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# “Jumping Out of the Agricultural Gate” (*tiaochu nongmen*)

Social Mobility and Gendered Intra-household Resource Distribution among Children in a Central Chinese Village, 1950-2012

HUANG YUQIN

**ABSTRACT:** Since the late 1950s, the implementation of the household registration (*hukou*) system has made converting rural *hukou* to urban status a central aspect of upward social mobility in rural China. Through a biographical approach, this article attempts to capture, in relation to historical periods between 1950 and 2012, the ups and downs of various forms of *hukou* conversion and social mobility channels, how these fluctuating routes have been perceived, interpreted, pursued, and actualised by the rural people in a central Chinese village, and their consequences in terms of gendered household educational resources distribution among children. By doing this, it addresses ongoing debates about the relationship between allocation of household resources, gender inequality, and social mobility in rural China. While examining the dynamics of these avenues to social mobility, this paper pays particular attention to education and its changing function as an important social mobility channel, and argues that there is an unintended link between higher educational attainment, improvements in gender equality in education in rural China, and social mobility. This link is nevertheless weak due to its logic of developmentalism.

**KEYWORDS:** social mobility, gender, intra-household resource distribution, education (in)equality in rural China.

Established in 1958, the current *hukou* system (household registration system) encompasses a series of regulations that institutionally divide all Chinese citizens into two categories: “agricultural *hukou*” (*nongye hukou*) holder and “non-agricultural *hukou*” (*fei nongye hukou*) holder. Serving to distribute resources between rural and urban areas, control rural-to-urban migration, and monitor certain groups of people, the *hukou* system has since its very beginning imposed a huge gap between rural and urban China. The citizens from the two categories are entitled to distinctively different social welfare benefits, including access to subsidised housing, education, medical care, old-age pensions, and employment opportunities, in absolute favour of “non-agricultural *hukou*” holders.<sup>(1)</sup> The rural-urban cleavage caused by this system and other imbalanced inputs from the government is so great that Whyte calls the situation literally “one country, two societies.”<sup>(2)</sup> That, to a great extent, has resulted in the fact that in the past six decades or so, converting one’s rural *hukou* to an urban status has become a central aspect of upward social mobility in rural China.<sup>(3)</sup>

However, *hukou* status is ascribed at birth and is mainly passed on by one’s parent(s). Children normally inherited the mother’s *hukou* status, and it is only in recent years that children have been allowed to choose either their mother or father’s *hukou* status, the policies varying from region to region.<sup>(4)</sup> Identity as an “agricultural *hukou*” holder or a “non-agricultural *hukou*” holder is to some extent solidified into inheritable social identities. This has made it extremely difficult for an agricultural *hukou* holder to obtain an urban *hukou*. Throughout the past several decades, rural people have had some channels through which they could obtain an urban *hukou*. The main identifiable routes mainly include higher education, cadre functions, and military service.<sup>(5)</sup> Apart from these direct paths guaranteeing the

change of one’s status from rural to urban, there have been indirect channels, which while not bringing an immediate change of status could result in partial access to urban resources, closing the rural-urban gap in the form of improved well-being.<sup>(6)</sup> Rural-to-urban labour migration and rural-to-urban marriage are among these channels. The implications of these direct or indirect routes have nevertheless fluctuated according to changing political and socio-economic circumstances and policies, and are gendered. For example, the aforementioned routes of cadre functions and military service are more open to men, whereas more women have been seen using marriage as a social mobility channel. Two main periods could be identified according to the changing circumstances: the collective era (1950s–1978) and the reform era (1978 onwards).<sup>(7)</sup>

1. Wu Xiaogang and Donald J. Treiman, “Household Registration System and Social Stratification in China: 1955-1996,” *Demography*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2004, pp. 363-384.
2. Martin King Whyte (ed.), *One Country, Two Societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2010.
3. Wu Xiaogang et al., *art. cit.*, 2004, p. 363.
4. Wu Xiaogang et al., *art. cit.*, 2004.
5. Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China’s peasants: The anthropology of a revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990; Wu Xiaogang et al., *art. cit.*, 2004.
6. Wealthy labour migrants might have chances to obtain an urban *hukou* upon purchasing housing, but the policy is regionally disparate and keeps changing. Rural-to-urban marriage by itself could not incur an urban *hukou*. See Zhao Yaohui and Liu Qiming, “Zhongguo chengxiang qianyi de lishi yanjiu: 1949-1985” (Research on rural-urban migration in China: 1949-1985), *Zhongguo renkou kexue* (Chinese demographic science), No. 2, 1997.
7. The demarcation of these two historical periods does not necessarily mean they are utterly different, but is out of some consideration of convenience, as many policies that have been important to the lives of rural Chinese were implemented concurrently with the transition of these two eras; for example, the resuming of college entrance examinations in 1977, the strict enforcement of the family planning policy in rural China, the slight relaxation of the *hukou* system, and the large scale of rural-to-urban labour migration.

This article attempts to capture, in relation to the two aforementioned historical periods, the ups and downs of these various forms of upward social mobility channels and how these fluctuating routes have been perceived, interpreted, pursued, and actualised by the rural people in a central Chinese village, and considers their consequences in terms of gendered household educational resource distribution among children. By doing this, it addresses ongoing debates about the relationship between allocation of household resources, gender inequality, and social mobility in rural China. While examining the dynamics of these avenues to social mobility, it pays particular attention to education and its changing function as an important social mobility channel, and argues that there is an unintended link between higher educational attainment, improvements in gender equality in education in rural China, and social mobility. This link is nevertheless weak due to its logic of developmentalism, which assumes girls' education would be useful only when it could bring forward development. This logic sees girls as agents of development of their family and the state, without caring much about how their own lives would be affected.

This article first reviews the gendered functions of education, marriage, and labour as means of social mobility for rural Chinese from a theoretical perspective. After briefly introducing the setting of the village of Lianhe and the research methods, it then proceeds to examine the upward social mobility means and their gendered consequences in the collective era and reform era respectively. It then moves on to discuss the recent declining function of higher education as a social mobility means and its implications for gender equality in rural Chinese households. The conclusion sketches out both empirical and theoretical findings.

