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Rural-urban migration in China: from poverty alleviation to sons' marriage

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, many rural Chinese have worked in cities in order to lift their households out of poverty. Yet, their needs and aspirations are not static and have evolved over the past four decades. In this paper, we use household and livelihood approaches to focus on people's resources, strategies and desired outcomes. Based on narratives and stories of four Sichuan households who were interviewed multiple times between 1995 and 2024, we identify three themes and phases. First, migrant work helped rural Chinese with sustenance and basic needs like children's schooling and having a reasonable shelter. In subsequent decades, rural households improved their standard of living via migrant work. A more recent need was to increase sons' competitiveness in the marriage market, made fierce by the high sex ratio and underscoring the downward flow of resources from parents to children. These changes suggest that migration theories should consider the values and understandings, customs, norms and identities that give meaning to people, as well as the policy, structural, social and cultural contexts that complicate the assumption of economic calculus and rationality.

摘要

中国的城乡迁移: 从脱贫减贫到子代婚配 *Area Development and Policy*.

自20世纪80年代以来, 大量中国农村居民进入城市务工, 以帮助家庭摆脱贫困。然而, 农村家庭的需求与期望并非一成不变, 而是在过去四十余年中持续演变。本文采用家庭与生计研究视角, 关注个体和家庭所拥有的资源、采取的策略以及所追求的结果。基于1995年至2024年期间对四川四个农村家庭开展的多轮访谈叙事与生活故事分析, 本文识别出三个主题与阶段。首先, 外出务工帮助农村居民维持基本生计, 并满足子女教育、基本住房等基础性需求。随后数十年间, 农村家庭通过外出务工逐步改善生活水平。近年来, 一个更为突出的需求则是提升儿子在婚姻市场中的竞争力; 在高性别比所导致的激烈婚配竞争背景下, 这一需求凸显了家庭资源由父母向子女的向下流动。这些变化表明, 迁移理论应当考虑赋予人们意义的价值观和理解、习俗、规范与身份认同, 同时也应考虑政策、结构、社会和文化情境, 因为这些因素会使基于经济计算和理性假设的迁移解释变得更加复杂。

RESUMEN

Migración rural-urbana en China: del alivio de la pobreza al matrimonio de los hijos varones *Area Development and Policy*.

Desde los años ochenta, muchos ciudadanos chinos de zonas rurales han trabajado en ciudades para sacar a sus hogares de la pobreza. Sin embargo, sus necesidades y aspiraciones no son estáticas y han evolucionado en las cuatro últimas décadas. En este artículo, utilizamos enfoques relativos a los hogares y medios de vida para centrarnos en los recursos de las personas así como en sus estrategias y resultados deseados. Identificamos tres temas y fases a partir de los relatos e historias de cuatro familias de Sichuan que fueron entrevistadas varias veces entre 1995 y 2024. Al principio, el trabajo de los migrantes ayudó a los chinos de zonas rurales con el sustento y necesidades básicas como la escolarización de sus hijos y tener una vivienda razonable. En las décadas posteriores, los hogares de zonas rurales mejoraron su nivel de vida gracias al trabajo de los migrantes. Una necesidad más reciente fue aumentar la competitividad de los hijos varones en el mercado del matrimonio, que se ha vuelto más intensa debido a la alta proporción de sexos, lo que pone de relieve el flujo descendente de recursos de padres a hijos. Estos cambios indican que en las teorías de migración se deberían considerar los valores y conceptos, costumbres, normas e identidades que dan

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migración rural-urbana; hogar; medios de vida; alivio de la pobreza; matrimonio; China

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

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significados a las personas, así como los contextos políticos, estructurales, sociales y culturales que complican las hipótesis del cálculo económico y la racionalidad.

АННОТАЦИЯ

Миграция из сельской местности в города в Китае: от борьбы с бедностью к женитьбе сыновей *Area Development and Policy*.

Начиная с 1980-х годов, многие сельские жители Китая стали работать в городах, чтобы помочь своим семьям выбраться из нищеты. Однако их потребности и устремления не стояли на месте и менялись на протяжении последних четырех десятилетий. В этой статье мы используем подходы к ведению домашнего хозяйства и обеспечению средств к существованию, чтобы сосредоточиться на ресурсах, стратегиях и целях людей. Основываясь на рассказах четырех семей в провинции Сычуань, которые были опрошены несколько раз в период с 1995 по 2024 год, мы выделили три темы и этапа. Во-первых, работа мигрантов помогала сельским жителям Китая обеспечивать средства к существованию и удовлетворять основные потребности, такие как обучение детей в школе и получение приемлемого жилья. В последующие десятилетия сельские домохозяйства повысили свой уровень жизни за счет работы мигрантов. В последнее время возникла необходимость повысить конкурентоспособность сыновей на брачном рынке, что усугубляется высоким соотношением полов и подчеркивает нисходящий поток ресурсов от родителей к детям. Эти изменения предполагают, что теории миграции должны учитывать ценности и понимание, обычаи, нормы и идентичность, которые придают людям ощущение смысла, а также политические, структурные, социальные и культурные контексты, которые усложняют допущение об экономическом расчете и рациональности.

1. Introduction

The large volume of rural-urban migration has been a driver of China's rapid changes and urbanisation over the past several decades. According to China's census data, the size of the floating population, or migrants residing in a city or county different from where they are registered (or where their hukou is), increased from 79 million in 2000 to 221 million in 2010, and to 376 million or 26.1% of the population in 2020 (Chan, 2023, p. 148; Liang & Ma, 2004). Rural-urban migrants constitute the bulk of the floating population. The National Bureau of Statistics (2025) reported a total of 299.73 million rural migrants in China in 2024.

Like migrants all over the world, the primary reason for rural Chinese to leave for migrant work is economic. When urban opportunities were made available to rural Chinese in the 1980s and 1990s, many pursued migrant work in order to alleviate poverty, despite the need to split their households – leaving behind the spouse, children and/or elderly. Being separated from loved ones is painful and may have long-term adverse physical and mental health consequences (e.g., S. Yang et al., 2023). To make things worse, rural migrants are considered outsiders and experience discrimination in cities, both institutionally and socially. Despite these negative life experiences, migrant work has become a default source of income for rural households, involving not only one generation but multiple generations and household members, and the volume of migration has continued to increase. While poverty-alleviation motivated the pioneer migrants, over the years the average income of rural households has improved, though it still lags significantly behind that of urban households. Data from China's National Bureau of Statistics shows that between 2013 and 2020 the per capita disposable income of rural households increased by 82%, higher than the 66% increase among urban households, and that the ratio of per capita disposable income for urban residents to that of rural residents declined from the peak of 3.33 in 2009 to 2.56 in 2020 (Tang et al., 2022). In this paper, we examine in what ways the needs and aspirations of rural Chinese have changed over the past four decades that have continued to drive rural-urban migration.

