

How Migrant Labor Is Changing Rural China

RACHEL MURPHY

Jesus College, University of Cambridge



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Values, Goals, and Resources

THIS book explores how labor migration is changing rural China and proceeds by examining the interactions among values, goals, resources, and social actors. *Values* are the meanings that people ascribe to attributes and actions. They are expressed in the norms and rules governing appropriate behavior in society, and they inform both goals and acceptable pathways to those goals. *Goals* are the things that people want to do, become, own, or feel; they are achieved by obtaining and deploying resources. *Resources* include both material resources (e.g., cash and commodities) and abstract resources such as contacts, information, and prestige. All these resources are distributed according to culturally embedded rules stipulating which people are entitled to what quantities of which resources under what conditions. *Social actors* are individuals or collective entities such as households. These actors usually attempt to deploy resources in ways that enable them to obtain more resources for attaining further goals. They are generally knowledgeable about society's values and distributional structures and reconstitute them as they use this knowledge to form and attain goals.¹ This means that each social actor continually stimulates interaction among values, goals, and resources. These interactions contribute to changes in the values and resources available within society to inform further goals, changes that both enable and constrain subsequent actions. Migration and return migration are strategies pursued by social actors for attaining goals; they involve the use and reproduction of particular values and mechanisms of resource distribution.

Values embedded in society underpin an expectation among both migrants and family members (remaining in the origin areas) that the migrant will return home once sufficient resources have been accumulated to attain their goals. Family and friends in the village sustain the return orientation of the migrants by providing resources to support out-migration, by conferring prestige on those who achieve their life goals at home, and by stressing values such as filial piety, love of the native place, and collective welfare. Ties between family in the origin village and fellow villagers who have already migrated furnish intending migrants with resources such as information, accommodation, and access to particular destination areas and occupational sectors. Family in the village also provide the migrants with security in the event of failure in the cities. Ideally, for

their part, the migrants honor a moral duty to contribute resources for strengthening their families socially and economically. They also use their resources in the village to achieve goals pertaining to life-cycle events such as marriage, building a house, educating children, setting up a business or career, and saving funds for old age. These values, goals, and practices afford people in the home community some control over the migrants and the resources that their labor generates.²

Return migration is sustained not only through values but also through a whole bundle of economic remittances in the form of money, commodities, and equipment as well as “social remittances” such as letters, information, skills, and ideas. Individual migrants often bring these resource bundles home in person when they visit or resettle. Alternatively, migrants send money, gifts, and information via the postal and banking systems or entrust them to returning fellow villagers. Through material remittances migrants contribute to the livelihood diversification of their rural households. This means that households do not rely solely on agriculture for their livelihood but instead minimize their risks and raise their returns to available labor by incorporating various income sources into the household budget. By sending remittances and maintaining contact with family members, migrants demonstrate their continuing membership in their households and keep the door open for future reintegration into the origin community. The flow of people and remittances between origin and destination areas, together with the continual deployment and redeployment of resources within a framework of shared values and obligations, creates single economies and societies that are spatially dispersed.

Migration and return shape and are shaped by the ways in which social actors both form goals and negotiate in obtaining and deploying resources to achieve them. These actors include migrants, returnees, the elderly (whose labor makes the migration of other household members socially possible), dependants of migrants, labor brokers, local farmers who cultivate migrants’ land, local government officials, indigenous entrepreneurs, transport operators, and labor recruiters. Examining the ways in which different social actors manipulate resources facilitates an understanding of how migration and return are changing the social, economic, and political institutions of sending areas. Yet before exploring the interactions between values, goals, and resources, I shall examine conventional theories of labor migration for insights into the resource characteristics of origin and destination areas and for contrasting perspectives on the role and outcomes of migration and return in distributing these resources.

1.1 MODERNIZATION AND STRUCTURALIST EVALUATIONS

Modernization and structuralist theories of migration have been influential in both academic and policy-making circles since the 1950s and 1960s, and this

influence continues in various forms to the present day. Each theoretical category dichotomizes economies and spaces into modern urban cores and traditional rural peripheries.³ In general, these geographical concepts of core and periphery also describe a nationwide pattern of uneven development favoring the coastal regions over the interior provinces, though within these regions cities are advantaged over the countryside.

For modernization scholars, development is a process involving the spatial redistribution of labor from low-productivity peripheries to high-productivity cores as well as the diffusion of resources from the latter to the former. They adapt the work of Lewis⁴ to argue that migration contributes to modernization because cheap rural labor allows industry to accumulate capital that is directed toward industrial expansion, further propelling the demand for migrant labor. In this explanation, only “surplus” or “zero value” labor migrates; once the supply of surplus labor is depleted from the countryside and urban labor markets become saturated with workers, rural wages rise and urban wages fall in accordance with supply and demand.⁵ While this is happening, capital is said to flow from the high- to low-wage sectors, further reducing differences in wage rates. In this model, labor mobility finally adjusts itself in response to the equalization of rural and urban wage rates with a general move toward equilibrium.

