

**“Left-behind” in the countryside: rural households in Gansu, China**

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## **Abstract**

The impact of labour migration on rural households in China has become a topic of interest to scholars both inside and outside China. Household members who stay in the village while others migrate have been referred to as the “left-behind”. This paper explores who is “left-behind” in one village in Gansu, China, using interview data collected from forty-eight households. The author concludes that the label “left-behind” is a limited one, as rural households engage in migration strategies linked to their life-cycle stages and participate in multiple strategies for income generation, combining agriculture, local employment, non-local employment, and other activities.

L'impact de la migration de main d'oeuvre sur les ménages ruraux en Chine est devenu une matière d'intérêt pour les chercheurs à l'extérieur comme à l'intérieur de la Chine. Les membres de ménage qui restent dans leur village sont désigné comme 'oubliés'. Ce mémoire explore les 'oubliés' du village de Gansu en Chine en se basant sur des entrevues avec 48 ménages. L'auteur conclut que le titre d'oublié est limité étant donné que les ménages ruraux s'engagent dans des stratégies de migration liées au cycle de vie et participent dans multiples stratégies à but de générer de l'argent en combinant l'agriculture, l'emploi local, l'emploi non-local, et d'autres activités.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, when China's rural reforms de-collectivized agriculture and established the household responsibility system, China's rural residents have been able to leave agricultural work to pursue off-farm employment (Solinger 1999). In the early reform years, most off-farm employment was provided by township and village enterprises, which allowed many rural residents to work close to their home village (Oi 1999). As restrictions on mobility and residence became more flexible, many travelled away from rural areas and sought opportunities in China's urban centres. In the 1990s, movement out of agricultural work and out of rural areas increased significantly. Now it is estimated that over 120 million rural people have left their villages for the cities since the 1980s. Tens of millions more are working off-farm in rural industry or are self-employed. These movements marked dramatic shifts of China's rural population out of agriculture and out of rural communities. The rural-urban dual structure, along with the *hukou* or household registration system and traditional familial obligations, combine to keep many people linked to their home villages and to their originating "household," even as its members are geographically and occupationally dispersed. Many remain behind in the villages, continuing to work the fields: spouses, children, and elderly parents. Those that remain behind have been referred to in China as the *liushou*, or those left holding the fort.

My goal is to explore the impact of out-migration on family members left behind in the village, particularly around the allocation of household labour resources. I conducted fieldwork in Gansu Province in early 2008 to uncover the many adaptations and adjustments that households make in response to changing labour opportunities. As China's rural households and their members embrace and resist the challenges and opportunities presented to them, their agency should be recognized through a household perspective that considers their linear and cyclical development and recognizes the diversity and dynamism within them. At the same time, we must recognize how out-migration patterns and the category of

the “left-behind” emerge from the structural context shaping rural-urban migration and the history of other social and economic factors that have shaped contemporary rural Chinese households. In this paper, I propose how to approach the left-behind, then provide some historic context on how labour opportunities have changed for rural families, outline my methodology, and describe my findings in one village in Lanzhou City, Gansu Province.

## II. APPROACHING THE LEFT-BEHIND

To understand the left-behind, I review some of the evolving discourse around China’s peasants and rural residents. Looking more closely at some of the Chinese research that has emerged on left-behind children, I argue that *liushou* is a socially-constructed category that is an extension of the floating population. I argue that we should explore the left-behind from the perspective of rural residents and that we should start from the household as the unit of analysis.

### **1) Discourse of the rural**

China’s rural population has been labeled in many ways. The encounter between debates on modernity and discourses of China’s rural population is recent. Before the Maoist period, which bore its own significations of peasantry and changing categories of peasants, Chinese intellectuals took different views of peasants. Han Xiaorong, in his review of Chinese intellectuals’ discussions of peasants from 1900 to 1949 investigates how definitions of peasants were understood to have different political consequences and indeed were formulated with political intentions (2005). Han provides a useful discussion of changes among intellectuals, exploring distinctions between the old literati, loyal to the state, and the new intellectuals of the new culture movement. The image of the peasant, Han argues, consistently took on four characteristics: “ignorant”, “innocent”, “poor”, and “powerful” (Han 2005). From 1949 to the late 1970s, labels of sub-groups of peasants were political categories, ones that were defined and re-defined, mobilizing power for and against different groups.

Kelliher, like Han, discusses intellectual views of the peasant, but brings it into the Deng reform era (1994). Referring to provincial- and county-level party documents and articles that date from 1982-83, Kelliher argues that in the “rediscovery” of the peasantry, familiar stereotypes reappeared as new post-Mao attempts at theorizing drew on older works. He traces the origins of theories of the peasantry to the 1920s and 1930s when intellectuals were trying to understand the relationship between peasant revolts and the party’s future. The theory of the “dual peasant nature” emerged, whereby peasants were seen on the one hand to have revolutionary potential stemming from their labour on land but on the other hand to be reactionary because they were ultimately small producers embedded in feudal values and bearing a “petty bourgeois character”. Kelliher argues that the dual nature of the peasant became a “fixed way” of seeing peasants (1994:395), yet evolved; after Communist state was established there was a “subtle shift” toward seeing the “dark” side of the peasant. The distrusted peasant was associated with cunning, backwardness, etc. (1994).

As peasants’ presence in the cities increased, Chinese academia and media presented an image of floating, instability, high fertility, and crime (Zhang Li 2001:29). Solinger notes that “Chinese journalists explicitly compared outsiders making their lives in the city to inferior citizens” (1999:4). Jacka points out that that terms like *waidiren* (outsiders) emphasize that migrants are from different places and that referring to their work as *dagong*, or temporary work, gives it less status than referring to it as an occupation or *laodong* (labour) in the Maoist sense (2005:44). Even when expressing sympathy for the challenges they face, discussions of rural migrants often reflect an urban-centric approach that does not reveal concern for the complexities of rural life, but rather sees migrants as almost homogenous characters in the city.

The circulation of the concept of *suzhi* has further reinforced a bias against those from rural areas and those with less formal education and formal

employment experience. Anagnost (1997), Kipnis (2006), Yan Hairong (2003b), Greenhalgh and Winckler (2006), and others attempt to unravel how the concept of “*suzhi*” or “quality” has circulated in recent years as part of discourse on “population quality” or the need to improve workers or peasants’ quality. Yan Hairong describes *suzhi* as referring to “the somewhat ephemeral qualities of civility, self-discipline, and modernity” (2003b). To have low *suzhi* is unmistakably pejorative, but it is often implied that *suzhi* is not an immutable characteristic but one that can be raised: “The project of raising the quality of the people is at base an educational project, and many of the activities deployed toward this end are educational in character” (1997:123).

It is often the rural population deemed as having low *suzhi*. As Murphy argues, “Both the education system and state developmental initiatives label villagers as low *suzhi* and deal with them accordingly, by instructing them in farming skills and civilized behaviour” (2004b:14). In some ways, *suzhi* has become a layered form of class/status distinction; as Jacka observes, “*Suzhi* has been mapped onto a geography of social and economic differentiation between the poor “backward” rural hinterland and the urban cities and coastal provinces” (2005:42). What is the relationship to the party-state? Yan Hairong suggests that “Improving the *suzhi* of China’s massive population has become vitally important in the planning of governing elites to become a competitive player in the field of global capital” (2003b:494).

## **2) Production of the *liushou***

### *Producing the floating population*

Zhang Li argues that the “floating population” was produced by a combination of policy actions and discourse. For Zhang, it was “everyday state practices” that create this new subject (2001:23). Looking at the household registration system, naming and media, and regulation of migrant lives, she argues that “that the floating population is made possible through multiple strategies both

inside and outside the state apparatus” (Zhang Li 2001:23). On “naming and categorizing”, she notes that “the floating population is a socially constructed category” (Zhang Li 2001:24). She traces the evolution of policy and media and academic discourse from the collective to reform periods that created such a category and produced concerns about the nature of those that fell within the floating population label. More than a census or statistical measure reflecting an abstract definition of residence and migration, the category became one loaded with meaning.

### *Producing the liushou*

I would like to expand on Zhang’s argument and suggest that the “*liushou*” represent the flipside of Zhang’s socially-constructed “floating population”. The left-behind has circulated as a concept in migration studies and policy. In China, the notion of the left-behind emerged in an informal term, 386199, which, as Xiang Biao explains, refers to women, children and the elderly. Villagers, local officials, and media have anecdotally observed that able-bodied adults were absent for much of the year, leaving behind parents, wives, and children. The term *liushou*, which refers to soldiers that stay behind, has become the term to refer to family members that remains in villages – “those who stay and hold the fort” (Xiang 2007: 181). As Xiang Biao notes, “386199” has become a shorthand to refer to the departure of able-bodied male labourers from the countryside. Given the numbers of rural-urban migrants, “The left-behind constitute the major part of the rural population in many places, and the countryside is thus said to be occupied by the ‘38-61-99 Army’: ‘38’ for the left-behind wives (March 8, Women’s Day), ‘61’ for children (June 1, Children’s Day), and ‘99’ for old people (September 9, the day honouring the elderly in China)” (2007:180). As he points out, in the “narrative of migration”, the *liushou* are not left behind as much as they are “waiting for migrants to return” (2007:181).

*“Liushou” as an extension of labels of the rural*

Zhang observes three “techniques of representation” (2001:30) of discourse on the floating population from the late 1980s through the 1990s: “unifying and homogenizing”, “dehistoricizing and dehumanizing”, and “abnormalizing”(2001:30-33). I would suggest that representation of the “left behind” follows similar forms, though with some differences. Like the “floating population”, *liushou* is a homogenizing category that is used to refer to people from across the country in different circumstances. It is perhaps less dehumanizing than the floating population, as it evokes sympathy for the plight of those remaining in the village (and sometimes also for the hard life of migrant workers). Yet discourse on the *liushou* may still show dehistoricizing and abnormalizing tendencies, as the structural context of migration and state policies are underplayed and the choices of families are brought into the spotlight, with the implication that a physically unified family is the norm.

Media, academic, and government attention to the issue has served to constitute the *liushou* category. Women’s Federations first took on the left-behind as a topic of social concern, which became further institutionalized by attention from education departments. In May 2004, the Ministry of Education’s Basic Education Section held a conference on left-behind children (Lanzhou University 2008:8). Some of this research has deemed “left-behind children” as a special population or as a vulnerable population. The Gansu researchers, for example, to explain the need for their research refer to *liushou* children as a *ruoshi qunti*, or vulnerable groups (Lanzhou University 2008:8). I would argue for caution when referring to a disparate group of children and their families with such a label, particularly one that implies that this status can have negative emotional effects.

*Research on left-behind children in rural China*

One well-funded research survey on the left-behind question reflects the framework commonly used to approach these issues. The Left Behind Children

study was funded by the non-governmental organization Plan International and conducted by researchers from the College of Humanities and Development/Center for Integrated Agricultural Development of the China Agricultural University, a unit that has a long history of providing research and technical support to bilateral and multilateral “development” projects in China. The researchers, Ye et al., summarize the four areas of investigation that they explored with the children: their daily lives (2005:55-69), their studies (2005:70-79), their “emotional world” (2005:80-87), and their perception of changes before and after parental migration (2005: 88-89). When looking at the daily life of the left-behind children, they consider the following: diet and clothes (i.e. cleanliness), medical care, change in workload, school attendance, pocket money, and social interaction (2005:55-69). Children’s personal lives, including their emotional state, becomes a field of study that is linked to their parents’ labour activities.

In the study, the researchers highlight several provocative media stories on left-behind girls who faced tragic outcomes: a girl in Hubei who committed suicide, a girl in Jiangxi who died in an accident at school, a girl in Sichuan who gave birth to a child, a girl in Hubei who was killed by her grandmother, and a girl who was killed by her aunt (Ye et al. 2005:5-6). In addition, they cite a teacher in Sichuan who was concerned about his students, and a study from Meishan, Sichuan (Ye et al. 2005:6).

Research was undertaken in 2004 in 10 villages in four provinces (Shaanxi, Ningxia, Hebei, and Beijing) (Ye et al. 2005:4). In each village, a mix of research techniques was used, including interviewing villager leaders, interviewing key informants, surveying children and their guardians, surveying students at school, and conducting workshop/discussion with children (Ye et al. 2004:25). Questionnaires were completed by 263 children between the ages of 6 and 18; of these, 161 were by “left behind” children and 102 by “non-left behind” (Ye et al. 2005:27). Another 298 guardians (149 of left behind children, 49 of

non-left behind), 23 tutors and teachers, 10 store managers, and 10 village doctors or pharmacy sales persons were interviewed (Ye et al. 2005:27).

What were the trends that they observed? Of the 2,362 households in the 10 villages, 542 households had permanent labour migrants (four months or more outside the village per year). The percentage of households with permanent migrant labourers varied by village, from 12.8% to 63.1% (Ye et al. 2005:29). Of the 2,362 households, 332 had left-behind children (14.3% of all households) (Ye et al. 2005:29). Of the 161 left-behind children who participated in the survey, the majority (132) of them had only the father working away from home (82%). Twenty-five of them had both parents (15.5%) and just four had only the mother away (2.5%) (Ye et al. 2005:32). In over half of these cases, parents returned home at least once every four to six months (Ye et al. 2005:36). In rare cases, children were left with other relatives or left by themselves.

In Gansu, an organization affiliated with Lanzhou University took on research on the left-behind topic, focusing on children. (This research also served as a platform for civil society organizing, as grassroots non-governmental organizations were invited to participate). Even though the researchers ultimately question whether there are notable differences between so-called left-behind children and children who remain with their caregivers, they refer to left-behind children as a vulnerable group, *ruoshi qunti*. They point out the limits in media coverage, noting that they have covered only “typical” or *dianxing* cases. But they ultimately seek out the exceptional cases and produced portraits of them (Lanzhou Daxue 2008).

In the Gansu study, researchers selected 12 schools in seven counties in Gansu Province (Anding District, Tongwei, Xihe, Zhangjiachuan Hui Autonomous County, Jishishan, Xiahe, and Minqin). They received a total of 2,751 questionnaires (out of 3,173 distributed) from children. One hundred and eighty children had parents working away from home, 81% of them stayed at

home with one parent, 14.9% were left with grandparents, and 4.2% were left with other relatives or friends or left on their own (Lanzhou Daxue 2008:16). The researchers then followed up with these children, creating case studies. They also used psychological testing tools on participating children.

In their attempt to take a “compassionate” look at their subjects, as media do with the plight of migrant women (Sun 2004), do the researchers simply create a picture of a problem group? Themes highlighted include lack of care, lack of security, conflict with domestic chores, guardians not supporting their studies, emotional problems, psychological problems, and hygiene problems. Although they ultimately point to policy and structural barriers as the cause, the researchers produce a portrait of unstable, failing, and even unhygienic rural children who are at a loss due to the absence of their parents. Grandparent caregivers are not appreciated but rather doubted for their inability to help children with their homework, etc.

#### *Critique of liushou research*

With regard to children, Xiang notes that a “discourse of familism” has constructed migrant workers’ absence from home as a moral failing (2007:185). But as Xiang shows us, such studies can be misleading when they do not involve comparisons to other groups. He notes that they “tended to focus only on the left-behind children, without comparing them with those who live with their parents” (2007:186), and discusses other research that found that parental migration had marginal or no limited impact on children’s psychological health or behaviour (2007:186). I might also suggest that rural children who follow their parents and attend urban schools may also have complicated experiences with the school system, based on discrimination against them by peers and teachers.

