



Gender, Place & Culture

A Journal of Feminist Geography

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgpc20>

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To cite this article: Willy Sier (2020): Daughters' dilemmas: the role of female university graduates in rural households in Hubei province, China, *Gender, Place & Culture*, DOI: [10.1080/0966369X.2020.1817873](https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2020.1817873)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2020.1817873>



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Published online: 11 Sep 2020.



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Daughters' dilemmas: the role of female university graduates in rural households in Hubei province, China

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how, following increased participation of students from rural backgrounds in China's higher education system, the educational achievements of young women affect the gender dynamics of rural households. It shows that the contributions of university-educated daughters to rural households go far beyond what has been described in the literature on women in rural Chinese families. Decisions pertaining to the careers and marriages of highly educated daughters are shaped by the strategies of rural households aiming to establish independent households of brothers and sons. Drawing upon ethnographic research in Hubei province, this article sheds light onto the processes of intense negotiation underlying household strategies and articulates the dilemmas faced by female members of rural households after graduating from university. How can they best support their families while constructing a life they desire and without treading on dominant gender ideologies?

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 November 2018
Accepted 3 August 2020

KEYWORDS

China; education; family; marriage; migration; gender

Introduction

'Sometimes I wish I was alone in the world ... without family and without friends. That way I could go as far as I can. Now I feel I have to be close to my family. To be there in case something happens. If something were to happen, I want to be right beside them.' (Crystal)

In 2016, Crystal was 22 years old and had recently graduated from a university in Wuhan, the provincial capital of China's Hubei province. Like many of her peers, she spent a lot of her time thinking about the ways in which she could make use of her newfound status as a university graduate to support her family. As a result of rapidly changing conditions in the Chinese

countryside, her family members had practiced labour migration since before she had been born. Without land and a stable home they were considered to be 'floating,' like the hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens who have practiced rural-urban migration since the start of China's reform era. As the first and only person in her family to have graduated from university, Crystal felt responsible for improving her family's situation. In this article, I show how educated daughters like Crystal play a crucial role in precariously positioned rural households by strengthening the social and economic position of their families through labour and marriage.

Crystal is one of hundreds of thousands of female university graduates from rural backgrounds living in Wuhan. Since the expansion of China's higher education system in the 2000s and the implementation of 9 years of compulsory education in 1986, it has become increasingly common for both male and female youths from rural backgrounds to arrive in Chinese cities as university students, instead of as labour migrants (Cheng 2014). Yet for young unmarried women, whose labour migrations have long been looked upon disapprovingly by parents and prospective husbands (see, for example, H. Yan 2003), this new pathway has made it possible for them to practice rural-urban migration without challenging the dominant gender ideologies that view female migration as 'licentious and risky' (Chuang 2016). University enrolment by young women of rural origin has increased exponentially and is a driver of the rapid growth of the number of Chinese undergraduates, which increased from 3.4 to 27.5 million between 1998 and 2017 (Cai 2013; Xinhua 2019).

Following feminist scholars who have argued for bringing gender into migration studies (e.g. Massey 1994; Mahler and Pessar 2006), China scholars have produced a sizeable body of literature on the role of women in Chinese rural-urban migration. This literature mainly focuses on young Chinese women who practice labour migration in the years before marriage (Chuang 2016; May 2010), and who move from China's inland regions to large cities in the country's eastern and coastal regions, where booming industries offer plentiful job opportunities (Gaetano 2015; Jacka 2014; Woon 2000; H. Yan 2003; Zhang 1999). Researchers often ask whether female migrations challenge China's patriarchal and patrilineal family culture. Early studies depict young women's labour migration as a sign of a radical break with traditional gender roles in Chinese society (Lee 1999; Zhang 1999), but later research is more sceptical and shows how female migrants' lives continue to be dominated by patriarchal structures (Woon 2000; H. Yan 2003). Chuang (2016) even argues that migratory processes reinforce patriarchal relations in sending communities.

Studies on gender and migration are closely connected to the literature on the role of daughters in the rural household. It is known that even in patrilocal, patriarchal and patrilineal family systems daughters remain closely

tied to the natal family (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1986). Research on rural China has also argued this point. Ellen Judd critiques the dominance of the patrilineal model in research on Chinese social organisation, showing that this model obscures the role of rural women in the natal household (1989). Yan Yunxiang argues that social change in Chinese society during the second half of the 20th century changed the power relations between junior and senior generations and led to 'the rise of girl power,' altering women's position in the rural household from that of 'statusless outsiders to new players in family politics' (2006, 119). Shi Lihong calls attention to changing ideas about the roles of sons and daughters in rural China. She argues that Chinese rural families are increasingly willing to raise a daughter as a single child, following a shift in parents' perceptions of sons as essential care providers to them as financial burdens (Shi 2017a, 2017b).