### **Social mobility and gender in rural China: Education, labour, and marriage as routes**

Social mobility routes for contemporary rural Chinese women have been documented in works on gender inequality in rural China, even though possible avenues are not systematically discussed. For example, in a paper on the rise of "girl power" in rural Chinese households, Yan Yunxiang<sup>(8)</sup> suggests that since the 1950s, rural Chinese girls have been gradually altering their position in the domestic sphere from being "outsiders" to new players in family affairs via external powering actors such as collective farming, participation in public activities, and better chances for social mobility through marriage, apart from state policies and reforms in favour of women. He identifies women's labour and marrying up as a potential social mobility means in the collective era. Zhang Hong,<sup>(9)</sup> based on her research on an inland village in Hubei, found that like their collective-era sisters in the village studied by Yan Yunxiang, rural girls in contemporary Zhongshan Village have been empowered by the cash-earning power gained from rural-to-urban labour migration,<sup>(10)</sup> despite the fact that lower fertility resulting from the family planning policy has also contributed to their empowerment. Juxtaposing these two works, one cannot help thinking about the implications of marriage as a social mobility avenue in reform-era rural Chinese society. Furthermore, while absolutely agreeing on the point regarding the downsized family, I would like to suggest that Zhang fails to differentiate the rural youth who literally "escape from the countryside" via higher education from those who engage in labour migration. "Higher education" and "labour migration" are two totally different social mobility paths, both on the institutional level and in the rural population's perception.

Institutionally, the actual residence of someone with an agricultural *hukou* in the city does not guarantee the obtainment of an urban status. This has

caused the situation in which rural-to-urban labour migrants are not entitled to many labour rights and benefits enjoyed by their urban counterparts who have an urban *hukou*, no matter how similar their jobs are. Educational barriers for migrants' children and health insurance barriers for migrants also exist. In this sense, although labour migration might be able to improve the rural people's well-being in the form of increased income, it cannot change their status. An agricultural *hukou* can, however, be changed to an urban one upon admission to a specialised secondary school (*zhongzhuan*) or college/university, and the new non-agricultural *hukou* holders have access to the aforementioned welfare.<sup>(11)</sup> This has resulted in disparate perceptions of rural Chinese about these two routes.

To "jump out of the agricultural gate" (*tiaochu nongmen*) is the term used in southwestern and central rural China to refer to the situation in which one not only stops farming and leaves the countryside but also attains "real work" (*zhengzheng de gongzuo*).<sup>(12)</sup> According to some surveys conducted among the rural-to-urban migrants, "real work" is associated with an identity as an urban resident and access to welfare limited to this group. The wage jobs done by the rural-to-urban migrants who are still registered as farmers are "*dagong*" (employment) at most, not "work" (*gongzuo*), according to the migrants themselves.<sup>(13)</sup> In other words, these rural Chinese perceive a hierarchy between "labour" (*laodong*), "employment" (*dagong*), and "work" (*gongzuo*), with "work" on the top. This also has caused the general impression in the countryside that "higher education" and "labour migration" are two totally different social mobility paths.

One consequence of this hierarchal perception is the often-mentioned rural parents' absolute preference for academic education over vocational secondary education (*zhongdeng zhiye jiaoyu*). Their preference is due to the former topping the hierarchy of schooling in China and leading to a "real job" with urban *hukou* and welfare attached, while the latter can only improve one's "labour" situation. Despite the promotion of vocational education by the state, parents consider it for their children only if other higher-status educational opportunities are blocked or unattainable.<sup>(14)</sup>

Another consequence is the pervasive common understanding in post-reform era rural China that education is the only way for rural youth to "*tiaochu nongmen*." As a mother from rural Shandong told Paine and DeLany, "Only through education can rural kids make their way (*chulu*)."<sup>(15)</sup>

8. Yan Yunxiang, "Girl Power: Young Women and the Waning of Patriarchy in Rural North China," *Ethnology*, 2006, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 105-123.
9. Zhang Hong, "China's New Rural Daughters Coming of Age: Downsizing the Family and Firing Up Cash-Earning Power in the New Economy," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2007, pp. 671-698.
10. Restrictions on rural-to-urban labour migration were only relaxed a bit after the start of economic reform in the late 1970s. See Barbara Entwisle and Gail E. Henderson (ed.), *Re-drawing boundaries: Work, households, and gender in China*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000.
11. Wu Xiaogang and Donald J. Treiman, "Inequality and equality under Chinese socialism: The Hukou system and intergenerational occupational mobility," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 113, No. 2, 2007, pp. 415-45.
12. Weng Naiqun (ed.), *Cunluo shiye xia de nongcun jiaoyu: yi xin'an sicun wei li* (Chinese rural education in the village perspectives: Four ethnographies of rural education in southwest China), Beijing, Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2009.
13. Entwisle et al., *op. cit.*, 2000.
14. Andrew B. Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2011; Heidi Ross, "Challenging the gendered dimensions of schooling: The state, NGOs and transnational alliances," in Tamara Jacka and Sally Sargeon (eds.), *Women, Gender and Development in Rural China*, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2011.
15. Lynn Paine and Brian DeLany, "Rural Chinese Education: Observing from the Margin," in Judith Liu, Heidi A. Ross, Donald P. Kelly (eds.), *The Ethnographic Eye: Interpretive Studies of Education in China*, New York, Falmer Press, 2000, p. 105.

**Table 1 – Details of those who managed to obtain an urban hukou in Lianhe between 1950 and 2012**

Unit: person			Means					
			Through cadre functions or military service	Through marrying an urban hukou holder	Through higher education			
					Specialised secondary Schools (Zhongzhuan)	College / University		
Time of Transfer	Collective-era		Male	3				
			Female		1*			
	Reform-era		Pre-1999 (included)		2	1		
					3	1		
			Post-1999		Male		3	6
					Female		3	16

\* This woman didn't attain an urban hukou upon marrying an urban hukou holder, but did so upon succeeding her father-in-law's position in a local post office, since her handicapped husband was not qualified for this position.

Paine and DeLany,<sup>(16)</sup> Weng,<sup>(17)</sup> and Kipnis<sup>(18)</sup> advocate understanding the meaning of schooling constructed by the rural population. After examining their understandings, they suggest that education in rural China is “marginalising,” as the significance of practical, rural knowledge is marginalised in rural schooling; and the conception of knowledge is what is promoted by authorities who are often located in urban centres, and is urban-oriented. How have the “marginalising” effects of academic education affected rural girls? Heidi Ross found that in rural Shaanxi, “most parents and girls, who see around them a tightly constricted job market, remain convinced that the only way for a girl to have a better life is by following the academic path.”<sup>(19)</sup> But she expresses concern for “the logic of developmentalism”<sup>(20)</sup> inherent in rural parents' educational aspirations for their daughters and the state's endeavours to improve gender equality in education. This logic of developmentalism assumes educated girls “to be both recipients and agents of development, not its victims.”<sup>(21)</sup>

From a historical perspective, this research intends to contribute to this strand of understanding education, gender equality, and social mobility in rural China. It broadens the time frame to include the collective era, and covers mobility avenues other than education, mainly labour and marriage, as these are also sites of gender construction that influence a female's ability to receive and use formal education. As a result, it reveals the gendered implications of the hierarchal perception of various social mobility means, and the gendered consequences of the logic of developmentalism in education.