In the next section, we review selected theories and approaches relevant to explaining the decisions and practices of migration, beginning with conventional migration theories and followed by the household and livelihood approaches. Then, we discuss narratives and stories as research tools for our fieldwork materials, engaging rural Chinese and migrants to tell us how they create their living, what is important and meaningful to them and what were the important changes over the past decades. This is followed by a table with basic demographic information and brief migration histories of the four households selected for the study. In the following sections, based on interviews with the four households from the 1990s to the 2020s, as part

of a larger research project, we highlight their three phases that focused on, respectively, three themes – poverty alleviation, improving standard of living and supporting sons’ marriage – spanning the 1980s to the 2020s. Based on their narratives and stories, we argue that a focus on shared values and understandings, customs, norms, identities and intergenerational interactions that give meaning to one’s endeavours is needed in order to explain persistent and large volumes of rural-urban migration.

2. Theoretical approaches towards rural-urban migration in China

Conventional migration theories focus on migration as a tactic by individuals to improve economic wellbeing, by moving from an origin with less advantageous income and income sources to one with more and better economic opportunities. Ravenstein’s (1885) ‘laws of migration’ indicate that migration is mostly due to economic causes. Based on the ‘push–pull’ framework for understanding migration, Lee (1966) highlighted factors that influence migration decision-making associated with the origin and with the possible destination, primarily economic ones. Gravity models assume that population flows are directly proportional to size of the origin and destination, measured by population or gross domestic product (GDP), again highlighting economic factors (e.g., Ramos, 2016). The neoclassical economics approach predicts that labour flows from low- to high-wage areas and that such flows will subside if regional wage differences no longer exist (e.g., Porumbescu, 2018). The Todaro (1976) model describes migration as a response to urban–rural differences in expected rather than actual earnings, popularising the view that migration decisions should be understood over a long time horizon.

The above approaches offer convincing explanations for migration, but they share two limitations. First, they assume an eventual permanent change in location of the migrant, from the origin to the destination. This is again based on the logic that the primary motive of migration is economic betterment: so long as the destination is more economically attractive than the origin, why would the migrant not want to move there? But this assumption overlooks migrants’ circularity, multilocality, translocality and return, all prevalent activities among international and internal migrants alike (Dick & Duchêne-Lacroix, 2016; Hugo, 2013; Schmidt-Kallert, 2009). Second, these approaches tend to consider migration an outcome of rational decision-making at the individual level, without paying sufficient attention to household dynamics, the interaction between the migrant and non-migrants, gender and generational perspectives, and needs and aspirations that may not be considered rational from an economic point of view.

Two approaches that have garnered increasing attention in recent decades offer alternative and supplementary frameworks of analysis. First, the household approach foregrounds the household as a unit of analysis. The new economics of labour migration theory postulates that remittances are part of an implicit and cooperative agreement between the migrant and the left-behind, under the assumption that the migrant will eventually return (Stark & Lucas, 1988). The life cycle and life course approaches highlight ageing and life events but also linked lives in the context of family and intergenerational relations (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2023). Research that uses a feminist approach and examines power relations and dynamics further illustrates the analytical and empirical centrality of the household for understanding migration. Lawson (1998), for example, advocated for seeing households as neither fixed nor static, but with an expanded conceptualisation, including households that incorporate multiple members in diverse places. Wallace (2002) argued that household strategies are especially critical for understanding societies that are subject to rapid change, when households are in situations of risk and uncertainty, when an increasing number of women enter the labour force, and when the informal economic sectors are large; all conditions that are common to many international and internal migrants today. In the same vein, Douglass (2014) proposed the concept of ‘householding’, which emphasises the social processes that form and sustain households that involve multiple locations in the world. In short, unlike conventional theories the household approach shifts the site of calculus from the individual to the household, thus opening the possibility of considering a myriad of household needs and aspirations to explain migration decision-making.

Second, the livelihood approach focuses on how people create their living. It uses a people-centred perspective that analyses people’s resources (what they have), strategies (what they do) and outcomes (the goals they pursue) at the individual and household levels (Oberhauser et al., 2004). While livelihood may be seen as involving mainly the economic and material aspects of living such as work and income, it is equally a matter of how people pursue other important goals in life and how these goals are situated in social, cultural,

historical and locational contexts. Much of the research using the livelihood approach has focused on development, poverty, sustainable living and survival strategies (e.g., Schmidt-Kallert, 2009), but some studies do highlight the role of gender (e.g., Choithani, 2020; Langill, 2021) as well as cultural and contextual factors that give meaning to one's endeavours and define one's sense of belonging to the community (e.g., Daskon & Binns, 2009; Po et al., 2020). Unlike conventional theories, this approach makes room for considerations beyond an economic calculus, including decisions that may not appear economically rational.

Combining the household and livelihood approaches offers a useful theoretical foundation to interpret rural-urban migration in China over the past four decades. Treating the household as the unit of analysis helps one see migration not just as an individual's activity but a household strategy and understand why Chinese rural migrants' moves are neither one-directional nor permanent. Zhu (2003) has long argued that rural Chinese practice non-permanent migration as a household strategy. Their migration is therefore best described as circular and multilocal. Specifically, rural migrants customarily return to the home village during the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), during farming seasons such as at harvest, or when major household projects such as building a new house require their presence. Hugo (2013) defined circular migration as 'repeated migration experiences between an origin and destination involving more than one migration and return', and he links circular migration to multilocality, by pointing out that circular migration effectively 'involves migrants sharing work, family, and other aspects of their lives between two or more locations'. When migrants 'earn in the high-income, high-cost destination but spend in the low-income, low-cost origin', they can maximise the purchasing power of their earnings from migrant work (Hugo, 2013), a view relevant to internal and transnational migration across many countries. But besides the economic calculus, the rural places of origin are also where Chinese rural migrants can identify with and can find a sense of security and social support (Fan & Wang, 2008). In a similar vein, C. Chen and Fan (2016) showed that rural migrants may prefer to keep their option to eventually return to their places of origin open rather than settling down in cities.