This article builds on these studies by analysing the crucial support provided to rural households by daughters with university degrees. It demonstrates that this support goes far beyond what has been written about rural women's involvement in the care of their natal families. Scholarly research has shown variously that women take on duties of physical and emotional care when their parents reach old age (Obendiek 2016a; Y. Yan 2003) and that younger, unmarried female labour migrants contribute little to rural households' finances due to their low wages (Chuang 2016) and high spending (May 2010). My research demonstrates that female university graduates from rural backgrounds use their newfound status as university graduates to improve the social and economic standing of their families through their labour and also through marriage. They share their urban earnings with their families, which are often directed towards securing property for their brothers and sons, and prioritise their families' needs over their own emotional attachments when making marriage decisions. These findings contribute to the literature on daughter investment and parental educational aspirations, which suggests that daughters' increased access to education benefits young women directly (Deng et al. 2014; Zhang, Kao, and Hannum 2007). Additionally, this article shows that young women's contributions to their households are the outcome of elaborate processes of negotiation, particularly between mothers and daughters, which shows that mother-daughter ties in Chinese rural households are not only characterised by affection and nurturing, as suggested by the literature on female ties in Chinese families (Evans 2007; Judd 1989), but also work to discipline young women and subtly coerce them into compliance.

The relevance of rurality

In this article, I use the term 'rural' to describe the backgrounds and the households of my interlocutors even though these backgrounds are diverse

and the households they were born into are often extremely mobile. Drawing lines between the rural and the urban has become increasingly difficult in China's highly mobile society. In dictionaries the term rural is defined as relating to the countryside and agriculture. How can people or families that have lived and worked in cities for years or decades then be rural? To answer this question, I will analyse how rurality influences the experiences of female university graduates. I will make a distinction between institutional and urban rurality to highlight different ways in which 'being rural' affects peoples' lives. Institutional rurality refers to being classified as rural according to China's household administration system with implications for citizens' access to state resources. Urban rurality refers to the consequences of being perceived of as rural in the city. Scholarship on rural-urban relations in China has long focused on institutional rurality (Solinger 1999; Chan and Buckingham 2008), but more recently researchers have argued that the effects of social exclusion resulting from identity-based discrimination against people from rural backgrounds have become more important for determining rural-urban migrants' 'life chances' than inequalities maintained by the household administration system (Zhan 2011; Jakimow and Barabantseva 2016).

Institutional rurality

The women introduced in this article are members of households that are rural according to China's household administration system. This system was originally meant to curb mobility and differentiate between the urban population, whose subsistence was guaranteed by the state, and rural citizens, who were assigned an agricultural plot of land for subsistence (Cheng and Selden 1994). When China's era of reform began in 1979 many citizens with rural registrations moved to cities in response to new opportunities in China's urban labour markets and the soaring rural-urban inequalities. The Chinese state no longer tried to curb this mobility, but instead came to view rural-urban migration as an important driver of economic growth (Solinger 1999). According to World Bank statistics, the Chinese population living in cities rose from 18 to 56 per cent between 1979 and 2016. Yet it has remained difficult for rural households to get urban registration and access to urban resources, particularly in China's larger cities (Chan and Buckingham 2008; Johnson 2017).

China's rapid urbanisation should be understood in connection with the 'agricultural modernisation' aimed at improving food security by increasing the scale of agricultural production. As farmers either lost access to their land as a result of land consolidation projects or came under the influence of large-scale companies, working in agriculture has become less and less

attractive (Schneider 2017), as illustrated by the immense drop – from 70.7 in 1978 to 27 per cent in 2017 – in the percentage of the Chinese labour force working in this sector (Guldin 2001; Chinese Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security 2018). In Hubei province these developments are especially pronounced, as the province is geographically suitable for large-scale agriculture and it is ambitious to become a ‘national leader in agricultural sustainability’ (Sutton 2018). Households with a rural registration in Hubei province are thus under pressure to develop alternative strategies to sustain themselves. Parents in Hubei province, which is relatively rich in educational resources, often point to higher education as ‘the only way out’ of this situation. The initiatives aimed at attracting university graduates by offering them an urban registration, which were rolled out throughout 2017 and 2018 in various Chinese cities, including Wuhan, have strengthened this view (*China Daily* 2017).

