

Chinese Women in Rural–Urban Transition: surrogate brothers or agents of their own fate?

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How has the joint family structure—one of the basic institutions of rural organisation in China—been used by families in the transition from rural to urban reality since the early 1980s? During the 1960s and 1970s, the rural people’s communes consolidated the role of patrilocal marriage patterns and the shared inheritance and responsibilities of brothers (both hallmarks of the joint family), while in the 1980s and 1990s, the joint family was used to maximise the economic interests of the new entrepreneurial groups in rural China. However, the transition to urban status and life gradually changed the role of sisters among siblings, as existing social patterns gradually eroded and changed meaning. This contribution explores how these macro-level institutional transitions manifest themselves in the social practice and institutional arrangements of a family case study.

Introduction: the joint family and changing social environments

Chinese rural families, as is commonly known, follow a practice of virilocal marriage: women move to their in-laws’ village at marriage and become part of the in-law family. Families’ patrilineal inheritance divides the communal family property equally among brothers. Families tend to divide their property at some point when the children have grown up. Even after division, rural families tend to live closely together,¹ the distinction being whether they practically and metaphorically eat at ‘separate stoves’. The casual observer cannot easily see the difference, for the occupancy of the living space and daily social life seem to be virtually the same for divided and undivided families. While the common observable criterion is that in divided families, the conjugal units (the married sons’ families) tend to eat their meals separately, the main difference is that their economic arrangements, ownership and responsibilities are normally separated according to detailed rules. This ideal-type pattern is all-pervasive in rural China; even where it fails to materialise in actual practice, it is held up as the ‘normal’ pattern.

The rural Chinese family structure, accordingly, at various points in its cycle is a conjugal unit or nuclear family (man and wife and their children), a stem family (parents and children, of which one is a married son with his wife and children),

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1. The notion of family in Chinese, *jia*, does not imply living together; it is defined by its members’ relationships, while the term *hu* (household) traditionally designates a co-habitational unit.

a joint family (parents and children, of which two or more are married sons with their wives and children), or imperfect ('broken') variations of these.² This seemingly innocuous and trivial (yet omnipresent and homogenous) pattern of family cycles is a vestige of hundreds of years of uniform imposition of lineage law in imperial times.³ The early division of family property after (some of) the children have grown up is an important and almost universally used feature of the system, pre-empting the inheritance at the death of the parents, in its present form it probably originates in the 1930s as an informal measure to circumvent the rigidities and gender equality of property inheritance.⁴ The organisational structures between the early 1950s and the recent past have not favoured any change in this, as male dominated and relatively atomised cooperatives, production teams and brigades, and later villages saw an interest in keeping as much as possible of an estate in local, male hands rather than seeing assets flow to other villages, into which female siblings would often marry. From the point of view of managing work points and collective duties and services, local authorities universally preferred the divided family, and therefore allowed them to register as separate households (*hukou*).⁵ Although the Chinese Communist Party

2. For details of the Chinese family's developmental cycles, see Susan May Greenhalgh, 'Is inequality demographically induced? The family cycle and the distribution of income in Taiwan', *American Anthropologist* 87, (1985), pp. 575–576.

3. For classical descriptions of the Chinese family structures, see Olga Lang, *Chinese Family and Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), pp. 134–154; and Hugh David Roberts Baker, *Chinese Family and Kinship* (London: Macmillan, 1979). The main seminal works by Maurice Freedman on the Chinese lineage help us understand how present-day family structures still in some ways echo past forms of lineage organisation; see Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in South-Eastern China* (London: The Athlone Press, 1958); and Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (London: The Athlone Press, 1966).

4. Kathryn Bernhardt in her book about *Women and Property in China* not only presents the sweep of legal provisions on lineage and family law in China over a 1,000-year period, but highlights a core juncture in the formation of current family practices in modern history: the Nationalist authorities of the 1930s in their eagerness to reject 'feudal' lineage law defined 'inheritance' as merely related to property and not to lineage authority, and inheritable 'property' as the estate owned by or shared by others with the deceased person at the time of death; women, Bernhardt argues, gained equitable inheritance rights, but as the view of inheritance was limited to property and not the lineage, the net result was that women's interests lost ground in comparison to the legal practice that had been continued and developed from the Qing dynasty. The division of the estate and the signing of '*fen jia*' contracts with the sons before the death of the father of a family became a universal and popular way of evading inheritance laws and to reinforce the patrilineal practices. See Kathryn Bernhardt, *Women and Property in China: 960–1949* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 110–116. David Wakefield, in contrast, examines the issue almost entirely from the point of view of inheritance rights: see David Wakefield, *Fenjia. Household Division and Inheritance in Qing and Republican China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998).