Circular migration and multilocality allow the rural household to make the most from both the urban and rural worlds, but also entail the splitting of the household into two or more locations. In other words, those who do not migrate are also part and parcel of migration (Schmidt-Kallert, 2009). The practice of split households and multilocality requires that household members be flexible, collaborative and creative, including reinventing gender and intergenerational responsibilities and relations. Fan (2009) and Fan and Chen (2020) showed that Chinese rural migrants and their family members are flexible in terms of work, location and roles, and they are collaborative and creative in household arrangements and division of labour. Multilocality is also common among international migrants. For example, Kōu et al. (2017) showcased how high-skilled migrants from India to the Netherlands and the UK are flexible in terms of location, household and caregiving arrangements.

Leaving a loved one behind, seeing one's child only once a year, or not being able to take care of an elderly parent, is clearly not ideal and is a source of emotional toll to the migrants and their family members. Yet Chinese rural migrants have practiced household-splitting for decades. To understand this requires considering their needs and aspirations and how they have evolved over time. A focus on household strategies for economic outcomes alone does not tell the full story of rural-urban migration in China. One must also consider household strategies that allow rural Chinese to create their living, and how their needs and aspirations are situated in social, cultural, historical and locational contexts, hence the livelihood approach.

As described earlier, the livelihood approach highlights resources, strategies and outcomes. While rural Chinese have only limited farmland and skills, their labour and mobility constitute their resources. Focusing on livelihood diversification, Tong et al. (2019) highlighted the impact of migration on agricultural and other non-farm activities, and have also identified migration as an increasingly dominant livelihood strategy in rural China. Yet, 'livelihood' is much more than making a living but is also about how people create their living. Not unlike research elsewhere, studies that employ livelihood approaches in China focus primarily on economic development (e.g., Liu & Xu, 2016; B. Yang et al., 2021), though intra-household relations and dynamics including gender and generation are equally important (e.g., Yu, 2020). Migrant work as a household strategy is only possible because of the willingness to split the household and to be flexible in household arrangement and collaboration. For example, the wife staying behind to take care of children and/or farmland demonstrates gender division of labour, and the grandparents living with left-behind

grandchildren illustrates intergenerational collaboration. These are all part of their household strategies and of their creating their living. The outcomes that rural Chinese pursue represent their needs and aspirations, which are not static but have changed over time. To rural Chinese suffering from poverty, support for sustenance, shelter and other basic human needs such as sending children to school constitutes the desired outcomes of migrant work. When basic needs are addressed, it would be meaningful to consider improving the standard of living, including improving children's educational attainment and the housing condition. Other important goals for parents, such as ensuring that the sons can find mates, could also be achieved using earnings from migrant work, though these goals can only be understood within the specific policy, social and cultural contexts.

In short, while conventional theories provide a basic foundation for understanding migration, the household and livelihood approaches facilitate a more granular and contextual perspective, one that foregrounds migrants' voices and agency, even though some of their decisions may not be considered rational from an economic point of view. The next section briefly describes narratives and storytelling as a research tool and introduces the fieldwork project as well as the four households to be discussed.

3. Narratives and stories

Narratives and storytelling as research tools have seen a growing interest, for researchers to investigate the ways in which people understand and experience the world (e.g., Webster & Mertova, 2007). These tools are especially relevant for research that employs the livelihood approach, which is people-centred and focuses on how people create their living. In this paper, we highlight the narratives and stories from four households in three villages in Sichuan province, interviewed multiple times between 1995 and 2024. This almost 30-year span of fieldwork was part of a project that initially involved 300 rural households in 12 villages in Anhui and Sichuan, major sending provinces of rural migrant workers. All the villages selected have little per capita farmland and limited non-farm activities, and have sent out large numbers of migrants pursuing work mostly in coastal provinces. The research team's composition has evolved over time, but has centred on the late Renmin University Professor Nansheng Bai's students, associates and collaborators, including this paper's authors who joined the team in respectively the mid- and late-2000s. Our fieldwork involved in-depth interviews with villagers, obtaining information about their demographic characteristics and migration histories, important household events such as marriage, birth, death, house-building and migration-related topics. Interviews with the same households in 1995 and 2005, supplemented by further and selected interviews in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2019 and 2024 (three villages in Sichuan only), provided valuable information for a period of about four decades, from the 1980s to the 2020s.

In the following, we highlight what the villagers actually said, supplemented by our explanations of the relevant contexts and related observations. We chose this approach because first, the quotes represent first-person voices of villagers, from interviews that were conducted largely in a conversational manner. Second, these quotes are selected to reflect our understanding and observations of people's livelihoods that are based on multiple visits and a large number of interviews. Third, behind the quotes are many stories and narratives, too voluminous to report in a paper. In order to protect villagers' identities, pseudonyms are used, and only the years of the interviews are reported, but not the locations within the province. We selected four households from three villages that we have visited multiple times, and where we have gathered rather complete information about their migration histories and other related information up to 2024. In all three villages, by the 2010s and 2020s, the vast majority of households have sent out migrants, typically from more than one generation.

Table 1 summarises the four households' basic demographic information and brief migration histories. All of the main interviewees were born in the 1960s and had two children. One or both of the spouses began migrant work in the 1980s and 1990s, when they were in their 20s or 30s, mostly in menial jobs such as construction and factory work. Both spouses joining migrant work became possible usually because the children were older or because grandparents were available to take care of them. All four households decided to use their migrant work earnings towards building a new house, in some cases building another new house in a later year or purchasing a home in a nearby town. By the 2010s, when the interviewees and their spouses were in their 50s, most had decided to return to the countryside. Their children either joined migrant work as teenagers or pursued an education beyond senior high. Most were staying in cities by the

Table 1. Basic demographic information and brief migration histories of four households.