Despite the ‘educational discipline’ of rural families, as described by Kipnis (2001), the fact that students with rural backgrounds are at a disadvantage within the Chinese education system in relation to their urban counterparts is broadly accepted and is supported by statistical research (Qiao 2010). Scholars have shown that the expansion of the Chinese higher education system has deepened rural-urban inequality in terms of access to higher education (Loyalka et al. 2017; Qiao 2010) and demonstrated that this inequality is more significant than, for example, the inequality between poor and non-poor urban youth (Li et al. 2015). The general pattern these studies show is that the number of students from rural backgrounds drops as the institutional rank rises, as a result of the lack of resources in rural education as well as the mechanisms within the higher education system that determine score lines and student quotas (Ye 2015; Qiao 2010). This means that, despite improved overall access for youth from rural backgrounds in China’s higher education system, their access often remains restricted to low-ranking and underfunded universities. These dynamics have serious consequences for opportunities for rural graduates in China’s urban labour markets, which have been shown to be marked by a significant rural-urban divide in terms of occupational attainment, wages, and contract status (Cheng, Smyth, and Guo 2015).

Furthermore, rural households have less access to state resources than urban households, intensifying the dynamics of intergenerational dependency (Santos 2017; Yan 2016). Currently, a rural citizen’s yearly pension amounts to 660 rmb (€85) (Shu 2018), making it difficult to retire without the financial support of one’s children. In combination with the fact that China’s one-child policy was executed less strictly in the countryside, this explains why rural families, in contrast to urban families, often have many children. As a result, the unintended empowering effect of the one-child

policy on urban singleton daughters is not at play in rural families (Fong 2002). On the contrary, rural daughters not only share parental love and resources with siblings, but are also expected to make their urban earnings available to their brothers. Securing marriage for young men in the family, in the rural context where an imbalanced sex ratio has driven up the price of marriage, thus drains their sisters' resources (Driessen and Sier 2019).

Urban rurality

In addition to these examples of the effects of institutional rurality, scholars have long described the stigmatisation of rural citizens in urban China (Solinger 1999; Yan 2008; Zhang 2001). Recent scholarship has argued that exclusion based on cultural prejudices and discrimination against people with rural backgrounds and identities, in addition to challenges resulting from institutional rurality, should be taken seriously (Jakimow and Barabantseva 2016; Zhan 2011). The popular narrative that has underpinned China's development since the start of the reform era has portrayed 'rural folk' as belonging to the past, lagging behind, and lesser than urban dwellers (Bach 2010). Yan Hairong has observed how this 'development teleology' is expressed in the way that urban recruiters treat rural employees' 'ruralness' as something that has to be washed away or deleted, or as a 'nothingness' on which proper forms of subjectivities need to be inscribed (Yan 2008, 94). In conversation with employers, I was confronted with similar attitudes. One employer told me that 'rural kids' can never achieve the same standards as their urban peers, no matter how educated they are. This employer also explained that youth from rural backgrounds are particularly suited for jobs that require some 'suffering,' as their motivation to help their family members prevents them from giving up easily.

In the Chinese marriage market, a social rural-urban division is also clearly visible. Research shows that marriage between people with rural and urban registrations is rare and that, in the case of rural women marrying urban men (the other way around is extremely uncommon), marriage partners do not relate to each other as social equals (Lui 2016).

Methodology

The multi-sited ethnographic research for this article was conducted between September 2015 and August 2016 as part of a PhD project. I spent 8 months in Wuhan and 3 months in other, rural and urban parts of Hubei province. In the summer of 2017 I returned to Hubei province to do follow-up research. Outside the periods of field research I communicated with my interlocutors on a regular basis via the Chinese social media application, *weixin*. I conducted this research project in Mandarin, which I have studied since 2004.

To select my interlocutors, I used snowball sampling, starting by meeting a small number of graduates in Wuhan by striking up informal conversations and developing my network from there. This article is based on the stories of 20 female interlocutors. I met most of them repeatedly and am still in regular contact with six of them today.

