RE-UNITING FAMILY AMONG RURAL MIGRANTS IN BEIJING[1]

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Self-employed migrants who have worked in Beijing for two decades have settled in an intersecting area between rural and urban areas. Based on extensive field research and in-depth interviews, this article examines the workers' attempts to define their urban living space and resist discrimination. The research shows that veteran migrants re-unite with their children and wives in an outlying, "sub-urban" area of the city, where cheap accommodations, public education, and an informal economy are present. The area is where migrants make claims on citizenship through asserting their parental responsibility and identity. (Rural migrants, re-uniting family, sub-urban citizenship)

The last thirty years of economic reform witnessed one of the largest migrations in modern China—the rural to urban relocation of millions of peasants searching for work. This movement has spawned numerous studies on changes in Chinese society. Existing research on migrant workers largely focuses on the migrants' inferior political, social, and employment status (Chan 1996, 2010; Solinger 1999, 2006; Chan 1998, 2001; Feng et al. 2002; Pun and Chan 2012; Wu 2010). Scholars have pointed out that the household registration system (hukou) has led to the systematic transformation of peasants into a pool of cheap labor for urban and industrial growth. They reveal that migrants face various forms of exploitation: they are often denied a contract, adequate rest time, occupational safety, and even remuneration (Pun Ngai 2005; Chan and Buckingham 2007; Shen 2010; Sun 2003; Selden and Wu 2011). Research at present mostly focuses on young, single migrants from rural areas, who in order to survive often work in factories or low-end, labor-intensive jobs that provide meager income, and live in restricted dormitory space with very little access to urban welfare and society.

While acknowledging the structural problems peasant migrants face in a capitalist society with a household registration barrier, this essay sets out to make sense of the new realities and challenges facing migrants who are not factory workers. It focuses on middle-aged, self-employed, skilled workers who have been in the city for two decades and tend to settle in an area intersecting the urban and rural spaces (*zhengxiang jiaohequ)* on the outskirts

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of Beijing. The intersecting area provides a base for migrants to reunite their households and make claims on citizenship. Based on extensive field research and in-depth interviews, this essay explores how they strive to define their living area in the city and resist structural discrimination. These migrants are highly aware of the problems migrant parents face with what are called “left-behind children” (*liushou erdong*) (Lee 2011). They are deeply concerned about parenting responsibilities and their children’s education prospects. This paper joins broader discussion of citizenship mutation in the global era and show that family and parental matters are major sites of contests where migrants negotiate and assert their residential rights in the city

FLEXIBLE LABOR AND FLEXIBLE HOMES

At the outset of China’s economic reform, the southern special economic zones such as Shenzhen and Guangdong were pioneers in recruiting rural villagers from all over the country as migrant workers in manufacturing. During the 1980s and early 1990s, urban housing, food rationing, and social welfare were restricted to the work unit system, which applied only to urban workers in state-owned enterprises. Migrant workers in the manufacturing zones often lived and ate inside the zone, following a strict schedule. Pun and Smith (2007) outlined the wide range of dormitory rules that dictated migrants’ lives regarding when to eat, sleep, and rise, to ensure maximum productivity. The Chinese migrant workers’ lives were controlled by “a dormitory labor regime” that maximizes their productivity and limits their access to the city (Pun and Smith 2007). During the 1990s, institutional reforms of state-owned enterprises were introduced and urbanization intensified.[2] There was an urgent demand for rural migrants in the growing manufacturing and service sectors. The housing reform, for example, generated a huge demand for commercial housing (*shangpin fang*). This, in turn, created a new market for labor to demolish old communities, construct new buildings, and install tiling, flooring, plumbing, electricity, etc. In other words, the new urban economy demanded a more service-oriented worker whose “product” cannot be mass produced in a factory (Logan 2002; Ma and Wu 2005). As a result, skilled migrant workers with flexible schedules, working without contracts, constituted a new labor force outside of the traditional manufacturing regime.