Much of the research influenced by this modernization perspective consists of micro-level studies of equilibrating processes. Broadly referred to as the neoclassical literature, this research assumes an economy that functions in isolation from social and economic factors and examines the decision-making of rational individuals as they weigh the costs and benefits of working in different regions and economic sectors. Todaro adjusts the standard neoclassical model to account for the fact that migrants may find themselves unemployed or working for a pittance once in the destination area. He explains that migrants base their mobility decisions on incomplete information and on the mere *expectation* that urban locations offer higher material rewards for their labor.⁶

In later studies, scholars have noted that migration does not involve simply a “one off” adjustment of the individual to intersectoral wage differences and that rational individuals seek not only to raise returns to their labor but also to minimize their risks. These realizations have led to interpretations of migration as a family-based strategy mediated by an implicit contract. In these models, the intrafamilial contract is underpinned by altruism and “enlightened self-interest,” ensuring that the benefits of migration are distributed to household members in turn. For example, remittances compensate the family for previous investment in the education of the migrant. And in the absence of institutional insurance arrangements, urban wages also provide the rural household with protection against drought, pests, and other risks inherent in “low immunity . . . traditional agriculture”⁷ as well as a backup that facilitates experimentation with riskier

crops. In turn, by remitting to the rural family, the migrant gains livelihood insurance, sustained rights to a future inheritance,⁸ and enhanced social assets and prestige that enable a future dignified return to the native place.⁹ In identifying rural–urban migration as a cause of surplus labor in the cities and in recommending rural development as a way of expanding rural employment opportunities and reducing the risks inherent in agriculture, many scholars approximate the structuralist position of associating migration with disequilibrium.

Although many modernization scholars recognize that equilibrium fails to occur in the real world, they nonetheless contend that – at an aggregate level – the migration strategies of individuals and households improve the distribution of labor and other resources both within and among regions.¹⁰ To give an example of redistribution within regions, out-migrants are said to assist not only themselves but also those who remain behind because they alleviate pressure on the land, leading to higher productivity per head and facilitating technical innovation in farming.¹¹ With regard to redistribution between regions, migration is credited with accelerating the diffusion of cultural and economic resources from cores to peripheries. These core–periphery interactions are said to promote human capital accumulation and the adoption of modern attitudes among rural people,¹² resulting in their “lesser accommodation of poverty”¹³ and the development of an entrepreneurial mentality and an achievement-based work ethos.¹⁴ In sum, from a modernization perspective, return flows to origin areas more than compensate for the outflow of “surplus” labor.

In contrast, structuralist theories argue that exchanges between core and periphery can never function as a balancing mechanism because they are fundamentally unequal.¹⁵ These inequalities are the result of histories of uneven capitalist expansion and colonial exploitation, adverse terms of trade in agricultural and industrial goods, and government policies affecting regional patterns of investment. Migration is denounced as both the child and parent of inequality because it helps to sustain the spatial and sectoral inequalities that propel movement from origin areas.¹⁶ The continuous movement of labor and other resources between origin and destination areas is described in the general migration literature as “circulation.”¹⁷ This means that rural–urban migrants regularly return home to help during busy farming seasons, for life-cycle celebrations, and when sick, injured, pregnant, unemployed, or just too old to work; they also remit money and commodities to support their rural families and substitute for their physical presence. For structuralists, circulation occurs because capitalist centers employ labor at wages that are less than the cost of reproducing labor power. In this model, circulation is common when agriculture fails to guarantee the subsistence of all household members and, at the same time, urban incomes are insufficient to allow migrants to settle in the cities either alone or with their families. Because the rural family provides support systems, the

wage sector escapes the burden of providing the welfare needed by migrants.¹⁸ Thus, migrant labor generates wealth for the cores while peripheries shoulder the burden of reproducing this labor.