Family stays were important for gaining insight into family dynamics. I was able to stay for periods ranging from 1 to 3 weeks in the homes of four different families in rural parts of Hubei province. I visited one of those families on four different occasions. Sometimes I was able to organise meetings with family members during their periods of work in the city. During stays in my interlocutors' home areas, I visited locations and people relevant for learning about their trajectories, including their middle and high schools, their teachers, neighbours, friends and family members. When my interlocutors moved within or beyond Hubei province during my period of fieldwork, I followed their forward movements, leading me as far as Beijing and Shenzhen.

The data for this article were collected using participant observation, by studying people in their everyday lives, and in their own time and space (Burrawoy 1991). I gathered most of my information through informal chatting, conversing and debating during periods of intensive 'hanging out'. In addition to the conversations in which I participated directly, I was able to observe the interaction between family members in their home and between friends and colleagues when they were socialising. Even though I did not focus on women exclusively during my fieldwork, I limit my discussion in this article to women's experiences. As a female ethnographic researcher it was easier for me to establish and maintain intensive relationships with women than with men. For practical reasons, I could stay in the family homes of only female interlocutors. I am therefore better equipped to discuss the issues central to this article from the female point of view.

Aside from having a rural family background and (previous) enrolment in higher education, I did not use additional criteria to select my interlocutors. This resulted in a varied group of research participants, including young women who had grown up in families that still farmed and those with parents who were labour migrants. My interlocutors included youth who (had) attended top universities and lower-ranked universities and were either still enrolled in university in 2015–2016 or had graduated less than 3 years before.

Julia: taking care of the family

As we stumble down the stairs of Julia's home carrying the bags and suitcases that she takes back to Shanghai after the New Year's celebrations, her

mother yells repeatedly: 'Make sure to bring a boyfriend home next year! Don't you be coming home alone!' Julia is 22 years old. Since graduating from a Bachelor programme in clothing design in 2015, she has landed herself a stable job with a Shanghai manufacturer of handbags. As we continue on our way to the bus stop, she whispers to me, rolling her eyes in annoyance: 'Listen to her now, my whole life she's been at me ... forbidding me to date anybody in high school and university, because I had to concentrate on my studies, and now she expects me to find a husband, just like that.'

Nobody – including me – in her leaving party knows that Julia, instead of thinking about getting married soon, has been making plans to uproot her life in Shanghai. One month later she will have quit her job and moved to Shenzhen, another megacity in south China, to pursue a career in internet finance.

Julia aims high and chases her dreams with determination. When her university teacher was asked to recommend a student for a job at a famous Shanghai clothing brand, she did not have to think long: Julia. Julia got the job and moved to Shanghai without thinking twice, but not a year had passed when she started to feel like she should move on:

I know it's soon, and that this is a good job. But, when I think about my future, I am just desperate. It is hard to get a promotion here and those in higher positions than me never really make more than 10,000 rmb (€1250). And they are mostly from rich families. They only need money to get by and have fun. For them, 10,000 rmb is more than enough. But it's not enough for me. It's hard for me to get a promotion here. And, even if I do, I still won't make enough, so I should leave.

When Julia says 'enough' she does not mean enough for her to meet the expenses of her personal life. She – in contrast with her urban colleagues who 'only need money to get by and have fun,' considers the size of her salary in relation to the challenges her family is facing, which are to get her brother married and cope with her mother's retirement. Julia's father died from cancer when she and her brother were 7 and 8 years old, leaving her illiterate mother to raise two children alone in an environment where she had no family of her own, having been a marriage migrant from Hubei's poorer western region. In recent years, the family has scattered throughout China, with Julia away in Wuhan, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, and her brother and mother working as migrant labourers in Guangzhou and Hunan province.

The costs of marriage in China have soared due to rising bride prices and the demand placed on the family of the groom to provide the new couple with a 'marriage house' (Driessen and Sier 2019). To marry, Julia's brother must own a house and a car, as well as pay a bride price, which was at least 10,000 rmb (€1264) in rural Hubei in 2016. One of the main reasons why rural parents are so keen to have their sons marry is because of the symbolic

power of marriage to reverse the relationship of intergenerational care. Before marriage, parents feel responsible for the wellbeing of their children. After they help their children, starting with their sons, to set up their own households, they hope to become the recipients of care. It is therefore no surprise that parents often look upon their son's marriage as a hurdle that needs to be overcome before they can consider themselves ready for retirement (Driessen and Sier 2019; Shi 2017b).