Household	Main interviewee	Children (year of birth)	Brief migration history
A	FENG Bo (male, born 1965)	Son (1988); daughter (1990)	Feng Bo began working in construction in 1983, in Yunnan, Hunan, Hubei, Jiangsu and Shaanxi, and built a house around 1995. His wife and two children started migrant work in 2005, in Zhejiang. Feng Bo and his wife returned in 2011 to build a new house.
B	MA Lanqin (female, born 1965)	Son (1984); daughter (1986)	Ma Lanqin began working in a clothing factory in Guangdong in 1994. Beginning in 2002, she and her husband went to Fujian to work in respectively various factories and construction. Their son and daughter started working in Fujian in respectively 2000 and 2002. Ma's husband returned in 2004 to build a new house and she returned in 2006 due to illness.
C	TAN Peiyu (female, born 1966)	Son (1989); son (1992)	From 1984 to the mid-2010s, Tan Peiyu and her husband did migrant work, taking turns or leaving their young children to be taken care of by the grandparents. They worked in factories, construction, mines and other jobs. Their older son went to post-secondary school then worked in Guangdong, and their younger son went to college then found a job in Chengdu, Sichuan. Both Tan Peiyu and her husband returned in 2014 to take care of the elderly and purchased an apartment in 2017.
D	LIU Guang (male, born 1963)	Son (1988); son (1990)	Between 1988 and 2023, Liu Guang worked in construction, restaurants, factories, security and other sectors, mostly in Guangdong. His wife joined him in 1992. They built a new house in 1997. Both their sons went to college. Then the older son worked in Chengdu, Sichuan; and the younger son worked in Dazhou, Sichuan.

2020s. Based on our interviews with the four households, in the following we identify three themes of different needs and aspirations – poverty alleviation, improving standard of living and supporting sons' marriage – as well as relevant policy, economic, social and cultural contexts. The three themes roughly correspond chronologically to three phases from the 1980s to the 2020s, though the phases overlap and are not mutually exclusive.

4. Theme one: poverty alleviation (1980s and 1990s)

For thousands of years, limited farmland and a large population have perpetuated poverty in the Chinese countryside. The hukou system that was formally implemented in the late 1950s further exacerbated rural-urban inequality. Details of the hukou system are the subject of numerous publications and are not repeated here (e.g., Chan, 2023). Suffice it to say that it is a registration system that gives urban Chinese entitlements to state subsidies and support – in education, healthcare, housing, retirement and the like – while allowing rural Chinese access to farmland. Hukou also severely constrained population movements from the countryside to the city. Researchers have pointed out that by keeping a large labour force in the countryside, the state extracted value from rural areas to urban areas, supplying low-priced agricultural goods to support urban industry and other state priority projects (e.g., Cheng & Selden, 1994). In other words, China's development strategy has favoured industry over agriculture and city over countryside. Over the years, there have been many hukou reforms, and the values of urban and rural hukou have changed (C. Chen & Fan, 2016; Fan, 2026). Despite these reforms, having a hukou in large cities is still an advantage (Chen et al., 2019; Gu & Zhao, 2025).

Since the 1980s, China's economic reforms have given rise to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, demanding cheap labour and thus making it possible for rural migrants to work in urban areas without urban hukou. These new job opportunities have offered a lifeline to rural Chinese, attracting hundreds of millions of migrant workers from the countryside. In the 1980s and 1990s, therefore, a primary objective of rural-urban migrants was to alleviate poverty and address the family's basic needs: subsistence, sending children to school, housing and other necessary expenses such as paying One-Child Policy fines.

As farming was the only means of livelihood for many rural households, if someone in the family fell ill or needed special care, then subsistence might not even be possible unless a household member left home for migrant work. This was why Feng Bo in Household A, a 30-year-old man when first interviewed in 1995, decided to go to Suzhou to work in construction:

I began migrant work in 1983. I was 19 years old. My brother was young, and my sister was disabled. It was a heavy burden on my parents. So I decided to go out to make money. (Interview, 1995)

Even though some rural Chinese did non-farm work in addition to farming, they were still poor. Ma Lanqin of Household B explained why her husband decided to pursue migrant work:

My husband has been farming and weaving for several years. He heard from a friend in the town that you can earn 30 yuan¹ a day working as a construction worker without skills in Fujian, whereas he earned only 10 yuan a day doing weaving at home. (Interview, 2005)

Poverty also made it difficult for some rural children to receive an education. Because of hukou, rural Chinese did not enjoy subsidies for schooling like urban Chinese did. It was not until the year 2006 that the Nine-Year Compulsory Education Act came into effect with the goal of providing nine years of free education to all children in China (Sun, 2022). Until then, children's schooling even for elementary school could be a significant expense for rural parents. When interviewed in 1995, Ma Lanqin in Household B was 30 years old and was the one doing migrant work while her husband stayed behind. Their two children were respectively 11 and 9 years old at the time. Without Ma Lanqin's migrant work, the two children might not have been able to go to school:

This year, I earned more than 1,800 yuan, spent 1,000 yuan, and sent back 800 yuan.² The money sent back was mainly for the children's school fees. We didn't have any savings; if we did, I would not go out. (Interview, 1995)

The willingness of rural Chinese to send their children to school despite their poverty reflects the age-old Confucian ideology that values education.

The traditional ideology of having a large family, and the practical value of children as the main source of old-age support – especially given the lack of government assistance for health, retirement and other social services for rural Chinese – also drove rural families to desire more than one child despite the One-Child Policy that was implemented in 1979. While the policy strictly prohibited urban couples from having more than one child, in many rural areas parents whose first child was a girl were allowed to have a second child without paying fines, reflecting the traditional son preference. However, if the first child was a boy, having a second child would incur a hefty fine. Still, many rural families who already had a son decided to pursue a second child for the reasons described earlier. In fact, all four households highlighted in this paper had a boy as their first child and decided to have a second child. Feng Bo of Household A explained:

After giving birth to a son, we had a daughter in 1990, and were fined 1,500 yuan³ for the second child. Why a second child? Well, most parents had two children. We wanted a second child despite the fine. The elderly's burden on a single child would be too heavy. Unlike urban residents, rural people are not protected by the government. The government will not care for older people in the countryside. (Interview, 2011)

By the standard in 1990, a fine of 1,500 yuan was very high, roughly equivalent to at least six months of Feng Bo's work as a skilled construction worker. Without migrant work, it would have been impossible for Feng Bo to pay such a fine.