5. The regulations governing household registration did not list family division as a ground for changing household registration, mainly focusing on birth, death, removal and marriage. The marriage of a son, therefore, became the main event triggering family division, as this was the juncture at which the status of all members of the household could be shifted, including the division into several households, each with its head (*huzhu*). For details, see Ministry of Public Security, 'Guanyu hukou dengji tiaoli zhong ji xiang tiaokuan juti zhixing yijian de tongzhi' ['Circular on opinions about the concrete implementation of various provisions in the regulations about household registration'] (issued on 1 October 1958), in Gong'anbu Zhianguanliju, *Hukou guanli falü fagui, guizhang zhengce huibian* [Collection of Laws, Regulations, Rules and Policies on the Administration of Household (Registration)] (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Gong'an Daxue Chubanshe, 2001), pp. 8–10; Ministry of Public Security, Third Office, 'Guanyu zhixing hukou dengji tiaoli de chubu yijian' ['Preliminary opinions about the implementation of the household registration'] (issued April 1958), in Gong'anbu Zhianguanliju, *Hukou guanli falü fagui, guize guizhang zhengce huibian*, pp. 11–33; Ministry of Public Security, Third Office, 'Guanyu jiaqiang hukou guanli gongzuo de yijian' ['Opinions strengthening the administration of household (registration)'] (issued 1962), in Gong'anbu Zhianguanliju, *Hukou guanli falü fagui, guize guizhang zhengce huibian*, pp. 34–39; and National People's Congress Standing Committee, 'Zhonghua renmin gongheguo hukou dengji tiaoli' ['Regulation of the People's Republic of China on household registration'] (issued 1 September 1958), in Gong'anbu Zhianguanliju, *Hukou guanli falü fagui, guizhang zhengce huibian*, pp. 3–7.

was determined to change Chinese family structures (among other things in order to achieve more equality between men and women), the rural organisation in the People's Communes (1957–1983) and later in the villages and townships strengthened the virilocal and patrilineal practices. In particular the household registration system (introduced in 1958 and still in force), which determines the status of individuals as either agriculturalists or urban residents and limits mobility to women marrying into their husbands' villages, has been instrumental in perpetuating the family organisation.⁶ The actual form of family organisation is, however, highly situational and subject to changes in the economic environment. While family cycles, in particular decisions on family division, are often considered in terms of strategies to deal with or otherwise arising from poverty,⁷ they were, as will be discussed below, also intimately bound up with the practices of collective production under the people's commune system.

Recasting the rural family

How do the family structures function? In social practice, family structures are resilient and conservative. We must presume that as taken-for-granted and habitual rules for normality they are rarely questioned; that their use is affected but never totally governed by laws and regulations; and that their application in long cycles crossing generations, as well as their role in upholding stable relationships between parents and descendants and between siblings, ensures their durability. Deviance, conversely, is socially and culturally construed as abnormal and as a source of conflict. The family structures are also flexible and dynamic, for they allow situational adaptation and interpretation within a social context, enabling elites to strengthen their social and economic status, and to define the boundaries of community. In particular, in the post-1978 period, the uses of symbolic and ritualistic references to 'past' family and lineage roles have added new dimensions to the use of family structures, including also the expansion of such structures, kinship bonds and practices to non-kin.⁸ This creative recourse to old patterns is not middle-class

6. On the household registration system's role, see Hein Mallee, 'China's household registration system under reform', *Development and Change* 26(1), (January 1995), pp. 1–29; Flemming Christiansen, 'Social division and peasant mobility: the implications of the huk'ou system', *Issues and Studies* 26(4), (April 1990), pp. 23–42; and Flemming Christiansen, 'The legacy of the mock dual economy: Chinese labour in transition, 1978–1992', *Economy and Society* 22(4), (November 1993), pp. 411–436.

7. Noted by Philip Huang for the early twentieth century in North China, and by Hugh Baker and Olga Lang from different perspectives in more general terms for pre-1949 China; see Philip Chung-chih Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), pp. 303–304; Baker, *Chinese Family and Kinship*, pp. 3–10; and Lang, *Chinese Family and Society*, pp. 134–154. Pennarz, discussing post-1978 Sichuan, points to early family division among the rural poor to deal with conflicts arising from low land/labour ratios, while Susan Greenhalgh in her study of Taiwan identifies small rural family size as both a source and a consequence of poverty. See Johanna Pennarz, 'Adaptive land-use strategies of Sichuan smallholders. Subsistence production and agricultural intensification in a land scarce poverty area of China', in Flemming Christiansen and Junzuo Zhang, eds, *Village Inc. Chinese Rural Society in the 1980s* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1998), pp. 159–176; and Greenhalgh, 'Is inequality demographically induced?'