Julia felt an enormous sense of responsibility towards her family, which she attributed to two key factors. First, she explained that not being able to help when her father was ill had made a deep impression on her and instilled in her a desire for independence. She said: 'I have seen what happens when a situation like that hits you. I have seen how you can only depend on yourself, how nobody can support you. I want to be ready when something happens to me or my family again. I want to be able to support them.' Second, Julia's brother has been a migrant worker since he was 16 years old and has, according to Julia and her mother, 'picked up bad habits,' including smoking, drinking and gambling. Living from hand to mouth, he has not been able to support the family. Julia resents her brother for shirking his responsibilities, but also feels guilty knowing that she was able to continue her education, and her mother would never have been able to afford education fees for two.

After Julia had graduated, the expectations of what she would be able to do for her family were high. However, *how* Julia would improve her family's situation remained the topic of constant and heated debate between Julia and her mother. Whereas Julia felt that her past had taught her never to rely on anybody but herself, her mother urged her to find a husband to depend on while she was still young.

Marrying well versus doing well

Despite her mother's clear instructions to find herself a husband, Julia decided to embark on a different path. Without informing her family, she quit her stable and relatively well-paid job, packed up her life in Shanghai, and moved to Shenzhen to take a job in a start-up. Although she had dreamed of working in fashion, her short career with the Shanghai brand had convinced her that she needed to 'jump' into the world of internet companies if she wanted to make some 'real money.' Yet this new career was off to a bad start. When Julia's new employer's promises proved empty and the expected earnings did not materialise, Julia had no choice but to cut her losses and leave the job without having been paid. She moved again, this time to Guangzhou, where she started working for a company selling bridal fashion, but quit soon after when she once more did not receive the salary

she had been promised. Finally, she returned to Shenzhen to work for a company selling English language courses.

Julia's mother found out about her daughter's whereabouts via family members a few weeks after her daughter had left Shanghai. She was upset that her daughter had left her job and moved to another city without telling her, but her anger was especially focused on Julia's failure to pursue a potential husband whom her mother had considered a good match. When I visited Julia in Shenzhen she told me despondently:

My mother doesn't talk to me anymore. She is upset with me, because I stopped dating a guy who she thought was great. He was tall, had a stable income, a good job, a house and a car. Even a PhD. I met him at a speed-dating event. There were seven girls at the event, and only one guy, but he asked me to go out with him again. I should've never have told my mom, but I just wanted her off my back for a while, and I knew it'd make her happy. Me and this guy ... we didn't get along, he thought I was too forward and opinionated for a girl, so we stopped seeing each other, and now my mother is furious that I didn't bend over backwards to make him marry me.

Julia was not interested in finding somebody else to take care of her and her family. She was determined to figure out a way of making enough money to turn her family's fate around all by herself. The way Julia's date reacted to her forward attitude fits current discussions about what constitutes femininity and masculinity in contemporary China as masculinity has become increasingly defined by a man's economic status; his entrepreneurial ability and his power to provide and consume (Zhang 2010, 186), femininity has come to entail needing to be provided for. Zhang's analysis of spousal advertisements shows that whereas men comment on their material possessions, generally a house and a car, as proof of their ability to get by in the post-reform economy, women rarely describe themselves in terms of possessions, but rather use terms that are considered feminine and focus on their appearances, using words like 'beautiful and fashionable,' 'a model-like body,' and 'elegant' (2010, 171). Women's independence and their ability to earn a decent income can be threatening to men and are therefore considered to be unattractive. Julia struggled with the tension between her desire to be independent and the frequent rebukes she received for not being sufficiently feminine. This tension is well-captured by the popular Chinese concept of the 'hero woman,' which describes a female go-getter; a strong, adventurous and successful woman who is ambitious and independently minded. During my fieldwork women often used this term to explain what they were *not*. The mention of hero women evoked strong reactions: 'I am definitely not a hero woman' or, disapprovingly, 'I don't want to be *that* kind of woman.' Young women with romantic dreams about their future love and family lives were careful not to align themselves with hero women, because this type of woman was considered to be unfit for family life. Julia and her

mother also feared that Julia's independence would get in the way of her finding a spouse.

In September 2018 Julia surprised me with a message: 'I've just bought a house.' With her mother's help, she managed to put down 270,000 rmb (€34,000) for a yet-to-be built apartment in Jingmen, a small city in central Hubei province. It had taken her a year of working extremely hard in the education sales job to save up 190,000 rmb (€24,000). After having purchased the apartment, Julia immediately indicated that she would 'give' the apartment to her brother. She also texted that her mother had told her that she 'finally realised that she has a fabulous girl.' For a short time, Julia felt relieved. She hoped that having acquired a house for her brother, who was therefore able to marry, would release her from her mother's pressure to get married herself. Her mother had long argued that she needed Julia to marry somebody who could pay a high bride price, so she could put that money towards her brother's marriage. Now this was arguably no longer necessary, Julia intended to save up money to enrol in a Master's programme in Hong Kong.