### The setting and methods

This paper mainly draws upon quantitative data and ethnographic information that the author collected in a central Chinese village, Lianhe,<sup>(22)</sup> from September 2005 to May 2006. A later series of interviews via telephone and further visits in 2008 and 2012 also provided useful information. Situated in Sha County, central Hubei Province, Lianhe had approximately 450 households and 1,600 residents in 2005. Villagers mainly rely on farming or jobs in faraway cities, or a mixture of farming and skilled manual or seasonal casual jobs in the county seat. Industrialisation is still at a low level, which makes Sha County mainly an exporter in terms of rural-to-urban labour mi-

gration. According to the local government's statistics, in 2005 about 54 percent of those aged between 18 and 35 left Sha County to work in big cities.

The method used in this study is a combination of participant observation, qualitative interviews, and some quantitative demographic data collected from the villagers. I had lived in Lianhe until the age of 18, and had connections in the village. During the ethnography I lived for eight months with a rural family that acted as intermediaries to introduce me to more interviewees. As a result, a snowball sampling method was adopted. The project was designed to explore the life stories of three generations of villagers in terms of their changing labour, leisure, and marriage/family lives.

In the end, a total of 57 women from various age backgrounds told me stories about their lives; 21 men were interviewed on their education and family/marriage lives. They all were agricultural hukou holders, and were particularly encouraged to talk about education attainment for themselves and their child(ren). Attention was particularly paid to the moments when residents decided to stop pursuing further education. I also managed to talk to three recent university graduates (two women and one man) who were originally from Lianhe and came back to visit their family from where they were working. My participant observation and informal chats in the villages provided another source of information.

Based on information collected via formal and informal interviews, my observation, and some data provided by the village committee, I managed to document the details of those who managed to obtain an urban hukou in Lianhe between 1950 and 2012, collected in Table 1, above. These details, together with life stories told by the villagers, enable us to depict the transforming social mobility channels and their gender consequences within rural households in Lianhe in both the collective era and the reform era.

16. Lynn Paine and Brian DeLany, *art. cit.*

17. Weng Naiqun (ed.), *Cunluo shiye xia de nongcun jiaoyu...*, *op. cit.*

18. Andrew B. Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire...*, *op. cit.*, 2011.

19. Heidi Ross, “Challenging the gendered dimensions of schooling...,” *art.cit.*, p. 162.

20. Heidi Ross, “Challenging the gendered dimensions of schooling...,” *art.cit.*, p. 148.

21. *Ibid.*

22. In the interest of confidentiality, I changed the names of the village, the county and the interviewees.

## Social mobility and gendered household distribution of resources among children in the collective era

This section focuses on social mobility channels in the collective era, their impacts on the gendered distribution of household resources for children in rural households, and the attendant family dynamics.

### Social mobility means in the collective era

In the commune system of the collective era, a peasant could achieve social mobility mainly in one of the following three ways: firstly, higher education: A rural youngster would be granted urban *hukou* status upon admission to a specialised secondary school (*zhongzhuān*) or university (*daxue*).<sup>(23)</sup> Secondly, cadre functions: The career path of first becoming a cadre and attaining membership in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at the production team or production brigade (i.e. village) level and then being promoted to a cadre at or above the commune (i.e. township) level allowed one to become part of the state's administrative personnel system and resulted in the granting of urban status. In the collective era, becoming a cadre was enticing in itself, even without promotion to the township level, as leaders of production teams and production brigades normally had absolute authority in the organisation of labour and distribution of resources.<sup>(24)</sup> And finally, military service: The career path of joining the People's Liberation Army (PLA), thereby attaining membership in the CCP, and then getting promoted in the army, or being discharged from military service into a local cadre, was a way into the state's administrative personnel system and triggered urban status.<sup>(25)</sup> Although *hukou* conversion through higher education was not restricted by government quota, the investment was huge and it took a long time to achieve. Furthermore, besides the expense of 12 years of pre-college education, there was the risk that rural students would fail in the college entrance examinations. This would result in them returning to their village and remaining peasants from then on. Higher education was therefore a risky investment. Moreover, the National College Entrance Examination was suspended from 1966 to 1977. University enrolment stopped until some institutions began to recruit so-called worker-, peasant-, and soldier- (*gongnongbing*) students on a political and labour performance basis in 1972.<sup>(26)</sup> However, with recommendation rather than merit opening the way, and with a rather limited quota, most of the opportunities went to those who had power or powerful connections.<sup>(27)</sup> Hence in the collective era, the most realistic way for most peasants to enter the city was by becoming a cadre or joining the People's Liberation Army.

These opportunities were far more limited for women than for men. Few women joined the army; even fewer local cadre positions were available for women, except for the person in charge of women's issues, who was always a woman. Even the women who did become cadres rarely had a real say in the committee; at most they simply carried out state policies and orders from above and normally were subordinate to male leaders<sup>(28)</sup> so that most promotion opportunities, if any, went to the latter. Consequently, virtually all existing means for obtaining an urban status were blocked for rural women. The only possible routes through which rural young women could achieve upward social mobility in their households and/or in society in general were labour and marrying-up, even though these means did not guarantee the change of their rural *hukou*. This greatly shaped the household educational resources distribution configuration in Lianhe during the collective era.

## Family dynamics: Paving the way for the boys

Stories in which daughters, especially older daughters, were asked back from school to help with childcare and/or labour in the collective were told to me again and again by parents and then-school-aged children. Subsistence-level living conditions and family size also played a role in these stories. Following the improved reproductive health of rural women, collective-era rural China had seen a post-revolutionary "baby boom"<sup>(29)</sup> that further reduced the average resources to which each child had access. But it was always girls who were asked to leave school; I did not find a single case in which a boy was forced to leave school. Most were allowed to stay in school as long as they wished unless they themselves did not want to continue, usually due to poor scholastic achievement. Among the 57 women, 20 were of school age during the collective era; 13 of those 20 were the older sibling in their family, with an average of two years in school, while seven were younger daughters and could on average stay at school for six years. Among the seven men who attended school during this period, no matter what their birth order, they stayed at school for eight years on average.

