural farming, a technique of organic farming. He formed the Farming Group (*zhongzhi xiaozu*) with several other villagers who also practice natural farming, apart from the Eco-tour Guide Group (*daoshang xiaozu*) which showcases the biodiversity of his village. He receives eco-tour guide training by environment education experts from Taiwan, again arranged by OG.

HXF strongly believes in the principle of natural farming. He agrees that it is the most versatile solution to rural issues such as polluted environments and low incomes. However, this can be at a high cost. For example, in order to enhance his farm's soil fertility, he had to leave it fallow for one whole year, without producing anything. This meant no substantial economic gain for that year. In HXF's case, OG compensated him for the economic loss incurred. But because it is not practical for other rural households without such financial support to do the same, the continuation of traditional or organic

farming will need significant external support from governmental or non-government agencies. It is therefore questionable whether this model is applicable in the long term.

HXF is a loyal follower of OG's approach. He maintains a good relationship with its village-based staff and frequents their office whenever he has time for a chat. He even ended up marrying one of the former staff. His wife, M, later became the main coordinator of the Guangzhou Farmers' Market. OG has made HXF and several other young people, some of whom are also return migrants, as the targets for capacity building (*zhongdian peiyang duixiang*)[152]. It arranges exchange trips to other cities such as Chengdu, Xi'an, Hong Kong and Taiwan to learn community development. It also has a learning network (see Chapter 5) that enables HXF and others to directly talk to experienced organic farming experts and eco-tour guides. It is the hope of OG that these return migrants will become the main task force of Village X's future development, after it withdraws from the village.

OG takes a participatory approach that advocates for villagers to decide their own projects (Jacka, 2013; Parpart, 2000). It also intends to carry out the NRRM's concept of self-governance (Xuefeng He, 2006; Tiejun Wen, 2017) by bringing collaborating villagers together through villager groups. This is based on the logic that villagers alone know what they need most and external organisations should only be facilitators. Eventually, it hopes that Village X can develop its own comprehensive cooperative.

Nevertheless, there are also challenges. For one thing, disagreements among villagers can threaten group unity. HXF told me that many village group meetings consist of verbal fights, "Especially the Women Group (*funv xiaozu*, the one in charge of hostel). Those aunties (*ayi*) are just enthusiastic about arguing with others. They don't care about the development of the group." He also said there are accusations of money stealing and the prioritising of personal interests over group interests.

OG had always planned to terminate its support to Village X after 10 years. By then it should have successfully built up the capacity of the villagers for a self-sustained mechanism run by villagers themselves. It would also need young people like HXF to take leading roles. It was the nineth year of their project when I was there and OG's staff were slowly wrapping up the project. However, both HXF and the intern L of OG, felt pessimistic about the future. L told me that while the villagers benefitted greatly from the

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[152] Only HXF has a college degree, others' education levels vary from primary to middle school.

project, it was questionable whether the project could continue once OG left. HXF felt the same way, "Young people will not stay here once they see there is not much to do. We can always go to the city."

Through HXF's village we can see how alternative development is practiced in rural China; and how it takes effort to integrate organic farming and traditional farming into the current modernisation agenda through rural tourism, as noted also by Schmalzer (2016). As traditional farming and small household farms decline, organic farming is becoming a niche platform that proposes new methods for traditional farming. Traditional farming is thus often practiced without pesticides and fertilisers, to distinguish itself from large-scale farming. HXF's experience also shows how return migrants can be a cohesive part of the external agencies' development scheme. This corresponds to Ge et al.'s (2013) finding that return migrants are usually more welcoming of external help. This makes them integral to many development projects. At the same time, it also raises questions about the sustainability of development projects in the countryside, and, in terms of capacity building, whether they are valuable in a long term. The numbers of return migrants also depend on such sustainability. They will eventually leave the countryside if the development projects cannot be continued.

6.3 Relationship with villagers

The above three cases demonstrate return migrants' participation in rural development. They showcase the different stages of rural development and offer a lens to understand how two different approaches to development schools are implemented at the village level. While CYJ's and CNC's cases represent an early stage of rural development, LLL's Town S shows how it can be after considerable planning and designing. HXF's village represents one that has almost reached its complete stage under the influence of alternative development. Most importantly, CYJ's, LLL's and HXF's stories all exemplify the importance of external agencies in pushing forward rural development. In CYJ's case, the capacity building project from Harmony provides her resources to implement her plan. In HXF's case, Organisation Green was the main driver of the initiatives taking place in the village. And in LLL's case, if it were not for the Taiwanese company, she would not have been a return migrant in the first place. Since this company's support was invited by the provincial government, it can be partially counted as governmental support.

Also, all development agencies, both government and non-government, as key stake holders, accentuate the significance of developing the capacity of both return entrepreneurs and return village cadres, especially as a long-term goal. They are perceived to be the coordinators between external agencies and local villagers and thus are expected to internalise the concept of external agencies and implement it in the villages. For this reason, how return migrants negotiate their relationships with villagers is an important empirical question. In what follows, I draw on the experiences of the same three individuals, CYJ, LLL and CNC, to take a close look at return migrants' relationships with villagers. This constitutes an important piece of the jigsaw puzzle of multiple actors in rural development.

CYJ's story

CYJ has worked on the village committee for over 10 years. In her current term, which had just started in 2018 (when the fieldwork took place), she was elected as both village director and village party secretary, which is referred to as 'carrying two roles on one shoulder' (*yijiantiao*), an indication of one's strong capability. CYJ is also widely accepted by the villagers. Before her election, many villagers called her to make sure that she would run for this term.

However, when she was first elected as village cadre five years ago, CYJ was not immediately accepted by the villagers for two reasons. One was that it was still very hard for villagers to follow the leadership of a woman. The other reason was that her family name is not the same as the majority family name of the village, indicating her family's history as migrants. Although born in the village, she was considered an outsider. Also, her return migrant identity caused estrangement from the villagers. When she started her service, she encountered huge challenges. She would receive verbal assaults from the villagers, asking her why she is meddling with others' business (referring to her outsider position). In the village's WeChat group, rude language directed at her can be seen by all the villagers who are in the chat group, including her parents and family members. In one instance, she was even beaten by a drunken villager who was convinced that she did something to sabotage his tourist business. CYJ said that she was under severe stress and cried constantly.

CYJ's relationship with the villagers improved considerably thanks to two things she did. The main reason is that she gained the endorsement of 'village wisemen' (*xiangxian*),

who hold a distinguished position in village matters. Literally translated as 'country wiseman', *xiangxian* refers to the elites who take responsibility in village affairs as civil representatives who are independent of government supervision. Nowadays, the term explicitly alludes to migrants who no longer live in the village but are still actively involved in village matters. They have usually achieved higher socio-economic status in the city, which enables them to channel more resources to the village. They are also the people who financially contribute the most to major projects in the village, such as building a new temple and renovating or maintaining the ancestral hall – buildings that still have important meaning in rural societies. To some extent, 'village wisemen' can even have more influence over village matters than local residents.

In CYJ's case, she gained the trust from one of these 'village wisemen'; let's call him A. In his late 50s, A and his wife, B, are prominent figures in Village W. When he was young, A left the village for Macau, the former Portuguese colony. He later became a factory owner with the money he accumulated. He then settled down in the city, while still maintaining a close connection with Village W. He and his wife, B, actively participate in the village matters. B is the president of the local women's committee. When CYJ had difficulty gaining trust from the villagers, she reached out to A for help. CYJ gradually gained A's support because he admires her courage of returning. She also impressed him with her dedication to the village.