Liu Guang of Household D, who was 32 years old in 1995, commented on having a second child after already having a son. To 'commemorate' his second child's birth in 1990, he included the character 'over' in the child's name:

There are four people in the family, two sons, the younger one is 'over policy'. We named him X over. (Interview, 1995)

While there was humour in the choice of name, in addition to being fined the household was penalised by receiving no farmland for the second child, even though in general farmland was allocated in per-capita terms. When interviewed in 2005, Liu Guang's father explained:

They have 2.1 acres of land, 0.7 acres of land per person. The youngest son was not given land because he was 'over policy'. (Interview, 2005)

Poverty was also reflected by inferior living conditions, including low-quality homes. Improving the living condition, by renovating an old house or building a new house with better materials – 'red brick' instead of 'brick and earth' houses – and more rooms (Chen, 2020), was a priority for many rural Chinese in the 1980s and 1990s. While migrant remittances were helpful, often times borrowing money was necessary to fund the house project because of the lack of savings and the high and increasing costs of house construction. Thus, paying back the debt from a house project compelled rural Chinese to pursue and continue migrant work. Feng Bo in Household A described:

From 1993 to 1994, I earned more than 20,000 yuan⁴ from migrant work. I had thought it was enough to build a house, but I didn't expect the cost of building materials to rise so much. Cement rose from 280 yuan per ton to 320 yuan, stones rose from 37 yuan per square to 45 yuan, and lime rose from 80 yuan to 100 yuan a ton. The house cost nearly 20,000 yuan, and I owed more than 7,000 yuan in debt. I still plan to go out next year; there isn't money to be made at home. (Interview, 1995)

Similarly, the top priority of Liu Guang of Household D in doing migrant work was to build a new house:

With the money I earn, I want to build a house first. (Interview, 1995)

His house was built in 1997. In addition to earnings from migrant work, a debt was taken out and was eventually paid off. Liu Guang's father indicated that house-building was the household's biggest expenditure.

In 1997, the house was built, a two-story building (four rooms), brick and wood structure, and it cost 50,000 to 60,000 yuan.⁵ Liu Guang borrowed a small amount, and (at the time of the interview) had already paid it off. . . . Their income is primarily from migrant work. . . . The most important expenditure is to build a house. (Interview, 2005)

5. Theme two: improving standard of living (2000s to 2010s)

When rural Chinese managed to address sustenance and their basic needs, they began to invest in improving their children's educational attainment, raising their standard of living, and planning for their future return. In Household C, Tan Peiyu and her husband took turns doing migrant work, splitting the household so that one parent stayed behind to take care of the children, or left the children behind to be taken care of by the grandparents. This is a common household arrangement in rural China. In 2005, when the children were in respectively junior high and elementary school, Tan Peiyu, 39 years old at the time, and her husband did not return home for the Spring Festival. The grandfather and grandmother, respectively 77 and 74 years old, discussed the schooling costs:

Our son and daughter-in-law did not return during the Spring Festival. They sent home 500 or 600 yuan every month. The biggest expense in recent years is the children's schooling: junior high costs more than 1,000 yuan⁶ a year, including lodging and food. Their oldest son already chooses the cheapest food, for 6 yuan a day you get only vegetables. Anything with meat costs at least 2.5 yuan. The younger son is in primary school, costing 300 yuan a year. Next year he will go to junior high, which will cost more. (Interview, 2005)

Boarding schools are quite common in the countryside, where students return home only during weekends. Paying for the older son's tuition and room and board, and anticipating that school fees for the younger child would increase as he went to junior high, the couple's migrant work was an essential source of income. Their need to save also explained why they did not return home as most did during the Spring Festival, given the transportation and other related costs.

Since the 2000s, as the standard of living improved, parents' expectation for their children's educational attainment also became higher, including going to college, something extremely rare for rural people in previous decades. However, despite the 2006 Nine-Year Compulsory Education Act, the cost of senior high and college education still fell on the shoulders of parents, as described by Liu Guang's father, of Household D:

If their older son is admitted to college, then they will continue migrant work to help pay for his tuition. If he can't get in, then they'll plan to return soon. They're not young anymore. The children can go out to work. (Interview, 2005)

Both of Liu Guang's sons subsequently went to college. When interviewed in 2009, Liu Guang provided some details:

My sons were admitted to colleges with high tuition. In addition, their living expenses are about 1,800 yuan a month; that's the entire income of my wife. (Interview, 2009)

The aspirations and capacities of rural Chinese to improve their living conditions have also evolved over time. By the 2000s, no longer was migrant work just a means to alleviate poverty but it also contributed to

raising the living standard of rural households. In Household A, the fact that Feng Bo mentioned a colour TV, its measurement and its cost, suggests that this was a significant purchase, made possible only by continued migrant work:

In the past few years, I have been working as a construction contractor in Suzhou, Jiangsu. In 2001, we purchased a major appliance, a 29-inch colour TV, which cost more than 2,000 yuan.⁷ (Interview, 2005)

Earnings from migrant work also made it possible for rural Chinese to not only have a reasonable and reliable shelter in the village but also aspire to upgrade their housing condition, as many intended to return to the countryside in the future. For Tan Peiyu of Household C and her husband, returning to take care of the husband's parents was a priority. When interviewed in 2010, Tan Peiyu anticipated that after the children finished school, she and her husband would return home from migrant work so that they could take care of the husband's parents:

I have never thought about staying in Dongguan for good. I just want to make some money. My plan is to wait for the children to finish school, and then go home to take care of the elderly. (Phone interview, 2010)

When interviewed in 2024, Tan Peiyu shared that in 2017 they decided to purchase an apartment in a nearby town. In order to accommodate the elderly, they chose an apartment on the first floor:

Our old house was very run-down and about to collapse, and it was on a hill making it very inconvenient to get to town. Before, we couldn't save much because the two sons were in school. Around 2017, we bought our current home (in the town), using the money from four people's migrant work: myself, my husband, and my sons. The home cost around 120,000 to 130,000 yuan⁸ at that time, about 90 square metres, on the first floor, which is convenient for the elderly. (Interview, 2024)

Because Tan Peiyu's two children joined migrant work after finishing school, in some years altogether four people were earning wages. Without the savings pooled together from four migrant workers, it was probably impossible that they could afford an apartment in town.