Apart from education, Lianhe parents cultivated social networks in order to put their boys on track for a cadre career or army recruitment. The story of Hanying, a young mother in the collective era, provides a good example. When I met her in 2005, she was really proud of her earlier investment in her oldest son. He had become deputy party secretary, that is, the second most powerful person in Lianhe at that time, or according to Hanying, a "superior person" (*ren shang ren* 人上人). This family did not have powerful connections, but according to Hanying, her oldest son's "eminence" was due on one hand to his capabilities and on the other to her cultivation of connections for him, especially at the outset of his career. She mentioned that when the whole family was on the verge of starvation, she saved good food to treat those who could possibly be useful to her son's promotion, with the hope that her son would achieve upward social mobility. In the end, her son did not manage to attain an urban *hukou*, but still managed to hold a powerful position in the village. Stories like this are not rare in collective-era Lianhe, but not all parents could succeed in the end, despite their endeavours. As shown in Table 1, three men from Lianhe managed to attain an urban *hukou* via cadre function or army service during the collective era. They are all currently living in the urban areas of the county seat or the prefecture, doing non-farming jobs or retired. The villagers in Lianhe showed enormous envy when they mentioned the three men's "light and easy" work in an office or their retirement pensions.

In contrast to this, chances for a girl to "get out of the countryside" were so slim that it would be much more realistic for her to improve her family life via labour and/or marrying up. Stories of girls being forced to leave

23. Wu Xiaogang and Donald J. Treiman, "Inequality and equality under Chinese socialism...", *art. cit.*, pp. 418-419.

24. Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: The recent history of a peasant community in Mao's China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

25. Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's peasants...*, *op. cit.*; Wu Xiaogang and Donald J. Treiman, "Inequality and equality under Chinese socialism...", *art. cit.*, 2007.

26. Hu Zhiwen, "Huifu gaokao, gaibian yidaren mingyun" (Resuming the national college entrance examination changed a generational of people's lives), *Huanqiu Renwu*, No. 4, 2007.

27. Lei Yi, "Huifu gaokao sanshi zhounian ji" (On the thirty-year anniversary of the resumption of the National College Entrance Examination), 2007, *Zhongguo Wang*, [www.china.com.cn/review/txt/2007-02/14/content\\_7828154.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/review/txt/2007-02/14/content_7828154.htm) (consulted on 13 Novembre 2012).

28. Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's peasants...*, *op. cit.*, 1990.

29. Delia Davin, "Women in the Countryside of China," in Margery Wolf and Roxanne Witke (eds.), *Women in Chinese Society*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 1975.

school to help parents with childcare and collective labour were often told to me. Marrying an urban *hukou* holder, as mentioned above, enabled rural women to gain access to the limited benefits granted to their urban husbands,<sup>(30)</sup> despite the fact that their rural status could not be changed upon rural-to-urban marriage.<sup>(31)</sup> This became so enticing that villagers reported cases in which healthy rural young women married young men who were disabled or widowed or divorced but who had an urban *hukou*. Indeed, as shown in Table 1, the only woman in Lianhe who managed to change her status in the collective era achieved that through marrying a handicapped urban man, and fortuitously obtained an urban *hukou* by succeeding her father-in-law's working position in a local post office, as her disabled husband was not able to do it. Lianhe villagers' comments on this case were mixed. A woman of similar age even used the word “degrade” to refer to the healthy-disabled match when she told the story to me, but in the end, she showed obvious envy toward that woman's current easy life while she herself had to toil in the field for only a little income.

It was not easy, however, to secure a marriage with an urban *hukou* holder. In many cases, a rural girl married someone who was from the same area and had the potential to attain an urban identity through cadre functions or military service at some point after getting married. Actually, the wives of the three Lianhe men who obtained an urban *hukou* through these means had been living a much better life than their rural sisters in Lianhe, even though they did not manage to change to an urban status. According to Lianhe women, they have a good fate (*haoming*).

According to the villagers, however, this kind of marriage was available to only a very small proportion of girls with family networks through which the marriage was arranged. For most purposes, in the collective era, Lianhe's young girls were encouraged to marry a rural young man through a match that would reinforce both families. Cases reported by the villagers revealed that from the 1950s to the early 1980s, village endogamy was a striking phenomenon in which typically more than half of the villagers were engaged.<sup>(32)</sup> Apart from a small proportion who claimed their marriage was the result of mutual admiration in the collective, the majority of women reported that their village endogamy was actively arranged by family members, especially mother and/or grandmother, and was somewhat against their will. For example, Lianmei, the oldest daughter of Hanying, the woman mentioned above, reported that her mother, in contrast to facilitating her son's promotion, asked Lianmei to give up school after less than a year so she could mind the younger children; and afterwards, she made Lianmei marry a boy from her own natal family, with the aim of “strengthening the ties,” largely against Lianmei's will.<sup>(33)</sup> In the collective era, when local cadres, especially males, had absolute authority, a daughter's marriage within the village could become a diplomatic strategy for a family to strengthen itself, as it would bring in new power for the family to resist hostility from leaders or other powerful influences in the village. Again, family networks played an important role in the arrangements. While possibly strengthening power in the collective, village endogamy did not significantly change or benefit women's lives compared to obtaining a rural-to-urban marriage.

### **Social mobility and gendered household distribution of resources among children in the reform era**

The scenario in the reform era was different. The means for social mobility changed, and the demographic context of rural households was different

due to economic reform and the implementation of the family planning policy from the 1970s onward. These resulted in different family dynamics and rural parents' different patterns in terms of distributing household resources among their children.

### **“Leather shoes or straw sandals?”: Education as an avenue of upward social mobility**

In the reform era, it has become much harder, if not impossible, to change one's status from rural to urban through cadre functions or military service.<sup>(34)</sup> On the other hand, higher education has become a much smoother avenue, and both rural parents and scholars declare it “the only” means.<sup>(35)</sup> In response to this, rural parents started to place enormous aspirations on their children's education. Firecrackers are lit in the village for those who manage to “*du chu qu*” (get out of the countryside via schooling), and banquets are arranged to celebrate young people's success in achieving an urban identity before they leave for their new life in the city.<sup>(36)</sup> Many actually take remedial courses after failing the National College Entrance Examination on the first attempt, and retake the examination several times if needed.

The link between education and social mobility has gained unprecedented emphasis among rural parents and teachers in the reform era. A former primary school teacher in Lianhe told me that she uses the contrast between “leather shoes” and “straw sandals” to encourage her students to study hard. She said:

You have to study hard! If you work hard and gain admission to a university, you will be able to wear leather shoes all the time. But if you don't, you will only have straw sandals.

The metaphor of “leather shoes” versus “straw sandals” reflects rural people's understanding of the huge gap between urban and rural China. Lectures given by teachers have been echoed by rural parents. I asked each parent with young children in the reform era about their aspirations for their children's future. None of them wanted their children to stay in the countryside. Farming is absolutely at the bottom of their list and is the least desired prospect for their children. All rural parents I interviewed agreed that “jumping out of the rural gate” (*tiao chu nongmen*) through higher education and then obtaining a formal job in the city is at the top of their priorities.