The second thing is that CYJ was able to attract a total of 10 million yuan[153] for local projects. I went to visit CYJ in Village W together with S, the director of Harmony. On our way there, S told me that CYJ was called the 'million village director' (*baiwan cunzhang*) because her incredible achievement of raising 10 million yuan for road construction. Situated at the peak of a mountain, Village W can only be accessed through a winding mountain track that used to be very narrow and rough, causing the village to be disconnected from its nearby towns and villages. CYJ then launched the project of widening the road as preparation for a later tourist development plan. By the time I went there, the road was almost finished. S told me in a clearly amazed tone that CYJ had raised all the money by herself. He commented: "This woman is something unusual."

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[153] Around 200,000 Australian dollar.

Figure 10 The 10-million-yuan road in CYJ's village

CYJ could not have accomplished so much without the help of A and the other 'village wisemen' who donated to the road project. In addition to the 5 million she raised from the 'village wisemen', she managed to get another 5 million yuan in matching funds from the government for it. According to the rural policy Beautiful Countryside, village cadres can apply for government funding for half the cost of facility installations, such as road construction, community centre construction, and river re-channelling, if the village can cover the other half. That is to say, if a village needs the government to contribute 1000 yuan matching funds, it first has to collect 1000 yuan. Hence, with the 5 million yuan she had collected from village migrants, some of whom were even overseas, she was able to get a matching 5 million yuan from the government. In total, she raised 10 million yuan funding for the road improvement.

The success of the road project has earned CYJ the reputation among the township officials as being a capable village director. Moreover, she has also convinced the villagers that 'she is for their benefit' (*wei cunliren hao*). This is an important gesture, as it has switched her position as an outsider to that of an insider. It is worth mentioning that her bringing in capital from outside the village was decisive in influencing the village to give her the position of village director, which was interpreted as her genuine care for the villagers (*wei cunliren hao*).

LLL's story

LLL's experience as village party secretary is similar to CYJ's in terms of not being trusted by villagers, but for a different reason. While CYJ encountered the challenges of being treated as an outsider, LLL's biggest issue was being too involved in disputes within the inside circle of the villagers. When LLL was elected as the party secretary of Village G in 2018, she was only 26, the youngest ever party secretary in her county. The story of her election is rather dramatic: she ran against her father, N, the former party secretary, and won.

Unlike village directors, party secretaries are elected only by the CCP members of the village. This means it is easier for the township government to intervene by influencing these party members. N had a prolonged conflict with the village director, which drew concerns from township government. The government thus intended to have LLL to replace her father. This for one thing will halt the dispute between the village's two cadres. For the other thing, by electing N's daughter, LLL, the township government also shows that it was not leaning towards the village director's side. LLL was not planning to run for the election. She was present at the voting venue simply to support her father and somehow got nominated. She won by almost unanimous votes.

In addition, being a 26-year-old female return migrant, who actively participates in rural development, LLL embodies all the ideal features the government intends to advocate for being return migrants. She thus gained the acknowledgement from the local township government. She already enjoyed a high social reputation before the election, which contributed to her success. After she was elected, the words have spread that Village G now has a 'beauty village party secretary' (*meinv cunzhishu*), a trendy term used to refer to young female, usually educated return migrants, who are village cadres[154]. She constantly appears in local newspapers and on television. Social media accounts publish her stories, picturing her as the representative of return migrants. LLL's success further testifies to the argument I made in Chapter 5, that social network and visibility can be essential in gaining resources in rural China. People voted for her in the hope that she could attract more resources to her village and thus bring about changes.

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[154] The term 'beauty cadre' (*meinv cunguan*) reflects the male gaze from the public discourse (Walters, 1995; H. Zhu, 2008). If a young capable male become village cadre, there won't contain any specific expressions disclosing his gender nor appearance.

Although LLL's young age and social reputation have brought her success in election, these do not continue to produce a similar positive effect on her later working. I first met LLL in 2018, not long after she had been elected. She told me people chose her to show their eagerness to changes by electing a very young woman as their leader. When I visited her a year later, her narrative has changed. She said instead that people chose her because she could bring them resources, namely, money. Because she is well connected with the township government, they believe she could obtain more governmental support for the village. She no longer felt appreciated by the villagers for her devotion and passion. The sense of being used is clearly implied in her statement.

Many things had happened between our meetings. When LLL started her service, she launched and resourced several projects, such as refurbishment of the ancestral hall, renovation of the seniors' centre, and canal cleansing. However, none of these projects contributed to improving her relationship with villagers. On the contrary, she was constantly involved in the relentless village disputes over land, as well as other trivial matters. During my second field visit, she was busy dealing with a dispute regarding the building of a public toilet. Since the village director was away in the city visiting his son at the time, LLL was the key responsible person. Although it was a very small project, it created long-lasting arguments and disagreements.

As the land used for the toilet comprised land acquisition from some rural households, there was the constant suspicion of being taken advantage of (*chikui*). She had chosen the land between her grandfather's and his neighbour's properties for the public toilet. Her initial idea was to save negotiation time by only dealing with her family member and her neighbour. However, when conflict between these people emerged, her position became awkward because she could be accused of helping her grandfather. Village director was also behind the accusation. Even though he was not in the village, he was able to persuade others to oppose LLL. And when LLL wanted to clear the misunderstanding by talking with him, he claimed that he could not do so because he was too busy in the city.

LLL took phone calls at all hours from villagers, who asked all sorts of questions. She also had to mediate the conflicts among multiple parties, being very careful not to show her personal inclinations. Projects were constantly paused because of villagers' interventions. A construction team simply left because they found it impossible to please everyone. LLL then had to spend another hour on the phone to persuade them to come

back, while making multiple phone calls to clear the disagreement. When I stayed at her home, I often heard her on the phone as early as 6.00 am and as late as 11.00 pm.

Moreover, N's old grudge against the village director was also constraining her from making any decisions. The village director is a male who is in the same age category of N. He represents the village cadres which I mentioned at the beginning of Section 6.1, who are usually male and less educated villagers at their 50s. She told me about her failure when hiring an accountant for the village committee. Because she introduced a new person into the committee, people began to say that she wanted to form her own group within it[155]. Eventually, the accountant could not face such pressure and quit. This experience also gave a negative impression of LLL's term of service. She described the situation as very difficult:

> People here try very hard to prevent you from making achievements
> as if that's their sole goal. They are so bored. They have nothing better
> to do. This is how they realise their values, by shooting out objections.
> They object to anyone who actually wants to achieve something here.
> Otherwise, they don't feel that they exist anymore. This even applies
> to the simplest matter here in the countryside.

Surrounded by endless accusations, LLL came up with a strategy by claiming her position as an outsider. She began to tell villagers that there would be no point for her in preparing a secret agenda, because she would not be staying in the village forever. She would leave after her term finishes in five years. Ironically, the promise that she would leave one day gave her more credibility. Villagers then trusted her a little more. She said:

> They always think that I want to take advantage of them. That I plan
> to have my own people here. I just told them, this is none of my
> intention, because I won't stay here forever. I am not planning
> anything in the dark. I am just doing my job. After five years I will be
> gone. It is up to them then.

