

# Return Migration, Social Remittances and Collective Action for Water Supply and Road Building: Gender dynamics in a Chinese village

■ Ge Jinghua



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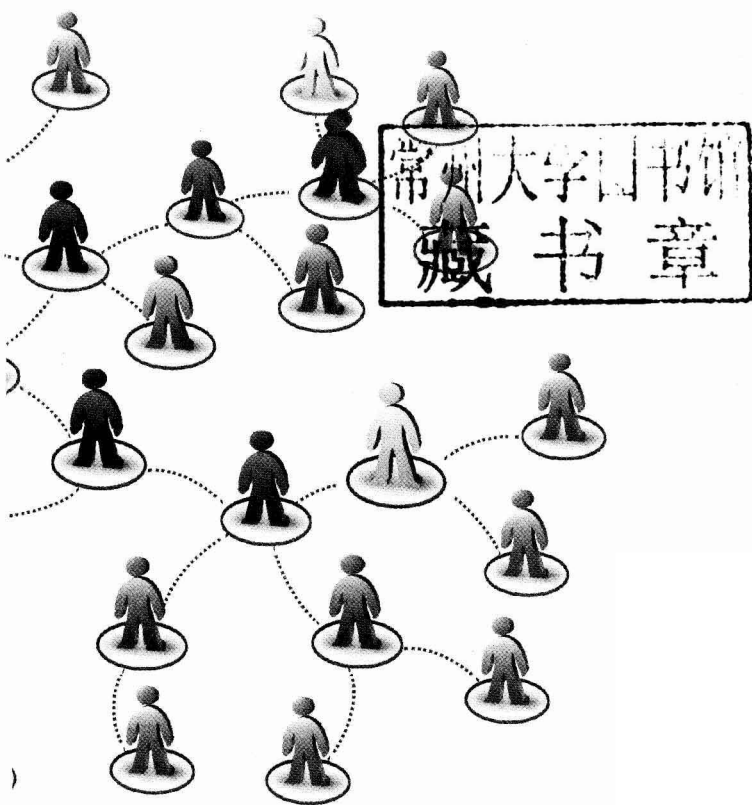
葛菁华◎编著

**Return Migration, Social Remittances and Collective  
Action for Water Supply and Road Building:**

Gender dynamics in a Chinese village

返乡流动、社会性汇寄与供水和道路建设集体行动：

一个村庄中的性别动力学研究



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# Abstract

The transition in the political economy of China has triggered the rural-urban migration of a huge percentage of the population. Rural-urban migration in China was characterized by circularity whereby majority of the out-migrants eventually returned to their original villages, maximizing the returnees' influence on the sending areas. These influences were not only through financial remittances but also included the influx of new knowledge, ideas, skills and social capitals to their families and communities, and thereby to some extent, the confrontation of established gender relations of the villagers.

Inevitably linked to the issues of migration and environment is the argument centering on human ecology that emphasizes the effects of human activities on the environment. Migration as a process that entails human movement predictably impacts the environment. Political ecology involves the possible weakening and marginalization of some groups due to the changes in political economy. Feminist political ecology underscore the contingent and structuring nature of gender in environmental knowledge, access and control over resources and in emancipatory social movements that aim to empower women in community struggles for resource control and environmental protection.

However, existing literatures regarding Chinese migration were more focused on the studies of the processes and the patterns of migration than on its impacts and consequences. Meanwhile, majority of the studies that centered on migration impacts highlighted the destination area rather than the point of origin. Thus, there was a dearth in studies focusing on return migration. Despite the growing scholarly interest in the topic of collective action, little is known about return migrants and their influence particularly on collective action for natural resource management in their places of origin. Migration itself was a gendered phenomenon that required more sophisticated theoretical and analytical tools than studies of sex roles and of sex as a dichotomous variable.

In China, as wider market-driven economic reform and migration combine contingently and historically, we find it useful to examine the effects of return migration on the natural environment as mediated through local collective action shaped by the vagaries of gendered power relations and the workings of social

capital. Therefore, this research was formulated to determine the impacts of social remittances from circular migration on collective action for water supply and road building from a gender perspective. Four research questions were addressed in this study: What are the gender-specific patterns of circular migration in the study site? What new knowledge, skills and values have return migrants acquired from their travels and migration experiences? What was the background of the return migrants? How have return migrants harnessed their social remittances for collective action to improve livelihoods in their village of origin? What were the gender dynamics of collective action and village leadership and did these challenges serve to further entrench social and gender hierarchies?