The challenges faced by rural households that have absent family members are not necessarily those that can be resolved by families themselves, as they stem in part from structural issues. For Xiang, the “fundamental solution lies

in the state finance system”; he argues that “remittances alone fall short in terms of generating substantial development and increasing the welfare of the left-behind” (2007:188). When he notes that “Most of the value of created by migrant labourers remains in the urban sector”, he also highlights the inequities of the rural and urban labour markets (2007:188). For Yan Hairong, that rural land is used not for production but to provide welfare support to those unable to work is an expression of the “spectralization of the rural” (2003a:586). She argues that “production land has become welfare land absorbing ill, injured, and unemployed bodies and enabling a cheap reproduction of the next generation of migrant workers” (2003a:586).

### **3) Household as unit of analysis**

In order to gain more insight into who is left-behind in rural areas, I conducted fieldwork in Gansu Province from December 2007 to March 2008. I interviewed villagers, asking about the type of labour and income generation that household members engaged in, and with this information I have tried to understand who is left behind in the village. Before exploring how household relationships to employment and migration have changed, I will discuss the relevance of households as a unit of analysis for this study. The Chinese rural household, which I argue is both a fixed and flexible formation, provides a useful unit of analysis for examining the left-behind and migration. I suggest that the “household” is a useful, though limited, unit of analysis for understanding rural Chinese communities. I first identify the importance of the *hu* (household) and the *jia* or family in China and second discuss the diversified livelihood strategies that are coordinated across life cycles. Despite the prominence of households as units, it is also important to note how the dynamics within households and families have changed with the development of private lives and individual interests as well as the stretching of households over distances.

A focus on the household is consistent with comparative studies of “smallholders,” which see the importance of the household as an adaptable economic unit. Murphy suggests viewing rural households in China as petty commodity producer households that have agency to use their labour and pursue different economic activities (2002:23). More important, however, is that this focus engages the ways in which the “household” in China – an administrative category of the state – can reflect and structure production, consumption, and reproduction (Judd 1994). As Judd argues, “The household in rural China remains a critical nexus of cultural construction and social relations in the practical world of everyday life and in the official political economy” (Judd 1994:165).

#### *The rural household in the Chinese system*

China’s economy, including its agricultural sector and employment markets, varies significantly across the country. Why then is it relevant to speak of a rural “household”, of which there many tens of millions? The Chinese rural household is not only the site of production and consumption, it is also the primary administrative unit on the basis of which land use rights are distributed and taxes and benefits applied. This is symbolically reproduced in the *hukou*, or household registration system, in which rural residents are recorded and tracked by household, while urban residents are registered on an individual basis (Judd 1994).

#### *The administrative, family, and economic household*

The household has overlapping faces: the “*hu*,” or the Chinese administrative unit, the “*jia*,” or the family group, and the “petty commodity household”, or the economic entity. Prior to the Communist Revolution, China consisted of small households in which the “family,” not the individual, was a key “property owning” unit, although clan and other levels of organizations were also relevant (Cohen 2005:81). Huang argues that labour on a family farm functioned like “an organic whole” (1990:200), with men, women, and children moving in and out of work as needed – they could not be separated into “units” (1990:200).

*“Rural” “households”: vast differences subsumed under administrative categories*

Across the vast territory of China, “households” are still categorized uniformly, and have statistics collected about them in the same way. Because China’s *hukou* system designates households as rural or urban (Solinger 1999), we can find cases where “rural” households in fact may have minimal links to land or agriculture but might still fall under the label of “rural”. Areas such as those discussed by Potter and Potter (1990) and Chan et al. (1992) in Guangdong, where agricultural machinery was introduced in the 1960s and rural industry developed in the 1970s, might still qualify as “rural” alongside villages that fall below the state poverty line, where households struggle to diversify beyond subsistence agriculture to include minor vegetable production or pig raising just for their own consumption. As economic opportunities have grown, so has stratification between households, villages, and regions. Different histories of economic development, shaped in no small part by contrasting access to resources and markets, have produced a variegated terrain of income generation options for contemporary China’s rural households.

*Shifting combinations of income generation strategies*

I propose using an approach that considers the labour provided by all members of a household and all the sources of income that were generated and sees them as potentially both linear and cyclical. Households engage in an array of primary and supplementary strategies to earn income. They grow grains, vegetables, and cash crops, and raise livestock for their own consumption and for sales through different channels. Households engage in trading, marketing, or services on a household level, locally and non-locally; they run industry/enterprises; and they seek out wage work, short-term and long-term. The combination of strategies chosen will depend on intra-household resources (i.e. labour power, skills, abilities, land, capital, etc.) and extra-household opportunities (i.e. ecological farming conditions, markets, demand, employment

opportunities, connections, etc.). The choices combine concerns about maintaining a subsistence base, avoiding risk, evaluating opportunity costs, recognizing the relative value of labourers, et cetera. These can vary within and between villages. Each combination involves adjustments of labour and household roles.

*Incremental moves away from “subsistence” and cyclical returns to farm/agriculture*

The linear dimension of household development is captured by perspectives that see farmers moving out of subsistence “incrementally” (Keister and Nee 2001:40) as they shift toward more profitable activities. The accumulation of knowledge, skills, and social capital, including networks, also adds to the growth prospects of farmers. Loss of agricultural skills among younger generations can also propel movement toward paid work. Yet a cyclical dimension can also emerge, as various factors may compel households to shift back into agriculture from paid work, or from commercial agriculture to subsistence agriculture, either because of market fluctuations or because of changes in family composition. Rural migrant workers can choose to return to their home villages to care for their children or the elderly, or to pursue commercial agricultural activities that may be more attractive than unprotected or exploitative paid work in urban areas.

*Generational differences and family cycles*

Generational differences affect household livelihood strategies not only because of changes in expectations, experience, and skills, but also because families can have varying supplies of labour and land and varying needs based on family cycles. The continuity of the household unit, as well as its flexibility, can be seen in the changing needs and resources of households as they grow and divide, following general patterns of Chinese patrilocality. Discussing a land-scarce area in Sichuan, Pennarz observes that household choices (i.e. toward agricultural intensification and various sidelines) can be viewed in relation to

“family cycle” issues of land redistribution and family division (1998:169). She observes six family cycle stages and corresponding labour-land relationships: “young family”/ “deficient land”, “subsistent family”/ “sufficient land”, “mature family”/ “labour surplus”, “migrant family”/ “land surplus”, and “dividing family”/ “divide land and labour” (1998:169). The number of able-bodied labour-providing household members and the division of land at different points in a family cycle changes the labour-land ratio and determine whether the land is sufficient to live off of or if there is a labour shortage or surplus.

Although the household is an important unit of analysis, intra- and extra-household dynamics should not be overlooked. Links above the household level are also extremely important. Networks, for instance, are important for local production and trading activities; as Judd notes, “Commodity production in the contemporary Chinese countryside is rooted in a household-based rural economy but is simultaneously enmeshed in wider networks of relationship” (Judd 1994:114-115). Croll highlights the “aggregate family”, referring to the links that are maintained after family division and among close kin, particularly patrilineal kin (1994:172). The “aggregate family” offers financial and other support, as well as economic partnership (1994:173). The role of networks in labour out-migration (Murphy 2002) is another dimension of the importance of extra-household relationships in economic development.

#### *The private life approach*

Yan Yunxiang goes further in re-evaluating the corporate model of the household, arguing that we should also look at the “private life” of individuals and households, not only their corporate character (2003). By private life, he refers to the “double meaning” of the family as a haven from the outside world and the individual’s private life from his/her family (2003:8). He argues that “the pursuit of family economic interests is insufficient to explain all the changes in family life, such as individual demands for intimacy and privacy” (2003:7). In my research, I was not able to investigate such “private life” concerns. Nevertheless,

we can make note of Yan's observations that a number of changes in family dynamics, such as gender roles, property, family planning, filial piety, were evolving not just in the reform era, but in the collective socialist period as well. He argues that "family was privatized" (2003). Therefore, when we consider changes in the family due to migration, we should be cautious about what we attribute those changes to, as new values and roles of women and youth were influencing households throughout the pre-reform period.

*Internal: Individual preferences and intra-household dynamics*

Keister and Nee (2001) and Murphy (2002) in recognizing the rational behaviour behind rural household choices make an important contribution, asserting the agency of rural residents. At the same time, two points should be noted. Individual members in a household can have different (and changing) perceptions of their own interests and preferences, such that rational choices vary. Intra-household dynamics are not always consistent with corporate behaviour. The internal unity of the household is frequently in transition. For example, not all funds earned by its members are contributed to the household budget. Yan Yunxiang in his discussion of the "politics of family property" observes tensions between generations of family members. He describes how young people in the collective period took advantage of opportunities created by the Youth League and the Women's Association to purchase items for themselves, rather than have their earnings go to the family (2003:161). The perspectives of different generations will also be shaped by their experience. Yan Hairong notes that in her interviews of young migrant women workers, she found that they did not have agricultural experience (2003a:588). She argues that China's socio-economic transitions have affected the experience of youth: "Rural youth live awkwardly and uncomfortably in the post-Mao era, trapped as modern subjects in the space outside the culture of modernity" (2003a:587).

*“Spatially extended” households: Absent members, extended households*

Increased out-migration can mean that households have members at a distance who may or may not contribute income and labour to the household, though they may nominally retain their *hukou* status in their village of origin. Moreover, with families renting out or transferring land use rights, there is greater variety in the “corporate” character of households. Individual and couple preferences also come into play. Despite these moving boundaries family moral and financial obligations, village *hukou* registration, nominal land use rights, and reliance on family for social support and assistance interlock and keep the “household” in central place.

One of the characteristics of internal migration in China is that the percentage of households that re-locate all members to urban areas is relatively low. Even with absences and migrations, the household registration system, as well as obligations to family members, ensure the salience of the household. Rural Chinese households remain tied, through household registration and land allocation, to their home villages. Even in cases where the full household leaves, filial obligations mean that members of the non-nuclear family (i.e. parents) may still expect financial and other support from migrants. As I learned through some informal discussions with migrant workers in Lanzhou City, sometimes rural *hukou* holders want to retain the privileges and benefits that rural residents hold, such as free access to compulsory education and rent-free housing. Thus, households are sending family members to cities, towns, and other rural areas to work, without cutting ties of financial and family obligation, creating webs of what Zhang – following Myron Cohen’s observation of the flexibility of the “*jia*” – describes as “spatially extended migrant households” (2001:118). These ties to home villages and originating households, combined with the barriers to permanent moves to the city, create migration patterns that are often cyclical, involving not only absence but also return. The duration of migration cycles can change, and in an increasing number of cases, temporary stays can solidify into

permanent residence in cities or towns, with only brief or rare returns to home villages.

### III. CHANGING LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES

What have been the structural changes that have led to such shifts at the household level? In 1978, when China's reform policies began, China's rural residents had gone for more than a generation with little control over where and when to work and with few options for leaving their communes. In the three decades since the reform process began, rural residents have migrated by the tens of millions to seek out employment, business, and education, sometimes uprooting their whole families. For many migrants, their legal and social identities remain tied to the countryside under China's rural-urban "dual structure", constructed in part through a household registration system, which offers land-use rights to peasants. Some have explored how the *hukou* division has created mass temporary internal migration, where rural workers have encountered various barriers to their permanent settlement in cities (see Solinger 1999 and Cheng and Selden 1994). Without wages and labour protections that would allow labourers to support their families through paid off-farm work, many rural residents continue to farm and maintain virtually rent-free residences in their home villages, where dependents and the less-employable can subsist more easily. The *hukou* system no longer keeps tight control over movement and residence, but likely continues to inform migrants' choices indirectly. As Wang and Fan argue, "rural migrants' inferior status and precarious existence in the city strongly encourage them to think of migration as a short-term device for increasing income and to maintain their rural residence as a permanent home" (2006:943). The uneven investment in rural versus urban areas also serves as a backdrop to China's internal migration.

In this section, I explore the perspective of rural households and how household choices were determined to a large extent by the broader external

context of rural-urban policies, *hukou* or household registration policies, the planned economy, and the reform period's transition economy. By taking a longer view of non-farm work and rural-urban migration, we can consider how different cohorts have experienced migration. Policies and actions of the central and local state governments interacted with local economies, regional cultures, and evolving family structures to produce different kinds of opportunities and limitations for the rural Chinese population, which have in turn produced diverse labour migration experiences and long migration journeys.

### **1) Collective Period**

Internal migration in China since 1949 has been structured by two major intersecting policies, the rural-urban dual structure, and the *hukou* system, with its corresponding distinction between rural and urban household registration. To Cheng and Selden, the CCP *hukou* system is “the central institutional mechanism defining the city-countryside relationship and shaping important elements of state-society relations in the People's Republic” (1994:644). Rural and urban areas were served by different policies. Investment in urban areas and guarantees of jobs and benefits to urban residents, which relied in part on extracting surplus from rural areas (Oi 1989), produced the economic gap between the two kinds of regions that would draw residents out of one into another. Before decollectivization began, an architecture of policies was gradually built to define and separate rural and urban. From 1949 to the late 1970s, the process went through different stages.

Over the 1950s, the *hukou* system and restrictions on internal migration were established. In different waves, workers were drawn from the countryside to meet demand and fulfill plan requirements (Solinger 1999). Cheng and Selden (1994) note three periods: the preparatory period (1949-52), the early implementation of *hukou* (1953-57), and “full scale implementation, collapse and reimposition” (1956-60). They chart how migration and residence came to be more controlled in the interest of protecting urban employment; people were sent

back to countryside and measures were taken to prevent hiring rural workers. Cheng and Selden highlight the close interrelationship between food rationing and *hukou* registration. Not only did food rationing make it more difficult for illegal migrants to get access to food, all births, marriages, etc. had to be reported in order to have corresponding rations (1994).

Yet tensions around pressures on urban employment and the need for a steady food supply for urban workers led to restrictions on rural-urban migration that would keep rural residents on farms. Zhang notes, “By the mid-1950s, voluntary labor migration to the cities came to be seen as an urgent national problem” (2001:25). She cites Selden who says about 20 million people went to cities from 1949 to 1957, and other researchers who note concerns about employment and about supplying workers with food (Zhang Li 2001:25). She argues, “As a result, the state passed new regulation measures to block the ‘blind flow’ (*mangliu*) of peasants into cities to avoid the pathological growth of oversized metropolises experienced by other developing countries” (Zhang Li 2001:25)

How was the line between the rural and urban drawn? The 1955 “Criteria for the Demarcation Between Urban and Rural Areas” set out how these regions, and by consequence the benefits and treatments for residents, would be defined (Cheng and Selden 1994:659). In 1958, the regulations that would carry on for three decades were promulgated (“Regulations on Household Registration in the People’s Republic of China”) (Cheng and Selden 1994:662). The Great Leap Forward occasioned large population movements as enterprises rushed to increase production and as the general chaos of the period led to the neglect of the system (Cheng and Selden 1994:664). 1960 brought a state push to reestablish control with the implementation of the 1958 regulations (Cheng and Selden 1994: 667).

What were the consequences for rural residents? As Zhang observes, “Cut off from urban employment, guaranteed food supplies, subsidized housing, and

other benefits of the city, peasants were anchored in the countryside for decades with virtually no spatial mobility” (Zhang Li 2001: 26).