Three points can be made about LLL's frustration with the villagers. First, while her good social connections and high social visibility enabled her to gain the position of party

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[155]拉帮结派.

secretary at such a young age, this does not ensure her the inside position in the villagers' social circle. On the contrary, it alienates her from the rural villagers. The village director once said to her that because she was too capable and very dominant at work, he did not dare to speak against her. However, she thought this was simply his excuse to blame her. He is using his inferior position as less educated peasant as a tool to justify his hostility and mistrust against LLL, which obviously appeals to many other villagers. Thus, LLL's strong capability negatively impacted her work relationships.

Second, being born in the village no longer guarantees her a natural bond with the villagers. This is particularly interesting, because according to the study of rural society (Xuefeng He, 2011a; Yunxiang Yan, 1996), a common connection like this can be sufficient for mutual trust between village members. LLL was born and grew up in Village G and family members still live there. From the traditional social order perspective, she is an insider of the rural social circle. However, she does not enjoy the trust of other villagers and her decisions were constantly questioned and misunderstood. Paradoxically, only when she pointed out her position as an outsider who would eventually leave, did she gain certain degree of trust from them. This allows more insights into rural social relations: while the rule of familiarity still applies, kinship is no longer a natural criterion for acceptance into the social circle. I will continue this discussion in CNC's story.

Third, LLL's story also sheds light to how youth is perceived and constructed in a Chinese rural society. During a dinner I had with LLL and her friend F, one of her very few friends of her own age who still lives nearby[156], LLL and F complained:

> The villagers are inconsistent in their thinking. On one hand, they
> count on us young people with all the work needs to be done. On the
> other hand, they think we are too young to be treated seriously. Our
> young age then could become a reason for them to criticise us.

In Yunxiang Yan's study of rural youth in Northern China (Yunxiang Yan, 1999), young people were regarded as trouble-makers. Their biological age was socially constructed as associated with rebelliousness, disobedience and insufficient filial piety.

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[156] F comes from a province far in northern China. She used to work with LLL in the hostel together, which established a strong friendship between the two. She later passed the civil servants' exam in another town and moved there. But her boyfriend is still working as a civil servant in Town Y, the capital town of LLL's county. So F occasionally meets LLL in Town Y, which is one hour drive from Town S.

They represented the evolving individualism and materialism that was believed to be influenced from 'outside' world. Two decades later, a newer perception of youth has evolved. Rural households, as well as whole villages, now rely more on the younger generation for their livelihoods. An inability to comprehend new technologies prevents the older generations from obtaining resources. For example, as mentioned earlier, FQ offered to help his village cadres with writing a project proposal, which is beyond their capacity. As return cadres, LLL and CYJ also become pillars of rural development in their villages. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily always build up the connection between the return migrants and local villagers.

CNC's story

Among the three returnees, CNC's attitude toward the villagers is the most conflicting. Although CNC does not have frequent interactions with local villagers, he still needs to communicate with them, mainly for the purpose of land transfer (*liuzhuan*)[157]. Discussing land transfer with villagers is one of his main daily work tasks. CNC confessed that it is also the most challenging part of his work. In his narrative, words like 'ignorant', 'backward', and 'changing their minds all the time' appear frequently.

In one incident, CNC had already established an initial agreement with a villager to rent his land. He even paid the deposit on the spot. The next day, CNC went back with a formal land transfer contract. However, the villager had changed his mind again. He told CNC that things have changed since the previous day: his wife was strongly against the deal, they had had a huge fight, and so he had to call it off, at least temporarily. He returned the deposit to CNC, apologising: "You don't want to see my whole family falling apart because of this, right?" Even though CNC found the whole situation outrageous, he had to agree because this person is a remote relative, as are most in his village. CNC was afraid that he might ruin his social standing and earn him a reputation of 'being cold blood for the sake of money' if he were to keep pressing this relative on the matter, despite believing he had the right to do so. In the end, he concluded: "Peasants are like this. They have no sense of abiding by the contract (*meiyou qiyue jingshen*). This is different in the city, where everything follows the written contract. It's so easy and simple [there]."

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[157] Refer to Chapter 2 for land transfer in China.

The argument for comparing the countryside and the city in terms of their credibility is almost a cliché in rural studies. There are different interpretations, depending on one's point of view. Thomason (2017) describes a scenario of chatting with an old lady from the countryside who told her that urbanites are unlike her very reliable (*laoshi*) country fellows; city people are very foxy, sleeky, and cannot be trusted.

This old lady's remark in Thomason's article contrasts with CNC's account. While it validates the point that the distinction between rural and urban is subjectively constructed, it also speaks to the fact that social identity shapes people's opinions. In CNC's case, he identifies himself more with the city than the countryside, which colours his stereotypical opinions of rural people. This is also reflected in his look and manner. Although he lives and works in the countryside, CNC struck me as a city businessman, with his white shirt, black suit pants and black leather shoes. As mentioned in Chapter 5, he referred to his experience when he first returned to Village A as 'knowing no one and nowhere'. His repetitive use of this term suggests that he does not regard returning to the countryside as the equivalent of going home.

Finding it very difficult to communicate with the villagers directly, CNC got an agent to help him – a childhood friend D, who had never migrated, but instead had mostly stayed in the countryside taking odd jobs as a construction worker. After CNC set up his company, D assisted him in merging land from other villagers. CNC would bring him to conversations with villagers and let him do most of the talking. He said, "He [D] knows how to talk to them. They have a different way of communicating." He was not referring to their local dialect, which CNC could understand as he was also born there.

The relationship between CNC and the director, E, is also quite subtle. I met E in his office, which used to be the local primary school. E is around 50 years of age. He spoke highly of CNC's contribution to the local economy and said that because of CNC's important role in the community, the village committee was willing to render any support he might need. At the same time, E repeatedly pointed out that he had limited ability to do so:

> You see I am just a peasant. I know nothing. I don't have education.
> Plus, I am very busy with the village affairs. So, to be honest what we
> can offer to CNC is very limited. Of course, we try our best, but I
> don't think we are much of a help.

On our way back, I asked CNC what he thought of E, especially after knowing that E was still growing Eucalyptus, a highly controversial activity in the rural. Villagers believe that eucalyptus trees are very toxic to the environment because the land they are grown on quickly becomes sandy and fragile. Despite this, due to its high return rate, rural residents tend to plant it in their fallow lands. This behaviour is an example of rural villagers being low *suzhi*. CNC differentiated himself from the villagers:

> I stayed clear of it. It's their business, I don't want to meddle around. Honestly, I really despise them for what they do (he means growing trees). But I stay out of this (*buguan tamen*). I just mind my own business.

He also conveyed to me that there was a bit of drama in the recently completed election of the village director. Even though he was invited to run, he turned it down: "I don't want to be in the middle of their dirty business[158]."

It's interesting to note that while I asked about his opinions regarding E only, he used the plural term 'them', which generally refers to all the villagers. The difficulties that both CNC and LLL has with the local villagers suggests that their identities as migrants, and their experiences of having been to the city and acquiring urban outlooks have somehow disqualified them from their villages' social circles. Even though they speak the same dialect, they often fail to understand and be understood by their own people. CNC unconsciously differentiates himself from the villagers by referring to them as 'those peasants': "I feel it is a tedious thing to communicate with those peasants. We don't have the same concepts." Or, "We have different understandings. My concept is not matching with those peasants." I then asked him if he didn't consider himself as a peasant, he immediately confirmed that he still did, so were his whole family, showing his conflicting identity.