With the changes in labor, megacities were required to meet the demand for living space outside of the cosmopolitan centers. Inevitably, the rural area adjacent to cities, with inadequate infrastructure, was opened to tenancy. It was the birth of the urban village, a distinctly rural landscape within the city’s boundaries (Zhang 2001, 2005). The urban village blurs the institutional division between rural and urban areas and acts as a buffer zone in which migrant workers can survive in expensive cities. The urban village has played

a supportive role in China's urbanization by introducing huge numbers of rural migrants into cities without using government resources (Li Zhang 2005:243–260).

Although rural migrants in urban villages generally have a low standard of living, spend very little, and cluster in poor quality housing, they do not suffer from the ethnic ghettoization or racial segregation that typifies the underclass in American and other Western cities. Studies have shown that rural migrants in China are generally "positive in terms of outlook" because they are economically active (Ma and Wu 2005:7). Smart and Tang (2005:80–98) argue that urban village settlements in Chinese cities are no "pockets of urban poverty" or "ghettoes of despair where the disadvantaged are trapped without hope." Others similarly suggest that migrants in urban villages are not the poorest group, as compared with laid-off workers in Chinese society, as they are active in market production and are better off than when in their former rural situation (Wu et al. 2010:74).

Fan (2008), however, suggests that rural migrants do not necessarily consider life in the city to be their ultimate goal because they are overwhelmingly channeled into jobs that are dirty, dangerous, physically demanding, low paying, and requiring long hours. She argues that rural migrants, discriminated against in the urban labor markets and treated as peripheral to the urban economy, often see themselves as outsiders. Their goal is to earn more in order to advance economically and obtain the best of both worlds. Migrant workers employ strategies such as split households, in which male migrants stay in the city, while their wives and children are in rural homes to tend to farmlands and save urban living costs, or circular migration to stay in host destinations as long-term practices (Fan 2008:88–94, 95–116, 2011).

Based on the research outlined above, this paper asks why migrants establish their households in the city if it is not their ultimate destination. Further, how do they speak about their decision to reunite their households in the city, and how is that related to their sense of belonging in the city? Our research found that although the migrants do not consider the city their permanent abode, they feel compelled to overcome the socio-political and economic barriers that prevent them from pursuing their rights in the city. Even though they are repeatedly thwarted in their efforts to integrate into the city, and they plan to return to the country in the future, they are highly aware of the economic benefits of prolonging their stay in the city. Given their dilemma of "no return and no exit" (*huibuqu, zoubuliao*) (Chan 2010), it is not surprising that veteran migrants tend to reunite their households as a means of making urban life more satisfactory. In this way, the migrants' decision to bring their wives and children to the city is a way to counter political and

economic barriers. Their narratives on parenting and households reuniting in the city help to understand their articulation of their urban belonging.

This study was done by team fieldwork between 2008 and 2010. During this period, the authors and Zhang Jieying, a research assistant from Peking University, conducted research by participant observation and in-depth interviews with migrants, their family members, children, and friends in what is here called "L" village of Beijing. Many migrants were not willing to share their private matters with us. Still, we established good rapport with 15 households in L village on the outskirts of the sixth ring road of Beijing. This article focuses on five migrant families whose members confided in us and expressed their concerns and anxieties about their staying together in Beijing. Each household contained two children. The national policy allows residents with rural household registration to have a second child if the first-born is a girl. However, some participants in the study had two children even when their first child was a boy. This may be due to their having escaped the reach of local government control.

Most migrants still deploy a split-household strategy, but we observed that household reunions among veteran migrants is a growing trend, particularly in the intersecting area between urban and rural spaces.

THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL SPACE

L village is on the sixth ring road in the northwest corner of Beijing, about 25 kilometers from the city center. One of the attractions that make L village a desirable residence for self-employed migrant workers is that at least five bus lines serve the village, making it a convenient locale for those who need to commute to the city.

Before the 1980s, L village was a remote agrarian place, where pigs were raised and peaches and cherries were harvested. It differs from other villages surrounding Beijing by the existence of a state-run aviation research center which hires a large number of workers. The center develops and manufactures various military aviation products and other items, such as golf clubs. Employment is no longer restricted to tenured workers. In the mid-1980s, its recruitment policy was extended to short-term contract workers, which attracts many villagers from Hebei province. With the influx of a rural migrant population, small workshops and businesses sprang up in L village. Interviewees said that the basic monthly salary at the research center was about 1,500 RMB per month in 2008; with overtime, it could reach 2,500 RMB. Most interviewees had worked on the center's production lines. Virtually all had transferred to other factories, or small workshops for higher wages, or started their own businesses.