Through the 1960s and 1970s, there was significant internal migration, but it was determined by political direction, not labour market dynamics (Zhang Li 2001). Zhang argues that

such large-scale displacements of urban people and spatial mobility were not seen as population movements; instead, they were conceived as political events, described in highly politicized terms such as *zhibian* (supporting the border areas by professionals), *shang shan xiexiang* (the sending of urban youth up to the mountains and down to the countryside), and *dachuanlian* (establishing revolutionary ties among Red Guards). Those who were involved in these movements were not regarded as distinct social groups to be subjugated to special regulations as the floating population is today (Zhang Li 2001:26).

Even though labour and production were collectivized, and workpoints were collected on an individual basis, the household form persisted as the site of consumption and domestic reproduction. Throughout, rural households had some control over parts of their time and labour. They were for the most part availed of private plots (distributed on a per capita basis) where they could grow crops to supplement what they received from the commune. Opportunities to embark on off-farm employment did exist; some peasants could go out in work teams and earn an income, which they were to exchange back into workpoints at home.

Although it is often noted that decollectivization freed households to make new choices around their labour and production and much social change can be connected to post-reform changes, I would like to follow Yan Yunxiang and argue that we can see the antecedents of current household dynamics in the domestic changes that took place during the collective period. Women entered into the workforce, bending traditional “inside” and “outside” divisions; young people explored new connections; filiality changed; and relations among neighbours shifted (Yan Yunxiang 2003).

*Changes and continuities in household labour allocation and family dynamics during the collective period*

Prior to 1949, rural households chose diversified production and income sources. Fei Xiaotong and Chih-I Chang outline how different rural families and villages in Yunnan in the 1930s adapted to economic constraints and opportunities, such as lack of land or proximity to urban markets, by engaging in transport (portering) and sideline activities, such as vegetable gardening and handicrafts (1945).

Although the flexibility of households to deploy different strategies to maintain and increase their incomes was curtailed under the collective system (when labour was organized by the production team), the rural household remained the site of consumption and reproduction. Except for a short period during the Great Leap Forward, food preparation has stayed in the household. Reproduction has been managed by households themselves, which were also located in physically separate homes. Class struggle led to many shifts in rural villages, but family structures were not dramatically changed from above. Referring to the collective period, Parish and Whyte argue that, “except in the cases of child brides and concubines, the government has not been directly concerned with changing the structure of households in which Chinese peasants live” (1978:133). There were certainly shifts in marriage trends, family divisions, reproduction, relationships to lineage groups, and more, but the basic form of the family stayed the same. Though the workpoint system of the planned economy affected the valuation and use of labour in the household, by rewarding individual rather than household labour, the “household” retained its structure, as food consumption, domestic work, and reproduction continued to be determined at the household level. Cohen argues that the family remained a “corporate unit”, noting that workpoints were still family property (and were transferable) (2005:82).

### *Collective vs. private production*

From the household perspective, the key distinction in kinds of income sources was between *collective* and *private* production. Households were allowed to have some private production – they were able to use spare-time labour on private plots and raise livestock, which they could consume, to supplement what was received from the collective. Importantly, these products could also be sold on the local market and the income was kept by the household., even though such trade was suppressed at different times and even subject to punishment. Based on his interviews, Unger found that rural households made one-quarter to one-third of their gross income from private activities (Unger 2002:16). As Unger notes, “private marketing could be largely curtailed but never altogether suppressed” (2002:16). For example, some urban residents would travel directly to the rural areas to buy vegetables and meat (2002:16). This surplus sold in periodic markets “helped fill in the cracks of the state supply system” and became more profitable with rising prices (Huang 1990:204).

With the exception of the Great Leap Forward period, private plots were permitted through most of the collective period (Zweig 1989:122). In some areas, such as parts of north China, private plots were “collectively farmed, and the harvest divided among individual households” (Oi 1989:139). Private plots could serve as an important source of income during the collective period. Zweig compares the place of private plots in different areas. In poorer areas, he argues, “private plots may have been the only thing keeping peasants from going hungry” (1989:132). In average income areas, private plots were the source of cash. Zweig provides an example of three teams in Jiangning County, Jiangsu Province, for whom private animal husbandry and private plot crops contributed “20 to 25 percent of the average total household income” (1989:132-3). Private plots could make even more dramatic contributions to peasant income, such as an example he provides of a brigade in Nanjing where by 1980, 36 percent of household income came from private trees, pigs, and fowl (Zweig 1989:133). Potter and Potter

found that in Zengbu, Guangdong Province, about one-fifth of income came from private plots (1990:108-112).

Livestock, mostly pigs, could also be held privately. In Gao Village, Jiangxi Province, Gao recalls that “pigs were the only source of cash income for the villagers and pigs are also the main source of oil and protein” (1999:52). Chan et al. emphasize the profitability of raising pigs: ten half grown piglets from a single brood could earn as much as half a year of collective labour (1992:71). Huang points out that the number of hogs raised in China from 1949 to the mid-1980s “quintupled”, and that this was achieved by “administrative fiat and in the cheapest way possible from its point of view—by drawing on household sideline products and spare-time household labor, rather than relying on commercial feed and remunerated full-time labor” (1990:207).

Households with more members were more likely to succeed economically (Croll 1994:164). Vegetable growing requires constant labour, so “spare time cultivation” makes sense as family members could work all day (Huang 1990:203). Zweig notes that the willingness to use leisure time contributed to the demand for private plots. Larger households with extra labour, such as older retired family members, were able to use take advantage of private plots (Zweig 1989:133). In rural Guangdong, Potter and Potter found that men rather than women worked on the private plots (1990:111).

Oi points out that, outside of external policy directives, team leaders were able to affect income earning opportunities, such as by influencing the allocation of private plots (when done by the team leader) or “controlling access to collective tools and animals” (1989:138). In addition, they could control how much time off would be given to do other business or to work, as well as how the team would be compensated for the reduction in labour (Oi 1989:140).

Other work opportunities were available away from the collective and sometimes outside of agriculture. Rural residents were able to engage in seasonal labour migration, working as “hired hands” in other villages (Unger 2002:120). It is important to note the growth of non-agricultural labour before the reform. Even during the collective period, some villagers were leaving for paid work. In Yunnan’s Lu Village, some villagers, usually men, were sent by work teams to labour on construction and mining projects (Bossen 2002:133). In Sichuan’s Qiaolou, a brigade construction team was established in 1974 (Ruf 1998:131) and an agricultural machine repair shop established in 1976 lasted for two years, using the skills of demobilized soldiers and sent-down youth (Ruf 1998:131).

Rural residents could work off-farm not only on collective work teams but also in rural factories, which were developing in some areas by the 1970s. For example, in Chen Village, a brick factory established in 1969 produced enough profit to spur on other enterprises for rice-milling and peanut oil processing (Chan et al. 1992:214). Soon thereafter, facilities for alcohol and starch followed. At the same time, more investment was made into agricultural machinery. A repair shop employed another eight people (1992:215). By the mid-1970s, the brigade enterprise team had one-sixth of the village’s work force employed full-time (though still excused for busy agricultural times) by it for its factory workshops and agricultural sidelines, such as the orchard (Chan et al. 1992:221). Employment positions were offered to households in exchange for capital support for brigade enterprises (Unger 2002:18). In the Qiaolou brick factory, to raise capital, each household was made to buy a 100 yuan share, and dividends could be traded for a job for a family member (Ruf 1998:133). The factory opened in 1982, and did well – profits were sufficient to repay loans, build capital for the brigade fund, and increase incomes (Ruf 1998:134). Although rural industrial growth was more significant in the 1980s, the collective period saw labour absorbed in rural industry too.

*Changes in the family during the collective period*

There were a number of changes to the family during the collective period, including the entrance of women into the labour force; increased freedom among youth to develop their relationships and choose their spouses; erosion of patriarchal authority and decline in the position of parents-in-law and the elderly; individualization of labour compensation and land use rights; and changes in family division and resulting labour allocation (Yan Yunxiang 2003).

Arguably, the most important change was the entrance of women into the labour force. Zhang Weiguo notes that the collective period brought more women into “outside” work, and in the Hebei village he studies he found that “women did regular work in agricultural which outstripped their previous involvement”, particularly young women (Zhang Weiguo 2002:157). There were still dramatic gender dynamics at play in labour allocation and compensation. Others have noted that women received fewer workpoints and were given specific tasks. Zhang also points out the gendered quality of the time (seasonal and age) distribution of men and women’s labour: “Women were expected to work during harvest season when their labour was much in demand, but not during agricultural slack seasons. Village cadres would not arrange women’s labour when there was surplus male labour to be arranged. Women also retired from collective work much earlier than men” (Zhang Weiguo 2002:158). We see that gendered division of labour in the collective period also meant that women would stay behind in the fields while other “work” was done. For example, “When men were mobilised to contribute their labour outside the village in a big project (e.g. an irrigation project), women were expected to work in the collective to fill the gap created by the withdrawal of men’s labour” (Zhang Weiguo 2002:158). Nevertheless, this was an unprecedented entry of women into work that has only continued to grow.

## **2) From 1978 onward: reform and opening**

With the launch of reform and opening, rural residents found new options within the bending constraints of economic and labour policy. The late 1970s witnessed major migration brought on by four changes, according to Zhang Li: agricultural reforms, growing urban economy, end of state monopolies on public goods and emergence of market-based activities, and loosened control on migration policy (Zhang Li 2001:26-27). Before then, rural households were unable to migrate. Chan et al describe the consequences thus: “Deprived of any means to escape from their community, they were consigned for two and a half decades to a hopelessly meager livelihood” (1992:302).

Reforms allowed for a resurgence of the role of the household as a unit of production. Households were able to arrange their labour as they chose, and had a dramatic increase in their own resources to produce: household responsibility land. They had previously had small private plots and the option to supplement their required labour with other work (e.g. in evenings). The context was not only of reform, but a broader ongoing transition from an agricultural economy: “The migration which has emerged in China since the 1980s is characterized not only by the economic transformation from an agriculture-dominated economy to an industrial one, a common phenomenon in developing countries, but also by the fact that China is undergoing a unique economic transition from a planned economy to a market economy” (Cai and Wang 2003:90). China’s rural households would seek out their place in this transitional context.

The journeys of China’s rural households into prosperous futures were constrained not only by the limited resources at their disposal but also by the various barriers to reaching new employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. 1981 State Council tried to prevent rural people from entering cities (Zhang Li 2001:27). Zhang argues that the perception of migrants shifted from “temporarily displaced outsiders (*waidiren*) who would soon return to their rural origins” to a

“social problem”, as their numbers increased and pressures on urban areas grew (2001:27). The new migrants, Zhang notes, could no longer be controlled by the rural political system, but nor could they be managed by urban officials (2001:27). She describes their status as a “prolonged liminality – belonging neither to the rural nor to the urban society” (2001:27). Zhang identifies two policy changes, the 1984 “State Council Notification on the Question of Peasants Entering Towns” and the 1985 “Provisional Regulations on the Management of the Population Living in Cities”, which tolerated rural-urban migration, but points out that local governments could still make it difficult for migrants in cities (2001:27-28). Through the 1980s, there was a “proliferation of discourse on the floating population” in government, academic, media, and popular channels (Zhang Li 2001:28). “Through the production of knowledge based on censuses, surveys, and social analysis, the floating population came to be conceived of as a real social entity that is fundamentally different from the urban population, and as a social problem to be solved” (Zhang Li 2001:30).

#### *Opportunities for changed labour allocation during reform*

When rural reforms and the household responsibility system were implemented, decision-making over labour use was returned to households. With the rural reforms of the 1980s, the “household” as a key political and economic unit was re-established (Judd 1994). The “household” in China re-emerged in the reform era as an important social formation and subject of study (Croll 1994:163). Cohen argues that “the increase in family-controlled assets after decollectivization has reinforced the family as a corporate unit” (2005:83). The household responsibility system continues to bind land use rights to the household level, though certainly there are many departures from it. Households had greater, though not total, control over agricultural choices and how to allocate their labour.

With the implementation of the household responsibility system, the distinction between “collective” and “private” production loses its relevance, although production quotas and the lack of liberalization of agricultural markets

meant that farmers still did not have full control over agricultural production. Since off-farm employment was constrained by limited local opportunity and the administrative *hukou* system, which controlled migration to the cities, agricultural production remained central. Thus “sideline” production and employment in township and village enterprises (TVEs) stood out as routes for household income generation. Harrell discusses surveys conducted from 1985 to 1987 among three villages in Panzhihua City, Sichuan. He identifies five different combinations of income: farming alone, wage alone, wage and farming, wage and capital investment (e.g. chicken farming), and finally wage, capital investment, and farming (1993:85).

A series of policy changes allowed trading, market activity, and reduced mandatory procurement. By the early 1990s, state agencies only procured approximately one-third of agricultural production, according to one Ministry of Agriculture survey of farmers (Sicular 1995:1031). Sicular argues that “the 1985 reforms fundamentally altered the commercial environment in rural areas” (1995:1023). Price controls slowly dropped away (Watson 1988:9). Small-scale businesses could be established and could trade non-grain products and light manufactured goods in 1981, and in 1982 surplus grain could be traded (Sicular 1995:1022).

Following reform, food purchases could be made in revived rural periodic markets, urban wetmarkets, reforming state-owned stores, and newly-established stores. In a major document on rural reform, “Document 1” of 1983, the marketing system was liberalized and “the State Council adopted new regulations for the management of free markets which loosened controls and sanctioned the types of trading which had emerged” (Watson 1988:13). Private traders emerged and contributed to inter-regional trade. For example, discussing a report on Chongqing, Watson notes that private traders increased from 20,000 in 1982 to 50,000 in 1983, and 130,000 in the year after (1988:21). Regarding 1983 reforms permitting long-distance trade, Cai and Wang point out that “This was the first

time that Chinese farmers had the legitimate right to do business outside their hometowns” (2003:75).

Although some villages kept up collectivized activities, control over household labour use was well received. Based on her interviews in different provinces, Croll reports that “In the early 1980s villagers repeatedly and quite spontaneously referred to and welcomed the ‘new freedoms’ or working methods as one of the most important changes in their lives” (1994:164). Families were able to invest more in what was formerly private production, or they could seek out paid employment opportunities that were growing around them in new rural industries. These shifting combinations employ household members in different combinations along gendered and age lines.

#### *Marketization, move to off-farm labour*

Though household labour was more freely assigned, there were greater demands. Croll notes that “Women, in particular, pointed out that although they had always had to work hard, the recent reforms had made their daily routine even more demanding” (1994:165). She suggests that the elderly and children were being brought into household labour more as a consequence of reform (1994:165). She points out a relationship between gendered production and labor allocation; whether sideline production or non-agricultural work was taken on predominantly by women (e.g. animal husbandry) or men (e.g. construction, mining) determined whether men or women continued – or even increased – their respective participation in agriculture (Croll 1994:166-7).

During the initial years of the reform period, activities previously conducted on a private basis could be characterized as “sidelines,” and sidelines were promoted by the government (Jacka 1997:145). Referring to domestic sidelines and the courtyard economy, Jacka argues that “what distinguishes the areas of work considered below is not so much their content, as their organisation

and their perceived location, both physically and in the economy” (1997:143). She identifies “four main types of production”:

(1) the cultivation of crops, fruit trees and vegetables on land around a peasant’s house, on private plots, in between the chief crops or on land not suitable for the chief crops; (2) the rearing of domestic livestock and poultry on land above or in courtyards; (3) the gathering of medicinal herbs and berries, hunting and fishing; and (4) the home production of handicrafts, including weaving, sewing and embroidery, the home processing of foodstuff and home production and repair of farm tools and other implements (1997:144).