Later, when I recounted my visit with CNC to the NGO director S, I mentioned the question I asked, S commented that my question was "too sharp" (*jianrui*). S's reaction is presumably because my question challenged CNC's self-identification. It is also possible that even though CNC doesn't reconcile with the idea of being a peasant, when I, as an outsider from the city, questioned him (even though I tried to be as neutral as

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[158] 不想管那些破事.

possible), he felt that it was not his place to associate himself with the city. This could be out of embarrassment or lack of self-confidence. CNC's conflicting testimony indicates return migrants' ambiguous roles in the countryside.

The three cases discussed in this chapter demonstrate the fraught and complex nature of returnees' relationships with rural villagers. They challenge the common assumption that as returnees are originally from the countryside, they should have an innate connection with local villagers and hence advantages in communicating with them and motivating them to participate in rural development. This assumption overlooks the contrast in socio-economic status between returnees and the villagers, which creates division rather than coalition. All three cases show that villagers are highly dubious, even hostile, towards returnees who wanted to start rural development work. The complaint that returnees are meddling around others' business (*duoguan xianshi*) is common. Villagers question the returnees' motivations, thinking that they must be getting lucrative benefits from their rural work.

The villagers' resistance to the return migrants also reflects their attitudes towards the hegemonic power of modernisation. Those who are long-term dwellers in the villages, namely, local farmers, might have been small-household subsistence farmers before, but now they are too old to take on the new styles of farming or find jobs in the city. Among them, older women (as opposed to young educated female returnees) are constrained to the domestic sphere of the household, often ignored and disrespected their whole lives. These are the generations who are reduced to be socially and economically 'useless' by modernisation and urbanisation (McMichael, 2006). They are not just marginalised by the rural-urban dichotomy, they are also at the bottom of the social hierarchy in rural societies. The modernisation hegemony has placed them as opposite to the desirable social subject. Chio (2011) points out that the relationship between those who are mobile and those who are not can be dialectical: one group's mobility could eventually entrench the immobility of the other group. Mobility here means more than just physical movements; it also includes social mobility. To some extent, the tension between educated return migrants and local villagers embodies the struggle of the rural population. At the same time, it also represents the conflicts between the older and younger generations.

That said, villagers are still highly subject to the modernisation discourse. This is suggested by their high dependence on return migrants. Villagers consult LLL over every

matter rather than decide for themselves. The villagers' attitudes towards the returnees also betray their mixed feelings about the city and urbanisation. On the one hand, they are in awe of what urbanisation can bring, and on the other hand, they fear it might be detrimental. Villagers' estrangement from return migrants is situated in the structural conflicts which creates the binary between rural and urban, old and young, less educated and educated. In that sense, the assistance and resources brought by the educated return migrants are hard to make transformative changes to the social landscape (Fraser, 2003), as it follows the modernisation logic. While local villagers are more dependent on the returnees, their hostility also grows as the presence of educated returnees are seen to reinforce the local villagers' marginalised position.

Return migrants also have mixed feelings. They can feel unfairly accused and suspected by the villagers yet also express compassion towards them. They may also want to identify with the villagers; CNC's seemingly contradictory identity as a peasant says much about this. Meanwhile, they more or less try to keep their emotional distance from the villagers. Some are more upfront about this, like HSM and CNC, who prefer not to 'get involved in the dirty water' or think villagers 'communicate in a different way.' Others are less explicit and convey the idea that villagers need to be educated or improved, echoing the argument that the rural populations are indeed lagging behind. For example, CYJ used the term "They are in need of guidance" (*tamen xuyao yindao*), and LLL said, "I often taught my villagers that if I give you a job today, you are just getting a couple of thousand yuan. But if you learn the skills, you will benefit for the rest of your life." By reflecting how peasants are perceived in development discourses, these comments hint at how some return migrants presume they have a superior role in rural development. They also show how the gap between the return migrants and villagers may be irreconcilable.

6.4 "Finding rural characteristics, bringing up the whole industry"

In talking about their strategies for rural development, almost all the participating return migrants replied with one expression: "finding rural characteristics, bringing up the whole industry[159]." This, in fact, corresponds to the government slogans printed out on the training brochures and banners outside township government offices. The so-called

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[159] 发展乡村特色，带动产业发展。

'rural characteristics' can be the plum blossoms in CYJ's village, the historic buildings and local handicraft in LLL's village, the orchid seedings in CNC's specialised cooperative, and organic products from HXF's village. Rural development, both mainstream and alternative, is the process of commodifying and marketising these characteristics, with the goal of developing them into an industry.

It is possible to identify at least four paradoxes that are embedded in this development principle. And understanding the role that individual return migrants play in negotiating these paradoxes is instructive. Most obviously, there is the contradiction between 'characteristics' and 'industry'. For one thing, the word 'characteristics' is connected to the quality of being rare and unique, which is the opposite of industrial production. The prerequisite of developing characteristics into an industry requires a large consumer demand. However, if the industry meets such a level of consumers' needs, the current size and number of local dwellers of one village can hardly satisfy the requirements of mass production without losing the village's characteristics. From a translocality point of view, rural characteristics could also be viewed as the place-based 'competitive edge'. The prospect of developing 'industry' speaks to the goal of incorporating rural characteristics into the capitalist market.

In the case of rural tourism and specialised cooperatives, such a paradox could be particularly salient. According to CYJ, she wishes to portray the plum blossoms and related products as the village's characteristics. Eventually, she hopes her village can attract enough tourists and consumers to bring sufficient economic income to the local households. To reach this stage, as noted by Oakes and Schein (2006), standardisation and commodification of the rural characteristics are the natural course, but this is contradictory to what is meant by characteristics, which is unique and non-standardised.

This dilemma is shared by the Alternative Food Network (AFN). On one hand, AFN wishes to increase the customer pool, which will reduce the cost of organic farming. On the other hand, it risks jeopardizing these farming methods in order to increase output volume. As Si and Scott (2016) point out, it is almost impossible to strike a balance between marketing organic food of high quality and replicating it into a wider range of products.

Then there is the paradox of developing an industry and protecting the villagers' benefits. What might happen when the characteristics developed into an industry? This question is explored in Oakes' (2006) ethnographic research into ethnic villages in

Guizhou and in Zinda's (2017) article about the Zhangjiajie world heritage sites in Hunan. In both cases, there is an integration of state and capitalist power managing these well-developed tourist sites. While villagers voluntarily present themselves as commercials, they are not the biggest beneficiaries of the industry. Private tourist companies with state backgrounds benefit the most. They also take control of the tourist planning without consulting villagers. In that sense, cases described in this study, such as CYJ's Village W and LLL's Town S seem to be able to benefit villagers more, as they still remain unknown to most of the tourists. In other words, their status of not developing into a tourist industry ensures the villagers to be the actual beneficiaries. But then there is the issue of sustainability. With fewer tourists visiting, local residents' livelihood will be affected. Migrants who return once to open small businesses will eventually have to migrate again.