Although remittances are integral to circulation, structuralists argue that these resources are monopolized by the migrants and their immediate families,¹⁹ selfishly directed toward house building and conspicuous consumption rather than toward agriculture and community welfare.²⁰ Scholars point out that the tendency of rural inhabitants to use remittances for consumption purposes reflects the underdevelopment and lack of investment opportunities that propelled the initial out-migration.²¹ Structuralists further contend that remittances provide a “stop gap” measure enabling farmers to live above subsistence level, thereby “maintaining current inequalities” and preventing the implementation of more fundamental measures that direct resources away from cities and toward agricultural production.²²

Origin areas are said to lose more than they gain from migration because, in the words of one Chinese economist, “it is not only ‘zero value’ labor that migrates.”²³ Several Chinese scholars explicitly refer to Lewis when arguing that, even if those who migrate are “surplus” in a quantitative sense, the qualitative selection effect of migration means that it is the young and skilled who move out – with detrimental consequences for developing rural enterprises.²⁴ Research conducted in other parts of the world similarly suggests that migration may exert a negative effect on local production because the loss of skilled workers decreases employment opportunities for others.²⁵ Moreover, in a situation where large numbers of able people are leaving, other villagers perceive that the city offers their only hope for advancement, propelling further out-migration. Chinese scholars contend that – even though out-migrants may be numerically surplus at a national or regional level – at the household and village levels, “nonsurplus” labor often leaves and so creates labor shortages and subsequent declines in agriculture, the maintenance of public works, and domestic welfare. These scholars state that, contrary to the Lewisian formulation, out-migration may act as a disincentive to investment in the home area and may thereby precipitate a downward spiral.²⁶

Structuralists tend to evaluate negatively the potential for returned migrants to compensate for the outflow of quality labor from origin areas. They scorn the modernization idea that returned migrants use human capital gains to promote economic development at home. Explanations for the failure of returnees to innovate include the tendency for migrants to be relegated to low-paying and unskilled jobs in the cities, the perception that only failed migrants return, the lack of investment opportunities in backward areas, and the incompatibility between urban production processes and the rural setting.²⁷ Far from improving human capital, migration is implicated (by some structuralists) in the deskilling of rural people in that years of drudgery in the destination areas make



This photograph shows the positive selection effect of migration. A labor recruiter measures the height of a potential migrant. Recruiters also check for other indications of “quality” – for example, the dexterity of the fingers and the ability to speak Mandarin.

them forget the farming techniques and crafts that they used to practice at home. Other studies report the apathy of national governments toward returnees and the resentment of local authorities toward innovators.²⁸ Finally, returnees are said to be negatively selected – with only the old, ill, and untalented going back home and forming a disadvantaged stratum in rural society.²⁹

Although a few returnees do create businesses, structuralists contend that their impact on the origin areas is at best neutral. Some studies assess pessimistically the cosmetic contributions of shops, hotels, and pubs established

by returned migrants in the saturated tertiary sectors of rural areas in Europe and some developing countries.³⁰ Other scholars, writing about former colonies, argue that migrants returning as petty traders or embryonic capitalist planters hiring paid labor exacerbate “a degenerated agrarian capitalism, corrupted and poor.”³¹ Returnee enterprises are generally said to do no more than provide an outlet for spending remittances, usually on urban commodities, thereby perpetuating the dependence of peripheries on cores.

Many Chinese intellectuals based in universities and government think-tanks embrace facets of both the modernization and structuralist positions. Their recommendations inform national policy-making on labor migration and rural development, thereby shaping patterns of resource deployment in the countryside. On the one hand, Chinese scholars concur with the structuralist position that government intervention is needed to redress fundamental inequalities in the political economy and that the “balancing” forces of the market are not sufficient for the regulation of migration. On the other hand, they endorse the modernization view that, if managed correctly, migration may be a low-cost way of generating resources useful for rural development. Rural–urban migration studies conducted in other parts of the world suggest that origin areas that benefit more from the developmental potential of return flows tend to have higher levels of rural development, better infrastructure,³² a more diversified economic base, land that is more fertile, distributional mechanisms and resource bases that provide more opportunities for acquiring property, a local government supportive of investment and innovation, and a social structure fluid enough to permit upward mobility.³³ Aware that conditions in the origin areas are important in shaping the developmental outcomes of migration, Chinese scholars have argued that grass-roots officials should intervene in their local economies to harness return flows so that the countryside can build up infrastructure in ways that attract further gains from migration.³⁴ As subsequent chapters reveal, although grass-roots officials in China seek to direct migration resources toward a local modernization agenda, social actors are still able to pursue their own goals. Some of these goals conform to the official modernization objective, but other goals bring rural producers into conflict with the local state over the deployment of resources.