In some respects, these activities continued the form of private production that households previously engaged in: “The area of land formerly used in Huaili as ‘private plots’ (*ziliudi*) is still allocated and cultivated in much the same way. It is now called ‘vegetable land’ (*caidi*), but little has changed except the encompassing context of market potential” (Judd 1994:131). Not only did vegetable production continue, in some places it also grew as private market prices rose (Huang 1990:215). For Huali, Qianrulin, and Zhangjiachedao villages, most households raised pigs and chickens (Judd 1994). Judd notes that pig raising was limited by the availability of fodder, and that some households would make production choices based on perceptions of advantageous demand and prices (1994:130).

Reform also resulted in decreased sideline production in some instances. Huang notes one village where fewer hogs were raised after quotas were removed in 1985 (1990:214). Both household and collective sidelines that did not provide significant returns were dropped in favour of more profitable options, such as crocheting, rabbit fur, and medicinal earthworms (1990:215). Huang notes that production of these would in turn fall, as supply increased and prices dropped. These shifts among households demonstrate, Huang argues, that “the farm household production unit is able to adapt readily to the changes”, in part because they were only “sidelines” using spare-time labor of the household and thus market fluctuations would not create great risks for households (1990:218).

The growth of village and township enterprises in the 1980s was dramatic and a key means of absorbing labour. Farmers were encouraged to work in township and village enterprises and were allowed to do so or run businesses if they were self-sufficient in grain (Cai and Wang 2003:75). Oi notes that “By 1987 rural industry surpassed agriculture as the dominant source of total rural income” (1999:1). Huang also observes that rural industry was more important than state or higher-level collective enterprise (1990). “Between 1978 and 1990, the percentage of the rural labor force engaged in village and township enterprises more than doubled, and the 57 million new jobs created from 1978 to 1986 alone equaled the total number of workers hired in all state-owned enterprises between 1952 and 1986” (Oi 1999:1-2). In Chashan commune, Guangdong, for example, half of the 109 teams had industries (Potter and Potter 1990:114). Local communist officials and “local government entrepreneurship” drove this growth (Oi 1999:2). In rich villages, some households would be subsidized to continue agricultural production so that the village could meet state quotas and consume in the village itself (Oi 1999:79). In other words, by the late 1980s, non-agricultural work was a critical source of employment and income in many parts of rural China.

Industrialization and private sector development depended on access to markets. As Huang notes for the Huayang area of his study, “Inland peripheral areas do not have the access to links with metropolitan industry or foreign capital and markets that the Shanghai area has enjoyed in recent years” (Huang 1990:259). Oi also points to the regional differences in rural industry:

Whereas in the eastern areas nonagricultural production was more than 80 percent of total rural output in 1994, in the central regions it was 15.5 percent in the western regions 19.5 percent. The differences are less sharp but nonetheless clear in employment terms. In the eastern regions, the nonagricultural labor force was 35 percent of the total rural labor force in 1994, while in the central regions it was only 23.5 percent and in the western regions 17.9 percent (1999:62).

In the areas where such opportunities existed, we can see that contemporary rural families have already had two to three decades of exposure to off-farm work and income.

#### *Migrant work vs. non-farm work*

With the intention of examining the emergence of labour markets, Parish et al. explore the degree of “nonfarm work” in China (1995:697). They use data from a 1993 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences survey of 141 villages in 32 towns and ten counties (1995:702).<sup>1</sup> They observed that “one-third of farm-born males and one-fifth of females were in nonfarm work” (1995:704). They define people “leaving” agriculture as “those whose father was a farmer” (1995:704). For Parish et al., the type of ownership of work site was a relevant feature: they distinguish between *state-owned or urban collective-owned enterprises* (approximately 20% of nonfarm employment), *rural collective enterprises* (approximately 40%), and the *private sector* (approximately 40%), the last of which consisted predominantly of self-employment (1995:708).

#### *Self-employment*

Referring to activities that others might consider “non-agricultural sidelines” or what Parish et al. call the “private sector”, Zhang et al. (2006) draw attention to *self-employment* in rural China. They note that from 1988 to 1995 self-employment accounted for almost 40 percent of “all new off-farm jobs created during that period”, when the ranks of the self-employed increased by 27 million to reach 52 million (2006:446). Using a 2000 dataset of 1,199 households in 60 villages in 6 provinces, they found that the vast majority, 93 percent, were “sole proprietorship” (compared to partnership) (2006:448). Zhang et al. estimate that 15% of the rural labor force in China is self-employed (2006:453). In their sample, they found that 25 percent were active in “wholesaling, retailing, and trading”, 21 percent in services, such as barber and tailor shops, 14 percent in

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<sup>1</sup> They refer to two samples: a “kin sample” and a smaller respondent sample of those who were available to be interviewed at the time (Parish et al 1995:704).

agriculture-related businesses, 15 percent in transportation and communication, with the remaining households engaged in other activities such as health care (2006:451). Notably, the average size of the sampled firms was 2.3 people, and “94% of workers in sample enterprises are members of the entrepreneur’s immediate family”, of whom “only 1% reported having drawn a wage” (2006:452). Most were husband-only firms (53%), while husband-wife operations had a share of 25% (2006:452). Focusing on these activities as “employment” may prevent us from seeing how remaining members of the family are involved in agricultural production for food (and indeed for the capital that may have gone to establish the “firm”).

Where off-farm employment through the 1980s was predominantly created in the rural areas, often allowing workers to continue to live in their homes, off-farm employment in the 1990s and beyond required a distinction between *local* and *non-local* employment. This distinction does not reveal differences in sectors or types of work, but is relevant for identifying different impacts on homes or families of out-migration.

### **3) Internal Migration: The view from the village**

With three decades of rural labour mobility, we observe changing patterns in rural-urban migration and rich diversity in rural households’ income generation strategies. Rural residents have migrated to work for economic and personal reasons. I note that migration has been facilitated in different patterns, based on the household availability of labour, demand within a “segmented” and “segregated” labour market and channels for migration that were established. In cases where migration was not facilitated, I note some sources of immobility of workers and their dependents.

#### *Who departs and why*

“Who” is migrating for work varies in place and time. Rural migrants include unmarried sons and daughters, married sons and daughters-in-law, male

heads of household, wives of household heads. Sometimes other family members accompany the migrants. Out-migration – the short-term and long-term movement of rural residents away from their home villages – results not only from changes in the policy environment, but also stems from the interplay of individual and family cycles, households' balances of land, labour, and capital and, as Murphy notes, of varying “values, goals, and resources” (2002).

Mallee argues that the availability of labour can be understood as “facilitating mobility”, or in other words facilitating the choice of labour migration as a route to cash income, rather than simply as a “push” factor (2000:55). Moreover, what is considered surplus labour can be *fluid* given changes in agricultural production. For example, certain cash crops could demand greater labour inputs; and low levels of capital investment in infrastructure translate into higher labour demand (e.g. water and fuel collection, human transport).

The migration experience of rural residents is richer and more complex than the pursuit of economic gain for household benefit. Migrant workers may have different intentions for leaving the village and different motivations for earning cash. The desire to get out into the city, to try one's fortune away from the village, or to gain autonomy may drive individuals to seek out these opportunities. Unwillingness to undertake agricultural work (Croll and Huang 1997:145), disinterest in rural life, the inspiration of television and media, attraction to perceived urban lifestyles and fashions (Yan Yunxiang 2003), and knowledge and awareness of potential outside opportunities also play a role.

Zhang found among Wenzhou female migrant workers that most wanted “to use their earnings to help build new houses for their natal families, obtain a better dowry, or support their brothers' education” (2001:130). As Zhang notes, female migration is also a way to delay marriage (2001:131). Thus, motivations

for earning cash and decisions on how income is to be spent are not necessarily intertwined with agriculture, but also with individual and family life cycles.

Using data from a study of women from Anhui and Sichuan from the late 1990s, Roberts et al challenge the image of young unmarried women traveling to export-oriented areas whose migration experience ends with marriage and the return to the village (2004). They found that women have multiple “migration episodes” and that married women migrate alone, with their husbands, and with their children (2004). In my anecdotal interviews in Lanzhou City, I encountered several stories of migration journeys with numerous stops, of women who had migrated with their husbands, sometimes leaving children behind in the village until they were ready to bring them along.

To Yan Hairong, in the post-Mao rural-urban context, migration is “a troubled process of subject formation for rural youth” (2003a:584). Young women that she interviewed were affected by a “discursive context” that differed from previous generations (2003a:584). Yan suggests the following contrast: “with Maoist modernity conceived of as improved national auto-sufficiency and post-Mao modernity defined as reinsertion of the nation into the global capitalist market” (2003a:584). With changes to rural-urban policy and of the reform and opening process, one which Yan emphasizes is entwined with the “global market economy” and its use of Chinese labour, the result is that “the rural is spectralized for the urban center telos” (2003a:584).

Who migrates has depended in many cases on migration channels created through village-based networks and connections (see Solinger (1999) and Zhang Li (2001)). The role of the local state in facilitating migration or in labour export has been a topic of interest (Solinger 1999). Guang argues for recognizing the important role that state actors had in organizing migration and creating channels for migration (2005). Fan argues that in transitional China gender is also a determining factor in what work opportunities draw rural workers: “Peasant

migrants are channeled into this labor market that is not only segmented between urbanites and peasants but also segregated by gender” (2003:27).

#### *Who returns*

As life-cycle needs may have driven individuals out to earn cash, others may bring them back to the village. Murphy discusses the individual and family pressures that bring long-term migrants back to their villages. For example, she observes young people returning home to marry, women returning home because of husbands, and migrants returning because parents ask them to (2002:204). For the young people of Wanzai, migration was a “stop-gap event between leaving school and marriage” (Murphy 2002:204). Migration itself is gendered in many ways and adaptation to it depends on “local gendered divisions of labor” (Murphy 2004a:252). Within the household, gender and generational divisions shift in response to both internal and external influences.

“Success” and “failure” are also used to explain return migration. Wang and Fan argue for “family” to be seen alongside success and failure as explanations for return migration (2006:949). Successful returnees would be those who return to the village and use their accumulated skills, knowledge, and capital to start businesses at home; failure migrants would be those who were not able to make a sufficient living in the city (2006:946).

Wang and Fan compare characteristics of continuing migrants, returnee migrants, and nonmigrants with similar data from a 1999 survey of Sichuan and Anhui rural residents. Wang and Fan summarize research that found between one quarter and 38% of all out-migrants returned (2006:941). Returnee migrants were older, less educated, and less trained than continuing migrants. For example, 78.9% of continuing migrants had education at or above junior secondary school, compared to 55.4% of returnee migrants and 46.4% of nonmigrants (2006:949). Based on their analysis, age was the most significant independent variable correlated to return migration (2006:948). The returnees group had the highest

proportion of married people and the lowest proportion of men (2006:946). In the survey, returnees could select three out of eight options to explain why they returned; these included age, marriage, childbirth, caregiving, health, job, investment and other (2006:949). Out of 1,559 responses, “Other” accounted for 23.67 percentage of the responses. Otherwise “Job” (23.22%), i.e. challenges of finding employment, and “Caregiving” for a family member (22.71%) were the most frequently named reasons, followed by “Childbirth” (11.10%) and “Marriage” (9.49%) (2006:949). Return migration is not only about needs in the village; Wang and Fan also mention concerns about children’s access to education (2006:943, 951).

#### *Continued relationship to allotted land*

Households do not necessarily move in a single linear direction away from agriculture, as noted above. Most Chinese rural households stay connected to land and to their home village for a few reasons: they continue to hold responsibility land (unlike other countries where more people are landless), familial obligations keep them connected, and they have administrative and financial barriers to a permanent move to an urban area. Migration away from the village occurs in cycles of return. As Pang et al. note, sometimes the poor health of the elderly in a family will keep able-bodied labourers on the farm, or will bring them back (2004:85). Murphy discusses how return migrants can become involved with entrepreneurial activities in their home villages (2002). The Chinese government’s recent subsidies for grain production reportedly drew farmers back to abandoned land. Economic decline in the industrialized regions can also push workers back to the countryside. In the next section, I will explore the situation in Zhushu<sup>2</sup> village, Yuzhong County, to assess the absence and return of villagers there.

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<sup>2</sup> Zhushu is not the real name of the village.

#### IV. ZHUSHU VILLAGE: LIVELIHOOD & LEFT-BEHIND

Because of the expansion of investment and development into China's western regions in recent years (Goodman 2004), landlocked Gansu Province provides an interesting site for research. My fieldwork took place in Zhushu Village in Yuzhong County, one of the rural counties included in Lanzhou City, the provincial capital region. I also conducted interviews with migrant workers in Lanzhou City proper. Below I outline my methodology and then proceed to introduce Zhushu village.

Fifty-two households were interviewed out of 856 households in the village and of these 48 had sufficient information to use. While this sample size was not sufficient to be representative, I did try to use random selection methods to determine which households would be interviewed. Using a table of random numbers, I selected a list of household numbers and of these 40 were interviewed. Because our visits were around the Spring Festival period, it is possible that we were less affected by the bias that might follow from the fact that we could only reach families during the day, as more family members were spending time at home. Among the nine sub-village groups in the village, one of them has its own sequential numbering system, so I chose random numbers to pick household numbers from its group of 80. Another 12 households that were not on the list of random numbers were approached if someone was home. At least one family from each sub-village group was interviewed. The majority of villagers approached were willing to participate in interviews.

A total of seven students assisted me with my interviews. Two of them accompanied me on my first visits and learned about my interview approach. These two students later took another two students, with whom I also spoke in detail about my project and interviews. Together, these four students were the key interviewers, and they were subsequently paired up with another three students who provided support. For the most part, interviews were conducted in pairs, with one person asking questions and the other taking notes. Each day after

they returned, they related their interviews. We tried as much as possible to have them report back to me in their original interview pairs so that they could fill in for each other any parts that were missing. I was able to ask questions to clarify and also to provide additional questions that they could pursue in later interviews.

These interviews were complemented by interviews that I undertook in Lanzhou City. In Lanzhou, I visited several neighbourhoods known to attract migrant workers. Although these interviews could not be representative in any way, they gave me an opportunity to learn more about the different backgrounds and views of migrant workers. In Lanzhou, in Chengguan district, I interviewed people around the main commercial-retail strip, the train station, bus station, and the major dried goods wholesale market, Dongbushichang. In the Yantan district, I interviewed people around the construction supplies market and Zhangsutun, the central food wholesale market in Lanzhou, which serves as a key wholesale market for the northwestern provinces. In Qilihe district, I visited the market area and stores near the West Train station, as well as the Xiaoxihu neighbourhood, which is known as a source of migrants from the predominantly Muslim counties south of Lanzhou.

Ranked in 2005 among the least developed provinces/regions in China by the UN's Human Development Index (28 of 31), Gansu has a population of 26 million, approximately 92% of which is Han Chinese. Average per capita net income in rural areas was 1,980 yuan RMB in 2005, compared with the national average of 3,254.9 (China National Bureau of Statistics 2006). Growing seasons are short (171.8 frost-free days in 2005), soil quality poor, rainfall levels low (427.6 mm in 2005). Gansu is a predominantly rural and agricultural province. In 2005, almost 70% of the population was living in rural areas (in comparison to 57% nationally) (China National Bureau of Statistics 2006).