I adopted a post-structuralist view of gender as a fluid process — unstable, reproduced and multi-dimensional — where it is “performatively materialized through practices”, or in short, how gender becomes “real” through acts. I was also acutely aware of the limitations of gender as a single analytical category. Thus instead, I situated gender within the intersections of kinship and class as people employ social capital to collectively act to improve their livelihoods in a village.

The major findings from my study are as follows. First, circular migration in the study site occurred in waves and was marked by gender, distance and engagement. Second, with the return of the migrants to the village, they brought with them valuable social remittances that helped promote collective road and water tank construction and management. Included among these benefits are the stronger patronage ties with potential benefactors such as government and county officials that attached to them vestiges of prestige and access to subsidies, a more democratic and efficiency-oriented consciousness for collective action, new ideas for material progress and entrepreneurship, a higher level of confidence to assume leadership positions in the village, as well as newly acquired construction and engineering skills and financial knowledge. Third, the harnessing of social remittances by return migrants for collective action to improve their livelihoods had taken place within the context of socially-embedded and resilient gender and social hierarchies and in-placed practices. The gender dynamics of collective action and village leadership are still patriarchy oriented and intricately woven with local kinship ties. Fourth, judging from the gendered power relationship among the villagers, the social remittances, employed within the context of the re-emerging kinship system, served to further entrench local social and gender hierarchies.

Therefore, as concluded from this study, first, there was a dearth in studies focusing on return migration, especially the female return migration for the sake of its mixed and contradictory process. As shown by this study, female return-

migrants might be able to economically gain and benefit from their status as out-migrants, but the role that they play as well as their involvement in village political life had to be mediated by relations of power in their households and their natal communities.

Second, under the contemporary context when the migration effects on the relationship between the people and the ecology were increasingly growing, gender issues in natural resource management should be examined in a translocal setting and embedded within the processes and practices at a wider macroeconomic level. Meanwhile, the local social institutions also played a significant role. Social and gender analysis in natural resource management should also evaluate the impacts of a temporarily successful natural resource management on the gendered power relations among resource users and their embedded social hierarchies. This will determine the long-term sustainability of a project.

Third, social remittance was not only a social concept, instead, it was a process that was socially embedded in social difference and power relations, which allowed a room not only for holding the integrated evaluation of the dynamic impacts of social remittance on sending communities but also for modification and variation by the individual who served as the agent of social change and for institutionalized change. Gender, being also viewed as a process, therefore obtained more drivers and grounds in deploying the migration research.

Fourth, the nature of neo-liberal economy has worked to intensify and underscore the gendered social differentiation. Thus, in order to achieve a more gender equal development from the migration, in formulating migration and development policy, more gender egalitarian and gender democratic development policies should be necessarily considered and advocated by the decision makers.

Currently, scholars that were actively involved in studying the impacts of return migration on the rural areas in China include Cindy Fan, Murphy Rachel, etc. However, their major findings were focused on the migration effects on rural income, productivity, agricultural production and labor, poverty and inequality, the social impacts on gender division of labor within marriage, the constraints preventing return migrant women from acting on their broadened perspectives and from exercising their agency, the return female migrant's well-being and the sense of their independence. Little emphasis was placed on the returnees' engagement in local politics. In this sense, our research stands as a unique study in relation to the Chinese context in this field.



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## Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Community Party
CNY	Chinese Yuan
CPRs	Common Property Regimes
DFID	Department for International Development
FPE	Feminist Political Ecology
FT	Facilitator Team
GAAS	Guizhou Academy of Agricultural Sciences
GO	Governmental Organization
HCRS	Household Contract Responsibility System
IDRC	International Development Research Center
IRDC	Integrated Rural Development Center
NBS	National Bureau of Statistic
NE	New Economics
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
NPC	The National People's Congress
PCD	Partnership Community Development
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMB	Ren Min Bin( 人民币)
RITNBS	Rural Investigation Team of National Bureau of Statistics
SEZs	Special Economic Zones
TNC	Transnational Corporation
TVEs	Town and Village Enterprises
VPIT	Village Project Implementation Team