Not every rural Chinese decided to purchase homes in towns. Instead, they used the savings from migrant work to upgrade their village home by expanding it or building a new house altogether. In many cases, just like Household C, earnings from multiple household members were necessary to fund a house project. In the 2000s, Ma Lanqin of Household B, her husband and their two children who had finished school, all were doing migrant work in Fujian. When they learned that their house in the village collapsed, they decided to pool all their savings together in order to build a new house. At the time of the 2005 interview, the couple's plan was to have a new house built in two years, and return to the countryside to live and farm when they grew old. This is a future-looking and reasonable plan, returning to farming and having a good house to live in at the home village after the migrant-work phase of their lives, as described in detail by Ma Lanqin:

While working in Fujian, my husband heard that our house had collapsed, so he returned in August to repair it. Because no one was there to take care of the house, it could fall apart even more. At that time, our family of four rented a room together, spending 1,000 yuan a month on rent and food. The two children gave us their income, about 1,000 yuan a month. After food and rent, the whole family could save more than 900 yuan a month, and 8,000–10,000 yuan a year. My husband said that it would be good if it was like this every year and we would not need more. The house could be renovated for 40,000 yuan.⁹ . . . At the current rate of saving, after two more years we would be able to save enough money to return by 2006, and we will have a new house in 2008. Then our children can continue to work outside and keep their earnings themselves. When we get old, we will return home to farm, my husband can also do some weaving, and we will have enough to live on. (Interview, 2005)

When interviewed six years later, in 2011, Ma Lanqin indicated that the actual cost of the house project was much higher than expected, and that she and the two children continued to do migrant work for three years before they were able to pay off the debt:

When we built the house, we had only 20,000 yuan in savings, and the rest of the money was borrowed. After building the house, we have been going out to work in order to be able to repay the debt. I, my son and daughter worked for three years to pay off the debt. (Interview, 2011)

How much did the house project actually cost? Based on the 2014 interview, it cost more than 90,000 yuan, more than double the cost expected during the 2005 interview. From an economic point of view, this was a

big loss, as the market price of the house in 2014 was less than 50,000 yuan. However, Ma Lanqin justified this from a non-economic perspective, as she and her husband would need a house to stay in when they return to farm after leaving migrant work:

It cost more than 90,000 yuan to build the house, and at present it will not sell for even 50,000 yuan.¹⁰ But I will not sell it, even if I had a house in town, because it is not convenient for farming. (Interview, 2014)

Even after many years of migrant work, rural Chinese still spoke about eventually returning to the countryside, which provided the rationale for investing in a good house. Liu Guang of Household D also intended to use his migrant work earnings to build a house and then return in the future:

I'll earn more money and come back and find something to do. (Interview, 1995)

Ironically, after Liu Guang's house was built in 1997, it was left empty because all household members were living elsewhere: Liu Guang and his wife were migrant workers, their two children stayed with their grandparents who lived with Liu Guang's younger brother. Liu Guang's grandfather described:

The house is still empty and there is no furniture. Nobody is living there. (Interview, 2005)

In other words, the notion that migrants would eventually return to the village may be part of the original plan, but it is not certain how many migrants and their children would actually return to the village houses that were built using earnings from migrant work. The younger generation, in particular, may prefer towns and small cities near the villages if they do return. This will also be briefly touched on in the 'Summary and Discussion' section. Nonetheless, a good house in the village has served another important purpose, that is, to increase a son's competitiveness in the marriage market, a focus of the next section.

6. Theme three: supporting sons' marriage (2010s to 2020s)

While poverty alleviation and improving the standard of living continue to motivate rural-urban migration, the sociocultural and policy drivers of birth control and marital formation represent a rather unique and increasingly prominent dimension of sustained migrant work. After the largely voluntary 'late, long, few' policy helped to lower the total fertility rate (TFR) from 5.9 in 1970 to 2.9 in 1979, the One-Child Policy was implemented in 1979, and TFR declined to 1.7 in 2004 (Hesketh et al., 2005). By the 2020s, TFR has declined further to around 1.0, and China's fertility is considered at the lowest-low level (Zheng, 2024). Yan's (2025) research postulated that as a result of fertility decline and the subsequent reduction of family size, intergenerational hierarchy in Chinese society has reversed from filial piety which 'presupposes that elders have moral authority, social prestige, and political and economic power over younger generations' (p. 762) to 'the senior generation's devotion to and self-sacrifice for the junior generation' (p. 759). While this 'inverted family' phenomenon may be more pronounced in urban areas, parents in rural areas too consider it their responsibility to help their children – especially sons – to be successful.

Nowhere is the downward flow of attention to junior generations more clearly illustrated than marital formation. Despite considerable changes to family life in China (e.g., Song & Ji, 2020), marriage continues to be a matter of the entire household. Also related to China's birth-control policy, its infamous skewed sex ratios constitute an important context for marital formation. Son preference has always been prevalent in Chinese society, especially in the countryside – thus the sex ratio at birth (SRB) is generally higher in rural areas than in urban areas – due to the need for labour for heavy work, the patrilocal family system, and the expectation that sons will take care of the aged and continue the family line (R. Chen & Zhang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). But the SRB has reached extreme levels since the enactment of the One-Child Policy, increasing sharply from 107.63 in 1982 to 111.45 in 1990, 119.92 in 2000, and 121.21 in 2010 (Jiang & Zhang, 2021), compared to the normal range of 103 to 107, primarily a result of sex-selective abortion and underreporting of female births (R. Chen & Zhang, 2019). Even though the SRB has declined to 111.3 in 2020 (Zhang et al., 2022), reflecting in part a response to the termination of the One-Child Policy in 2015 (Fan et al., 2020), it is still much higher than the normal range. Very high SRBs since the 1980s have resulted in a shortage of women for men of marriageable ages, namely, 'marriage squeeze' or 'marriage crowding-out' (R. Chen & Zhang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022).

Even without the challenge of very high SBRs, gendered hypergamy is widely practiced in marital formations in China, such that prospective husbands are expected to have attributes such as better socio-economic statuses than the prospective wives (Fan, 2022). Hypergamy, combined with marriage squeeze, has motivated women of marriageable ages – to be precise, women's parents – to demand that the prospective husband be competitive economically. Research has shown that this distorted marriage market has driven families with sons to develop strategies towards increasing their competitiveness, such as investing in the sons' education and accumulating savings (R. Chen & Zhang, 2019). The savings are necessary in order to fund satisfactory housing and bride price, without which men are generally considered less competitive in the marriage market.