It was disappointing when Julia's mother rebooted her campaign for her daughter to marry after only a few weeks of relative peace. She told her daughter that, despite the purchase of the house, she would always be too embarrassed to retire from her migrant labour job as long as her daughter remained unmarried. Julia's intention in buying the house for her brother had been to enable her mother to retire. She could not stand the idea of her mother working all year in a cupcake factory in Hunan province. Now Julia found herself in an impossible position in which her resistance to marriage became directly connected with her mother's inability to retire.

Julia and her mother shared the same goals, but disagreed strongly about how to attain them. Julia was not in principle opposed to the idea of marriage, but disliked the feeling of being dependent on others and hoped to marry one day out of love and without making herself reliant on her partner. She disapproved of her mother's tendency to judge her love interests solely by their ability and willingness to contribute to household finances. Julia's mother insisted that it would be better for her daughter to focus on finding a suitable husband instead of developing a career. She argued that Julia was 'wasting her time' and that she should marry while she was young. Time is an important factor, especially as it is considered very difficult for women older than 26 to find a marriage partner (Zavoretti 2017).

The experiences of young women like Julia should be understood in light of the unbalanced sex ratio in China. As a result of population planning policies and a persistent preference for sons, 22 million more boys than girls were born in China between 1980 and 2000 (Greenhalgh 2013). In poor, rural areas the differences are especially pronounced (Greenhalgh 2013; Unicef

2015). This means that most rural daughters in Hubei province have brothers for whom it is difficult to find a marriage partner. Julia's story illustrates how this situation affects the position of daughters in the rural household, especially those with university degrees, whose earnings – in contrast to their brothers, are not earmarked for marriage, as women are expected to find a husband who will provide for them. Such women are considered well-positioned to support their families. Moreover, they are expected to give this support willingly, in return for the support they themselves received as students. Of course, in this way family systems form an important foundation for patriarchal dynamics in Chinese society at large.

Recent scholarship on patriarchy in China, notably the edited volume by Santos and Harrell (2017), has been very helpful for thinking about these conflicting developments. The chapters in this book break open the black box of patriarchy by offering ethnographies of the ways that deep-seated patriarchal structures continue to come to expression. Julia's story demonstrates that patriarchal hierarchies along gender and generational lines continue to shape her life, with all her choices being steered by her strongly felt need to help her mother support her brother. At the same time, and as other studies on gendered relations in the Chinese household have shown, the patriarchal household is 'not a place of stark black-and-white oppositions but one of bargaining and negotiations' (Zavoretti 2017, 130).

This article demonstrates that ethnographic research is especially suitable for observing these processes of bargaining and negotiating. Unlike the interview-based studies on negotiations about migration decisions between husbands and wives (Choi 2016; Choi and Peng 2016), which emphasise men's pragmatic attitudes and willingness to compromise in the making of migration decisions, during my extended stays in family homes I observed that the formation of rural household strategies is the outcome of long and emotionally draining processes of negotiation. Julia worked hard to help her brother, but she was also his staunchest critic, never missing an opportunity to talk about the ways he skirted 'his responsibilities as a man.' In her fits of rage she went as far as saying she hated her brother. When she gazed at him as he stumbled around the house in a drunken haze during the holidays, her whole body tensed up with irritation and revulsion. 'He's never helped me in any way,' she would whisper to me. 'He doesn't do anything for this family.' In other families I was also repeatedly confronted with emotional eruptions and communication breakdowns between family members as a result of disagreements about the division of responsibilities among members of the household.

The next case study tells the story of Misty who, in contrast with Julia, was keen to give up her independence and dreamed of marrying into a family that would help strengthen both her own and her family's precarious position in Chinese society.