Case studies in countries other than China find that government-sponsored credit and training schemes targeting potential returnee entrepreneurs or migrant investors tend to be disappointing. These studies refer to international rather than internal migration;³⁵ many discuss the aftermath of mass repatriation, where origin governments expect returnees to solve their own reintegration problems through self-employment but take few measures to improve the local business environment. One problem with support schemes for intending returnee entrepreneurs is that financing is usually offered for large manufacturing projects whereas the socioeconomic backgrounds and capital restrictions

of migrants limit them to small service-sector enterprises.³⁶ Another problem is that government-organized investment projects frequently fail because of the migrants' distrust of the government³⁷ and, in some instances, because of corruption. The few returnee support schemes that do exist are found to be unsystematic;³⁸ although some schemes generate results, these tend to be less than anticipated. Finally, returnee incentive schemes funded by governments in the host countries usually flounder because the economic benefits from resettlement subsidies and low-interest loans fail to match the economic incentives of working in host-country labor markets.³⁹ Despite the overall lack of government success in creating conditions that support returnee participation in enterprise creation or encourage migrants to invest at home, parallels with official–returnee interactions in the Chinese countryside can be found in Jordan, where better-endowed returnees from the Gulf have been lobbying for a more liberal business environment and the government has been relatively responsive.⁴⁰ Later chapters will demonstrate that the actions of local officials partially explain why, in light of the general failure of returnee innovation and related government efforts in other parts of the world, migrants in many parts of rural China nevertheless have contributed to local economic development.

1.2 MOVING BEYOND DICHOTOMIES: VALUES, GOALS, AND RESOURCES

The modernization and structuralist approaches offer contrasting perspectives on the causes of migration and return and on the outcomes of resource redistribution in the origin areas. Although these approaches yield valuable insights, three weaknesses detract from their usefulness. Two of these weaknesses pertain to the role of dichotomies in restricting and simplifying the explanation of how migration is changing the countryside: the core–periphery dualism already mentioned, and the dichotomy separating analysis into micro and macro levels. A third weakness stems from the tendency of modernization and structuralist theories to understate the noneconomic dimension of the migration process. Each of these limitations is discussed in turn, together with suggestions for moving beyond them.

The enduring influence of the first dichotomy – between modern core and traditional periphery – means that migration and return flows tend to be viewed as forces that are external to peripheries. Modernization research discusses how return flows make traditional societies more modern,⁴¹ whereas structuralist studies consider how migration undermines the socioeconomic fabric of traditional communities while providing the resources for maintaining archaic production methods, buttressing traditional power structures, and reinforcing ritualized methods of status attainment.⁴² Similarly, the impact of returnees on the countryside is classified as either innovative and modernizing (e.g., bringing

back ideas that challenge the traditional order) or conservative (e.g., buying land in order to live a traditional life). These interpretations, which are very much a product of the strong development policy focus of the migration studies field, plot the movement of different dimensions of origin areas along a continuum of traditional and underdeveloped at one end and modern and developed at the other, thereby limiting explanations of change.

The reification of modern core and traditional periphery also leads to the idealization of resources and values within origin and destination. So, in seeing mutual aid as a characteristic of traditional societies, both conflict in rural communities and cooperation among urban residents are ignored.⁴³ As another example, the idea that “traditional” migrant women from origin areas are emancipated through exposure to the modern host society disregards the role of modernization in perpetrating oppressive dimensions of gender relations and also glosses over differences among both origin societies and migrant women.⁴⁴ As shown in Chapter 4, changes precipitated by migration often defy classification as either modern or traditional and instead represent the adaptation of existing social practices to new contingencies, many of which are brought about through migration.

The second dichotomy is concerned with the level of analysis. Modernization studies examine migration decision-making at the individual and household levels, whereas structuralist research explores the relationships between migration patterns and macro-level shifts in political economy. By neglecting the interactions between the micro and macro levels, modernization and structuralist analyses offer only a partial perspective.

Regardless of whether the theoretical focus is on individual responses to economic incentives or on macro-level changes in the political economy, the resulting research tends to overlook the noneconomic characteristics of origin and destination, the nonlabor qualities of migrants, and the contingent nature of the migration process. In seeing migration and return as phenomena determined predominantly by economic and environmental stimuli, migration and return are assumed to be processes that are external to the agency and subjectivity of social actors. In reality, migration and return are strategies used by individuals for pursuing goals that are formed through continuous socialization, and migration itself becomes one of the factors in the socialization process. Furthermore, individuals form and pursue goals by using and reproducing the cultural values, social arrangements, and distributional mechanisms that constitute their environment, so they both create and respond to their environment.

Some scholars have attempted to overcome the limitations of the micro and macro dichotomy by conducting community-based studies that integrate different levels of analysis. These studies consider the social, political, and economic characteristics of origin areas and potential destinations – sometimes

conceptualized for simplicity as “push” and “pull” factors – and the responses of different decision-makers to the characteristics of different places. *Push* factors usually include increases in the costs of farm inputs, inefficient credit markets, underdeveloped infrastructure, unfavorable environmental conditions, high population-to-land ratios, underemployment arising from technical innovation,⁴⁵ inequitable patterns of land distribution resulting from local class relations or inheritance customs, restrictive traditional values, and oppressive family relationships.⁴⁶ *Pull* factors can include demands for labor with certain attributes, higher urban wages, the lure of an exciting new environment, opportunities for increased freedom, and better facilities and entertainment. A further “pull” factor is the presence of fellow villagers and relatives in the destination area who assist the new arrival with finding accommodation and employment.⁴⁷ The operation of this factor is known as *chain migration*, whereby previous migrants draw fellow villagers to a particular destination area and a particular occupational sector.