The perception and meaning of schooling constructed by rural Chinese is in fact at the root of some recent educational developments. For example, as mentioned above, parents showed absolute preference for academic education over vocational education. Another example is the sudden nationwide decline in enrolment rates for specialised secondary schools

30. Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's peasants...*, *op. cit.*, 1990.

31. Zhao Yaohui and Liu Qiming, “Zhongguo chengxiang qianyi de lishi yanjiu: 1949-1985,” *art. cit.*

32. Potter and Potter mentioned similar evidence in Zengbu, Guangdong Province, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. See Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's peasants...*, *op. cit.*

33. In the story Lianmei told me, she was not happy about the arranged marriage as the boy “talked little and was not considerate.” But she “had to accept him” after the boy's parents locked them in a room together, under the acquiescence of her parents, and she was literally raped and impregnated by him. She said, “If it was now, I would have had so many measures to get rid of the foetus and break up with him. But in 1978, one had no choice.”

34. Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's peasants...*, *op. cit.*; Weng Naiqun (ed.), *Cunluo shiye xia de nongcun jiaoyu...*, *op. cit.*

35. Lynn Paine and Brian DeLany, *art. cit.*, p. 105.

36. Weng Naiqun (ed.), *Cunluo shiye xia de nongcun jiaoyu...*, *op. cit.*

(*zhongzhuān*) in the late 1990s after a long period of flourishing, despite the government's promotion, and the concurrent boom in senior secondary schools (*gaozhong*) nationwide. Specialised secondary schools had gained popularity among rural parents over college education during the 1980s and most of the 1990s. Compared to college, which enrolled only senior secondary school graduates, specialised secondary schools recruited excellent junior secondary school (*chuzhong*) graduates and demanded a relatively shorter term of investment while offering enticing returns, that is, an urban identity and a "state" job secured by the government. Their attraction of a large proportion of junior secondary school graduates constituted a major reason for the low net enrolment rates for senior secondary schooling before the 2000s. Toward the end of 1990s, however, the job allocation system was abrogated, resulting in a specialised secondary school graduate having to fend for herself/himself. Concurrently, the expansion of the higher education sector in 1999 greatly lowered the threshold for college and caused an unusually high rate of college enrolment between 1999 and 2003.<sup>(37)</sup> A specialised secondary school qualification can in no sense compete with a college qualification. This pushed a large proportion of junior secondary school graduates onto a senior secondary school-then-college path and caused the dramatic decline in specialised secondary schools in the late 1990s. As a result, the net enrolment rate for senior secondary school almost doubled between 2000 and 2008 after experiencing a long "bottleneck" period.<sup>(38)</sup>

This transformation can actually be tracked in Lianhe. As shown in Table 1, before 1999, five young people went to specialised secondary school, compared with only two who were enrolled in universities; while in the post-1999 era, six went to specialised secondary schools without attaining the academic performance required for a place in a good senior secondary school (*gaozhong*) or university (*daxue*), according to the villagers, in contrast to 22 who were academically capable of choosing the route of senior secondary school and then university. The decisions made by rural students and their parent in Lianhe actually were congruent with the national trend.

### **The complexity of gender equality in education, labour migration, and marriage**

How has this transformation in education's function as a social mobility means affected Lianhe parents' resource distribution among their children? First of all, apart from this change, socio-economic and demographic context in the reform era has also changed. Since its implementation in the early 1970s, the family planning policy has caused a downsizing of families in rural China.<sup>(39)</sup> Lianhe is no exception. In rural China, due to popular resistance, the "one-child policy" was recast such that if the first-born child was a girl, a peasant couple could have another child after an interval of four years, while if the first-born was a boy, the couple was not allowed additional births. This amended version has been popularised as a prevalent population control policy in rural China since about 1988.<sup>(40)</sup> Lianhe residents generally observed this amended version of the policy, with only a very few exceptions caused by fluctuations in implementation and, in a minority of cases, infringement of the policy. On the other hand, despite improvement in living standards brought about by economic reform in its early stage, the cost of supporting a child's education until he or she enters university is much higher than in the collective era.<sup>(41)</sup> In Lianhe, parents lamented that children's educational expenses had eaten up a large proportion of their income. Under these circumstances, their decisions on "invest-

ing *how much in which child(ren)*" are circumspect. Do they still give preference to sons?

The biggest difference between higher education and other aforementioned social mobility means, particularly cadre function and military service, is that it is based on merit and academic achievement as well as household resources, rather than gender. Therefore, it opens a way for rural women as well as for men. This, together with the aforementioned socio-economic and demographic context of rural households, changes rural parents' strategies to invest in their children's education. A bias toward academically stronger children, whether boys or girls, can be widely observed among rural parents in Lianhe, a fact that effectively increases the level of gender equality in education.

As shown in Table 1, in Lianhe in the reform era, 35 young people have made their wish to "*tiaochu nongmen*" come true, among whom 12 are boys and 23 are girls. Among these girls, four are from daughter-only families, while the remainder (19) have an older or younger brother.<sup>(42)</sup> Among the 19 girls, two have a brother who is also a specialised secondary school/college graduate; five have a brother who left school after finishing nine-year-compulsory education; and the rest have a younger brother who is still pursuing his education in either junior or senior secondary school (*chuzhong* or *gaozhong*). Apart from these families, I also came across several rural parents who told me they will invest more in their daughter's education, with the hope that she will be admitted to a university, as they felt she could achieve higher marks at school than their son(s). Among the 35 young peoples' families, the majority were facing constrained resources. Despite this, many parents reported that they borrowed money from local banks or relatives to keep their academically promising children, either boys or girls, in school. My interviews with two academically stronger girls revealed that their brothers actually discontinued schooling after the nine-year basic education so that the limited family resources could be concentrated on the more academically promising girls. The brother of one of the girls even engaged in labour migration to Guangdong, aiming to earn tuition fees for her.

A strong incentive behind the investment in academically stronger children is the high returns it can bring about: first of these is an urban *hukou* and the welfare attached to it; secondly, a "formal job" in the city could incur more income than either farming or migrant labour; and finally, it means permanent residence in a city, while labour migration is often temporary, especially for women.<sup>(43)</sup> These returns on investment in academically strong children are witnessed by other villagers, who are encouraged to follow the example. In one case in Lianhe, the family of two sisters suffered serious economic deficiency while they both were at university, but now, according to their mother, the monthly pay of each is equal to the annual income of a typical peasant household. Such cases no doubt encourage parental aspirations for daughters' education, especially in households without a son.

37. Wu Bin and Zheng Yongnian, "Expansion of Higher Education in China: Challenges and Implications," Briefing Series – Issue 36, 2008, University of Nottingham, China Policy Institute.