Cheap rents, lax safety rules, and cheap labor make it possible for many small workshops to thrive and provide job opportunities in L village. These workshops manufacture low-quality clothing, linens, hardware, plastic goods, and food products. From 2007 to 2010, a large building project attracted more migrants as construction workers. During the time of our research, a major Beijing real-estate developer converted a large area of L village into a high-end residential district. Although most of the workers on the project resided in designated dormitories outside L village, they represented a large pool of low-end consumers whose needs generated even more small business opportunities.

The changes in L village have motivated its original residents to quit farming and become landlords. They rent out their farmland for industrial use or lease a brick structure (*pingfang*), built alongside their residence to house migrant families. In recent years pingfang have proliferated in L village. Tenants pay a monthly rent ranging from 120 to 150 RMB for a brick shelter of about 100 square feet, with poor ventilation and little insulation, and must share one water faucet and one toilet (two pits with no flushing) with several households.

Most veteran migrants living in L village are self-employed and have stayed in Beijing for over a decade. Many are skilled handymen specializing in electricity, installing tiles, flooring, brick laying, and other building trades. Their projects can be long or short term, and they negotiate their contracts directly with their customers. Other businesses include taxi service, small food stations, or convenience stores, all without proper licenses. Some specialize in collecting, sorting, and reselling discarded objects. These recyclers rent large open spaces previously used for farming to pile up and trade objects. All the interviewees are without employment insurance, but they earn more than general factory workers, with an average monthly wage of 3,000 RMB in 2009 and 5,000 RMB in 2011.

In 2000, the public primary school in L village began to accept students with rural, non-Beijing household registrations, a welcome development for the many migrants who had been forced to leave their children behind. Many interviewees moved to L village because of this educational opportunity. The school has good facilities, a good staff, and does not charge fees. Its central location in L village and proximity to migrant housing make it possible for the children of migrant workers to attend school on their own.

The intersecting area is different from the urban village in being much farther away from the urban center and still retaining lots of agricultural character. The intersecting area is thus a place of waning agriculture and immature urbanization that accommodates many externalities of industrial production and urban consumption, including household and industrial waste. It also is where rural migrants manage to reunite their households in Beijing.

SCHOOLING AND PARENTING OF MIGRANT CHILDREN

Ran, 40 years old in 2010, is from Sichuan, and is one of the hundreds of thousands of rural migrants who came to Beijing in the early 1990s. With two of his brothers-in-law forming a renovation team, Ran became a skillful tile layer, working in both household and commercial settings. In 2008, he made an average monthly income of 3,000 RMB; by 2010, his income was 5,000 RMB. Over nearly 20 years, Ran had lived in many parts of Beijing, moving away from the city center as the rents rose.

In 2000, Ran moved to L village because of its primary school. Ran brought his wife and son, who were staying in rural Sichuan, to a pingfang inside L village. His two brothers-in-law and many other relatives from his hometown followed. The close-knit network enabled the group to form a small neighborhood within L village. Ran's son attended school and Ran's wife worked as a janitor in commercial buildings in Beijing for a monthly income of about 1,200 RMB.

In their small pingfang—with two beds, a big closet, a desk, couch, stove, and cabinet—Ran and his wife were able to be with their son every day. Not surprisingly, Ran considers this a much better arrangement than the division his family endured when his wife and son were in Sichuan. Still, his life was not complete: his second son, ten years younger than the older one, remained in the rural hometown. Ran told us his worries:

> I want to bring him to Beijing. It is not good for a child to be separated from his parents. Even though he is much loved in his hometown, he is not close to us. Last year when he visited Beijing, he was always missing his uncle and auntie and even called them "daddy" and "mommy." I know so many parents who must leave their children at home and work elsewhere. The problem is that the children will not get proper parental teaching and discipline [*guanjiao*]. I think the parent as a role model is very important. Some of the parents play Mahjong all the time and try not to care about their children. I never play Mahjong and often chat and exchange views with my son.