8. Zhe Xiaoye has made interesting observations on this type of social utility and coined the term 'virtual kinship' (*ni qinyuan*), while Huang Xiyi has analysed the return of the lineage and family bonds in the rural enterprise sector. Zhe Xiaoye, *Cunzhuang de zaizao—yige 'chaoji cunzhuang' de shehui bianqian* [*Remaking the Village—The Social Transformation of a 'Supervillage'*] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1997); Huang Xiyi, 'Two-way changes—kinship in contemporary rural China', in Christiansen and Zhang, eds, *Village Inc.*, pp. 177–211.

escapism, but involves the social reinterpretation of institutions that can arbitrate real-life issues of status, labour, and money. We may, with neoclassical or institutional economists, regard them as ways of reducing transaction costs, or, with Bourdieu-inspired sociologists, see them as *habitus*, as those rules of behaviour that make social life possible, or we may, also with Bourdieu, view them as fields of symbolic violence, where both the strong and the weak connive in rules of oppression as part of everyday social practice. While such rationalisations may help towards a broader understanding of family structures in terms of subliminal power exchange and equilibration of social interest, they do not suffice to explain what happens when the family structures themselves are in crisis, and when they become more prone to deliberate manipulation and construction. That is to say, when the socially subliminal practices transcend the boundary into socially conscious agency, they lose their taken-for-grantedness and become negotiable. The ‘re’construction of ‘past’ structures may locally and in particular circumstances be felt as natural extensions of existing practice in a changing world,⁹ but they are a sign of crisis. They are not considered ‘natural’ (on the contrary, they are seen by many as perverse and retrograde: perverse, because they fundamentally violate the established notions of kinship; and retrograde, because they hark back to practices politically deemed ‘feudal’ and violate the main discourse of ‘economic development’).¹⁰ The ‘crisis’ of family practices, in other words, is not clear-cut and absolute, but rather a sign that they are being stretched beyond their flexibility and begin to appear contrived from the perspective of competing discourses.

The ‘strategic use’ or ‘manipulation’ of family structures, accordingly, cannot be reduced to ‘rational behaviour’, as those involved mobilise the available socially embedded conventions for family structures, balancing economic benefit, political expediency and social status as best they can. The reliance on pseudo-kinship and lineage ritual in diverse contexts is, in my view, a sign that Chinese rural society lacks effective alternative institutions for dealing with trust, capital investment and human resource management in private business interactions among strangers. For those who engage in pseudo-kinship institutions they are rational and effective solutions to local and specific problems, while emerging and ‘progressive’ political, market and business norms reject them as a solution.¹¹

The joint family

The passage of the family through the stages of the ideal-type cycle of nuclear, stem, and joint family is based on what in the literature is broadly described as the

9. Huang Xiyi argues convincingly that constructed kin relationships are a way of dealing with diminishing social trust in market exchange during the reform period: see Huang, ‘Two-way changes—kinship in contemporary rural China’.

10. They differ fundamentally from the conventional practices of male adoption into families without male heirs and other ‘traditional’ uses of pseudo-kinship.

11. Interviews with rural entrepreneurs I have undertaken indicate an acute awareness of the lack of legal recourse, credit institutions, management control, and mechanisms for retention of labour; there is a main cultural gap between entrepreneurs who emphasise formal contractual relationships and moral suasion based on market and mutual benefit on the one side, and on the other entrepreneurs who take recourse to ‘improper’ forms of action (including pseudo-kinship, private credits and certain types of corruption), which their critics claim invariably backfire.

'strategy' for family division. The family structure is in itself a manipulable resource that can be utilised in anticipation of or reaction to external circumstances with the aim being to secure the interests or improve the conditions of the family. The joint family is, in other words, one stage in this cycle, and is largely a function of decisions on property division. In this particular respect, it varies from Monica Das Gupta's general description of the North Indian and Chinese 'joint family'. In her understanding family division is a slow, gradual process, culminating with the father's death.

The joint family system of North India and China has a very different logic [from the European stem family]. To begin with, sons inherit equal shares of the property, although one son may have the use of additional land if the parents are living with him. Transfer of property and managerial authority takes place gradually, beginning with the sons working under the father's direction and moving on to the sons taking over some of the managerial decisions as the father ages. Gradually, the father becomes only titular head. The sons move from cultivating their land jointly, to cultivating it separately and later to formalizing the transfer and division of the estate. This last step often takes place after the father's death.

Marriage is not a central event in the household lifecycle. Children may marry at any point and sons' wives can be incorporated into the household whether or not the son is financially independent. Household and the property management is conducted by the unit of the father and his sons, with the help of the women married into the family.¹²

The difference between Das Gupta's broad description of the joint family pattern and the practice in China can perhaps best be understood if we regard the '*fen jia*' family division as a function of an administrative system that militates against graduality and only allows a brief window of opportunity for formal change in conjunction with a son's marriage. This may also explain why the family division in China, once made, tends to be adhered to more strictly than Das Gupta's formulation suggests. The Chinese version of the joint family with its early division of the property was exceptionally well suited to the people's commune system. The main assets belonging to individual families were the family homes and the right to grow vegetables on the private plots, and the main social duties were the delivery of collective work and the care of the elderly and the children in the family. The family capital, shared by all brothers, therefore, was simple and intrinsically linked to the residential arrangements. The joint family was mainly concerned with building, refurbishing or extending living space to accommodate all sons and their families, and with providing for elderly, retired parents. Local authorities were more able to control labour participation from small family units, and so encouraged early family division.