Misty's dream of marriage

When I saw Misty sitting in the reception room of the yoga school where she taught, I noticed something different about her. There was an open notebook in front of her on the table and she was reading with great concentration. The notebook turned out to be filled with accountancy notes Misty took as a student in one of Hubei province's lowest-ranking universities. Misty had often told me that she had been utterly uninterested in accountancy as a student, so I was surprised to see her enthralled by these notes. When she looked up, I noticed other, physical, changes. Her previously straight, thick black hair was permed and coloured and her lips were painted bright red. Her eyes sparkled with excited energy as she blurted out: 'I'm getting married!' I sat down to hear what had happened since I had seen her a few days previously when she was still single. Talking a mile a minute, Misty filled me in on all the details of this unexpected match:

I was introduced to a boy by a marriage agent, and he is originally from my village, our families have known each other for a long time, but his parents have a business in Wuhan, and I am going to marry him, oh, I'm soooo happy! I love him soooo much and my mother came down to meet his parents and everybody was so excited. I walked down the street with him and my mother said everybody looked at us in envy, because we make such a beautiful couple! Oh, I've never had a boyfriend before.... Oh, I'm so excited! And so scared.... His parents asked me for my date of birth today, because they want to consult an astrologer. Oh, I hope the result will be good, because I really don't want to break up!

As Misty kept talking, an older woman from Wuhan, who regularly practiced yoga with us, sat down at our table to hear what the commotion was about. When she heard about Misty's marriage proposition she started to fire questions at her. 'What kind of family is this? What do they do? Where do they live?' Misty explained the family's circumstances: 'They are originally from my hometown, but they now have a home in Wuhan!' She looked at us in a meaningful way before she continued: 'They even have a business here, it's a laundry business, and the best thing is: they need somebody to help with their accountancy!' As Misty's sudden interest in her accountancy notes started to make sense to me, she explained why the prospect of marrying into this family excited her so much:

Their house is here in Wuhan, you know? That is so good! This family's conditions are really quite good ... and he, my boyfriend, is really good at negotiating contracts for the business.... Okay, he's not so handsome, my housemate already said that he's not handsome enough for me, but he's really nice.... He has some pimples, but I think he's okay, he's quite tall. I think I'm really very suitable for this family.... I can work in their company.... Their son didn't go to university, he only went to high school, but I think he's very skilled.

Misty turned out not to be so lucky. Events unfolded exactly as predicted by the older woman, who had said: 'They will not tell you about the astrologer. If the result is good, you will notice, because they'll invite you again. If it's not good, they'll just take distance from you.' Within a few days Misty started noticing that her boyfriend had stopped responding to her text messages and no longer invited her out on dates. She was heartbroken and suffered from crying fits for weeks to follow. Without explanation, Misty was thrust back into singlehood, feeling mistreated and disillusioned. She had experienced a few days in which she felt the ground under her feet solidify, looking at a stable future within a family that, although it did not have urban registration, owned an apartment and a business in Wuhan. This marriage would have ended her struggle of trying to make a living in Wuhan.

Marrying into stability

In Misty's explanation why this potential husband and family were 'so good,' the importance of their firm base in the city was very clear. She emphasised again and again that this family had both a home and a business in Wuhan and that these facts trumped all other considerations. It did not matter to her that she did not find the potential husband attractive. She also did not mind that he had only a high school education, even though she had a university degree. Misty was unemployed at the time when she was introduced to this potential husband. She had been fired from her previous job with a real estate company 2 weeks before she was introduced to him, and after having been employed there for only 6 weeks. This job had been the last in a string of jobs with inadequate or no contracts, and with a commission-based salary; the type of job commonly held by university graduates from rural backgrounds with degrees obtained from low-ranking universities.

Misty's family situation was relatively stable, with parents who were both alive and living together and a brother who worked as a policeman and was already married. Her parents still worked on their farm. Yet her mother's health was failing. She had long suffered from stomach pains for which she could not get proper treatment in their hometown and she therefore visited Misty every few weeks to see a doctor in Wuhan. These trips were costly and Misty was responsible for providing her mother with a place to stay in Wuhan. The difficulty of Misty's situation had really dawned on me when she knocked on my door shortly after losing her last job to ask whether both she and her mother could temporarily move into my studio apartment. Taking into account Misty's exhausting and disappointing experiences in the urban labour market and her desire to gain better access to urban medical services for her mother, it was no surprise that she felt excited by the idea of marrying into a family with a strong foundation in Wuhan.