In addition to his distress about being separated from his second child, Ran is anxious about his older son's education in Beijing. He regards Beijing schools, which claim to offer quality education (*suzhi jiaoyu*), as putting less emphasis on academic subjects and more on art, music, and sports, which works against the interests of migrant children. The current college entrance system requires all children to take exams at their registered household hometown, regardless of where they are raised and schooled. Ran's son, although enrolled in a Beijing school, must go to Sichuan to take the college exam. Migrant youngsters often find themselves at a competitive disadvantage when taking exams with their peers educated in their hometown, as the latter have been intensively trained in major academic subjects.

Because of this, Ran's sister sent her two children to Sichuan to go to secondary school, when the older one had completed his primary education in L village. Returning to their birthplace is not easy for migrant children raised in Beijing. In the summer of 2009, when Ran's sister's children were in Beijing for their summer holiday, the 15-year-old son complained about his hour-long trek through hilly terrain to attend a boarding school. The 10-year-old daughter had to stay with a hometown neighbor for her primary school in the village. Separated from each other, the brother and sister could meet only on Sundays when they visited their grandparent. Their parents in Beijing had to pay the boarding school fee, and room and board for their children. Both children said it was difficult to adapt to the inconveniences of rural life and complained about the difficulty of the homework and tests.

The children's mother, a salesperson in a supermarket, described the children's relocation as unavoidable if they were to continue their education for college. Relocation has created many problems: family separation, major expenses, and a lack of parenting. She worried about her daughter, who had just reached puberty, "going astray." Making frequent phone calls to her children and their teachers to follow their progress, she believes that migrant parents must be proactive to ensure that separated children do not feel abandoned.

The Chens, also from Sichuan, have been recycling unwanted goods for more than 15 years. Their two teenaged daughters remained in their hometown and were being raised by their grandparents. The Chens worried about the children's lack of parenting: "Of course we understand the problem of left-behind children. It is a source of juvenile delinquency in today's society, but we rural migrants have no choice but to accept it." Mr. Chen once returned home two days earlier than scheduled to see if his two daughters were frequenting an internet bar. He told us, "I was just waiting for two days behind the Internet bar, but my daughters did not show up. That really relieved me. I would be so angry if I saw them coming in."

All the veteran migrants we knew used electronic devices such as QQ (short-message software widely used in China) and mobile phones for communicating. They considered the technology necessary for gauging the welfare of their children, but worried about it providing access to pornography and their children making friends with strangers.

In August 2010, Ran learned that his son, having achieved excellent grades in L village primary school, had been admitted to one of the best secondary schools in Beijing. Enrollment in this school previously had been limited to students with urban registration or Beijing residents. In 2010, the Beijing Education Bureau changed its policy and allowed qualified students with rural household registration to study in local schools. Ran's family was

overjoyed because this meant his son did not have to leave Beijing for a boarding school in Sichuan. But Ran's son would face fierce competition from local students. Concerned about this, Ran took a day off to attend a teacher-parent meeting:

> I spotted an advertisement when I was renovating the premises of a tutoring service. It said that the tutors could enhance the exam results of high-school students. I know that most of my son's classmates are enrolled in tutoring classes. But these classes are 100 RMB per session. That is too expensive. My daily salary as a tile worker is 120 RMB. Enrollment in one subject costs about 1,000 RMB a month. That is his mother's entire monthly salary, and there are so many subjects in the high school.

During a visit, Ran's 12-year-old son came home looking tired. We joked that he should go to bed and get some sleep. This prompted Ran to say that he waits until his son finishes his homework before he goes to sleep every night. We expressed surprise that he could stay up late and still get up at around five o'clock in the morning for work. Ran said, "It is not too late. I want to be more supportive."