A push–pull perspective can also be used to explain return migration. As examples, “push” factors would include job insecurity, poor living conditions, social discrimination, and legal restrictions on urban residence. “Pull” factors refer to expanded employment or investment opportunities in the origin areas,⁴⁸ access to land or opportunities for acquiring property, high labor demands sustained by low-technology cultivation methods, and the presence of family and kin. Yet, as Rhoda points out, it is not always easy to distinguish push from pull in the countryside because, in the absence of economic development and local job creation, improvements in infrastructure such as roads and schools may propel further out-migration.⁴⁹

Some studies fall broadly within the neoclassical cluster in that they consider the interactions between push–pull factors, individual or household characteristics, and rational decision-making. Individual characteristics include age, gender,⁵⁰ marital status, stage of the life cycle,⁵¹ level of education, and skills; household characteristics include demographic composition, stage of the development cycle, size of the family landholding, and socioeconomic standing. One such study among seasonal migrants in China finds that the specific demands of destination labor markets pull individuals with particular attributes, whereas household characteristics shape demands for agricultural labor and thereby determine who is pulled back home, when, and for how long.⁵² The study further reveals that inhabitants of townships with more local earning opportunities are not as responsive to the pull of outside labor markets. Another category of neoclassical research focuses less on push–pull factors and more on how the attributes of individuals and their personality traits affect their socio-psychological perceptions of “place utility” and the intervening obstacles to migration.⁵³ Still other studies belong within a broadly structuralist cluster in

that they explain how labor circulation is shaped by capitalist exploitation, traditional relations of production (including family and class-based exploitation), and resulting changes in social relations of production and demands for cash and labor in both origin and destination.⁵⁴

The best of this research stresses that origin areas are integrated with urban networks through transport systems, proximity to towns, local marketing structures, and the mutual aid and information networks established through previous migration and that this integration produces environmental stimuli that are more complex than a bifurcated push and pull.⁵⁵ Recognition of rural–urban integration, together with ongoing debates about whether the micro or the macro is the most appropriate level of investigation, have led some researchers to designate “articulatory migration networks” as the unit of analysis. For these scholars, networks refer to the various levels and spheres of social, economic, and cultural relationships – spanning both origin and destination – that engage in different facets of an ever-changing “bipolar” world.⁵⁶ For other scholars, migration networks are the medium through which individual or household decision-makers with particular characteristics respond to shifts in combinations of push and pull caused by macro-level socioeconomic transition.⁵⁷ Some scholars also point out that effects of shifts in push and pull on household and individual decision-making are moderated by chain migration and the role of social networks in providing resources such as information, employment, and food.⁵⁸

In trying to overcome the core–periphery and micro–macro dichotomies, this book retains the discussed insights on multilevel analysis, the ways in which social networks both shape and are shaped by the migration process, and the feedback mechanism between migration strategies and socioeconomic change in both origin and destination. However, unlike much of the existing literature, this book redresses the tendency of analytical frameworks to subordinate the agency and subjectivity of social actors to environmental factors.⁵⁹ In particular, the goals and strategies of those who have remained in or have returned to the countryside – and the ways in which they reproduce and change their social environment – require further scholarly attention.

Focusing on the interactions among values, goals, and resources is a way of making the agency and subjectivity of social actors (as well as changing combinations of environmental factors) central to the explanation of how migration is changing rural China. This is because the agency of social actors is only meaningful if interpreted within a wider social, cultural, political, and economic context. Understanding the broader environment in which social actors form goals and struggle to obtain and deploy resources involves recognizing that individuals are positioned within households and that households are embedded within a wider network of extended family, kin, community, and patron–client

ties.⁶⁰ These multiple levels of socioeconomic organization affect the cultural values and power relations that underpin struggles over the distribution of resources within households (e.g., along age and gender lines) as well as the range of resources that households are able to harness from the wider society. In focusing solely on economic rationality, modernization theories overlook the fact that individuals and households seldom make decisions in isolation from wider social groups. In contrast, the perspective adopted in this book is that social groups define rationality by specifying the characteristics of a respectable person or family and thereby create shared values; hence, what is “economically rational” can be “culturally specific.”⁶¹