Historically, Chinese marriages have always been an important way for families to establish alliances and exchange labour (Zhang 2000, 60). A daughter's marriage was a unique opportunity for families to be economically rewarded for raising girls (Croll 1987). As well as being a source of bride price, a daughter's marriage meant one less mouth to feed, as the tradition of patrilocal living prescribes that brides move into the husband's family home. In today's rural China, where parents still have limited access to state-provided social security, marriage remains important for a family's status and stability. Shannon May's research in a village in northeast China describes how families hope that their daughters will find urban husbands who can form bridges 'to legally sanctioned urban privilege' (2010, 900). Similar to May's labour migrants, university-educated women from rural areas also rarely marry into urban households. As I explained before, rural and urban youth are largely segregated in the Chinese higher education system. Moreover, the sex ratio in China's urban areas is more balanced than in rural areas, which makes it less necessary for urban youth to look beyond rural-urban boundaries for suitable spouses. Educated women from rural backgrounds therefore focus on marrying men who are suitably equipped to build up stable lives in an urban environment rather than on those who have an urban registration. Misty's case illustrates that marrying into a family with property in the city is considered as marrying into stability.

In recent years, scholars have shown that homeownership is becoming an important marker of belonging and success in contemporary Chinese society (Fleischer 2007; Zhang 2010). Yet, as a result of pre-reform rural-urban divisions in terms of living situations, homeownership is much more common among China's urban population than its rural one. The urban 'real estate boom' of recent decades has made it increasingly difficult for rural-urban migrants to buy property in towns and cities. For young women like Misty, who find only low-paying jobs and have no family capital to back them up, buying property in Wuhan is nearly impossible. Marrying into a family that owns property might be the largest leap possible towards having a stable life in the city.

Misty was not the only one of my interlocutors who tried to help her family and herself through marriage when conditions in the urban labour market proved disappointing. While chatting about (prospective) dates with interlocutors, potential suitors were often discussed in terms of what they or their family could offer the bride and her family. For 22-year old Morning Sunshine, whose family had recently lost their farmland to a land consolidation project, forcing her parents to become labour migrants when they were already in their fifties, the situation was clear. She explained that she could not afford to marry the wrong man. Like the women described in Obendiek's study (2016b), Morning Sunshine felt 'indebted' to the family

members who had invested in her education. She did not want to be 'selfish' in her choice of partner. She therefore unhesitatingly chose to marry a man who belonged to a family that could provide a 'marriage house' in the form of an urban apartment in a small city near her home village, despite having long been in love with somebody else with somebody else. To Morning Sunshine's mother, this marriage represented the family's first step towards finding new stability after the policies implemented to drive China's agricultural modernisation had forced them into a life of hypermobility.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed how female university graduates from rural backgrounds navigate a social landscape in which their positions are shaped by their gender, educational achievements and rural status, as well as societal structures including marriage and labour markets. In the scholarly literature, Chinese daughters in rural households have long been discussed in the context of China's tradition of patrilocal living and patrilineal family systems, which prescribes that young women marry into their husbands' families. Scholars have argued that Chinese daughters keep closer ties with their natal families than is often assumed. This article has taken this argument to the next level by showing that the young women who become the first member of their families to enrol in universities provide crucial support for precariously positioned rural households, particularly in terms of financing the marriage of sons and brothers and facilitating their parents' retirement. The ethnographic data in this article have shed light on the intense negotiations, particularly between female members of the household, that bring about the reconfiguration of gendered household dynamics. The differences between the two cases remind us that female university graduates from rural backgrounds are not a homogeneous group. Whereas Julia works very hard to maintain her independence, Misty cannot wait to marry into a family with a strong foundation in the city. These cases, of course, represent two points on a much wider spectrum.

The influx of students from rural backgrounds in the Chinese higher education system, both male and female, deserves more attention in the scholarship on Chinese society, as it changes rural-urban migratory patterns and reshapes the country's rural-urban relations. In this article I have shown that these students' enrolment in higher education should be understood in relation to changes in China's agricultural sector. Moreover, I have argued that despite their educational achievements, graduates from rural backgrounds continue to suffer from the social and economic marginalisation in the urban environment that goes beyond the institutional exclusion of rural citizens in Chinese cities. In this article, I have provided a bottom-up ethnographic

perspective on how women's increased access to – the lower rungs of – China's higher education system affects their role in rural households, describing the dilemmas pertaining to women's efforts to support their families while building a life they desire without upsetting dominant gender ideologies. In the future, more empirical and comparative research is needed to disentangle the complex social positionalities of female university graduates from rural backgrounds in China.

Acknowledgements

My greatest debt is to the young women and their families who shared their stories and welcomed me into their homes. I also thank Katherine Brickell for guiding me through the publication process, the anonymous reviewers for their critical and thoughtful comments, and Carole Pearce for her invaluable writing support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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