## 1) Zhushu Village

Zhushu village is located around the town seat, near the “Bai Hu” (white tiger) mountain range (now renamed “Cui Ying Mountain”), about 15 kilometres from the Yuzhong County seat, and not far from the “San Jiao Cheng” exit of the state-level highway from Lanzhou.<sup>3</sup> The elevation of the area ranges from 1450-1800 metres above sea level (Yuzhong County Gazetteer Editorial Committee 2001:103), lies in Yuan Chuan river valley, a tributary of the Yellow River (Yuzhong County Gazetteer Editorial Committee 2001:115). Nearby now lie the secondary campuses of Lanzhou University and the Northwest Minorities University, which chose to move out to Yuzhong County rather than expand within the city.

Zhushu is an administrative village consisting of 9 sub-villages and a population of over 3,000 in 856 households. Average income is reportedly 2,500 yuan per person, according to the former party secretary.<sup>4</sup> From a few facts about the village layout and demographics, we can discern its relative economic situation. Situated in a valley, where it has access to irrigation, it has better physical conditions than villagers in the surrounding “mountainous areas”, as some villagers refer to other parts of the county. A generation ago, some families moved to the village from a mountainous area. Sub-villages 1, 2, and 3 lie to the east, with sub-village 1 extending off from the town street. Sub-village 4 is centrally located. Sub-village 8 is also considered a “natural village” – it is located approximately 1 km away, adjacent to the current university campus, and bears its own name as well as a separate numbering system for houses. There are approximately 80 households in this natural village. On the west side are sub-villages 5, 6, 7, and 9 (sub-village 9 was formerly included as part of sub-village 7

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<sup>3</sup> The village is approximately two hours from central Lanzhou by public bus.

<sup>4</sup> There are about 20 to 30 households that are considered “*te kun*” i.e. very poor; the party secretary explains that it is usually because of “*zhili*” or intellectual ability problems. Another 100 or so are regularly poor (*yiban pinkun*), either because of illness or in the party secretary’s assessment, unwillingness to work hard. There are reportedly some people who receive senior’s subsidies, i.e. 50yuan/month or 600 yuan/year; it was understood to be for people over 70 years old with 1 or 2 children. As for those who qualify for “Five Protections” benefits (*wu baohu*) the party secretary said that it could not be achieved. For low income (*dibao*) the party secretary knew that the subsidy was some 20 yuan.

but then separated into its own sub-village). These sub-villages used to be located where the town street now lies. From about 1974-5 to 1981, over 200 houses were moved to build the town's main street.

The town's commercial street runs through the north end of the village and consists mostly of one-storey buildings, such as the town health clinic, police station, and the local branches of a bank, rural cooperative, and China Telecom. The small Zhushu train station is also located off this main street. Stores include general goods stores, few clothing stores, and agricultural stores (e.g. processing of oil, fertilizer stores). On the south side of the village is a major road running towards the entrance of Lanzhou University's Yuzhong Campus. Not far away is a chemical fertilizer factory, the outline of which is clearly visible from certain spots of the village. At another end of the village, separated from the villagers' homes by the stretch of a wide road, the town government's blue building stands; at 4-5 stories, it is the tallest structure in sight. The village is the seat of the town.<sup>5</sup> For several years, a public bus has been running through the village. The county seat can be easily reached by small bus. The village has its own pre-school, primary school, and junior middle school.

From their household conditions, I conclude that these villagers live modest lives, but with many conveniences still lacking in more remote areas. Families generally have three one-storey buildings facing a small courtyard. Each courtyard has a surrounding wall made of brick. Houses were formally straw-mud structures, but now most are made of red brick. Some have white tile decorations. Doorways are often covered with colourful quilts made of geometric shapes. Rooms have coal stoves and villagers treat purchased coal as a necessity,

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<sup>5</sup> The last village elections were held in December 2007. The village committee has five members, none of whom are women. There is a women's representative, but she does not sit on the committee. The elected party committee also has five members, none of whom are women. The former party secretary reported that there used to be women on the village committee when the committee was larger. Each "*dui*" has between 1-3 "*duizhang*". These are not elected. The former party secretary spent 13 years as the village leader and 9 years as the party secretary. He is now about 60 years old (i.e. he became village leader in his late 30s).

unlike poorer areas where coal is still reserved for special occasions. Buildings have one to four rooms, all with doors facing the courtyard. Most sleep on a *kang*, a large heated platform bed common in north China, but some families have regular bedroom furniture. When spending time at home, women may sit on the *kang*, sewing or knitting. Kitchens have tile covered stove areas (i.e. burned with straw or in some cases firewood). Some have electric stoves. Sometimes cooking can be done on the coal stove inside a regular room. Flooring is brick or cement. Some families have added tiles to the floors. A couple of households have even constructed shower rooms, with tiles and water piped into a shower that uses a solar water heater, inspired by urban facilities.

Access to media and transportation is not a challenge in this village. By the late 1980s, most people in the village had a black and white television. By the late 1990s most had colour televisions. According to the former party secretary's recollection, there were few bicycles in the 1960s, but they became popular by the late 1970s. One household reporting having three to four bicycles, essentially one for each person. Three-wheel vehicles of different kinds and mechanized hand plows became popular by the late 1990s. Several villagers mentioned purchasing such items in recent years. For example, a "*san beng beng*" or three-wheel vehicle cost one family 5,000 yuan a few years ago. Thus villagers have ease of transportation. In the following section, I explore land and agricultural conditions.

## **2) Land and Agriculture**

In order to determine whether those left behind in the village had a heavy agricultural labour burden, I wanted to find out how much land Zhushu villagers had available, what they did with it, and how they balanced their labour needs. At the same time, I wanted to find out how paid employment might compare to agricultural earnings.

*How does land availability and agricultural structure affect the labour of those in the village?*

The term *liushou* can evoke an image of women and elderly toiling in the fields. Yet there are some mechanisms for shifting out land access, such that those households lacking in labour power are not necessarily burdened with land that they cannot manage. Land use rights (and the labour demanded for them) are held by the household unit but also moved around to extended family, including both male and female children who have married out. Land use rights have varying degrees of value for households and thus fit into household calculations in different ways. In most of the cases I encountered, when it is possible to work locally and farm, households will continue to do both. Below I review the trend of decline in arable land availability, which might further push down the significance of agriculture in the local economy. I then discuss how labour shortages due to out-migration can be addressed in part by adjusting the amount of land farmed.

#### *Decline in arable land*

Yuzhong County went through the process of converting to the household responsibility system from 1980 to 1982 (Yuzhong County Gazetteer Editorial Committee 2001:184). The county overall has seen a decline of per capita land between 1949 and 1990, according to the county gazetteer. In 1949, the county had 871,194 mu<sup>6</sup> or 6.22 mu per capita. The amount of arable land went up through the 1950s and 1960s until there was 1,218,100 mu in 1962, but per capita land was declining to 5.21 mu. By 1990, the total arable land in the county was 1,229,400 mu, and just 2.78 mu per person (Yuzhong County Gazetteer Editorial Committee 2001:184-5).

We can see a similar pattern in decline of arable land in the village. The village currently has total arable land of 4,900 mu, all of which is valley land (*chuan di*), not mountainous land. This averages approximately 1.6 mu per

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<sup>6</sup> Mu is a unit of area equivalent to approximately 0.1647 acres.

person, most of which is irrigated. Approximately 18 percent of the village's arable land has been converted to non-agricultural use. The village used to have 6,000 mu, but lost over 1,100 over the years due to factory construction, road expansion, construction of the town street, the development of university campuses, construction of a water station, and conversion to residential land for new families. Various forms of compensation were offered to families in exchange for land. A sub-village leader provided the following summary. One of the first major conversions was to build a fertilizer factory, which provided 10,000 yuan per mu or a guaranteed job. Later, road construction and Lanzhou University compensation gave villagers about 10,000 yuan per mu, roughly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Northwest Minorities University, which came later, offered 18,000 yuan per mu. Most recently, the water factory (*shui chang*) gave compensation of 30,000 yuan per mu in 2005.

#### *Land division*

In Zhushu village, land was first divided in the first half of 1981, and then was adjusted based on demographic changes three times after that, most recently in the late 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Unger points out that in many villages, re-allocations of land to meet demographic needs took place in spite of official central policy (2005); this may have been the case here as well.<sup>8</sup>

The process of land division, as in the rest of rural China, is deeply gendered (Judd 2007). Given that land resources and agricultural production can be connected to labour and migration choices, we should recognize that gender issues in land use rights are important. Among the households interviewed, there

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<sup>7</sup> Long-term use rights were affirmed in 1984 when terms were extended from three to fifteen years, and the right to transfer land was included in the 1986 Land Management Law (Ho and Lin 2002:691). Land was being rented out to outsiders, particularly in areas where residents were no longer farming (Ho and Lin 2003:691), but this occurred in a grey realm legally until the 1998 Land Management Law confirmed that land could be rented to individuals and units outside the collective (Ho and Lin 2003:691). In addition, land-use rights were formally extended to thirty-year terms in this law (Ho and Lin 2003:690).

<sup>8</sup> Household members that have an urban *hukou* do not receive a land allocation. For example, the retired male workers in YZ-8 and YZ-20 who receive pensions do not have land allocations.

was a handful of examples that showed the gender bias in current land management practice. For example, one family reported that land was last divided in 1995, but they noted that the wife only got 1.2 mu of land and the son only 0.8 mu (YZ-7). In another family (YZ-9), an adult daughter's land was reclaimed by the village when she married out of the household, but the village did not allot land for their new daughter-in-law (who in fact works in Lanzhou with their son). In a family where the elderly parents are taking care of their daughters' children, they have only land allocated for themselves, not for their daughters or grandchildren. Their daughters' land was reclaimed by the village after they married (YZ-11).

### *Informal land re-allocation*

Households find ways to re-assign land informally. Since most families are still farming, there is no evidence of the land exchange mechanisms instituted in other areas.<sup>9</sup> What happens in cases where out-migration and/or generational change have not left enough labour power or interest in farming? Villagers do rent out land for a nominal fee to other households (100-200 yuan/mu) according to the former party secretary. Other families seem to have made adjustments among their extended family or with neighbours to adjust to excesses or shortages of land. Some families make arrangements with parents, siblings, or extended family. For example, in one family where the remaining elderly couple does not have labour power to farm, their married daughter farms their land (YZ-8). A widowed man and his youngest son together retain seven or eight mu of land, but the son is away from the village working elsewhere. Who farms the land? Another son, who has separated families, farms all of his father and brother's

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<sup>9</sup> Qian et al (2004) describe land exchanges and "innovative market institutions" (2004:1066) in their study of rentals in Zhejiang Province in 2001. In their survey, they found that land market exchanges had risen: 20.8 percent of households participated in land exchanges, effecting 13.1 percent of arable land" (Qian et al 2004:1054). Examining cases of renting out land, they found that under thirty percent occurred privately to villagers within or outside their village (Qian et al. 2004:1068). Almost all the remaining cases involved village mediation in the exchange (2004:1068), often to rent to agribusiness for larger-scale farming, which led them to observe three new "institutions": land trusts, "reverse renting and sub-contracting", and a "shareholding land cooperative", where households transfer land rights as shares into a cooperative structure, which they can rent out land (2004). By contrast, Zhushu did not appear to have any connection to land rental to agribusiness or contract farming that extended beyond the household.

land, except for just under two mu. This son in turn lets other people farm some of his land, as the total land he has is more than he can manage. According to the father, he does not receive financial compensation for letting out his land (YZ-31).

Sometimes arrangements are made between villagers based on availability of land. One farmer mentioned that after losing land to expropriation he did not have enough for his needs so he used land that was assigned to someone who was no longer in the village. In another example, we see how family change (i.e. a divorce) rather than out-migration can decide the availability of labour to work the land: a divorced man lets another family farm his land. He works at the Lanzhou train station, and there is no other labour power in his family to work the land (YZ-42). Meanwhile, some families seek out more land. A couple in their mid-40s with two teenaged children uses some extra land – 4 mu is theirs and 4 mu belong to people who have moved away. They do not pay rent, since there is no tax. They farm this extra land, even though the husband works at a local factory and she gets occasional work over the year (YZ-52).

### *Agriculture*

Despite the rising costs of agriculture, particularly around irrigation, fertilizer, and labour costs, households in the village continue to farm crops for their own consumption and for sale. Villagers were not asked extensively about their agricultural workload, but except for those households choosing more labour-intensive vegetable production, there was little mention of insufficient labour power. The availability of what Murphy refers to as “labor substitutes” (2004a:256) gives households added flexibility. Not only can they hire additional help for harvesting and sometimes planting, they can also use mechanized hand-plows and tractors and rent livestock from villagers in order to save themselves the labour burden of caring for livestock throughout the year. Although in my own research I was not able to chart the relationship between out-migration and the labour burden for those who remained in the village, it could be argued that

this village fit well into one of observations made by Murphy as she examined the workload of elderly women, wives, and young girls in four villages in Jiangxi (2004a). The impact of out-migration on women who were left behind depended on a mix of factors, including whether remittances could cover living expenses as well as the existence of labor substitutes (2004a:256). She concluded that “Heavy workloads are especially serious for women living in poor households, widows, and women living in villages without access to mutual aid labor or mechanized services” (2004a:261).

In Zhushu Village, villagers have the benefit of irrigation; they do not have to count on the heavens to survive, or “*kao tian chi fan*”, as many others throughout arid Gansu do. In fact, many families reported that they did not bother farming their dryland, leaving it to *huangzhe* or lie fallow. For the most part, this share of dryland was less than one mu. Families generally plant a mix of wheat, corn, flaxseed, and vegetables. During the collective period, essentially the same crops were grown, though they also grew more tobacco and fewer vegetables. Some families reportedly still grow a bit of tobacco, but we did not meet any. Some families have plastic greenhouses, but not many, as it seems that it requires a considerable investment. Subsidies for grain (19 yuan/mu according to one family) are provided for the land on which wheat is grown.

Zhushu villagers treat agricultural production as a source of food and to a lesser extent income. As we know from other research, China’s rural population depends to a large extent on self-produced food. Using China National Bureau of Statistics data, Gale et al found that in 2003 an average of 38% of rural food expenditures were “‘noncash’ expenditures” (2005:4); it was not only low-income families but also high-income ones that count on producing their own food (2005: 5). They found that the cash share of expenditures was significantly higher in the eastern and central provinces, but even in those provinces rural households still consumed their own self-produced grains, purchasing only 19% of the grains they

consumed (2005:6-7). Thus, it is not surprising that Zhushu village residents continue to grow food.

### *Wheat, corn, and flaxseed*

Most families grow winter wheat for their own consumption, saving it for up to 2-3 years (YZ-4). Some families do sell their wheat; for example, YZ-7 sold for 0.8 to 0.9 yuan/jin<sup>10</sup>. One way to sell it is to sell it to villagers from a neighbouring village that has committed much of its land to greenhouses. For the most part, they do not buy seeds for wheat, and instead save their own seeds. Seeds costs 50 jin per mu (YZ-12). Output per mu ranges from 800 jin to over 1,000 jin, with one family reporting that it managed to get a yield of 2,000 jin by applying a lot of fertilizer. Weeding, which is women's task, is done in 3-4th month. Wheat is harvested in 5-6 month of the lunar calendar. Grinding wheat costs 5 yuan for 100 jin.

Families that grow corn use it to feed their own pigs or to sell it to feed companies. Most buy high-yield seeds from the local *nongkezhan*, or agricultural technology station. One widely used variety used is Shengdan #10. One household mentioned buying it from the county (YZ-7). Seeds cost 5 yuan per jin, and 5 jin are needed per mu, according to YZ-11. Corn is harvested in the seventh or eighth months of the lunar calendar.