Although migration is usually motivated primarily by economic goals, the outcomes permeate cultural, political, and ideological spheres of rural life, which in turn shape the content of values and lead to the next generation of goals. Values and goals are internalized and develop over time through interactions between social actors and a spatially extended reference group. Therefore, migration strategies are not simply opportunistic and immediate responses to push and pull stimuli; they are also the products of values and life goals inculcated through longer-term socialization and life experiences.⁶² This is well illustrated by societies in which particular combinations of environmental factors that generate economic imperatives have intertwined with existing cultural practices to generate a “culture of migration.” This means that migration becomes an endorsed and expected means of attaining economic goals and a rite of passage for young people.⁶³ The culture of migration means that children grow up expecting to spend part of their lives in the cities, and young villagers who do not migrate are derided by their peers for being unadventurous and without ability.⁶⁴

Values operate on two levels. Individuals consciously use certain values at the discursive level as reasons for their actions. At this level, values themselves can be seen as resources that social actors use to give meaning to their actions, legitimate their choices, and cover up inner conflicts generated by the contradictions of the migration process. On the other hand, there exist hidden values and rules that are inherent in the routine everyday practices of social life. People tend not to question this second level of values because they seem natural and part of common sense. However, a researcher can observe everyday life and listen to people talk about matters of importance to them in an effort to identify the culturally embedded values and norms that may contribute to migration decisions.⁶⁵ Of course, actions are not determined by a single set of values. When giving content to their goals and legitimating their actions, individuals may choose from a range of potentially competing values.⁶⁶ Moreover, migration and return often widen the range of values from which individuals are able to choose,⁶⁷ giving “perspective” and thereby enhancing the scope for agency.

Some authors explain values and goals by using the concept of *narrative* – that is, the ways in which people speak about their identities, histories, current situation, and future intentions. These scholars demonstrate that people act in accordance with narratives that fit in with how they understand themselves and that migrants may suspend one narrative while another narrative guides action. So, for example, migrants might explain that they send money home because they are dutiful children or good spouses. At the same time, however, migrants talk in terms of being modern young people and so temporarily suspend “dutiful children” or “good husband or wife” narratives when spending a month’s wages on consumer goods for themselves.⁶⁸ Some of the competing narratives arise from the fact that – although the aim of migration is to strengthen the household economically and socially – migration entails the prolonged physical separation of family members. As a result, while remaining mindful of the need to fulfill from a distance the obligations associated with their rural identities (e.g., as wives, parents, children, and household members), migrants may develop new goals through the experience of living alone in cities. Manipulating and suspending narratives that embody contradictory values and goals is a way for migrants and other individuals to smooth over their inner conflicts.⁶⁹

Migrants, returnees, nonmigrants, and households deploy resources in order to achieve physical goals, such as warmth and nourishment, as well as goals informed by shared values or collective rationality, such as maintaining self-respect and participating in social activities.⁷⁰ This latter type of goal is illustrated by Adam Smith’s example of the eighteenth-century English gentleman who wears leather shoes in order to conform to social standards of respectability and to achieve the goal of avoiding shame.⁷¹ Sen points out that the resources required for attaining specific life goals increase with the prosperity of the society. Hence, poverty is viewed not as a result of the deprivation of resources per se but as the incapacity to attain goals.⁷² This perspective provides a focus for understanding the strategies and outcomes of resource deployment in sending areas: as societies undergo change, the resource requirements needed to achieve particular goals also change. The social context of migration goals and resource requirements is further suggested by case studies finding (1) that individual and household perceptions of relative deprivation rather than household consumption motivate migration⁷³ and (2) that the elite migrate to counter tendencies toward social leveling precipitated by the migration of other social groups.⁷⁴ As subsequent chapters of this book will demonstrate, return flows of cash and commodities alter the resources required by villagers for maintaining self-respect and for participating in a changing society; this can be seen, for instance, in the rising standards of socially respectable housing or wedding feasts.

The capacity of migrants to obtain further resources depends not only on their control over present resources, such as information and skills, but also

on the unobservable components of chance, opportunity, and aptitude. Why some people succeed in obtaining many resources while others barely survive, or why migration alleviates the poverty of some households but forces others into debt by raising standards of social respectability, are just two instances of the many contradictions generated by migration. Such contradictions are not explainable within a neat theoretical framework, in part because it is not possible to separate migration from other social processes⁷⁵ or to account for the ways in which contingent factors (many of them unobservable) interact. So instead of trying to present an unsutured reality, subsequent chapters of this book highlight inconsistencies and contradictions – viewing them as integral to an understanding of the ways in which migration changes origin areas.⁷⁶