During the post-1978 reforms the role of dowry and bride-price has become ever more important as an element of greater social stratification. Dowry and bride-price normally become the exclusive property of the married couple. This shift created a new mode of property division based on the separate financial needs of the married

12. Monica Das Gupta, 'Lifeboat versus corporate ethic: social and demographic implications of stem and joint families', *Social Science and Medicine* 49(2), (July 1999), p. 175.

couples, and it also meant that more substantial amounts were used to marry off daughters. The joint effect of price inflation in the 1980s and the rapid social and economic development in rural China throughout the 1980s and 1990s caused the dowries and bride-prices to rise rapidly. Families often used private and other informal loans to meet the rise in cost, gambling on future rises in income to aim for an equitable family division. With changing price levels and requirements, there could be no obvious measure of fairness in distribution, and formal *fen jia* was often delayed as a consequence.

Labour mobility and the growing occupation in rural industries created further challenges to the family system. During the people's commune era (1957–1983) the joint management of family incomes was strengthened by the fact that the collective handled payments of work points as year-end ledger transfers to each head of household; in undivided families, the head of the household therefore was able to control most of the cash in the family. Rural industries in the 1970s began to replace work point payments with salary payments. However, these payments were locally transparent and were easily managed by the head of the family. In the 1980s, labour mobility outside the collective and the expansion of private cash transactions made the joint management of family incomes by the head of the household illusory. It became impossible to monitor incomes let alone control them. The cash flow needs of private businesses run by family members also exposed the joint family property to economic risk.

Rural entrepreneurial elites in many cases were strengthened by the joint family structure. Families who at a core juncture in their cycle had many labourers and were able to purchase or contract highly profitable means of production at the start of the reforms had a head start as entrepreneurs.¹³ In the post-reform rural setting, the collaboration between a father and his adult sons became an important lever for entrepreneurial development.

Urbanisation and occupational diversification increasingly challenged the 'traditional' family cycles. Although families are not defined by co-residence of all members, the socio-economic functioning and rationale of the joint family (as well as the practice of family division) are fundamentally local and rural, linked to the usufruct of land, ownership of buildings and the old age provision in the families and is in some circumstances extended into the realm of local or small-scale entrepreneurship. It is inclusive of migrant workers, soldiers, students and others who stay away for long periods and may provide them with an occupational framework on return.

However, the change of status to urban resident, the decreasing reliance on farming, the change of residential patterns, and the entitlement to pensions radically change the social contexts of the rural joint family. As a general trend, family planning (most effective in and near urban areas) has also severely limited the future of the joint family, as generations now coming of age consist of people with no or few siblings. Even so, urbanisation also involves people from areas that did not comply with family planning policies, so one should not jump to the conclusion that the joint family pattern is being broken by demographic fate.

13. See Flemming Christiansen, *The De-Rustication of the Chinese Peasant? Peasant Household Reactions to the Rural Reforms in China since 1978*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Faculteit der Letteren, Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1990, pp. 107–138; and Greenhalgh, 'Is inequality demographically induced?'

In the urban context of China, only the nuclear (and the ‘broken stem’) families prevail in an economic and residential sense. The communality of work, related to the usufruct of land and residential arrangements are irrelevant. While wider kinship relationships have gained greatly in importance in the informal sectors of the economy, urban labour relationships are, from the perspective of the family, individual and atomistic. As opposed to farming where skills are shared, home-grown and localised, urban work is based on specialised and trained skills that are personalised. The political economy role, so to say, of the urban family is much more insignificant than that of the rural family. Yet, as we shall see in the case study, the family straddling the rural–urban boundary does function in ways not unlike those prevailing in the rural context, perhaps with the sophistication of a division of labour based on the diversity of skills and access to social and economic resources that accrues to the different members of the family.

Women: a case of a changing family

Women’s mobility

Unmarried rural women in the virilocal community are the most mobile. The consequences for the joint family and family divisions of daughters leaving the village are insignificant in a structural sense; from interviews and conversations I conducted during the 1980s in various places, it emerged that the out-migration of daughters was common, but that they were required by their fathers to send home part of their work income as remittances. When fathers in rural Jiangxi showed me colour photographs their daughters had sent home from Shenzhen or Dongguan, it seemed clear to them that their daughters had left for good, sending home money, but aspiring to marry into an urban community; they sensed that they would neither be able to arrange for the daughters’ marriages nor would be required to contribute much of a dowry. There is no doubt that the high rate of female migration from rural China can be attributed to virilocality. Similarly, the observation has often been made that women more easily move upwards socially, for because they are mobile, they tend to be able to marry into more prosperous villages. (So too do men who are adopted into families lacking sons.) The family planning policy, which has led to a skewed gender balance in the generation coming of age in recent years, is seen as directly responsible for a growing ‘market value’ of women, ensuring them socially upward mobility and leaving the poorest villages to unmarried men.

These broad impressions derived from aggregate trends are important, but they hardly illuminate the processes at work. I therefore in the following use an individual outline history that may show how the role of women changed over time, and how ‘strategic’ choices were blended into shifting priorities and moral perceptions.