Flaxseed is grown for self-consumption as cooking oil or is sold. For example, one household that grew 2.5 mu of flaxseed kept half and sold half, earning about 1,000 yuan (YZ-27). Seeds cost 5 yuan per jin; they use 15 jin for over one mu in one household (YZ-12). It costs 8-9 yuan to process 100 jin of seeds (YZ-7), which they can do at a small shop on the town street. Oil can also be sold at the price of 13 yuan per jin. One household sold 800 jin of seeds for 2.4 yuan per jin. If they make it into oil, 100 jin of seeds produces 33 jin of oil, which they can sell for 13 yuan per jin (YZ-5). One household reported harvesting 300-

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<sup>10</sup> Jin is a unit of measurement equivalent to approximately 0.5 kilograms.

400 jin per mu (YZ-13). In other words, one mu of flaxseed can produce enough oil worth approximately 1260 to 1680 yuan. Although some families do earn funds through flaxseed oil production, few families treated flaxseed as a cash crop like fruits and vegetables.

### *Fruit and vegetables*

Although vegetables offer the potential to earn cash income that wheat and flaxseed do not, not all families choose to grow vegetables, weighing market risks and the extra labour power required to tend to vegetables. Vegetables are grown primarily for sale to peddlers or vendors who buy from the village to sell elsewhere; the village likely benefits from its relative proximity to urban Lanzhou. Villagers grow cauliflower, cabbage, greens (*qingcai*), and carrots. In the past, hot peppers were popular. Tomatoes and cucumbers are not grown in this village as they are in nearby villages, as Zhushu villagers do not have greenhouses, which villagers commented were expensive and a growing technique they were not familiar with. Without greenhouse investments, households in Zhushu can still profit from their vegetable production. YZ-4 can make a 2,000 yuan profit on one mu of cauliflower, cabbage and a green vegetable (3,000 gross, 1,000 yuan costs). Labour and other inputs are relatively high. For example, carrot seeds, which were bought locally, cost 30 yuan/jin. One family growing 8-9 fen<sup>11</sup> of carrots could get about 200 yuan worth of carrots from each fen of land (YZ-27). Some commented that they do not grow vegetables because the risks are too high. Prices can be unstable. For example, YZ-9 described a season when just 0.2 yuan was earned per jin for their carrots. YZ-43 commented that income from vegetables is not stable and that growing wheat is more *huasuan* or cost-effective. The labour investment required to grow vegetables can be an issue. For example, in one household it was explained that they grew fewer vegetables after the wife in the household started to work locally (YZ-28). Vegetable growing has led to cooperation among fellow-vegetable growers, where wheat harvest tends to draw on help from relatives.

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<sup>11</sup> Fen is a unit of area that is equivalent to 1/10<sup>th</sup> mu.

Families that are located in sub-village 8 have small orchards. These families generally forego growing wheat, focusing instead on a mix of fruit, mostly apples, and corn. Apples can be a good source of cash income for these households, but they have to use their cash to buy wheat. For example, YZ-11 with 1.5 mu of apples earned 3-4,000 yuan in profit. Similarly, another household (YZ-10) with just over 1 mu reported that it could earn 3-4,000 yuan when the fruit grows well.

### *Agricultural Inputs*

Households in Zhushu Village, as in other parts of China, face rising input costs, which can make agriculture less affordable and less of a worthwhile investment compared to working. One farmer (YZ-5) commented that farming is not cost-effective, especially as agricultural costs increase. He cited one fertilizer's price jumping from 40 to 70 yuan; similarly, where it would have cost 5 yuan to have someone transport things it might now cost 15 yuan. In his case, money earned from working went to cover these costs. Villagers regularly apply chemical fertilizers, mainly urea. One household with 7 mu (YZ-37) had just bought inputs for the coming season, spending 607 yuan on 5 bags of urea (72 yuan per bag), 3 bags of phosphate fertilizer (22 yuan per bag), 2 bags of ammonium bicarbonate, and 9 jin of flaxseed seeds. This household reported spending 2,000 yuan the previous year, so this is likely one of a few purchases for the year.

One of the most significant costs for Zhushu Village households is irrigation. Irrigation water in this village comes from well water (from production team-owned wells or privately-owned wells) or from the Yellow River, pumped in by the San Dian Water Factory. Villagers noted that water levels have been declining and that well water resources are decreasing. Residents of a sub-village near the Lanzhou University apparently also use waste water from the campus. Families are charged by the hour for irrigation water – each crop receives 2-3

rounds, and there is also a round for winter irrigation, which according to one old man is the most expensive as it uses the most water. One household noted that their land is irrigated three times per year, 6-7 hours each time (YZ-12). Payment goes through the sub-village leader (*duizhang*) or for private wells directly to the well-owner. Water from the recently developed San Dian Water Factory costs 40 yuan per hour, which was twice the cost of well water available to one household (YZ-46). One household reported that it costs 78-80 or 100 yuan to irrigate one mu. For one private well, which was reportedly dug for 130,000 yuan, water costs 15 yuan/hour, significantly more than the 9.5/hour cost of the village well. One household that runs a small shop said that they have some exchange accounts with the village committee – village cadres come and take things from the store, but then do not charge them for water. They have not paid for water costs in two years (YZ-43). In addition to the financial cost of irrigation, there is also a labour cost. For example, when irrigation waters are released, it is on a 24-hour schedule, and villagers are informed of when to attend to their own fields.

As noted above, the total costs of irrigation represent a significant expense for households. For example, one household (YZ-4) with 3.5 mu of land, including one mu of vegetables, spends over 400 yuan each year on irrigation. YZ-7 said it spends 7-800 yuan for its 6 mu (including one mu of vegetables). YZ-9 1,300-1,500 on water for 5 mu (including 1.6 mu of vegetables). YZ-14 a household with 6 mu of land, all irrigated, spent 1,114.50 yuan on irrigation (they happened to have a receipt on hand). YZ-18 spent 500 yuan for 5 mu. YZ-22 spent over 1,000 yuan on water for 6-7 mu. YZ-25 spent over 1,000 yuan for over 6 mu. YZ-27 spent 7-800 yuan for 4 mu of irrigated land, including 0.8-9 of vegetables; they also spent about 1,000 yuan on pesticide and fertilizer. YZ-32 spent 8-900 yuan on water for 5-6 mu of land.

#### *Agricultural labour, mechanization, and livestock*

To complete agricultural tasks, households use a combination of labour substitutes, seasonal return migration, and sometimes mutual assistance. For

those employed locally, they are fortunate that their work follows the agricultural calendar. For example, the break around the Spring Festival holiday and during the summer holiday allows farmers to take care of the wheat harvest. Some families note that they have been affected by lack of labour availability. YZ-5 reported returning home for the harvest, YZ-7 said they did not have enough labour. Some families cut back on their paid work to take care of agricultural work. For example, YZ-9 both husband and wife work occasionally locally, but will not if there if they are too busy with crops.

Gender distinctions in labour are not very strong, though generally speaking men plow if they have a hand-held mechanical plow (*shoufu tuolaji*), and are responsible for monitoring irrigation, but households seem to adapt depending on the availability of labour. One woman claimed that only women do weeding, but in other families both men and women did weeding. Vegetable production is more time consuming. A couple of families seemed to have increased their vegetable production only in the last couple of years (to 1-2 mu). It seems that vegetable growing has occasioned cooperation among households: vegetable growers help each other with planting and harvest of vegetables. YZ-9 reported that both men and women do all agricultural work, but men largely take care of plowing and irrigation.

Few families have their own livestock for plowing. Most use either a hand-held mechanical plow (apparently 1/3 of families have one) or pay other families that have livestock (mules or oxen) to till their land for between 20-35 yuan/mu. A hand-held mechanical plow cost 4,500 in the fall of 2007. YZ-9 used its own money and borrowed 2,000 yuan to make this purchase. One family explained that it rents livestock because its land cannot be reached by tractor; they pay 30 yuan/day.

For harvest, families often pay for extra help— migrant farm labourers, referred to as “*maike*”, from Dingxi or Longxi (prefectures to the south) come to

work in groups. *Maike* have been coming for many years for this work (it seems that the Lanzhou harvest comes earlier, so they can work before returning home for their own harvest). One villager estimated that there have been labourers working the harvest since the 1980s. Households reported spending between 80 and 120 yuan per mu. It might be a bit more expensive if the wheat has grown too tall and has fallen over. One household (YZ-46) explained that they hired 6-7 people to work for three days at a cost of 100 yuan per mu.

By comparison, in Chan et al's Chen Village in Guangdong, outmigration at the outset of the reform period created labour shortages and demand for temporary "farmhands" from poorer counties (1992:274) and by 1982 there were some one hundred outsiders working there (1992:274). By the 1990s, with local villagers able to rely on remittances from relatives in Hong Kong or on employment, few farmed themselves. Instead, migrants from other parts of Guangdong came semi-permanently to farm the land, on what Chan et al call a "sharecropping basis" (1992:301). In Zhushu village, extra farm labour continues to be seasonal only.

### *Livestock*

Only a minority of families keeps large livestock. Some families choose to reduce their labour burden by not keeping livestock, while the remaining families who do keep livestock use it as a way to generate income. About 20-30 families have large livestock, which they rent out to other families. A couple of families commented on how it is not cost-effective to raise their own plowing livestock (because you have to feed them all year, unlike a tractor). In one household, the husband rents out livestock for a living (see section on self-employment below). Families can even save themselves hours of cooperative work that they might have spent in the past slaughtering pigs at Spring Festival. About 10 years ago, a slaughterhouse (*tuzai chang*) was established nearby, so families take pigs there for 30-40 yuan, rather than kill the pig themselves, which is a lot of work as it requires boiling a large quantity of water.

There is little animal husbandry in the village. Some families grow a few chickens. One family used to have chickens, but they were killed when the bird flu was a concern, and they did not resume raising them. One family that was interviewed actually raised sows to sell piglets. The year before, 3 sows produced 40-50 piglets. In 2006, each piglet sold for 70-80 yuan. In the second half of 2007, the price shot up to 3-400 yuan per piglet. They sold 10,000 yuan of piglets, for which the estimated profit was 3-4,000 yuan. Seeing the potential in the raised prices, they decided to get more sows, and had four or five at the time of the interview (YZ-37). Most families grow 1-2 pigs, primarily for self-consumption but they can also sell if they have enough meat. That year, one household sold half a pig for 800 yuan. Another used 1,500 jin of corn and *fupi* to feed its pig. Interviewees noted that costs of piglets had jumped up that year, and a couple of families expressed concern that they would not be able to get a piglet because of the cost and high demand. In the recent past, they cost 100 yuan, but had apparently jumped to 4-500 yuan; for at least one household, the price was too high (YZ-9).

### **3) Non-Farm Work and Self-Employment**

Among the 48 households interviewed, there were 207 people who were named as household members (in this estimate, I include family members who were working outside of the village, but not family members who were described as having moved permanently to another area). Although I did not collect detailed data on exactly how labour was allocated and how many days were spent away from the village, based on the general descriptions provided, I estimate that in the preceding year 31 people were working most of the year away from the village (21 male and 10 female), 49 were working near the village and living at home (29 male and 20 female), and another 52 were engaged primarily in agricultural and domestic work. Of the remaining villagers, 57 were children, elderly, or disabled people who did not perform much productive labour, and

another 18 were students at the senior middle school level or above (8 studying away from the village and 10 studying locally).

To determine who might be left behind, I wanted to find out in each household who had gone out to work, doing what, where, and for what length of time. I learned that Zhushu villagers had as much as three decades of formal employment, and that employment opportunities changed based on local industry and economic developments. Although the village has lost arable land, it has gained a range of employment opportunities for different demographic groups in the village. Over the years, the particular mix of gender segregated labour changed in the village. Through the 1980s and 1990s, a number of village men found jobs at the local train station and nearby rural industry, many of them involving heavy labour. Some villagers also started to leave for work and business elsewhere. In the 2000s, the establishment of second campuses for two major Lanzhou-based universities in the Zhushu Village area created job positions as “cleaners” for villagers, for which a number of women were hired. Villagers also reported informal temporary work and self-employment opportunities. In this section, I describe the older cohorts of non-farm workers, some now retired, almost all male, who were working locally. I then highlight the range of employment and income generation opportunities available locally. Despite this range, many, particularly younger residents, including single women, choose to find work outside the village, which I subsequently outline.

#### *Earlier cohorts of workers*

Many older Zhushu villagers, particularly men, already know a lifetime of paid non-farm employment. That there are many residents remaining in the village in their 50s and 60s who themselves were not full-time farmers further challenges the image of weak elderly whose offspring are unwilling to stay in the village and farm. One 52-year-old man referred to how he started to labour when he was 15 or 16 to earn workpoints in the production team in the 1970s (YZ-49). Some people already went out to work in the 1980s, once the household

responsibility system was in place. For example, YZ-49 describes going to Yuzhong County or Lanzhou for unskilled work. A 51-year-old man first started working when he was 16 (in the early 1970s). He had worked in Lanzhou and Longxi. In the past, he made 5 yuan per day. He used to work all year long in construction and at the time had other people farm his land. Now he works just two to three months per year doing physical labour (e.g. working with bricks and sand at local construction sites, where he can earn 30 yuan per day). His wife, who is the same age, has been running a small shop for many years (YZ-18). A 52-year-old man has worked for many years as a cement/clay skilled worker. He started in 1981. He now works four months out of the year, making 40 yuan per day doing cement work (YZ-25). A 60-year-old man used to go out to work at the Lanzhou Airforce (which was located near the village where Lanzhou University's Yuzhong Campus is now situated) and at the railroad. He could earn 2.5 yuan per day in 1982. As a carpenter, he is considered a skilled worker and could earn 30 yuan per day. More recently, he worked for three or four years at Lanzhou University's Yuzhong Campus, but now he is too old. The family plants 2.8 mu of vegetables (YZ-19).

A handful of older men receive pensions, which highlights the lack of sufficient state benefits to the rural elderly. For this handful of individuals that had the opportunity to obtain formal work many years before, they could live relatively comfortable on their pensions. One man (YZ-8) who reported receiving 7-8,000 per year, was in the army and then in the Lanzhou No. 7 Car Tire Factory. He does not have a rural *hukou*, so he does not have land. His wife has 1 mu. They buy grain to eat and cover health care costs with the pension. A retiree from the Yuzhong Cement Factory receives 960 yuan per month. He notes that he is a “*zhengshi tuixiu gongren*,” or an officially retired worker (YZ-13). His son also has a factory job, but not a stable one. A retired 66-year-old male teacher makes 2,000 yuan per month from his pension (YZ-16). A 70-year-old man reported having been in the workforce for 54 years, having been in the army, in the public security bureau, in security at Gansu Agricultural University, and at a cigarette

factory (YZ-36). There were no examples of women receiving pensions. For those who never secured a stable job, a lifetime of hard labour and temporary work would not result in any kind of pension.