1.3 PETTY COMMODITY PRODUCERS AND LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION

In focusing on how return flows of resources and new ideas (either modernizing or, in the view of structuralists, corrosive or conservative) change the countryside, there is the tendency to overlook the resource endowments and the capacity for innovation within the origin areas themselves.⁷⁷ These resource endowments and innovations are particularly evident if rural families are viewed as petty commodity producers who pursue migration and return as extensions of their existing strategies for rural livelihood diversification. Following Hill Gates, the term “petty commodity producer” refers to households with small landholdings that produce farm and handicraft goods for their own use and for sale in the marketplace. As a further defining characteristic, the continued reproduction of these households depends on their deployment of labor both inside and outside the marketplace, and this includes “noncapitalist exchanges with kin, friends, and fellow villagers” as well as “the buying and selling of labor power.”⁷⁸ Petty commodity producers pursue rural livelihood diversification strategies by deploying their labor and other resources in farming and a range of other activities including selling agricultural and handicraft commodities, migrating to faraway places as wage laborers and traders, or outputting for capitalist factories. In combining their economic activities rural households strive to increase their income and minimize their risks.

Petty commodity households are adaptable and resilient in the face of socioeconomic transition because of two mechanisms: flexible labor deployment and familial cultural values. As an example of the former, rural households in prewar Italy and Japan allocated part of their labor to the industrial wage sector. But when unemployed workers returned home during the Great Depression, families adapted through the entrepreneurial “self-exploitation” of their labor, leading to a proliferation of owner–operators involved in sewing, food processing, shoemaking, domestic services, and parts production. In the postwar period

these farming family businesses have continued to survive, transform, and prosper within networks of family and local relationships. Although agriculture is of decreasing importance for these Italian and Japanese families, it nonetheless remains significant.⁷⁹ Similar examples of flexible labor deployment by petty commodity producers in different historical periods can be found in the Chinese societies of Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as in mainland China, and such family enterprises are now praised by some as the engines of East Asia's economic growth.

As an example of familial cultural values, research in environments as diverse as mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and sub-Saharan Africa reveals that children are raised with the deeply entrenched belief that they owe their parents an irredeemable debt for the gift of life. This means that parents have a lasting and legitimate claim on their children's earnings.⁸⁰ In some cultures (e.g., the Philippines), this sense of debt may be cultivated more strongly in females than males with the result that households are more likely to entrust their daughters with the task of migrating to earn wages.⁸¹

When socioeconomic transition affects patterns of household labor deployment, new opportunities for earning wages may afford subordinate individuals increased leverage, causing patriarchy to intensify ideological measures aimed at preserving the family's authority over its primary resource – labor. This is illustrated in rural Italy, where “Catholic” values of obedience and the unity and cohesion of the family were effective in maintaining family control over women's labor at a time when they were earning independent wages.⁸² Similarly, Hill Gates argues that during the Song dynasty, when large numbers of rural Chinese women were earning high wages from silk production, patriarchy sought to strengthen their control over this labor through an intensification of cultural practices that subordinated women, such as foot binding, puritanical morality, and taboos on widow remarriage.⁸³ However, ideological forces are not always completely successful in asserting family control over labor. This is because the increased leverage of some household members can precipitate the reconstitution of family ties; for example, sojourner sons may accumulate the economic resources for pursuing earlier marriage and separation from parents.⁸⁴

Many debates have centered on the position of rural petty commodity households in a changing world: are they a transitional category or a permanent but changing part of a world in transition? For modernization scholars and many national governments, including the Chinese, rural producers will be transformed into wage laborers and inevitably disappear.⁸⁵ Similarly, for some structuralists, circulation is a transitional process, albeit an unstable one, with uncertain outcomes arising from “resistance and reluctant behavioral adaptation” by traditional people to the “pressures of proletarianization.”⁸⁶ For other structuralists, economically diversified or “rural proletarian” households are a fixed

feature of the economy, the products of permanent structural inequalities and endemic rural underdevelopment.⁸⁷ These scholars point out that circulation is “deeply rooted in a variety of cultures and found at all stages of socioeconomic change.”⁸⁸

More recently, some development scholars have argued that poverty alleviation through rural livelihood diversification is not a transitional economic arrangement preceding the realization of modernization teleology but instead is a satisfactory end in itself. This perspective shifts the policy debate away from whether it is better to try to keep rural dwellers “on the farm” or to encourage their permanent proletarianization in the cities; rather, the policy implications are that government should (1) adopt policies that increase the freedom and range of options for rural households to diversify their livelihoods and (2) enact measures to protect the vulnerable from abuse and destitution.⁸⁹ This is not to deny (as comparative studies of China and Mexico reveal) that migration networks are in transition, evolving and maturing, with “daughter migrant communities” and native place associations eventually becoming established in the destination areas.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, diversified households pursuing flexible migration strategies are a permanent part of a changing countryside. The concept of rural livelihood diversification is compatible with the insights derived from understanding rural petty commodity households as resilient, adaptable, innovative, and endowed with resources – rather than as transitional, backward, traditional, and devoid of resources.