Xiao Li, a 25-year-old man has only a primary education. His uncle had been a recycler of used goods in L village for 15 years. Xiao Li took over his uncle's business and settled in Beijing with his wife and two-year-old son. Eight other migrant households from rural Sichuan shared a large courtyard with Xiao Li's family. The courtyard had ten pingfangs and a large open space used for storing and sorting recycling goods. Every day the inhabitants of the courtyard search Beijing's residential and commercial districts for recyclable objects such as bottles, paper, shoes, plastic, foam, clothes, and metal. In 2008, a hard-working couple could make a monthly income of 3,000 to 4,000 RMB.

Xiao Li sold objects he collects from a nearby residential district. The district pays him a small handling fee and gave him "exclusive access" to the waste generated there. His wife could offer little help because of caring for their energetic two-year-old son. Xiao Li's family situation was uncommon, as most nonworking mothers of migrant households remain in the rural community, where there is extended family support to look after their children and the cost of living is much lower. A family in the city with only one breadwinner is not cost-effective, and raising a child in a waste-sorting area is hardly ideal. Xiao Li and his wife were unperturbed about these concerns.

One reason that Xiao Li insisted on keeping his household together, a courtyard neighbor explained, was that the couple's older son, who had been placed in the care of his grandparents, drowned while swimming unsupervised in a pond. After the tragedy, the couple decided to keep their younger son with them wherever they went. Other migrants said that drowning was not uncommon with small left-behind children. For Xiao Li, raising his son in a dirty courtyard was better than risking losing him.

In 2010, when Xiao Li was ready to enroll his son in the L village kindergarten, his wife became pregnant, which meant the family would have to be divided again. In the summer of 2010, Xiao Li's family returned to Sichuan, where his wife and children remained after he returned to L village to continue working. Xiao Li was torn by the fact that he would be able to see his family only once a year.

After giving birth in Sichuan to her second child, Ling, a 24-year-old cousin of Xiao Li, moved into the recycling courtyard with her husband, a cable technician, and their one-year-old son. Ling said that although the cost of living in Beijing was high and the recycling courtyard was dirty, she had to keep the family together. Her relatives from Sichuan had moved to Beijing and many resided in L village. Ling believed that she would have childcare support in the courtyard and could rely on her relatives to look after her newborn while she worked in the city.

DISCUSSION

Pun and Lu (2010) regard China's development of capitalism as "peculiar." To adapt its socialist system to the global economy, the Chinese government called on rural migrants to work but not stay in the city As a result, Chinese migrant workers must deal with the separation of production in urban areas and reproduction in the countryside. For rural migrants working in Chinese cities, industrialization and urbanization are two entirely separate processes. The result is "an unfinished process of proletarianization" by which rural migrants are uprooted from their home but are unable to settle in urban centers due to their meager incomes. They are trapped in the process of becoming, and their identity as workers remains permanently "quasi" (Pun and Lu 2010:497–498).

Our study supports Pun and Lu's thesis of the unfinished process of proletarianization. The interviewees face the problem of separation from their children even though they have worked in Beijing for decades. However, our research also revealed that some migrants do not passively accept their status as "quasi" workers. The veteran migrants have instead created a way of living in the city margins that makes their urban experience more autonomous and enjoyable. Reuniting their households is a means of contesting their second-class citizenship. Not all migrant workers are able to effect such reunions and even those who succeed often do so only partially, as in Ran's case, or temporarily, as in Xiao Li's case. A united household might not be the most economical or rational option, but all our interviewees concurred that it contributes significantly to the well-being of all family members. In this respect, our study supports Ip's (2008) findings on rural migrant families in the Pearl River Delta, that "family" to the migrant worker is conceived as a

space, an entity, or a set of relationships that constantly challenges state prescriptions and arrangements (Ip 2008:204–205). In other words, the veteran migrants' determination to bring their families together in L village is their response to the current capitalist arrangement, which treats them as casual labor without family needs and obligations.