There is also the paradox of the logic of rural characteristics and developmentalism. What is interpreted as rural characteristics is ironically the result of the rural being perceived as being backward and under-developed. For example, the preservation of historic or old houses is usually due to the villagers lacking sufficient money to build new ones. CYJ, for example, pointed out that the under-development of Village W contributed to its good natural environment. At the same time, the logic of developmentalism aims at fast modernisation and capital accumulation, which contradicts to the so-called rural characteristics.

The divergence between rural characteristics and developmental logic leads to the last paradox, which is reflected in the oxymoron of ruralism constructed by urban elites, such as rural scholars, NGOs, and the middle-class. While developmental discourse situates the rural space as the backward and 'low-quality' group that is in need of improving, rural tourism is hinged on another set of urban imaginings, that the rural is a pure, uncontaminated and pristine place that is almost the last salvation of civilisation. It derives out of urban elites' frustration with modern civilisation. It is also integrated with politically left-wing cautiousness against capitalism and nationalists' defensiveness against foreign forces.

Thus, rural space is designed to be the 'rear garden of the city', which speaks for relaxation; or 'a town with temperature' that is unlike the indifferent and alienated city. We can also see this from the comments of NGOs. S from Harmony advised CYJ to preserve more rustic houses to bring out their rural characteristics. He also told CYJ if she didn't try to find "something special", she would not be able to attract more tourists:

"Even if they come once, they will not revisit." He also mentioned the high competitiveness in the rural tourism market: "I have been to at least a hundred villages. Every village is doing the same thing, old houses, peasant family happiness, and so on. You have to be outstanding and bring out your characteristics."

Villagers, on the other hand, don't care for their rural characteristics. It is their wish to step into modern civilisation as soon as possible. CYJ told me that her villagers protested about the old-house preservation plan. House construction has a very significant place in rural society. Building a new house is the primary goal of migration (C. Chen & Fan, 2018; Xu et al., 2017). It is also a matter of their social image in the countryside. It is the most pronounced evidence of the household's accomplishment, as a deed of 'glorifying their ancestors' (*guangzong yaozu*). In addition, having a new house is also a crucial condition for a young male to find a spouse. Therefore, households with male descendants are eager to build houses in order for them to marry.

Villagers came to CYJ to complain about the project: "Many of them have put all their effort into building a new house. They want to live in modern buildings with air conditioning and television. They can't go back to previous life without flushing toilet just like that." CYJ said she understood this and was caught up in the conflict between the villagers' aspiration of becoming more modern and the urban tourists' expectation of them to remain 'non-urban'.

In summary, it is undeniable that return migrants have a decisive position in implementing rural development. Their role of curating the external assistance into their rural village is pivotal, even though they may suffer from severe frustration and disbelief from villagers and external agencies. They also channel many new ideas and concepts to the rural space and their dedication to rural development does increase the economic income of local households. For example, many return entrepreneurs hire local farmers to attend to their properties, bringing solid income to the farmers' households.

Apart from the above more tangible impacts, perhaps the most profound impact of the returning migrants lies in their identity as 'return migrants'. Being the place entrepreneurs (Oakes & Schein, 2006), they are the promoters of modernisation and urbanisation in rural society, which also reproduces the social unevenness between the rural and the urban. This is different from what people usually assume – that return migrants are defending the rural space. Instead, they are instrumental to rural development projects by actively injecting urban influences and transforming the rural

landscape. While they may have made significant contributions to rural development, it remains questionable if they have indeed managed to forge a genuine connection to, or become truly integrated with, their rural communities. If not, despite their many entrepreneurial endeavours, they may fall short of the expectation that they give voice to the concerns and needs of villagers.

This analysis has revealed that rural space is a highly convoluted social sphere in which different powers conflict and compete against each other. State and capitalist forces tend to take advantage of the untapped resources awaiting them in the wide rural space, whereas development agencies are busy installing their ideologies and agendas. Return migrants are the social group who directly interface with these paradoxes. Amid struggles such as those presented in these case studies, they demonstrate their agency through mediational attitudes such as 'wait and see', 'striving for a balance between villagers' appeal and external agencies' requirements', and so on. At the same time as they are glorified with the social reputation as the 'pioneers' who are young and inspirational, they are confronted with dilemmas that even experienced urban elites are unable to solve. Being subject to the entrepreneurial discourse, they have no choice other than to be pushed to the forefront of rural development.

Conclusion

By investigating the experiences of educated return migrants, this thesis reveals a complex picture of these returnees' lives and changes in their rural communities. To my knowledge, this study is the first systematic and detailed ethnographic account of educated returnees to be written in the English language and has significantly enriched the discussion on social change, rural development, rural-to-urban migration and spatial inequality. With an investigation into returnees' self-formation and their translocal agency in place connection and scale negotiation, the empirical findings of this study bring nuance to our understanding of how neoliberal governance operates at the individual level.

I argue that a new approach should be taken in understanding migration, as it is best understood and conceptualised as an assemblage of the following: decision-making about mobility; translocal imagination and discourses; strategies and tactics allowing one to be here and there simultaneously; and a set of everyday and technologically enabled activities used to make connections. My work outlines a novel way of understanding and conceptualising mobility as the interplay between actual physical movement and social mobility.

In the preceding chapters, I have considered different aspects of return migrants' experiences in order to examine their identity construction. In this concluding chapter, I summarise three key themes from my research in order to provide an overview of life after return. These three themes are return migrants' role in constructing social identity, their role in the rural household livelihood plan, and their role as a 'place entrepreneur' in the rural development discourse (Oakes & Schein, 2006).

7.1 Constructing social identity

In this thesis, I have demonstrated how return migrants' identity is formed through a dynamic interaction between a 'top-down process' and individual initiatives 'on the ground'. Identity formation occurs from the top, emphasising and facilitating the discourse of self-development through the re-branding of individuals from 'return migrants' (*huiqian renkou*) to 'return entrepreneurs' (*fanxiang chuangye*) or 'return youth' (*fanxiang qingnian*), endorsement from the elite, and narratives from public and social media. Identity formation also occurs via individual responses to these stories, narratives

and discourses. Returnees take advantage of incentives – both material and social – and state policies in rural development; in doing so, they demonstrate entrepreneurship and qualities befitting the image of 'desirable' neoliberal subjects capable of taking the initiative to move toward self-improvement, self-development, and self-enterprise.

In the intellectual youth sent down movement (sent-down for short), rural youths who studied in county level school were also among the sent-down youths; this is likely to be the first return migration movement in China (Schmalzer, 2016). Differences between sent-down movement and the current return migration in China are quite obvious, as they are situated in different political contexts; however, there are also clear similarities. In her book *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China,* Schmalzer (2016) recounts the motivation, tactics and contradictions intellectual youth faced in the socialist era, many of which resonate with the experiences of the return migrants I have studied.