*Younger cohorts of workers engaged in local industry and commerce*

While in recent years the presence of new periurban university campuses created employment, the local train station has served as a significant source of work for many men in the village. Different generations have made a living working at the local train station, a small local stop on the rail line that connects to Lanzhou. But for a number, it seems that the hard labour of some of the jobs was unsustainable, and marked just one segment of their occupational histories. One 52-year-old worked there in the 1980s as part of the production team (YZ-3). A number of male residents reported working there as loaders for several years until their bodies could no longer bear the physical demands of the work. They had to seek other work. For example, a 58-year-old man worked for years as a loader at the train station, which he first started doing during the collective era. He made 200-300 yuan per month, but this money had to be given to the production team. He would get workpoints in return. After reform and opening, he could earn 500 yuan per month, but he only worked for another few years as it was very tiring work (YZ-32). There was technical work available on the rail line too. A 55-year-old man spent 35 years working on the railroad, doing assembly (not loading as many other villagers did). He did not get a pension, just a one-time severance payment of 14,000 yuan or so, to his dissatisfaction. He now runs a small shop in the village repairing agricultural machines while his wife farms (YZ-29).

Younger generations continue to work at the train station, earning an income comparable to what might be earned in the city, but without the living expenses of being in a city. A married man in his thirties works as a temporary loader, making 7-800 yuan per month, which he does not share with his parents, though he and his wife and two children are living with them. Meanwhile, his

brother is in Harbin (YZ-51). A 36-year-old tried working in Lanzhou; he met his wife there and ended up returning to the village. He now works at the train station, where his older brother also works, making 1,000-2,000 yuan each month (YZ-2). For some individuals in the village, then, working at home can be preferable to trying to work in the city.

The local fertilizer factory has been another major employer of men in the village. The fertilizer factory was established in 1969 as a state-owned enterprise. In 1994, there were over 1,000 employees there. By 2000, the company was failing. In 2002, the use of the factory was transferred to private operators, while the government retained ownership. In 2005, the factory was completely privatized and sold to a Zhejiang entrepreneur. There are over 600 workers there now. Most of the fertilizer is sold in south China. The factory produces *niaosu* and *tansuanqing*. Some people gained positions at the fertilizer factory as compensation for land requisition. To be eligible, they had to meet certain criteria. Others have worked there as permanent and temporary employees.

A 40-year-old man with a senior middle school education works as a loader at the chemical factory, making between 1,000 and 1,500 yuan per month; his position is only a temporary one (his 67-year-old father had a position at a cement factory, from which he receives a pension) (YZ-13). A 36-year-old has a permanent position at the factory, which he got in 1994 as compensation for land that the factory took. He met the criteria at the time of being under 20 years old, not married, and with a junior middle school education (YZ-30). One man in his 30s worked as a loader for a few years at the Yuandong Huafei Chang when he had first graduated from junior high; this work was too tiring (YZ-35). A 45-year-old currently at the fertilizer factory reported making 700-800 per month. He has been working there for over 20 years, and was hired at the time (he made a point of saying he was *zhaogong* or recruited, presumably as a contrast to those who got a position in exchange for land) (YZ-37). A 45-year-old works there

cleaning, lighting fires, and tending the grounds. He makes 500 yuan per month (YZ-52).

Other nearby industrial employment that was mentioned included a carpet factory and a food products factory. One 33-year-old woman who is now at home with her primary school child previously worked in the local carpet factory, where she met her future husband, a man from Tianshui who married into her family (YZ-34). One 65-year-old retiree receives a pension from a food products factory. His daughter was laid-off from the factory when it went bankrupt (YZ-20).

The local town street has also created some work opportunities. The 47-year-old wife of the sub-village leader had work in the 1980s preparing food for workers at the town industrial commercial bank, where she made 400-500 yuan per month. She got this position from a couple that she introduced to each as a matchmaker (YZ-44). A 50-year-old woman has had a part-time job since the previous year at the health clinic, preparing food. She makes just 300 yuan per month. She works a half-day, boiling water, making lunch, and washing sheets (YZ-25).

Some villagers are able to find more stable work in the county. Since the county seat is not far away, some can work there and return home. A 30-year-old with a junior middle school education is a driver for the county post office. He makes 700-800 yuan per month (YZ-22). A 25-year-old married man with a junior high school education is a driver for the county government's United Front department, making 800-900 yuan per month (YZ-38).

#### *Recent arrival of temporary work opportunities*

In recent years, the expansion of university campuses to Yuzhong County has provided numerous direct and indirect opportunities. In the 48 households in this study, 11 people had year-round work at one of the campuses. Most of these

were women, though there were also men. Another three women had occasional work, adding up to two to three months per year, tending to the grounds at one of the campuses (e.g. YZ-33). Both men and women reported gaining some occasional construction work while the university campuses were being developed, although those opportunities diminished after the campuses opened.

Men of different ages have found work at the campuses. For example, a 61-year-old man with health problems works as a gatekeeper at a worksite, making 300-500 yuan per month (YZ-35). A 34-year-old man who has working as a cleaner since 2002 at one of the campuses earns 500 yuan per month (YZ-35). A 43-year-old man with a junior middle school education works at Lanzhou University's Yuzhong Campus in the boiler room/water room (YZ-46). A 27-year-old unmarried man delivers papers in a temporary job at the Northwest Minorities University. He makes 600-700 yuan per month, much of which he gives to his parents (YZ-49).

Some young-middle-aged women have been able to find work on the two nearby university campuses as cleaning workers (making 450-500 yuan per month). A 34-year-old woman works at the Northwest Minorities University as a cleaner; she now makes 480 yuan/month, an increase in the salary from a few months before, which was 450 yuan (YZ-5). A woman in her forties with a senior middle school education works at Lanzhou University's Yuzhong Campus as a cleaner, making 400 yuan per month, while her husband takes care of agriculture and fruit crops (YZ-10). A 26-year-old married woman works at the Northwest Minorities University campus as a cleaner for 480 yuan per month. She is the primary source of cash income in her household, which includes her parents-in-law and her husband (YZ-14). A 40-year-old woman who lives with her in-laws has worked at Northwest Minorities University since 2005. She is a cleaner and makes 480 yuan per month. Before she started this job, she planted vegetables (YZ-45). A 50-year-old woman worked at Northwest Minorities University as a cleaner for a year, making 450 yuan per month, but she was let go, told that they

only wanted people 45 and under (YZ-3). A 47-year-old woman was working for two to three years as a cleaner at Lanzhou University's Yuzhong Campus. Her husband complained that she lost her job because she did not send gifts to the logistics department (*houqinbu*) (YZ-29).

There are also opportunities for occasional work. A 51-year-old woman has been working for the last few years at Lanzhou University's Yuzhong Campus doing occasional work. She makes 1,000 yuan for doing about two months of work (gardening, weeding, caring for trees) (YZ-33). A 45-year-old woman with a grade two education has for the last two to three years been doing occasional work at Lanzhou University's Yuzhong Campus, labouring for two to three months out of the year, for 20 yuan per day, working with bricks, weeding, etc (YZ-37).

The campuses have created indirect work opportunities as well. A 47-year-old woman has been working since 2007 in an internet café. Before that, she worked up to three months of the year at one of the university campuses, making 16 to 17 yuan per day. Her daughter also works in an internet café. (YZ-28). A 24-year-old with junior middle school education has been working at an internet bar, making 400-500 yuan per month. Before that, she worked in Lanzhou in a plastic factory, hotel, etc. In other words, she went out to work and has returned home. Her mother also works at an internet café (YZ-28).

Both men and women can find occasional work throughout the area. A 54-year-old man notes that he goes out for occasional construction work, making 3,000-4,000 yuan per year. This is to supplement household expenses (YZ-14). A 38-year-old woman works occasionally at a brick factory. She started going in the first half of the previous year (she has one son pre-school). She makes 20 yuan per day, and works only if they have work to offer (YZ-24). A 44-year-old sub-village leader works at construction sites for two to three months out of the year (YZ-48).

### *Local self-employment*

Local business or self-employment is also an important source of income in the village for both men and women. There were eight self-employed people among 48 households that were interviewed. For example, a 50-year-old man is self-employed renting out his livestock. He makes 5,000-6,000 yuan per year. He used to work as a loader at the train station in the 1980s and 1990s (YZ-27). A 55-year-old man is running a repair shop for agricultural machines (YZ-29) while his wife farms. He previously spent 35 years working on the railroad, doing assembly (YZ-29). A 32-year-old married man runs vehicle repair shop (YZ-39) while his wife farms. He reported making over 10,000 yuan per year. While he has just a primary school education, his older brother has a college education and a factory job that he was assigned to until the factory went bankrupt. Their father was a production team party secretary; the children do not have to support their parents because he has a cadre pension (YZ-39). A 44-year-old married woman runs a small shop while her husband makes money driving people. She makes 200 yuan per month from the store. The store earned more money in the past. It was first opened in 1996. In the 1990s they could earn as much as 1,000 yuan per month because they were facing the main road. After 2000, the roads were changed such that the more traffic went on another road, and business has gone down. (YZ-43). A 47-year-old married woman, the wife of a sub-village leader and a successful matchmaker, runs a small restaurant on the town street. She had many years of work preparing food for workers at a township-level bank branch, making 400-500 yuan per month. After the bank closed, she opened a small restaurant in the vacant building, where she now earns 350 yuan per month (YZ-44). Sometimes husband and wife work together. For example, a husband and wife run a flour milling shop (YZ-26) on the town street. Two of the husband's older brothers have jobs that they obtained after they left the army.

Self-employment has its own challenges. The father of a middle school student spent six to seven years selling vegetables at Lanzhou's major wholesale

market, Zhangsutun, driving back and forth between the village and the city. He made a profit of 5,000-6,000 yuan per year, he reported. He returned home because there was not enough labour power in his small household (YZ-7). He sees an opportunity in the campuses. He hopes to start a fruit stall near the gate of one campus. One family tried to open a meat kebab stall for a year, but just on the street, not in a building; they were not successful (YZ-2). In other words, the economic opportunities created by the campuses and other businesses do not always translate into opportunities for villagers.

### *Leaving the village*

Despite the availability of employment opportunities in the area, villagers continued to move out for employment, many to Lanzhou. Many of those who traveled longer distances to work were young, some going to work in service or manufacturing jobs in the eastern regions, others finding employment related to their vocational, college, or university education.

Migration is interwoven into many households' life cycles. Some couples in the village met while working away from home. One woman who married into this village was working in Lanzhou for several years before getting married. She went to Lanzhou as a teenager, first hawking goods on the street, then worked in a hotel, then at the Dongbushichang wholesale market. She is originally from Gaolan County, Pingliang, and she met her husband in Lanzhou. They stayed in Lanzhou, where she earned more money than her husband (she earned 600 yuan per month). For a while, she brought her own mother to Lanzhou to help with childcare, an example of drawing on natal ties for support. She has now moved to the village, where her husband now has a job loading at the train station, making 1,000-2,000 yuan per month (YZ-2).

Villagers return for periods, not only to assist with agriculture, but also to take care of domestic goals, such as house construction and having children. In one household, a man has returned from his work in Lanzhou to build a house for

his three-generation family. The family was budgeting 50,000 yuan and the man was planning to stay in the village for a year to complete this work. House-building is a major goal for many rural families. Murphy notes, “Building a house and marrying are interlinked life-cycle goals that are fundamental to social reproduction, the transmission of resources from present to future generations, and the long-term viability of the family” (2002:103). Sargeson found through her study of four villages in Zhejiang in 2000 that “house-building reflects families’ demographic and social aspirations” (Sargeson 2002:931). In her survey, she found that the majority of households who had re-built their houses in recent years did so “because they wanted to sustain, expand or divide their families” (Sargeson 2002:939). Other reasons included updating a dilapidated building or striving for a new style of home and for future earnings. (Sargeson 2002:943-944). Sargeson argues that housing itself rather than securing land rights for agriculture is an “investment” for families (2002:945). Housing and mobility were also connected; Sargeson notes, “A quarter of survey respondents agreed that house-building encourages geographical mobility” -- villagers notes that they migrated in order to earn money for housing (2002:945).

Women who return home to the village to give birth to a child find that it can be difficult to work again due to child care constraints. A 33-year-old married woman with a seven-year-old child reports that she would like to go out to work, as her husband does, but she cannot because there is no one to take care of the child (YZ-12). We are reminded that there are likely many women who feel weak ties to the village they married into that would prefer to work and live in the cities if there were social supports there.

*Nearby urban centre: Lanzhou*

In the families that were visited, there were taxi, shoe-makers, vegetable sellers, factory workers, and loaders in Lanzhou. Among the 31 people reported to be working away from the village, at least 13 were in Lanzhou. For example, one 36-year-old man makes 30 yuan per day on construction sites, traveling with

a group of workers around Yuzhong and Lanzhou. After expenses, he can bring home 600 yuan (YZ-12). A 41-year-old man works in Lanzhou's Xigu District at an electricity station. He previously worked locally when there was construction taking place at the new university campuses. He makes over 20 yuan per day, and leaves his wife and small child behind in the village. He is able to return once per month. (YZ-24). A 33-year-old married man has been a taxi driver in Lanzhou for six to seven years. He makes 1,500 to 2,000 yuan per month. He lives there with his wife, but he has not separated families (he is the younger of two sons). His father and brother give them some grain sometimes (YZ-31). One man has been working with a *sanlunche* or three-wheel cart at the Dongbushichang market for over one year, earning sometimes more than 1,000 per month after living expenses (YZ-34); his wife is at home with her parents, who farm. One young unmarried man, age 23, works in Lanzhou in a cake shop. He earns 700 yuan per month, which he spends and keeps himself (YZ-49). A 20-year-old man with a junior middle school education is a driver in a work unit, making 800 yuan per month. He has less education than his two older sisters, who are in a vocational high school and a college (YZ-50).

Lanzhou, despite its proximity to the village, is not always the first choice for out-migration. A 26-year-old and his 24-year-old brother, both with primary school education, now work in Lanzhou at an aluminum factory. They have been there for two years. They make 800-900 yuan per month. The two of them had in fact traveled all over the country, working in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Qinghai. Together they could save 8,000-9,000 *yuan* in a year. For these young workers, their attempts to earn a living were not without risk. The older son at one point was tricked into going to Tibet, where he had to work digging for gold, without any way to contact anyone. He escaped after four months. The younger son worked in Inner Mongolia making noodles. The father, a skilled labourer (a tile maker), used his *guanxi* or connections to get his sons these jobs at a factory meant for people with disabilities (YZ-25).

*Long-distance migration (unskilled)*

Villagers ventured to Guangdong, Inner Mongolia, and other provinces, often following family members or villagers, but the village did not appear to have significant chain migration. A 49-year-old father worked in Hebei for the preceding year in order to pay his son's senior middle school education costs. There he can earn 70 yuan per day. Before he left, he worked locally in addition to farming, but he could only make 10 to 20 yuan as a day labourer at the train station (YZ-1). His wife is not in good health; they have 4 mu of flax, wheat, and corn crops, which is not a heavy agricultural load (vegetables are planted only in their courtyard and they do not raise their own livestock). The teenaged son helped out more during harvest, which is not much of a burden since the busy season is during the school holidays, he said. The married-out daughter also came home to lend a hand. Thus, in this small family unit, the lack of access to better paying jobs locally pushed the father to head to Hebei.