Migrants take their role as parents very seriously. In interviews, they shared their anxiety and sorrow about their divided households. They used expressions like "parental teaching and control" (*guanjiao*), "learning bad habits" (*xuehuai*), and "the children's future" when discussing their difficulties. In expressing their concerns, migrants articulated a heightened awareness as responsible parents who need to be proactive in communicating with and understanding the needs of their children. In their personal narratives, they always made parenting more important than economic or employment issues. An example is that of the father who forfeited two days of work to go home early to see if his daughters visited the internet bar. There is Ran, who refused to indulge in the gambling game of Mahjong in order to be a better role model. Xiao Li would endure the difficulties of keeping a family of three in Beijing to ensure his child's safety. Most migrant parents also emphasized the need to have heart-to-heart talks with their children in order to better understand their needs.

In many ways, the narratives of "attachment parenthood," "understanding your children," and the problem of "left-behind children" are part of the daily consciousness of rural migrants. On the one hand, these narratives on parental responsibility can exacerbate the anxieties of rural migrants who must leave their children behind. On the other hand, the narratives have also motivated an increasing number of migrants to bring an end to their split households. By participating in parenting discussions, the migrants assert their role as responsible parents and their determination to unite their household in the city.

Our study found that veteran migrants' conception of their parenting role and identity depends on the resources available in their neighborhood, such as the availability of public schools, public transportation, support networks, and job opportunities. In this sense, the intersecting area, though rural and lacking in urban infrastructure, provides a vital space for migrants to access urban opportunities and establish their identity as concerned parents and as citizens (Du and Li 2010). Ran and many of his relatives moved from an urban village in the city to the intersecting area so that their children could attend the public school in L village. He and his extended family members, residing in close proximity, have formed a strong support network. Their children attend public school, play together, and look after each other. The parents, with their long work days, rely upon such networks and proximity to the public school for the reunification of their families. In a filthy courtyard, Xiao Li and his wife and

many of his relatives sorted and traded their recycling materials, played cards, and watched over the children running about. By taking advantage of such communal spaces and incremental institutional changes, such as with school admission policies, veteran migrants assume a working-parent identity in the city.

CONCLUSIONS

The migrants' sense of citizenship remains partial and location specific. They have not achieved full political recognition and its associated social welfare entitlements. But some veteran migrants, through long-term networking and work in the city, are able to articulate what we call a "sub-urban citizenship" in the intersecting area between the rural and urban spaces. There, job opportunities, inexpensive accommodations, and children's schools are available. With the term "sub-urban citizenship," we wish to draw attention not only to the suburban location of veteran migrants' reunited households, but also to their secondary citizenship status in terms of political, social, and economic entitlement.

Ong argues that the idea of citizenship has undergone global changes, in which rights and entitlements are increasingly "dis-articulated from national terrain, but re-articulated on contingent grounds of political claims and mobilization" (Ong 2006:504). Ong calls those contingent ground "space of assemblage." This study show that the intersecting area represents a "space of assemblage" where migrants make their residential and parental claims, and thus assert their right to the city (Ong 2006). There veteran migrants no longer invoke traditional notions of citizenship, but instead assert their parental rights and their children's right to an urban presence and entitlements.

The migrants' dilemma in contemporary China is the product of the country's socialist history and the global phenomenon of "graduated sovereignty," in which governments throughout the world restrict citizenship entitlements based on pre-existing class, race, or regional divides, in order to respond to global capital forces (Ong 2000). An objective of this essay is to recognize the negotiations and struggles of veteran migrants in the place they strive to define, whether socialist or global capitalist. To think of migrants as either exploited peasants who will never be real workers or temporary sojourners who have no plans to settle in the city misses the full picture. There now are migrants whose children have grown up in Beijing, who have family and business networks there, and who do not plan to return to rural homes. They choose to cope with the problem of "unfinished proletarietanization" by reuniting their household in the intersecting area. Such sub-urban citizenship is continuously challenged by the constraints of the existing college entrance exam system, changing family conditions, and many policies that discriminate

against the migrant population (Montgomery 2012). Still, there is the potential for policy reform and veteran migrants keep finding gaps and fissures in the system, which allow them to assert their rights.

NOTES

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2. There were reforms on the hukou system in the 1990s but these, such as the "blue stamp" scheme or the selling of hukou through home purchase, investment, and skills, were mainly designed to attract a pool of skilled workers or desirable elites. See Chan and Zhang 1999; Wong and Huen 1998.

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