The long haul: gradual urbanisation

A snapshot of a family in 1979, focused on the situation of the daughter in that family, followed by several retakes during the subsequent quarter-century, may reveal how the family managed itself, and how this woman’s situation developed. There is

nothing typical about the case; that does not need to concern us, for what matters is the structural behaviour we can identify, and how we conceptualise the evolution of conditions and the choices as they appear for the people involved.¹⁴

The year is 1979

At the centre of the picture we see a young woman, 18 years old, who has passed the senior middle school locally and is now in charge of the collective chickens in the production team. Her father is 51 years old, and her mother 47. Her eldest brother, 29 years old, at the age of 16 had been lent out for construction work on the railways and soon after was selected for hard and dirty work in a local coalmine, about 20 km away. This work provided him with an urban resident status. At 19 he joined the CCP, and soon became a lorry driver in the commune's cement factory; five years ago he married and moved into a separate house; after a while he got a job as a driver in an urban work unit. He does not live at home any more. Her second brother, 23 years of age, had joined the army and is poised to come back soon. Her younger brother is 15 and is just finishing lower middle school. Her paternal grandparents had died in 1935 and 1963.

The household lives in two *jians* of a building with a total of six *jians*. A *jian* is a section of a house from back to front between the poles that carry the ridge. One of the *jians* is divided into two separate rooms, one is a kitchen and the other is where the family sleeps. To either side of the family there are other families; one of them is the family of an uncle.

All members in the household have agricultural household status, but looking at the whole family, the eldest brother has an urban resident household status, and the brother in the army will most likely get one on his return home.

The family is, strictly speaking, in family terms, a stem family, but in household terms, as a co-residential unit, a nuclear family. The eldest brother and his wife and child are, in principle, still members of the family; for all intents and purposes, however, they are separate from the collective economy, have no reason to claim a share of the house, and can thus in practical terms be regarded as outside the equation. There has been no opportunity to divide the property, and this would anyway have seemed premature, given the present structure of the family.

The young woman has passed the higher middle school examination at the local, poor-quality, middle school. The policy of recommending worker, peasant and soldier students for the higher education quota (which would have given her a good chance of getting in) has been abandoned and replaced by a competitive entrance examination in which she stands no chance. Her job is to look after the hatching lamp and the newly-hatched chicks in the collective chicken farm, earning her a small income in work points.

The young woman's parents were activists during the Land Reform. Her mother is a CCP member and heads the local branch of the ACWF. Both parents are illiterate, but the father is a self-taught technician.

14. In order to protect the identity of those involved, I have changed a number of aspects and mixed some elements from various persons. However, the story is essentially true.

The year is 1982

The woman is now 21 years old. As the railway authorities have just claimed a large slice of the production teams' land, a number of people are 'accommodated' (*anzhi*) as part of the compensation package. After a selection procedure she was, along with others, transferred to urban household status and employed by the railways. The employment is partly local, and partly in the nearest city; she continues to live with her parents.

The family is still living in the same place with no alterations. The second brother has not returned from the army, as he had been selected for a career as an army officer. During an interview two decades later she recalls,

In 1982, when the railways took over our land, a dozen or so people from [the production team]¹⁵—basically all young people—got jobs with the railways. Because my second elder brother at the time was with the army, as a matter of special consideration, I got a job with the railway company. My brother learned quite a lot in the army. He rose to ranks, became an officer. Only if you are an officer can you change profession,¹⁶ if you are not an officer you are still a peasant when you are demobilised. If he had returned home just in time to become a worker in the railway company, then I wouldn't have been able to (Interview, September 2003).

At her age, she is supposed to be marrying soon. Official policy states that marriages should be delayed to 25 for men and 23 for women. My records show that men in the village traditionally married women a couple of years younger than themselves, and the dominant marriage age for women had risen from 17–23 in the 1950s to 22–24 in the 1980s.¹⁷

If she had not been transferred to the railways, this would have been the time when relatives would have helped her towards choosing a spouse in a nearby village. Some women married locally, in the same village, but most left for villages in the wider area. Anyway, the policy on late marriage gives her respite, and to a certain extent the transfer to the railways changes the situation. In general terms, women with agricultural household registration cannot aspire to marry urban men, because the household registration of children follows that of their mother. Not having agricultural household status any more, the channels are open to find an urban spouse.

She is not the only person with urban resident status in the sample. The proportion of people in the village with an urban resident household status jumped from 1% in 1977 to 11% in 1982. Apart from the state acquisition of the land, the reasons included restoration of urban household status to 'old' sent-down youths (or their eldest son) and at least one marriage of a local woman to an urban resident. However, our protagonist is the only female holder of urban residence status.

Household status, and by implication work in a state work unit, is considered an asset normally afforded to men. The fact that she achieved it probably has several

15. Another interviewee states that the number was between five and seven.

16. This implies changing household registration status and being employed by the state.

17. These numbers are based on a sample of 26 households with detailed data on 116 people; the calculations can only serve as crude indicators. A further limitation is that data on women only relate to those who remained or arrived in the village, although sporadic information is available on those who left.

reasons, among which her educational level (which was higher than that of her younger brother, who had discontinued education after junior middle school), the 'special consideration' for a family with army personnel,¹⁸ and most likely also a demand from the railway company to include women in the transfer. It also undoubtedly helped her that her mother would have seen this as an important target for her role as local leader of the Women's Federation.