The driving force of the two movements is similar – both came about to ease the tension of surplus labour in urban areas. In the sent-down movement, the Chinese government highlighted a scientific approach to agriculture as a trope to motivate intellectual youth, who were encouraged to gain education and take part in modernity. Modernisation in agriculture was already being promoted under very careful camouflage in communist ideology. In the current wave of migration, modernisation is still the key framework in regard to agriculture. A spirit of entrepreneurship and self-improvement is also a part of the return entrepreneur discourse and serves a similar purpose to scientific agriculture in the previous movement. Educated youth in both movements were caught between urban and rural, though their position between the two varies in degree and expression depending on the time period. In the socialist era, the dilemma for youth was in the collision between *tu* (local and traditional) and *yang* (foreign and advanced). Officially, the government advocated for a collaboration of the two; educated youth and experts representing *yang* were urged to cooperate with local experienced farmers (representing *tu*) by forming scientific experiment groups. In the post-socialist era, modern technology is used to frame a process where *tu* is being assimilated by *yang*. As the key force of modernity, return migrants – especially return entrepreneurs – are considered to represent *yang* and must face confrontation from villagers, who are labelled as *tu*, in the course of rural development.

A comparison between these two return migration movements elucidates how state power can take either an authoritative or facilitative path in reaching the same goal. In comparison to their predecessors in the socialist era, the current wave of return migrants is obliged to return, not because of a mandatory order from the state, but because of the invisible political, economic and social barriers that are difficult to overcome should they wish to stay in the city. A careful analysis of their mobility decisions, the factors that shape their decisions, and their own retrospective assessment of their decisions offers us a glimpse at the extent to which educated migrants internalise the neoliberal ethos. An analysis of returnees also reveals how such an ethos informs their translocal practices, including what they actually do on a daily basis, their choice of lifestyle, social circles and what communication methods they use to navigate between the city and the village.

I return to the story of WYL, presented in full at the beginning of this thesis, to highlight an important feature of social identity in China today. When I invited WYL to participate in my research on return migrants – often referred to as return youth – she told me that she didn't identify as such because she does not think she has done anything since her return. But as detailed in Chapter 6, it is clear that WYL has done remarkable work as a schoolteacher. How then can we understand her dismissal of the suggestion that she has made a significant contribution? As I have illustrated, the return entrepreneur discourse urges return migrants to dedicate themselves to rural development. Two types of careers fall into the category of return youth, and these are entrepreneurs and village cadres. As a teacher, WYL does not qualify as a return entrepreneur and thus does not relate to the dominant narrative. In other words, she believes there is an equivalence between being a 'return youth' and being a 'return entrepreneur'. She makes light of her contribution not only because she is excluded from the entrepreneur narrative but also because she has internalised the discourse of entrepreneurship.

WYL's view of herself and her contributions is not insignificant. Literally translated as youth who return, the term 'return youth' should encompass returnees like WYL. However, her reaction suggests that her belief is a generally accepted social standard. There is no clear description of the new term 'return youth', even though it is often printed in publications, used on TV and is widespread on social media. In comparison, the criteria for the term 'return entrepreneur' seems to be clearer, as it emphasises returnees' devotion to rural development. In this way, the government has consciously created an ambiguous concept of return youth that overlaps with that of return entrepreneurs. This ambiguity is

powerful and plays a part in regulating educated return migrants in three ways. First, it leads to return migrants' self-screening. As she does not recognise herself as a return migrant, WYL speaks to her reflexivity in regard to the entrepreneur discourse (discussed in detail in Chapter 4 and 5). By denying herself the label of return youth, WYL both internalises and reinforces the subjectivity of this term of social identity.

Secondly, ambiguity surrounding these social labels can also work to entice rural graduates in the city. The return entrepreneur discourse plays an undeniable role in this new trend of return migration. To some extent, government advocacy for return migrants is ultimately a push for more return entrepreneurs. As we saw from HXF's story, an increase in numbers of return migrants is a consequence of this government 'support'. Though HXF was not financially able to start his own business, he identifies as a return entrepreneur and has thus been embraced into this social identity and the challenges that come with it, even though he does not have the adequate resources necessary to work and live in this way.

Lastly, all educated return migrants are subject to the discourse of return entrepreneurship – even those like WYL who do not identify as such. Return entrepreneurship is so pervasive that it becomes part of people's common sense and regulates their value system (Harvey, 2005). The juxtaposition of higher education degrees and youth engenders a more vulnerable situation for returnees. This applies to every educated return migrant which dictates all aspects of returnees' lives. As they are more educated, young, anxious to survive in the competitive market and eager to make something of their life, this cohort of returnees is particularly susceptible to the entrepreneurship discourse and responsive to the neoliberal logic of the market.

7.2 Shifting values and forms in the rural family

This research has provided insight into how return migrants navigate tensions between individual desires for self-development and the needs of their families. The return migrants who have participated in this research project all share a common understanding of the importance of maintaining a good relationship with their family, even if they disagree with family members' decisions. While the need to demonstrate good *suzhi* is a factor, this maintenance of family relationships is also a practical consideration of the crucial role households play in securing an individual's safety net. In my study, I uncovered a dilemma that is particularly common among this cohort of return migrants. On one hand, they seek independence and individualism; on the other hand, they are deeply constrained by the household's supportive network and familial values. During the Chapter 2 discussion of the household livelihood plan, I argue that individuals' flexibility in making their own decisions reflects the strength of the household livelihood plan. Though return migrants boast about their social mobility, constraints from rural households are still severe. Despite contributing to their rural households' increased income, returnees have not necessarily improved their own social status by doing so. There is, in fact, little room for rural individuals to make their own decisions about their life planning; for some, the household's constraints can even be detrimental.

My research has also brought to light the gender dimension in return migration. While my work shows how both male and female return migrants conform to their respective gender norms, it provides new insight into the experiences of female return migrants. An analysis of female returnees' decision-making and everyday strategies in both their private and family lives reveals a shift that has occurred in family structure and division of labour in rural households during the migration era. My research reveals increasing flexibility in rural households, much like what was reported by scholars like Wu (2017) and Shen (2013) who focus on urban families. Rural households are becoming less constrained to certain forms and rules, and what we might think of as old values – such as family unification – are no longer as significant as they once were. Decisions about family members' movements – to stay or to leave, to be together or to be separate – are made on the basis of maximising the economic position of the family and satisfying its evolving needs. The multi-dwelling arrangement is still very common even for return migrants after they return. The ubiquitous use of social media has reduced the problems

caused by physical separation and, to a certain extent, made it possible to stay connected without living together.

In contrast to the experience of female returnees in the past, those who are college graduates are now more able to find a formal job outside the household. They are not expected to limit themselves to labour in the traditional domestic sphere (Chuang, 2015; Ge et al., 2011; N. Zhang, 2013). As I conclude in Chapter 3, the boundary of the domestic sphere has been expanded from just the household to the whole rural sphere. Consequently, the outer sphere has shifted to the urban scope. However, while female returnees are not prevented from seeking a formal job, they are also not encouraged to do so. This tension underlies the difficulty female return migrants experience, and it is especially the case when their pursuit of career interferes with their familial duties. For example, if CLL – a newly married female – wishes to postpone getting pregnant until she passes the civil servants' exam, she will face enormous pressure from her partner's family. CLL's wish is dismissed as her role as a child bearer is considered by her in-law family to be more urgent than her work at this stage in her life. Married women who already have children seem to have more negotiating power; some of them, like ZHL, get assistance from their in-laws. In addition to her husband's support, ZHL is able to focus on her store in part because her mother-in-law takes care of her daughter during working hours. It is a similar case for HSM, whose mother-in-law takes care of her newborn baby while she works at her social media company. These women who have already fulfilled their role as child bearers have more flexibility in securing a formal job outside the family.