38. Heidi Ross, "Challenging the gendered dimensions of schooling...", *art. cit.*, p. 155.

39. Zhang Hong, "China's New Rural Daughters Coming of Age...", *art. cit.*, p. 671.

40. Delia Davin, "The State and Population Planning: China and Romania Compared," 1991, Leeds, University of Leeds, *East Asia Papers*, No. 1.

41. Weng Naiqun (ed.), *Cunluo shiye xia de nongcun jiaoyu...*, *op. cit.*

42. Most of the girls have a younger brother, which is permitted by the amended family planning policy; while a couple of them have an older brother as the result of infringements.

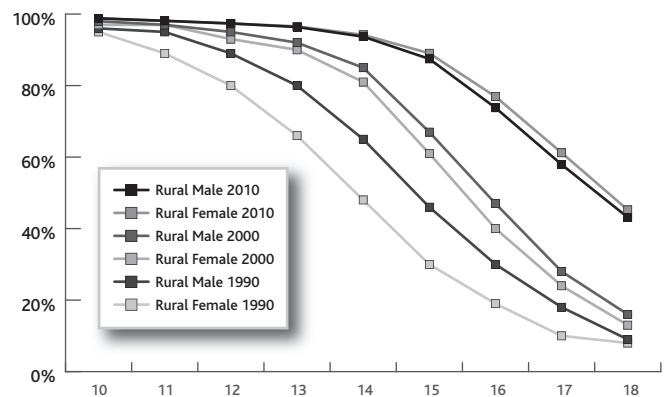
43. Rachel Connelly, Kenneth Roberts, and Zheng Zhenzhen, "The Impact of Circular Migration on the Position of Married Women in Rural China," *Feminist Economics*, 2010, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 3- 41.

Parents in Lianhe, especially mothers, generally report that between their son and their daughter, they wish even more for their daughter to “jump out of the agricultural gate.” “Life in the countryside is too hard for a girl!” they lament. Actually, in the stories told by Lianhe parents and girls, those girls who obtained an urban *hukou* through higher education are now living in “a different world” from other girls who did not manage to do so. I met a 24-year-old Lianhe girl, Da’e, in 2005. She left school at the age of 16 due to poor performance, and had been engaging in migrant labour in Fujian and Guangdong since then. She came back to Lianhe due to the closure of the hair salon where she had been working in Guangzhou. She told me the following when mentioning Ling, a former neighbour and schoolmate in Lianhe who chose an academic path, obtained an urban *hukou* in Guangzhou, and found a bank job there after graduating from university: “We were both living in Guangzhou, but we belonged to two different worlds. We grew up together, but now I am one of those ‘floating workers’ while she is a ‘white collar’ girl in Guangzhou. We will have absolutely different life paths: hers, relatively easy and secure; mine, full of hardship and uncertainty...” In Lianhe, boys who do not achieve academically can learn manual skills such as heavy machinery operation, painting, driving, welding, or mechanical repair through technical school or apprenticeship. These skills often guarantee a decent income in the rural areas, but they are considered unsuitable for rural girls.<sup>(44)</sup> Girls without academic achievements either help parents with farming or do non-farming factory jobs in the county seat or other urban areas. After getting married, they toil between home and farmland/factory. Like parents in rural Shaanxi, most Lianhe parents and girls “who see around them a tightly constricted job market, remain convinced that the only way for a girl to have a better life is by following the academic path.”<sup>(45)</sup>

This, to a great extent, has improved gender equality in education in rural households, as stated in Attané’s article in the present issue. Large-scale quantitative surveys reveal that the largest differential in access to education in China since reform is not a gender gap, but an urban-rural one.<sup>(46)</sup> As shown in Graph 1, compared to the situation in 1990, in 2000, the gender gaps for rural children’s access to both basic nine-year compulsory education and post-basic education – that is, the university preparatory period that often occurs between 16 and 18 years old – are closing. In 2000, even though rural boys were generally still getting better education than rural girls in that age group, the improvements in gender equality in education in rural China are obvious, especially in the case of rural youth aged 16 to 18, normally the year for entering university. And in 2010, the nationwide school retention ratios for rural girls were very close to those of rural boys before the age of 13. More importantly, for the first time in history, for every age group between 13 and 18, greater proportions of rural girls than boys remained in school. That means that gender equality in education in rural China has greatly improved, whether during the compulsory education period or the university preparatory period.

The improvement in rural girls’ education is, however, subject to the logic of developmentalism, which assumes that educated girls will boost the development of their family and the state, without considering the possible effects “educational desire” might have on them.<sup>(47)</sup> In fact, studies in rural China suggest that showing early academic promise may be particularly important for rural girls.<sup>(48)</sup> That means rural girls have to study extremely hard, and they normally only gain priority over their brother(s) when their academic achievements are significantly better and when they demonstrate the absolute promise of success. That would also put them under consider-

**Graph 1 – School retention ratio of Chinese adolescents between 10 and 18 in 1990, 2000, and 2010, by age and sex.**



Source: Based on data of population censuses of 1990, 2000, and 2010. The data of 1990 and 2000 refer to Zheng Zhenzhen, Rachel Connelly, “Cong liangci renkou pucha jieguo kan Zhongguo de jiaoyu fazhan” (Observations of the Development of China’s Education from the Results of Population Censuses), *Renkou yu jingji* (Population and Economics), 2008, no. 4, pp. 44-50.

able pressure. Furthermore, since the improvement of gender equality is not an end in itself, it could be reversed when circumstances change. More details regarding this will be given in the next section. What has occurred in Lianhe is exactly what has been taking place in rural Shaanxi, where Heidi Ross did her research: “The most important factor, after taking into account the girls’ performance in school, was whether further schooling would be relevant, attainable and deliver a stable, preferably state, job.”<sup>(49)</sup> In this sense, the closing gender gap in education in rural China is to some extent an “unintended consequence” of the complex structural transition in China.

Furthermore, as also shown in Graph 1, in both 1990 and 2000, less than one fifth of rural youth could pursue an academic route till they were 18 years old. In 2000, over half of both boys and girls chose to leave school at 16, the age of completing compulsory education. Despite the great improvement of education attainment in 2010, less than half of rural youth chose to remain in school till 18. Lianhe was no exception in this regard. Lianhe parents told me that if their children do not have the potential or luck to achieve anything academically, employment (*dagong*) as a rural-to-urban migrant is the second option. Labour migration has become an important way to improve rural families’ lives, as the average wage of rural-urban migrants is more than three times that of the average farmer.<sup>(50)</sup> But who does what kind of migrant labour is more complicated than we might have expected. The configurations of resource distribution between

44. Heidi Ross also mentions a similar perception among rural parents in Shaanxi. See Heidi Ross, “Challenging the gendered dimensions of schooling...,” *art.cit.*, p. 167.