In rural areas, during the matchmaking process, it is almost a necessary step for the prospective wife to visit the prospective husband's family house. Large and newly built houses are much more attractive to prospective wives than older and traditional houses. As a marker of economic status, the housing condition – such as how recently the house was built or renovated, its size, what materials were used and whether there is a separate house or at least separate space or floor for the newlyweds and their future children – is a major factor in the matchmaking process (Fan, 2022). Marriage squeeze has also contributed to increasingly hefty bride prices (Li & Li, 2023). Traditionally, the bride price represents a compensation to the natal family for having raised a daughter just to give her away to another family, under the patrilocal tradition. But increasingly it has become an important component of marriage matchmaking, along with the physical home, reinforcing the transactional nature of marital formation.

As housing and bride price are the biggest expenditures for families with sons, some families borrow money to finance those expenses and many resort to seeking and continuing migrant work (Li & Li, 2023). If there is more than one son in the family, then the burden is even heavier (Fan, 2022). Saving for a son's marital formation may begin when the son is still young. This is yet another symptom of the 'inverted family' (Yan, 2025), where parents consider it their primary responsibility to ensure that their children get married and where parents prioritise the happiness and success of their children as the ultimate purpose of their endeavours (Yan, 2025). To parents, marriage is one of the most important life events that correlates with happiness and success.¹¹

For Household A, interviews conducted in 2011 and 2024 both highlighted the tight relationship among a son's marriage, intergenerational interactions, house-building and migrant work. First, having a new or renovated house has become a necessary criterion for a man of marriageable age to find a wife, reflecting the high SRB, marriage squeeze and transactional marital formation, as discussed earlier. For Feng Bo and his wife, the house built in the 1990s had become too old and was no longer sufficient for the son to be competitive in the marriage market:

... Our son has reached marriageable age, but he won't be able to find a wife unless we have a new house. (Neighbours who joined the conversation also chimed in and said that no women would agree to get married if the husband does not have a (new) house.) (Interview, 2011)

We built a new house in 2011. Our old house had two rooms, but there was not enough space for additional family members. So, building a new house was for the purpose of my son's getting married. My son got married in 2012 after we built the house. The second floor is for the son and daughter-in-law, with a separate kitchen. The house was built with the money from migrant work by the two of us and our son and daughter. (Interview, 2024)

Second, as discussed earlier, the decline in birth rate has transformed intergenerational interactions, shifting the family's focus to the happiness and success of descendants (Yan, 2025), such that parents increasingly shoulder the burden of enabling and ensuring that their children get married. Third, migrant work is necessary in order to finance house-building. Feng Bo's son got married one year after a new house was built. Typically, these new houses are at least two stories high, in order to accommodate both the parents and the newly-weds. In this case, the newly-weds are given the second floor, which has its own kitchen, allowing for some privacy and independent living. Fourth, the house project reflects intergenerational and gendered collaboration, as it was funded by the migrant work of not only the parents and the son who was getting married, but also the younger sister. The fact that the sister contributed financially to the house project, even though she would eventually leave the natal family at marriage to join her husband's family,

illustrates persistent patriarchy and male bias. That is, the welfare of sons is prioritised over that of daughters, so that the latter are expected to help fulfil the needs of the former (Fan & Chen, 2020).

Ma Lanqin of Household B observed that prospective daughters-in-law not only expect a new house, they may prefer a house/apartment in towns or county seats. In other words, a new house in the village may no longer be sufficient:

Actually, I really want to buy a house in the town or even the county seat, but our finances are limited and we really can't afford it. The reason for buying a house is for the son's marriage, because women nowadays have high expectations. They want the husband's family to have a house in the town, preferably in the county seat. (Interview, 2014)

What's more, the bride price is increasingly hefty. When interviewed in 2024, Ma Lanqin lamented that her son was already 40 years old but remained single. She referenced the pressure that the parents were under – the son does not have a house in a town or county seat, nor a car, and he faces ever-increasing bride prices. Not being able to help the son get married may be interpreted as a parent's failure, as illustrated by Ma Lanqin's frustrating tone:

My son is 40 years old and is still single! Not married, no house, and no car! Now the bride price is as high as 120,000 yuan.¹² 60,000 and 80,000 yuan are considered cheap. (Interview, 2024)

Similarly, by the 2020s Tan Peiyu of Household C and her husband became concerned about the sons' ability to find mates. Their younger son, who after migrant work went to a university in Chengdu, found a job, and got married the same year he bought a home there. While commenting on the bride price, Tan Peiyu considered it reasonable.

After finishing college in Chengdu, my younger son stayed there to work. In 2023, he bought a house in Chengdu and got married in the same year. The bride price was 50,000 yuan,¹³ which is not high. Some paid 60,000 yuan or 80,000 yuan, and some even more. (Interview, 2024)

When it came to the older son, however, Tan Peiyu was clearly upset. She was not happy with the fact that the older son was still not married, that matchmaking activities during the Spring Festival had not been effective, that prospective wives demanded a house and a car, and that few women of marriageable age were available. Like the parents in Households A and B, seeing to it that the sons are married seems to be a measure of whether the parents have fulfilled their responsibilities, and may be a source of pressure and unhappiness:

My older son is not married yet! Women nowadays have high demands for the husband! I want a house! A car! My son's salary is not high! Every year during the Spring Festival he stays for six to seven days and we arrange for him to *xiangqin* (matchmake). Where do you find women to date? Females are few in number! That's why we use matchmakers, who charge 200 yuan just for introductions, whether they are successful or not. But spending money may not lead to success! (Interview, 2024)

By the 2020s, it appeared that both sons of Liu Guang of Household D were doing quite well economically, as both had bought homes in Chengdu. The older son got married in 2019, but Liu Guang was frustrated that the younger son, 34 years old in 2024, was still not married, despite multiple matchmaking arrangements:

Both sons work in Chengdu and have bought homes. The older son got married in 2019, the younger son is still single. He is just not getting married! We urge him often, but it's useless! He returned for the Spring Festival, and we arranged *xiangqin* for him at least three times. He only stayed for a few days. We are anxious and have reminded him constantly but it's useless. He said he's busy. Ugh! (Interview, 2024)

7. Summary and discussion

Since the 1980s, rural-urban migration in China has been sizeable and has only increased in volume. Over the past four decades, rural Chinese have continued to pursue migrant work despite the need to split their households and tolerate hardships associated with urban work and with being in cities. In this paper, we have argued that conventional migration theories that focus on individual decision-making and on economic motive and rationality are inadequate, and that a household approach that emphasises

intrahousehold collaborations and intergenerational interactions, and a livelihood approach that draws attention to how people create their living and address their evolving needs and aspirations, offer additional, alternative and important insights. These approaches highlight people's resources, strategies and desired outcomes, which help reveal the values and understandings, customs, norms and identities that give meaning to their endeavours. In this way, the voices of migrants and their family members facilitate our understanding of not only the sustained and large volume of rural-urban migration but also how policy, structural, and social and cultural drivers have shaped the meanings of migration to rural Chinese.