Male migrants also face obstacles if they choose to return, as this indicates their retreat from the outer to the domestic sphere. These men are challenged by gender norms, and under such circumstances, most resort to entrepreneurship as a career and thus confirm the mainstream discourse. The very few who do not choose entrepreneurship seek other ways to maintain power within the family through negative agency of deception, complaining, or narrative of mobility- (as discussed in Chapter 3 & 4).

Though previous research in migration studies claimed that it is more challenging for female returnees to participate in public affairs (Ge et al., 2011), my research revealed that the situation has changed. What I learned from the female participants in my study is that with the majority of male villagers migrating away to cities, female returnees have had to increasingly step up and take a role in village matters. CYJ, for example, formed a project team of a dozen village women to assist her in advancing rural tourism. I

observed that in addition to the new roles educated female returnees had taken in village life, less educated female returnees were forming voluntary groups, taking part in village affairs such as garbage separation, and establishing childcare services. Women had become the backbone of village life.

My research shows that women are increasingly taking on roles in both the rural household livelihood plan and the village's public affairs. However, the fact that women are now able to gain formal work is quite limited to educated women. (My research did not explore the experiences of those who are less educated.) And because educated female returnees are now obtaining paid work, household obligations are shifting to older generations. Under the marketisation system, rural households' lack of social provisions like basic health care means that the older generation is an extra burden (Yuhua Guo, 2001; Thomason, 2017) and the most vulnerable demographic among rural populations. In order to survive, elders are entrusted with as much household responsibility as they can manage (Brown, 2016; Thomason, 2017). Women who are both physically and intellectually capable are able to leave the domestic sphere and take jobs outside the house only because the older generation has stepped into the domestic sphere of the household. Furthermore, both female and male educated returnees use a large amount of household resources in order to finish their degrees, and it is believed that they will ultimately contribute more economically if they work outside the house. Thus, the reason why educated women are no longer constrained within the household is related to both economic needs as well shifts in cultural and gender norms. This raises an important final point about rural families; women's increased participation outside the household does not necessarily correlate to an improvement in their position in the family hierarchy.

7.3 The place entrepreneur in the rural discourse

My research enquires into return migrants' engagement in rural development and their negotiation of the rural-urban dichotomy; the above chapters have tackled the issue from different perspectives. From my analysis emerges the key role of the place entrepreneur in the rural development discourse (Oakes & Schein, 2006). The public glory and social reputation of return migrants hinges on rural-urban differences. The rural-urban binary portrays rural as the opposite of urban, and returnees are viewed as being altruistic and unselfish for returning to a lifestyle of lower social status. Chapter 4 illustrates how return migrants deny such claims by protesting against the rural-urban

binary. From LLL's point of view, "city for me is a place for entertainment. Countryside is real life". Such a viewpoint puts the former in an inferior position compared to the latter. Returnees' narrative of mobility, which is discussed in Chapter 4, demonstrates their efforts to eliminate the gap between rural and urban. With the help of smartphones and social media, they also "craft the urbanity" (Schein, 2006, p. 223) on their body and daily life by integrating urban commodities, hobbies and social networks into their lives. Through daily translocal practice, returnees have demonstrated a life that intertwines both the rural and the urban, the offline and the online.

While return migrants repudiate the rural-urban binarism, I show in Chapter 5 and 6 how they also subscribe to this distinction. Return migrants who are isolated from return entrepreneurs' social networks, like WYL, find their social life unfulfilling because they are unable to create new social contacts. They identify with the urban lifestyle – shopping, exercise and going out with friends – and are detached from rural social life after their return. Others, like CNC, state that they were conditioned by their time in the city, and this alienates them from the villagers when they return.

The tension between rural and urban is most pronounced in rural development. In Chapter 6, I consider each return migrant and how they embody different power struggles. On one hand, they experience hostility from villagers. Villagers hold a deep mistrust of them. But villagers also rely heavily on return migrants, who are seen as 'resource sponges' that can bring economic benefit and improve livelihood in the village. Due to changes in the political and economic landscape, villagers also count on return migrants to give them advice. They are not familiar with the constantly changing rules and regulations and rapidly developing technology. In FQ's case, for example, the village cadres did not know how to write a project proposal that had recently been introduced to local governments. Thus, they were dependent on young people like FQ – who tend to be a similar age to their grandchildren – to guide them in business matters. Return migrants also face a myriad of orders and instructions from external agencies, including governments and NGOs. While return migrants have sympathy for and feel an obligation to their fellow villagers, they also view themselves as distinct from or fundamentally different than the villagers; this makes it impossible to integrate fully into village life. To some of these return migrants, villagers stand in the way of rural development when judged through the ethos of market entrepreneurship and self-improvement. Because of

this, villagers with 'undesirable' positions in the community are deemed to be less capable of bringing about – and less deserving of – the economic benefits of rural development.

By no means do I intend to suggest that individuals have no choice other than to succumb to the power of the top-down policy and discourse of rural development. My thesis is, in fact, an account of the various ways in which return migrants exercise agency in their decision-making. We now understand that the reasons behind individuals' choice to return are multi-faceted and complex, and the outcomes of their decisions to return are also diverse and difficult to generalise. Some returnees also manage to achieve social mobility and improve household livelihood through their return. Many return out of a sense of responsibility for their hometown. WYL, for example, returned with the aim of helping the children of her hometown. LLL chose to stay in her hometown after graduation with the goal of bringing more migrants back home. XXR who is passionate about organic farming, devoted his finances accumulated during migration to setting up an organic business. Apart from the more practical considerations, migrants also return for inspiration. As more return migrants go home, it is possible that by moving their translocal body, they are also able to further shift the power dynamic between rural and urban.

Although the term 'return migrants' is used for many different individuals and their differing experiences in migration, it is only by being attentive to the experiences of this group that we can appreciate the complexity of their lives. My goal in this research has been to consider these individuals holistically and to emphasise the interconnection between social, economic and familial. It is by doing so that we can reveal what is similar and different between their experiences. It is my hope that this research contributes to our understanding of return migrants, their choices and the challenges they face. The interviewees that took part in this research are a product of the changing political economy of rural life, who also impact and reshape both rural and urban locations when return.

Educated return migrants make their lives in complex and evolving communities. Important research remains to be undertaken on the similarities and differences between return migrants in different regions of China. Rural life is changing rapidly in terms of local economies and work, family life and gender norms, and participation and leadership in public life. The experiences of return migrants who took part in this research provide a window into these wide-ranging changes taking place throughout the country. Through

the lens of these returnees' experiences, my research has provided a nuanced and complex picture of how the state policy of rural development and a neoliberal market logic are shaping the formation of new social identities in contemporary China.

Appendix – 1

An overview of the research sites and provinces

Fujian Province

Introduction of Fujian from Wikipedia reads: "Fujian is a province on the south eastern coast of China. Fujian is bordered by Zhejiang to the north, Jiangxi to the west, Guangdong to the south, and the Taiwan Strait to the east. Its capital is Fuzhou, while its largest city by population is Quanzhou, both located near the coast of the Taiwan Strait in the east of the province." ("Fujian ," n.d.)Another coastal city Xiamen is also famous for its tourist industry. It has become a very popular tourist place for young travellers in China.