The family is still, in its residential form, a nuclear family, but with the marriage of the second brother, it is becoming a joint family in strict family terms.

The year is 1987

She has married a worker in the railway company two years ago, in 1985, and born a son. She and her husband moved to a house near a major railway company compound in 1986.

At home, her younger brother, now 22, has married a local woman of 20, and they have got a daughter. They live together with the parents.

Since 1983, the family has done well. After a career as an officer in the army, the second son has returned to the nearby city and got a job in the rapidly expanding commercial and industrial administration at city level, married to a woman working in personnel management of the city's local transport system.

Through both the elder and second son, the father becomes aware that with the reforms it is possible to buy private lorries, and he is able to use his second son as a guarantor for a bank loan. He is himself an able driver, but the plan is for his younger son to drive and himself to be in charge of logistics and maintenance. The moment for starting a lorry transport company is right. The informal exchange of goods is taking off on a large scale. Long haul transport by private operators becomes an alternative to public transport services, which experience severe bottlenecks as demand grows. He repays the loan within one year and is able to buy a second (and better) lorry.

The proceeds from the business enable him to negotiate the terms for his youngest son's marriage. This involves refurbishing and equipping an outhouse for the couple, including a telephone connection, a refrigerator and several other items.

However, he spends more money on building the house in the city for his daughter. The two eldest sons are instrumental in this endeavour, although they do have their own good quality housing within the work units. The house is built for two families, and our protagonist moves in with her husband and son. A nephew of the father moves in with his family in the other part of the house.

The rationale for building this house is not entirely clear to me. One obvious reason is that our protagonist and her husband needed more living space than the railway company was willing to offer. Although nobody ever put it in those terms in interviews, the building of the house could be seen as a dowry, a contribution to her well-being in marriage, and a lever for achieving her marriage. In fact, however, the ownership of the house remained in her father's hands.

18. It was believed that the absence of a young person from the farming family was a severe burden on the family, which had to be compensated through 'special consideration'. This flagged up the patriotic contribution of the family involved and was a status marker. This rule was commonly applied in a wide range of regulations.

She is now living in a nuclear family unit with her husband and baby son. As a woman who has been ‘married out’, her links with the paternal family are formally broken.

Although all children have married, and one son and his family live with the parents, the family property has not been formally divided. The residential pattern in the village is that of a stem family, while in principle, the family is still a joint family.

Why has the family property not been divided? The main reason is that the brothers do not have a real claim on the house in the village and are totally separated from agriculture. As urban residents, they are not part of the local household registration, so there is no point in making them separate heads of households. The recent affluence made old age care an irrelevant issue.

By contrast, the reasons for maintaining the joint family are many. The lorry-based enterprise is based on the management and initiative of the father, the work of the youngest son (and the youngest son’s wife, who drove a small car), and support from the elder brothers.

Promise of prosperity in the late 1980s?

The father’s and youngest son’s business activities enabled an expansion of the family home. A new, three-storey house with large rooms and up-to-date furnishings was built, and new trees were planted around it. The need to rebuild the house arose partly because the main road in front of the house was to be expanded, encroaching on the yard in front of the house and an outhouse. The house was finished some time in the early 1990s and was a major symbol of progress and family pride.

Developments in the 1990s

Our protagonist worked first in the railway canteen and later in the inspection workshop, most of the time in the city, but sometimes in the substation near her parents’ home. Although there was free rail transport to the city with frequent work commuter trains, she often stayed overnight in her parents’ home. In 1990, she discovered that her husband had cheated on her, and she got a divorce.¹⁹ She and her son continued to live in the house in the city, while her husband left. She soon fell victim to ill-health and went back to the village while on sick leave.

Her father died in a local railway accident in 1992. In the late 1980s, the business had gradually begun to go downhill. The transport market tightened, her father, although enterprising, was never able—as one of his neighbours said—to ‘keep an eye on the long term development and concentrate his efforts on what he was good at; he always wanted to explore new ways of making money’. He did not want to employ strangers, for he was politically opposed to capitalist exploitation. For him, ‘relying on one’s own labour’ was a matter of honour and nobility. In short, her father was not able to capitalise on his head start, and several minor factors together brought the business to a halt; by local standards, the family was still wealthy, but failed to

19. This is entirely her version of events, and it is not possible to get a reliable sense of which factors actually led to the divorce.

achieve further growth. He tried his hand at raising crabs and at producing plastic pellets from plastic waste, and lost money. Her younger brother went with his wife to Guangzhou for three years; through an introduction from the eldest brother, he worked as a driver for a private school there. When he returned to the village, he opened an insulation materials factory, which was a success. However, it appears that he had borrowed private money in a way that exposed him to blackmail, and he was muscled out:

I don't know why, when he did transport, he'd been borrowing money from somebody, and then they came and took over the factory. In reality he'd borrowed much less, but they took it over. There was nothing to do. If you don't do as they say, they'll raise hell (daoluan). So he finally gave it to him (Interview, September 2003).