Through the narratives and stories of four households in Sichuan province, as part of a larger project involving multiple interviews of rural households from 1995 to 2024, we have highlighted how the needs and aspirations of migrants and their households have changed over time, and how they have continued to create their living through migrant work. In the 1980s and 1990s, poverty alleviation was the main motivation for migrant work, whose earnings not only supported subsistence but also helped parents send children to school, pay One-Child Policy fines, and enable a reasonable village home for the family which often involved taking out a debt. By the 2000s and 2010s, rural Chinese who had lifted themselves out of poverty were able to use earnings from migrant work to improve their standard of living by for example, adding appliances to the home, increasing their children's educational attainment, and upgrading their village home or even moving to a nearby town. Since the 2010s, marital formation has become an increasingly demanding expense for rural households with sons. Marriage squeeze as a result of the skewed sex ratio, exacerbated by the One-Child Policy, has made the rural marriage market highly competitive for men, further reinforcing the transactional nature of marriage and requiring that the prospective groom's family provide not only satisfactory but impressive housing, along with skyrocketing bride price. The shift of focus from ancestors to descendants, a result of the decline in birth rate and family size, also underlies parents' dedication to enabling their children's success and happiness, including finding a mate. Such a sense of responsibility – extending to continued migrant work to fund a son's marital formation – can only be understood in relation to policy, structural, social and cultural contexts that frame the needs and aspirations of rural households.

From poverty alleviation to raising the standard of living to helping sons to compete in the marriage market, for four decades rural Chinese have resorted to migrant work to help them meet their evolving household needs and aspirations. Sustenance, sending children to school, improving the living conditions, building a house for migrants' future return and for sons to get married, and funding other expenses such as hefty bride prices, are household activities central and important to the livelihood of rural Chinese. As such, over the years migrant work has evolved from a single person's or a couple's strategy to a household strategy that may involve every able person including children who have finished school. Migrant work has also become a long-term strategy rather than just a temporary solution to alleviate poverty. Our interviews with village officials have also confirmed that rural-urban migration is a key factor in differentiating the economic status of rural households. One village official described:

Among the households in the village, those who have pursued migrant work have the best economic status, followed by those who engage in non-farm work locally, followed by those who rely solely on farming locally. (Interview, 2009)

In other words, rural-urban migration has evolved from a tool to ensure survival to an important, default, and long-term means of improving the household's economic and social well-being.

While the narratives and stories of rural Chinese highlight their agency by leveraging migrant work to meet their needs and aspirations, they have also shown that some of the migrants' decisions are not rational or successful from a purely economic point of view. For example, the desire for a good village house is often explained as part of the plan for the eventual return of the migrants and even their children. Liu Guang of Household D, when interviewed in 2005, indicated that his future plan was to return to the home village, justifying his building of the village house. But nine years later, in 2014, Liu Guang shared that the plan did not materialise. He expressed regret that he did not purchase two apartments in the town instead, and commented on the flawed assumption that everybody would return to the home village eventually:

The motivation for building a house at that time was due to the traditional view: we should live at home. At that time, 20,000 yuan or so could get you two apartments in the town. But I didn't even think of buying a home there. I didn't expect that the two children would not come home to live. The house has been built for 10 to 20 years, and no one lives there. (Phone interview, 2014)

Similarly, the notion of building a village house in order to help a son get married assumes that the son and daughter-in-law will return to the village but overlooks their possible desire to live elsewhere. Research has pointed out that the younger generation of migrants have little farming experience (Fan & Chen, 2013), suggesting that their intention to return is not as strong as the earlier migrants. As described earlier – for example, as shared by Ma Lanqin of Household B – prospective wives nowadays prefer a house in a nearby town or even county seat to a village house. Will home purchase in towns and small cities constitute the next round of needs and aspirations that justify and demand rural Chinese to continue migrant work? The answer will lie in a continual engagement with the actors – rural Chinese and rural migrants – and in centring their voices, narratives and stories that identify what needs and goals are most valuable and important to their household and to their creating their living. While not replacing conventional migration theories, the household and livelihood approaches offer more granular, people-centred and context-sensitive explanations for considering assumptions beyond individual, economic and rational decision-making.

Notes

1. For reference, the per capita annual net income in rural Sichuan in 2005 was 2,803 yuan. Data for notes 1–10 and notes 12–13 are extracted from China Statistical Yearbook, various years.
2. For reference, the per capita annual net income in rural Sichuan in 1995 was 1,158 yuan.
3. For reference, the per capita annual net income in rural Sichuan in 1990 was 558 yuan.
4. For reference, the per capita annual net income in rural Sichuan was respectively 698 and 946 yuan in 1993 and 1994.
5. For reference, the per capita annual net income in rural Sichuan in 1997 was 1,681 yuan.
6. See note 1.
7. For reference, the per capita annual net income in rural Sichuan in 2001 was 1,987 yuan.
8. For reference, the per capita net annual income in rural Sichuan in 2017 was 12,227 yuan.
9. See note 1.
10. For reference, the per capita annual net income in rural Sichuan in 2014 was 9,348 yuan.
11. Ironically, recent research has found that to Chinese youth, the traditional view of marriage as an essential life milestone has waned, as evidenced by the rise in late marriage, single-living and cohabitation (Li, 2025).
12. For reference, the per capita annual disposable income in rural Sichuan in 2023 was 19,978 yuan.
13. See note 12.

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