45. Heidi Ross, “Challenging the gendered dimensions of schooling...,” *art.cit.*, p. 162.

46. Zheng Zhenzhen, Rachel Connelly, “Cong liangci renkou pucha jieguo kan Zhongguo de jiaoyu fazhan” (Observations of the development of China’s education from the results of population censuses), *Renkou yu jingji* (Population and economics), No. 4, Vol. 169, 2008, pp. 44-50.

47. Heidi Ross, “Challenging the gendered dimensions of schooling...,” *art.cit.*, p. 148.

48. Emily Hannum, Peggy Kong, and Yuping Zhang, “Family sources of educational gender inequality in rural China: A critical assessment,” *Gansu Survey of Children and Families Papers*, University of Pennsylvania, 2008, [http://repository.upenn.edu/gansu\\_papers/6](http://repository.upenn.edu/gansu_papers/6) (consulted on 13 November 2012).

49. Heidi Ross, “Challenging the gendered dimensions of schooling...,” *art.cit.*, p. 165.

50. Ha Wei, Junjian Yi, and Junsen Zhang, “Inequality and Internal Migration in China: Evidence from Village Panel Data,” *UNDP Human Development Research Paper 2009/27*, p. 9. Accessed on 2 December 2010, [http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2009/papers/HDRP\\_2009\\_27.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2009/papers/HDRP_2009_27.pdf) (consulted on 13 November 2012).



out-of-school children depend to a great extent on the gender structure of children and the economic situation of the household. In households with both son(s) and daughter(s) where none shows academic promise at school, their parents may, if the economic situation permits, pay the high price of buying admission to a technical secondary school for them. If resources are short, such opportunities are normally restricted to boys, since sons are seen as the ones who financially support their own family after marriage, while daughters will contribute to their husband's family by providing unpaid domestic work and care. As a result, out-of-school boys often start learning manual skills while girls work on assembly lines or in the service sector. However, in households with only daughters, girls can enjoy a relatively higher level of equality in resource distribution.

In the county where Lianhe is situated, about 54 percent of those aged between 18 and 35 left their hometown to work in big cities in 2005. Among them about 70 percent were women, possibly due to their "nimble fingers" being more popular in South China's export factories.<sup>(51)</sup> The local government did not document their educational background, but judging from their age, the great majority of these young women left school after completing nine-year-compulsory education.

Compared to education and labour migration, marriage seems a less important avenue of social mobility in reform-era Lianhe. Firstly, since de-collectivisation, village politics have been less intensive, and village endogamy seems to have lost its popularity. Secondly, marrying an urban *hukou* holder from a nearby county town or prefecture seems not only unfeasible due to the large scale of labour migration, but also not that enticing due to the inland-coastal regional differences they have witnessed. In theory, labour migration can facilitate the marriage of girls from inland rural areas to boys from more affluent coastal areas and therefore cause a bride shortage in inland areas, as Davin has warned.<sup>(52)</sup> This might be true before 1990 when the 1990 census revealed that marriage was the leading reason for women's migration.<sup>(53)</sup> However, the 2000 Chinese census showed that more than two-thirds of migrant women between the ages of 15 and 44 cited employment not marriage as the principal reason for their migration.<sup>(54)</sup> In Lianhe and the surrounding villages, in 2005 and 2006, I did not observe a single case in which a rural girl migrated to a wealthier area due to marriage. That might be because these girls' contacts with local men are limited due to the fact that their social networks are normally confined to "people from the same hometown" or colleagues from work<sup>(55)</sup> on the one hand, while the widely-adopted dormitory labour system has made the factory their main working and living space on the other.<sup>(56-57)</sup>

### Is education still a social mobility ladder?

When education as a social mobility ladder is not as effective as before, what will happen in terms of rural parents' educational investment? Research shows that along with the expansion of higher education in China since the late 1990s and the increasing enrolment rates of college students, the returns on higher education have decreased. Firstly, the difficulty for new university graduates to secure a job has become one of the greatest emerging worries in China in the last few years.<sup>(58)</sup> Intensifying competition in the labour market and the impact of *guanxi* (referring to a person's network of relationships) have also added to the woes of the socially disadvantaged, particularly college graduates with a rural origin.<sup>(59)</sup> Importantly, research reveals that in recent years, the enrolment rate of students with a rural origin in China's first-tier universities has continued to decline, and the

majority of college students from rural areas mostly congregate in second-tier or even third-tier universities.<sup>(60)</sup> This makes it more difficult for them to compete with those from a better university.

Secondly, even when they find a job, skyrocketing housing prices and living costs in Chinese cities make it difficult for them to repay what their parents have invested in their education. Those with a rural origin who obtain an urban identity upon attaining higher education are often categorised as "phoenix men" (*fenghuang nan*) and "phoenix women" (*fenghuang nu*).<sup>(61)</sup> Compared to their urban counterparts, who often receive financial assistance from their parents in housing purchases,<sup>(62)</sup> they not only receive no help, but must actually send money back to support their parents. Compared to "phoenix women," "phoenix men" face even greater challenges, as husbands are traditionally expected to prepare housing for future married life.<sup>(63)</sup> If they are unable to do that, their marriage prospects in the city will be affected. Parents in Lianhe acutely sense this change. An anxious mother asked me, "When can my son get married and have his own house?" Her son is a college graduate and is now working in Shenzhen. With a monthly income of about 7,000 *yuan*, very decent from Lianhe villagers' point of view, he cannot afford to buy a flat in Shenzhen, contributing to his being dumped by his girlfriend. At the same time, another young man from Lianhe, one of his junior secondary school classmates, saved up 100,000 *yuan* by working on construction sites in Shenzhen for years. With this money, he built a two-storey house for himself in Lianhe and married a girl from Henan whom he met in Shenzhen. This comparison increased the aforementioned mother's worry.