After this failure, he went off to Xinjiang and tried to make money on transport and trade, but eventually returned to the village, where he began a workshop making wooden packaging boxes. While he was away, his wife and daughter lived in the city house for a while, while our protagonist was convalescing in the village. While living in the city house, the younger brother's wife had male visitors, leading to divorce.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the residential family structure can, with reference to the official household registration, be characterised as follows:

- Our protagonist with her son formed a broken nuclear family. Both have urban residential household status.
- The parental home was initially a stem family, and after the father's death, a broken stem family. All members have agricultural household status.
- The elder brothers' families were nuclear families. All members had urban residential status.

In family terms, the family was still a large joint family because the property was not formally divided; in formal terms, our protagonist was not part of this family. However, the long-term absences, and the moving back and forth between city and village indicate that the family did not properly fit the ideal-type schemata of rural households. The household registration indicated the official pattern, while the actual situation was undetermined and pointed in no specific direction. In other words, while the family structure was clearly in a transitional stage, there were no conventional practices that could predict a 'normal' development.

Early 2000s

Our protagonist lives in the city house with her son. She has taken early retirement in her early 40s due to bad health; she enjoys a meagre pension. She has converted an outhouse into what is registered as a small 'tobacconist' shop with a licence to sell cigarettes, alcoholic drinks, salt, vinegar, soy sauce and instant noodles. She has rented the shop out to somebody else for a share in the proceeds, amounting to around 450 RMB monthly in the first year. The real trade in the shop is mahjong gambling for local people.

Her younger brother has remarried, this time a woman from a more distant rural area, where, incidentally, the father's family originated about 80–100 years ago, and

where there are still contacts, and the couple has a small baby. They live with the mother in the village.

The wife of the second brother, who works as a personnel manager in the public transport department of the city, operates a container transport company in the city house. As she is not allowed to have a private-sector job besides her civil service position, our protagonist is registered as the director of this company. Her younger brother works for it intermittently. The company has two permanent drivers and a mechanic looking after the lorries, and employs other hands on an irregular basis.

She has a male companion, and has gone through a private wedding with him (failing to register the marriage with the authorities). It is not entirely clear whether they live permanently together.²⁰ I surmise from the context that a formal marriage may affect rights to pension or other entitlements, or that there are other formal obstacles in the way.

Her son has not done well in school, but she has sent him to a private cookery school, and he has passed an examination. However, he has, at 16, been unable to find a job. He has rejected several opportunities because the wage was too low.

The family structure in co-residential terms has not changed much, although some of the people involved have. We face a question of how we can classify our protagonist's new husband, whom she alternately refers to as her 'husband' and her 'fiancée'. In family terms, they are married, but not in official household terms; their residential arrangements were obscure.

Short sharp shock: swift urbanisation

Suddenly in 2003, the situation changed, and the whole village was to be razed for a large-scale development. The villagers were to be compensated, but would need to move into temporary housing for 18 months before a new town development could house them.

The mother and the younger brother moved to the city house to live with our protagonist. The younger brothers' wife and newborn baby moved to her parents' house far away.

All rural members of the family became urban residents, were given monetary compensation, but would have to arrange for their future work themselves.

The family, household and residential patterns following this major change are difficult to conceptualise. They are in flux. The replacement flat given in compensation was for the broken stem family of the mother, the younger brother and his family, reflecting the valuation of the original property and providing that to the younger brother as head of the household in the village. At least in this respect there is clarity; he is the head of the household and therefore deemed to be the owner of the property in the village. The other brothers have no claim to a share, even if there is no formal division of the property.

As this all happened, our protagonist's 16-year old son became infatuated with a woman who was eight years older from a city 2,000 km away, whom he got to know

20. I could not find out during the interviews whether he was temporarily absent from the home, only turning up occasionally, or whether they did not, in fact, live together permanently.

in an Internet chat-room. She came on a visit and hoped to settle in the home, finding a job locally. She lived with the son in his room for a while, while our protagonist sought to force her to leave. The young woman had everything against her: she was 'lazy, unintelligent, unfit for proper work, lying on bed all day, didn't brush her teeth or wash her feet', and she didn't pay the rent she had promised to. The son, with the stubbornness of adolescence stuck to her.

As this intrusion on the family became unbearable, our protagonist called the local television crew over to make a report. This is routine in this city. Whenever citizens encounter injustices and immoral practices, the local television company is willing to reflect the public concern and make a public moral judgement. The young woman was vilified, and the mother supported in her fight for a moral solution. The two young people living together in illegitimate circumstances and the age discrepancy between them were the main targets of the moral attack. The young woman, unemployed, with a vocational college degree, much older, and coming from a different city was, so the media judged, cynically manipulating the young man in order to get a foothold locally.