Other examples of villagers in distant provinces seemed to be predominantly young people. Several young migrants are working in the east as noodle-pullers, an occupation apparently in high demand. Villagers in their 20s and 30s worked in Beijing, Harbin and Tianjin in noodle shops. For example, two brothers and their sister are in Harbin. The 22- and 20-year-old brothers are working in a beef noodle restaurant making 1,800-1,900 yuan per month. They have been gone for three to four years. (YZ-29). A 25-year-old unmarried man with a junior middle school education went to Harbin over three years ago. He was taken there by other villagers. Since last year, he has been in Tianjin, working in a beef noodle restaurant. He has come back once since he went away, and he has not sent money home. His father thinks that he will move back to the village to farm. He is the younger of two sons and his older brother is more educated and now employed in Xinjiang (YZ-33). A married man in his thirties who served four years in the army learned how to pull noodles, even earning a certificate. He has spent eight years working in Harbin in a restaurant. He earns 1,800 yuan per month, more than double what his brother makes locally. He gives 3,000 yuan to

his parents at Spring Festival. His wife, whom he married one year earlier, is at home in the village with a newborn (YZ-51).

Young women also seek out work far from home, not long after finishing school. Two girls traveled together to Inner Mongolia, where they are working as service staff in a *dianchang* or electric station. One girl, 19 years old, was able to send 3,000 yuan home to her parents in one year. She made 700 yuan per month with food and accommodation included. She has a junior middle school education, but her mother hoped that she would go to a vocational school (YZ-37). A 21-year-old young woman with a senior high school education is now working in Shenzhen at a Japanese cell phone company, making 60 yuan per day. In the preceding year, she sent 8,000 yuan home. She was admitted to a college program, but her parents decided they could not afford it, as her older brother is in college; the father, a sub-village leader, originally tried to arrange a job for her as a waitress in Lanzhou, but she did not want to serve people (YZ-44).

In other counties in Gansu, state mediated labour export drives significant numbers of migrants, but in Zhushu Village, there were few instances of such migration. According to the former party secretary, not many people have been “organized” for labour export by the local county government. This year, two women were sent to Tianjin to a clothing manufacturer, where they could earn 800 yuan per month, but such a salary could only be obtained by working over 10 hours a day (piecework), so the two women left.

#### *Long distance migration (skilled and white collar)*

In addition to the migration noted above, there were a number of cases of migration to other provinces of skilled or educated workers who had already left the village to attend college or university. For example, one 28-year-old who had graduated from a college program in Urumqi stayed on in the city to work there. He does not send home money, but he calls once a week. His sister, who completed a vocational program in nursing is in Urumqi too (YZ-3). A male

graduate of Hangzhou University is now in Beijing (YZ-8). A young man who went to university in Jiangsu and stayed to work there makes 20-30,000 yuan per month. He sends money home to support his younger brother, who is in a college program in Lanzhou (YZ-15). A 26-year-old working in Lanzhou graduated from university in 2007 (YZ-16). At the Zhongchuan airport in Lanzhou, a married 30-year-old man who has a college (*dazhuan*) education, pumps fuel at the Zhongzhuan airport. His child is left at home in the village. He was assigned (*fenpei*) into this position. He graduated from the Minhang vocational middle school. He gives his parents 1,000-2,000 yuan per year (YZ-20). A young woman working as a nurse in a hospital in Lanzhou studied at the Lanzhou Medical College, first earning a college (*dazhuan*) degree, which was later upgraded to an undergraduate university degree (*benke*) (YZ-22).

After learning about the wide range of jobs, temporary and permanent, of villagers of different generations, and the movements back and forth from the village to outside places of work, I question the relevance of categories such as “migrants” and “left-behind”. For example, the “left-behind” elderly in the village could also be viewed as retirees; indeed, some even earn pensions. Interviewees in their fifties and sixties reported many years of paid work, most of it local. Would it be more appropriate to chart changes in family dynamics around household and agricultural work to the beginning of the reform and opening period when residents were able to start working outside the commune more extensively?

The limitations of terms such as “migrant” and “left-behind” were also underscored by the cases of those working outside the province, almost all of whom were people under thirty. Does this suggest that younger people are looking farther afield for work? If we look more carefully, we see that ten of the eighteen cases I learned of were of people who completed vocational school, college or university. Without knowing how access to education has changed in the region, we might nevertheless guess that this under-30 generation has

benefited from educational opportunities that allow it to find work, either technical or white collar, which, not surprisingly, is not located near the village.

#### **4) Family structures**

From exploring the different kinds of work that men and women have, both in the village and outside the village, as well as the age and gender factors at play, we can develop a picture of who is left behind in the village.

##### *Generational family structures*

We can observe four kinds of generational family structures shaped by migration in Zhushu Village. The majority of families were two-generation families. Among the 48 families interviewed, 11 were three-generation stem families. In three households, there were only grandparents and grandchildren living at home – I call these “three minus one” families. In three other cases, there was essentially only one generation, as adult children had permanently moved away from the village with little likelihood of return.

##### *“Left-behind”*

##### **Children and wives**

When parents leave young children behind in the villages, they are usually leaving them with the other parent or grandparents. In Zhushu Village, it is not common for children to be left behind with elderly grandparents alone, absent extenuating circumstances. For example, in one case where the grandparents are taking care of their daughter's three-year-old daughter, it was because their son-in-law was in an accident and cannot work. Their daughter cannot take care of everything, so she leaves her daughter with her parents and provides 200 yuan per month for her care. They are also caring for the nine-year-old son of their divorced son, who is home and around but perhaps is not very active. The grandparents, age 60 and 61, farm 6.8 mu of land, including 2.8 mu of vegetables, which is currently their primary source of cash income. They cannot afford to pay people, so they plant themselves. The grandfather used to work as a carpenter

and made a good salary, and even worked until recently at Lanzhou University-Yuzhong Campus, but he is not working anymore (YZ-19).

More commonly, one parent, often the wife, remains with children. For example, a father, 36-years-old, has been working out of the village for many years, though not farther than Yuzhong or Lanzhou. His wife and their daughter stay at home. He is the only son in his family, but his parents passed away a number of years before, so they do not live with elderly people. They have 4 mu. The wife does all the domestic work and most of the agricultural work; her husband does come home to help. She feels like it is an amount of work that can be done by one person. There is some cooperation with other villagers at times (YZ-12). In another family (YZ-34), where a son-in-law married into a family, the nine-year old daughter and wife were left behind, but in this case they were left behind with the natal family. The parents, who are in their mid-fifties, continue to take responsibility for land, which is their own. They have more land than some other families (9 irrigated mu for five people), as the land of two daughters who have already married out has not been returned to the village.

#### Elderly parents

In Zhushu, we find that elderly often continue to work, as they do in many areas. Pang et al. (2004) found a pattern of relatively high rates of participation in the formal workforce, by which they refer to on-farm, off-farm employment, or off-farm business (2004:77). Of men and women surveyed who were 50 years and older, 69% were engaged in the labour force (Pang et al. 2004:77). Among those aged 50 to 59, 89.9% of men and 82.7% of women were in the formal workforce. Among those aged 60 to 69, 80.3% of the men and 50.0% of the women were in the formal workforce. Among the eldest, those 70 years old and over, 31.3% of men, almost one in three, were still working, and 10.7% of women were working (Pang et al. 2004:77). As they point out, “it is not until people in rural China are in their seventies that most drop out of the formal workforce” (Pang et al. 2004:77). These findings led them to remark on the role of older

people in farming, as at least 85% of those who reported working were engaged in farming (Pang et al. 2004:79). As for paid work and self-employment or business, “between 16 to 30 per cent of those who have formal work earn a wage off the farm or run their own off-farm business” (Pang et al. 2004:79).

Some of the parents who were left on their own a) were still able-bodied, b) had children who left via education, or c) had children who were young adults and were not yet married or not yet established. Another question might be, has the shifting opportunities provided by education meant that parents have shouldered the labour burden (which is declining anyway as their land is reduced and there is replacement labour and machinery)? In a village like this, which has irrigation, they can farm just a bit, or even pay people to do the heavy work, and live without many other needs. For example, one couple in their early 50s, whose two children are in Xinjiang, can still farm and work occasionally (YZ-3). In another family, the couple in their fifties still farm. Their daughter is married off, and their son is in Lanzhou with his own family. The son had worked locally as a loader until he could not anymore. He then went to Lanzhou and became a taxi driver. There he lives with his wife, whom he met in Lanzhou, and their young son. The parents felt that their son was not able to provide them with financial support because he himself struggles to cover expenses in the city. Their son used to help with agriculture. Both husband and wife share agricultural tasks, but only the husband does tilling and irrigation. They used to plant themselves or hire labourers, but the year before they borrowed money from relatives to buy a mechanical hand plow. They do the work of harvest themselves, but for vegetables villagers help each other. They have gotten paid work on local construction sites over the year, but they said they would focus on farming during the busy season. Their son and daughter-in-law have a house waiting for them in the same courtyard – they built it before he got married. The parents suspect that the family may return to the village if their expenses increase too much as their five-year old gets older. They have five mu of land, theirs and their sons (the daughter-in-law and grandson did not get any land).

When adult children are themselves not established, they may not support their parents. One couple in their early fifties has one unmarried daughter working in Lanzhou and an unmarried son in Beijing. The children are in their mid-twenties. They do not give money to their parents. The parents earn money locally; the husband picks up two to three months of work each year and takes care of farming while the wife runs a small shop. They can hire livestock to plant and hire labourers to harvest. The husband used to work in construction in Lanzhou and Longxi; he spent four to five years away and had other people farm his land. He commented that land should be farmed and that if you farm you will have food to eat. He thought the children would eventually return to the village to live (YZ-18).

Adult children sometimes provide support. A couple in their fifties works locally. They farm their six mu but they do not spend that much time on it. The husband drives a truck, making 1,000 yuan per year. The wife does short-term work. The son in Lanzhou can occasionally come home to help. They have two sons, both of whom went on to post-secondary education. The older son graduated from university and is working in Jiangsu and is able to send money home for his younger brother, who is in a *dazhuan* (college) program Lanzhou. For the parents, this is the most difficult period for them, as they try to support their son. But in another 5-6 years they expect that they won't need to work anymore, just farm a bit of land (*zhong yi dian di*) (YZ-15).

In some cases, elderly individuals can rely on pensions. In one family, the 66-year-old husband is a retired teacher. His 54-year-old wife does the agricultural and domestic work (3.5 mu of land). They receive 2,000 a month from his pension. Their son has graduated university and started working in Lanzhou. Their daughter graduated from a vocational school in Lanzhou and is working in Guangzhou. Presumably, they could live on the pension and not farm (YZ-16). A 70-year-old man and his 66-year-old wife are alone in the village.

Their two daughters married out, one to Lanzhou City and one to Yuzhong county seat. Their one son, age 39, and his wife and child, are all in Shandong Province. The old man is a retiree with a pension (800-900 per month). They have just 1.5 mu of land, having recently given up 1.5 mu for the water factory, receiving 45,000 in compensation. They farm themselves, with the old man running the tractor. They grow wheat and occasionally grow flaxseed (YZ-36).

Should those cases where children are in college or university count? There were eight young people studying away from the village. There were another eight young people in senior middle school, already a kind of gradual transition away from home, as the students often live in the county seat during the week. Some of those might continue on to college or university. A couple in their forties with four mu of land has three children, all of whom are progressing with their education. The youngest is in senior middle school. Their older son and daughter are in university and normal college, respectively. In effect, the couple is already farming without assistance from their children. The mother also picks up extra paid work, as their major financial burden is educational costs. Presumably, the hope is that the children will get jobs. In the meantime, the parents can probably work for another 10-20 years (YZ-10).

#### *Not “left-behind”*

There were many cases where households were able to generate enough income from local sources that they did not have absent family members. For example, in YZ-13, the elderly father earned an income and his son had a job at the fertilizer factory. A young couple in their twenties live with parents/in-laws in their fifties. The daughter-in-law has a job at a university. The son was offered a job in Lanzhou but did not take it (YZ-14). In another family, parents in their mid-40s had a recently married son and daughter-in-law living with them. They seem unlikely to migrate in the near future since the son, age 25, has a job as a driver in the county. The daughter-in-law is originally from Jingyuan County; she worked nearby at a food products factory (YZ-38). In a young family where 32-

year-old parents care for their two children, age 8 and 2.5, the husband does not have to care for this parents because they moved into town and his father receives a cadre pension. His older brother received a college education and was originally assigned to a factory in Yuzhong, which went bankrupt; his brother now sells cell phones in Lanzhou. (YZ-39).

When we look at how families are changing and how households might be stretched, we cannot use migration as our only lens. Family planning policies have shaped rural households for more than a generation; when we consider care for the rural elderly, we should also consider that there might be few adult siblings sharing these responsibilities. Among the households in this study, some of the cases of grandparents caring for small children were doing so not only because of out-migration but also because of divorce or health problems. Examples of health problems being a factor in migration decisions point to the lack of a social safety net, of health care or disability support. For empty nest families, where children have been sent off to college or university, it would be expected that upon graduation these adult children would seek work away from the village. Do we see a *de facto* family separation taking place not at the moment of marriage or official separation, but rather as an extended process that takes place through education? And, if so, perhaps we should consider post-secondary education as a critical factor in shaping migration patterns, both permanent (for the children) and temporary (for their parents).

What is expected of villagers who are away? In one family where the son and his young family are in Lanzhou, the parents who are in their fifties do not expect him to give them money because the cost of living in Lanzhou is too high (YZ-9). In one family where the son and daughter-in-law and five-year-old son have left the village, father/grandfather expects them to return to the village because expenses in the city will go up as the child grows older. Another father mentioned that he expects only the younger of his two sons to return home to farm. The elder married son has a college degree and a government job and is

likely permanently settled with his spouse in Xinjiang. The younger son, who has only a junior high school education, has spent the last three years in northeast China working in noodle restaurants in Harbin and Tianjin (YZ-33). This left-behind father is predicting, based on his two sons' occupational opportunities, that one son may return home.

Murphy argues that migration preserves rural traditions and also leads to change: "Remittances provide funds needed for maintaining the social customs associated with house building and marriage, while migration changes the values and relationships that social actors reproduce through these customs" (2002:111-112). Anecdotally, villagers noted the increase in marriage costs. A 50-year-old sub-village head remarked that his own marriage cost 1,000 yuan, while marriages now cost 30,000 yuan (YZ-44). A 40-year-old woman noted that her bride wealth was 2,000 yuan and the total marriage costs were 7,000 yuan. These days, she said, the bride wealth runs to 8,000-10,000 yuan and total marriage costs to 30,000 yuan (YZ-45). One household where the parents built a house for their son and daughter-in-law within their courtyard was mentioned as an example of intensive spending for a marriage; they said that they spent 30-40,000 yuan on the house and were then able pay a lower bride wealth (YZ-9). These examples remind us that out-migration is not necessarily an attempt to exit the countryside, but rather a necessity for maintaining links to it.

## V. CONCLUSION

This project began with a concern with rural residents who are left behind in the rural areas and how they are affected by the absence of family members and fellow villagers. Using the household as a unit of analysis, I found that that households in Zhushu Village engage in numerous strategies for earning income, combining agriculture, local employment, non-local employment, and other activities. These strategies change as families move through different life-cycle stages. Migration and labour patterns in Zhushu Village have their own

characteristics, shaped by the availability of local employment opportunities created by the new university campuses, the lack of major chain migration, the transportation access to Lanzhou, and the relative viability of agriculture given the region's irrigated valley land. The households interviewed in this village rarely fit the stereotypical mould of the "left-behind" category. In some cases, families showed how they adapted to different conditions. In others, the reasons for migration (i.e. for education), fully encouraged by family members, did not support the image of absence and abandonment sometimes evoked by the left-behind. Therefore, I conclude that we should be cautious in applying the socially-constructed category of the left-behind without attention to local contexts and structural issues that shape rural China.

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