These situations have discouraged rural people's investment in their children's education, and the idea that "education is useless" is emerging and prevailing in some parts of rural China, especially poor areas.<sup>(64)</sup> When household resources are constrained, rural parents will not borrow money to send

51. Zhang Hong, "China's New Rural Daughters Coming of Age...", *art. cit.*
52. Delia Davin, *Internal migration in contemporary China*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1999.
53. Cindy C. Fan, "Migration and Gender in China", in Chung-ming Lau, and Jianfa Shen, (eds.) *China Review*, Hong Kong, Chinese University Press, 2000, pp. 423-54.
54. Zai Liang and Zhongdong Ma, "China's Floating Population: New Evidence from the 2000 census," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3, September 2004, pp. 467-88.
55. Shen Tan, "Gender Difference in the Migration of Rural Labour," *Social Sciences in China*, 1998, pp. 70-76.
56. Ngai Pun, "Gendering the dormitory labor system: Production, reproduction, and migrant labor in South China," *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 13, No. 3-4, 2007, pp. 239-258.
57. Based on his research in a different county in Hubei and his analysis of nationally representative data set from the Chinese Household Income Project (1995, 2002 waves), Lei Meng suggests that rural migrant girls might want to marry urban men, but fail to do so due to "incomplete information and inadequate social networks" in urban areas. Lei Meng, "Bride Drain: Rising Female Migration and Declining Marriage Rates in Rural China", Working Paper, Xiamen University, 2009, pp. 5-6, [http://se.sufe.edu.cn/upload/\\_info/32822\\_0910120859381.pdf](http://se.sufe.edu.cn/upload/_info/32822_0910120859381.pdf) (consulted on 14 November 2012).
58. Jiefang Ribao, "Xunzhao daxuesheng jiuye de chuntian" (Looking for springtime: Employment of university graduates), 17 February 2009.
59. Wu Bin, and Zheng Yongnian, "Expansion of Higher Education in China...", *art. cit.*
60. Hongbin Li, "China's Human Capital Inequality: Evidence from College Entrance Exams and Admissions," paper presented at "Is Growth without Equity Today in China Tomorrow's Instability?" Conference, Stanford University, 6 December 2011, [http://iis-db.stanford.edu/evnts/6930/Hongbin\\_Li\\_Stanford\\_talk\\_1.pdf](http://iis-db.stanford.edu/evnts/6930/Hongbin_Li_Stanford_talk_1.pdf) (consulted on 13 November 2012).
61. These two terms grew out of the Chinese idiom "Sparrows turn to phoenixes" (*Maque bian fenghuang*), indicating great upward social mobility.
62. Sun Liping, "Dushengziniu jiating jiegou shi zhicheng Zhongguo fangjia shangzhang zhongyao yinsu" (The family structure of the only-child generation has greatly contributed to the skyrocketing housing price), *Jingji guancha bao* (Economic observation paper), 8 August 2006.
63. Zhang Li, *In Search of Paradise: Middle-class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 2010.
64. *Changsha Wanbao*, "Nongcun daxuesheng jiuye nan, chuxian 'xin dushu wuyong lun'" (University graduates' difficulties in finding a job causes the idea that 'education is useless' to reappear), 21 June 2006.

their academically promising children to school as some did before 2000, since the returns have decreased. In relatively better-off families, however, when economic circumstances permit, parents are still willing to invest in girls' higher education, as life in the city seems easier for a “phoenix woman” than for a “phoenix man” who must buy housing for future married life.<sup>(65)</sup> In the end, girls' academic performance and the economic situation of the family play key roles.

## Conclusion and discussion

Since 1958, the *hukou* system and the constantly imbalanced inputs from the government in favour of urban areas have made obtaining an urban identity a key aspect of upward social mobility in China. Throughout the last six decades or so, higher education, cadre functions, and military service have become relevant or irrelevant for rural boys and girls to obtain urban status, in accordance with changing political and socio-economic circumstances and policies. Marriage and labour have also functioned as social mobility avenues. Through adopting a biographical approach, this research examines how rural parents in Lianhe have responded to the fluctuating implications of these social mobility means and the gendered consequences among their children. Despite seemingly individual choice, the decisions rural Chinese parents make regarding resource distribution among their children is bound and affected by elements at the family level (marriage and population policies), the economic level (employment and labour market situations), and the cultural level (values and preferences regarding appropriate roles and aspirations for sons and daughters by fathers and mothers). This research suggests that apart from being the result of the Chinese government's efforts, the closing gender gap in education beyond the nine-year basic education in rural China is also an “unintended consequence” of the rural Chinese population's attempts to break through rural-urban segregation and achieve social mobility. Education as a social ladder is also open to girls. The key factors are the academic promise showed by girls and the economic situation of the family.

The correlation between social mobility means and improved gender equality in rural China nevertheless sadly reveals that in this logic, educated girls become valued by their parents as a means for reducing poverty and improving the family's situation. The lives of rural girls are rarely considered ends in themselves. This is demonstrated by the fact that in the collective era, rural girls were forced to leave school to help with childcare and collective labour or to accept marriage against their will, while in the reform era, girls with poor academic performance leave school to engage in migrant labour. On the issue of rural girls' education, rural parents' logic is congruent with “the logic of developmentalism”<sup>(66)</sup> of the Chinese state. To some extent, the concern for girls' education in developmentalistic logic has resulted in improved gender equality in education. But Ross worries that when girls' lives are rarely considered as ends in themselves, the improvement will be impaired.<sup>(67)</sup> Rural parents' logic seems to reproduce the logic of the state at the household level. In other words, the improvement in gender equality in education could be easily reversed.

Furthermore, recent research reveals that the rural-urban gap in higher education has been replaced by more subtle inequality in which rural children congregate in second-tier and even third-tier universities, and education's function as a social mobility ladder is declining. The fact that the rural-urban gap is actually still widening and becoming even more difficult to bridge has already negatively impacted rural Chinese population's “edu-

cational desire.” How will this affect gender equality in education in rural China? This will be a question requiring more scholarly attention.

Moreover, the biographical approach enables us to observe family dynamics over time. Over these 60-odd years, we have seen in the collective era that extra-household institutions favoured older rural men who were more likely to attain an urban *hukou* through being promoted to certain official positions or in the army, while in the reform era, the institutions are more favourable to young people, as they have opportunities to obtain urban *hukou* through higher education or to enhance their livelihoods through the labour markets in south/east China, which especially favour young girls with nimble fingers, clearer vision, and more energy.

Finally, while the conclusion is drawn based on research in a central Chinese village, a similar phenomenon, including mobility routes for rural girls, aspirations for academically promising girls, and perception of the hierarchal relationship between academic education, vocational education, rural-to-urban labour migration, and marriage can also be seen in rural Shaanxi,<sup>(68)</sup> rural Shangdong,<sup>(69)</sup> rural Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou,<sup>(70)</sup> and rural Gansu.<sup>(71)</sup> Poverty and its huge rural-urban gap are what these areas have in common. In this sense, what we have found in Lianhe may represent the situation in poor rural Chinese areas generally.

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65. Zhang Li, *In Search of Paradise...*, *op. cit.*

66. Heidi Ross, “Challenging the gendered dimensions of schooling...,” *art.cit.*, p. 148.

67. Heidi Ross, “Challenging the gendered dimensions of schooling...,” *art.cit.*

68. *Ibid.*

69. Lynn Paine and Brian DeLany, *art. cit.*

70. Weng Naiqun (ed.), *Cunluo shiye xia de nongcun jiaoyu...*, *op. cit.*

71. Emily Hannum *et al.*, “Family sources of educational gender inequality...,” *art. cit.*