Fujian has a long history of sending illegal immigration to overseas. Many American Chinese are descendants of illegal immigrants from Fujian ("Fuzhounese Americans," n.d.). Fujianese are also well-known for their strong social network connected through the same geographic locations within and outside Fujian. Fujianese who live outside Fujian are closely bonded. They have their fellow country people clubs (*tongxianghui*). The mutual help system within these inside circles is crucial in supporting Fujianese to be successful in business and political sectors. Inside Fujian, people also have a very strong kinship. Villages usually maintain well maintenance of their temples. Because of its large number of overseas immigrants, the economic status of Fujian is relatively high.

Field sites

The majority of my research sites are here. I have visited 9 villages and towns, which are situated in the east and south part of Fujian. Local residents in these villages worship Taoism and Mazu, a marine god who is worshipped in south eastern China and Taiwan. The building or renovating the temples is usually the most important village affair. Villagers who already migrate to overseas or other regions also contribute to the event. The local festivals related to their worshipping figure are usually very important social event locally. For example, CNC's village celebrates Zhang Shenggong's (a figure in Taoism) birthday every year. According to him, all migrants return home for this day. The number of people who return is even higher than that of Chinese New Year. Fujian

is not a major agricultural province. Many villages, such as Village W, is unsuitable for farming due to its geographical features. Many villages have the gambling issue, which is a severe issue not just in Fujian, but many regions throughout China.

Usually, my participants are scattered in each township, so I have to travel quite extensively to visit them. One site, Town S, manage to attract a cluster of return migrants, which becomes one of my key field sites. Participant LLL is from this region. The reason that more migrants return is because of the development of local tourism.

(Photos taken near Town S: left – newly built country library for tourists; right – the renovating ancestral hall that LLL work was working)

Jiangxi Province

Introduction of Jiang in Wikipedia is as this: "Jiangxi is a landlocked province in the east of the People's Republic of China. Its capital and largest city is Nanchang. Spanning from the banks of the Yangtze River in the north into hillier areas in the south and east, it shares a border with Anhui to the north, Zhejiang to the northeast, Fujian to the east, Guangdong to the south, Hunan to the west, and Hubei to the northwest."("Jiangxi," n.d.)

Jiangxi is one of the earliest bases of CCP. Thus, it is also known as 'Former Red Capital'. Unlike Fujian, Jiangxi is one important agricultural province that produces rise. Jiangxi is famous for its agricultural products such as rice, green tea, and so on. A large number of people in Jiangxi are Hakka, a Han subgroup who speaks the Hakka language. Hakka people are also well-known for their tight familial, kinship and geographic bonds, just like the Fujianese. Hakka people are hardworking and skilful handicraft people. Furniture manufacturing is the occupation that many Hakka people used to take. In general, due to its inland position, Jiangxi's economic status is quite low, especially compared to the other two provinces of my research, namely Fujian and Guangdong.

Field Site

Participants WYL, WXM, ZHL, HSM and her husband GHL are from Jiangxi. WYL's Village K is a very small one, with only 20 households. ZHL's village D, where WYL works, contains more resident. It is also the village where the market takes place every two weeks. HSM works in the town centre while her family is still in her hometown. Compared to villages I have seen in Fujian, the field sites I went to in Jiangxi seem to be more heavily involved in agriculture. Its economic development also lacks from those in Fujian.

(Photos of Village K and Village D: left – Village K, where WYL's home is; right – Village D Central Primary School, where WYL works)

Guangdong Province

"Guangdong (also known as Canton province) is a coastal province in South China on the north shore of the South China Sea. Its population is 113.46 million (as of 2018). It is one of the most populated provinces in China."("Guangdong," n.d.) It is also one of the most economically developed regions. It contains manufacturing centre PRD, and two cosmopolitan tier 1 cities which are Guangzhou (also the capital of Guangdong) and Shenzhen. Other cities, such as Zhuhai, Dongguan, and Huizhou are also economically prosperous. Guangdong is also one of the main destinations of rural migrants. Guangdong is the border with Hong Kong and Macau. The local dialect spoken in Guangdong is mainly Cantonese.

Field Site

My research site, Village X, is located in Conghua District, Guangzhou, Guangdong. Conghua used to be a neighbouring city of Guangzhou. In 2014, it merged into the jurisdiction of Guangzhou in 2014. Village X is located in a tourist region famous for hot

spring. The village, however, is quite hard to reach due to its location. Being situated within the mountainous area, it takes one hour to get to the nearest urban regions. The village is quite small, with around 50 dwellers. However, because of Organisation Green and its project, it attracts many young migrants to return. Returnees often hang around at one's place, drinking tea and chatting till early in the morning. Their daily hobby also contains fishing and playing card games.

(Photos of Village X: left – village overview; right – OG's office in Village X, which used to be an ancestral hall. The red poster on the door reads: *fanxiang youzhong*, meaning returning to the countryside is meaningful (the last word '*zhong*' is a pun, means both seeds and courage in Cantonese)

Appendix – 2

List of main research participants

Name code	Age	Gender	Education	career	Location	Name code of related family members and friends
CLL	28	F	University graduate	Temporary staff in township government	Village E, County G, Fuzhou, Fujian	Husband – C
						Sister-in-law – Y
CLM	28	F	University graduate	Entrepreneur (Partner with her husband in passionfruit agriculture)	Town Q, County B, Zhangzhou, Fujian	Husband – XXR
CNC	39	M	College graduate	Entrepreneur (Owner of an orchid farm)	Village A, County A, Zhangzhou, Fujian	Childhood friend – D
						Village cadre – E
CYJ	33	F	University graduate	Village Cadre	Village W, County M, Fuzhou, Fujian	
FQ	27	M	University graduate	Entrepreneur (partner of a corporate farm)	Village B, County T, Longyan, Fujian	
GHL	around 30s	M	University graduate	Permanent staff in a state-owned bank	Town J, County H, Ji'an, Jiangxi	Wife – HSM
HSM	Around 30s	F	University graduate	Entrepreneur (owner of a social media company)	Town J, County H, Ji'an, Jiangxi	Husband – GHL
HBZ	39	M	Three college degrees	Entrepreneur (owner of a family farm)	Village C, County C, Zhangzhou, Fujian	
HXF	27	M	College graduates			Wife – M

					Entrepreneur (traditional farming and eco tour guide business)	Village X, Town L, Guangzhou, Guangdong	Father – T
							Intern – L
LLL	26	F	University graduate		Village cadre	Village G, County Y, Fuzhou, Fujian	Father – N
							Friend – F
WXM	24	F	University graduate		Public schoolteacher	Village K, County H, Ji'an, Jiangxi	Neighbor – WYL
WYL	26	F	University graduate		Public schoolteacher	Village K (home) and Village D (work), County H, Ji'an, Jiangxi	Sister – G
							Brother – K
XMW	27	M	University graduate		Entrepreneur (owner of a company majoring in old building retrofitting)	Village F, County F, Fujian	
XXR	28	M	University graduate		Entrepreneur (owner of a passionfruit farm)	Village S, County Z, Zhangzhou, Fujian	Wife – CLM
ZHL	30	F	College graduate		Entrepreneur (owner of a baby product store)	Village D, County H, Ji'an, Jiangxi	Husband -- O
							Daughter – P
							Friend who went to Singapore– H
							Friend who went to Singapore – J

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