1.4 TEMPORARY AND PERMANENT RETURN

Shifting combinations of push–pull factors, the evolution of personal goals over time, and changes in individual circumstances mean that return migration embodies a wide range of actions. Some migrants return “temporarily” to the native place, intending to re-migrate after a specified period. Other migrants return home “permanently” and take steps to resettle in the home community. However, those returning for temporary visits may end up remaining in the village for an indefinite period, and those who intend to resettle in the village may re-migrate. Moreover, the convenience of modern transport allows people to act quickly on their migration decisions.⁹¹

Even migrants who are permanently absent from their villages invoke the “narrative of return” to escape social and moral censure for forgetting home and to avoid confronting their ambivalence toward the native place and the social relationships there.⁹² These migrants initially delay permanent resettlement because they lack the funds for achieving their goals in the village. They maintain a homeward orientation, committing increasing portions of their wages to the needs of both family in the village and the requirements of an urban lifestyle, so

less money remains for the attainment of their goals. Over time, the migrants form even higher life goals that require more resources or become accustomed to urban life, so they postpone resettlement indefinitely while maintaining links with the native place. The narrative of return means that – throughout their urban-based lives – they remit money, visit home, build a house in the village, and even participate in migrant funeral associations that send the bodies of the dead back to the native place. Thus, despite their absence, migrants exert a continuing influence on their home communities.

Narratives of return migration become institutionalized to the extent that – even when socioeconomic transition, structural factors, or personal circumstances mean that they neither intend to return home nor need to participate in the institution of return – migrants still retain links with their native place. For example, in Latin America, high levels of industrialization in some cities have created a demand for permanent and skilled employees as opposed to the itinerant and unskilled workforce that characterizes labor-intensive production. This increasing demand for a stable workforce has caused employers in some places and sectors to improve wages and living conditions, enabling the migrants to bring their spouses and dependants with them to the cities.⁹³ Studies the world over suggest that, the more stable the presence of migrants in the cities, the less the remittances.⁹⁴ This is because remittances are strongly correlated with the intention to return. Yet despite settling in the cities and despite declining remittances, new settlers maintain an active interest in their native homes and continue to invest in the social networks associated with home. For instance, urban residents in Latin America sponsor construction projects and Saints' festivals in their villages, and overseas Chinese invest heavily in both welfare and entrepreneurial projects in their ancestral homes on the mainland.⁹⁵

Even after the permanent settlement of the third and fourth generation, what appears to be permanent settlement in the host society may not be so permanent. For example, the fallout from structural adjustment in sub-Saharan Africa means that cities are failing to provide sufficient resources to sustain the livelihoods of many urban residents. The continued actions of families and individuals in sustaining the institution of return across generations (through spatially extended reciprocal ties) means that these urbanites are still able to return to their ancestral homes in the countryside and lay claim to resources such as land, food, and social support.⁹⁶ A further example, this time from China, is that following the disbanding of the communes, the second- and third-generation descendants of farmers who migrated to live in other villages have been returning to their ancestral homes. The initial migrants were uprooted from their ancestral homes during a variety of periods: fleeing war and famine before 1949, escaping famine in the 1960s, or migrating because of national dam construction projects in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these migrants and/or their descendants have since

returned to their ancestral homes to receive land allocations, partake in a more thriving economy, and return to where they “belong.” They are entitled to return because “the native home is the native home and the leaves fall to the root of the tree.”⁹⁷

1.5 CONCLUSION

Clearly, in examining the role of migration and return in changing the countryside, it is necessary to consider the ways in which values and resources generated from outside the village interact with social processes, values, and resources internal to rural society. The resulting impact of migration and return on perspectives, resources, and allocative structures has, in turn, implications for the ways in which actors participate in the society and economy. In particular, migration and return strategies of individuals and households precipitate a fundamental reallocation of resources within households, among households, and between rural society and the local state; this is explored in later chapters. In examining the impact of migration on origin areas, it is also important to remember that many changes in rural areas are not precipitated by migration, either directly or indirectly, and that migration interacts with the outcomes of other forces of change – for example, economic liberalization.⁹⁸ Viewing rural people as petty commodity producers recognizes their agency in both shaping and being shaped by socioeconomic transition; it also challenges modernization and structuralist classifications of them as backward and traditional. Change through migration and return is not the result of encounters between the modern and the traditional. Rather, through migration and return, individuals and families use, reproduce, and reconstitute values and resources in their efforts to attain goals. This creates a continual feedback mechanism whereby migration and return become institutions internal to the village – institutions in which both migrants and nonmigrants participate, and institutions that interact with the outcomes of other processes of change.