The urban challenge to the rural family structures hit in suddenly. The elder brothers' nuclear families were structured in the urban ideal-type mould; their careers and social frameworks were established within work units. Our protagonist failed to enter into that pattern; her work unit either did not care enough to support her, who had neither arrived there early as a party member and model worker or a well-trained army officer (as her two brothers had), or she experienced bad luck with her health and the fidelity of her first husband.

For our protagonist's son, of course, the family does not offer stability and protection in the long-term perspective. The family has no grip on him in terms of joint production and communal property, and the job market is not able to give him the instant monetary satisfaction he feels he needs. He does not believe that he may be building a career through training in poorly paid jobs (as his mother wants him to), and he seems not to have a sense of direction.

In the same generation, the younger brother's daughter is doing much better and has continued in an educational setting, but depending on her ability to find a good career, this may simply be problems delayed.

Family cycles and women

The application of some concepts of family structure to one case of an urbanising family has, I hope, demonstrated the variability of basic social institutions, and how they have been applied. The extent to which the family institutions rationalise and describe behaviour as 'natural' and 'taken-for-granted' is a measure of their success and constancy. The families involved use them because they are socially embedded, and they can use them to rationalise their practice. In a broad sense, we may say that family structures, real and constructed, compensate for institutional deficiencies in the wider society by reducing transaction costs; while this point will not be discussed at any length here, it is worth noting that, for example, the family's business ventures relied on opportunities created by family and would otherwise not have been possible due to the lack of proper institutions in the market place. It is difficult to make a sharp

distinction between management of relationships within the family and strategies for dealing with the 'outside world', as the relations between siblings are to a large degree externally determined, and their shared use of resources directly influences their prosperity.

In the case study, the female protagonist has an ambiguous role in the family; she remains part of and loyal to the family. She benefits from the city house, which in principle is joint property, and she helps her brothers and the second brother's wife by being the registered director of their firm. She helps her mother and younger brother with temporary residence. She has, during almost 20 years, acted for her family in the urban context. In that sense, her role as sibling is significant.

We may look at it from another angle: her marriage experience was, for some reason, unfortunate. The marriage did not enter her into a role in a rural family pattern, but a marriage with less emphasis on shared family assets and responsibilities, drawing on status competition within an urban work unit, a role for which she was not prepared. She was, like the system had made rural women, an 'asset' by force of the status and prowess of her parental family and the skills as a worker and manager she could bring to the marriage.

By that standard, she had an excellent starting position in her early 20s. Her parental family had locally high social status and was rapidly getting richer, and was able to provide a house for her use. She had, on paper, a good education, she was effective and hard working, and she had urban household status. Her attractiveness to potential urban spouses lay only in the affluence of her family and the offer of a house. Her other advantages were not judged as positively as they would have been in the countryside. In the 1980s, urban status markers were closely linked with the educational level of the parents, their status in the cadre hierarchy and on salary scales, the educational level of the spouse, the status of her work unit, and so on.

Was her (first) marriage a misalliance, a violation of the Chinese demand for '*men dang hu dui*' (the appropriate match in wealth, background and ability of the marriage partners)?

The difference between the partners lay in the complex asymmetric relations between them, in a sense the classical drama of high class status versus the new rich, in addition to male dominance, to which came his greater ability to manoeuvre in the work unit.

The role of family patterns is to create 'natural' choices and control conflict, making asymmetric relations seem fair deals and natural. Or in Bourdieu's way of looking at it, allow the oppressed to be an active part in playing out the game of suppression.

Her first marriage failed because it lacked the fig leaf of a shared understanding of the role of the family, and very crudely manifested itself in a game of dominance and power. Her husband's infidelity provided her with a way out. In her second marriage she seems more sophisticated and controlling, protecting her own assets and her family and using the strength that she derives from the joint family, from her brothers. In her case, the joint family exists (and persists) as a reality, based on her house, the company run by the brothers, and the mutual support among the siblings: they do not share a residence or assets, but rely on each other. The main difference with the original version of the joint family is that she should be in a different one, not her

parental joint family, but that of her in-laws. Has she been co-opted as a brother? Has she gained more control over her life?

To what extent did our protagonist act to shape her future? In how far was she able to negotiate strong terms for herself? It is hard to gauge from the interviews, for in them she projected, understandably, an image of high moral character (in contrast to her first husband's infidelity) and also of resignation reflecting her frequent illnesses, her early retirement (i.e. inability to gain a proper foot-hold in the work unit), and her lack of control over her son. However, I do believe that her strong-willed mother was a major engineer of the cohesion among the siblings, commanding respect among the daughters-in-law and supporting our protagonist.

This case study is unable to state that Chinese women during the reforms have been able to change family institutions; neither can it assert that urbanisation necessarily brings liberation to urbanising women or gives them the means with which to assert new rights. However, the inclusion of the protagonist in a collaborative framework with her brothers is a pattern that may seem attractive in the urban context, where the (limited) land and residence resources have become relevant, and where inclusion of a sister may add significant resources to the family in the context of the (semi-)private urban economy. For the urbanising rural family, family division becomes less imperative (as the elderly begin to receive pensions), and the (undivided) family adds mutual support in a more atomised environment.

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