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# Filial daughters? Agency and subjectivity of rural migrant women in Shanghai



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# Background information

- Rural-urban migration
  - China: 168m rural migrants; 12.3% of the entire population
  - Post-migration pattern of residence
    - Temporarily non-patrilocal (not neolocal): a couple does not live close to the natal family of **either the husband or the wife**, as well as to the mode of residence taken up by adult children who **separate from their parents** before marrying
  - Profound changes to **migrants'** intergenerational and conjugal relationships
    - Filiality and rebellion have different meanings compared to what Jacka (2006) found in the 1990s and the early 2000s

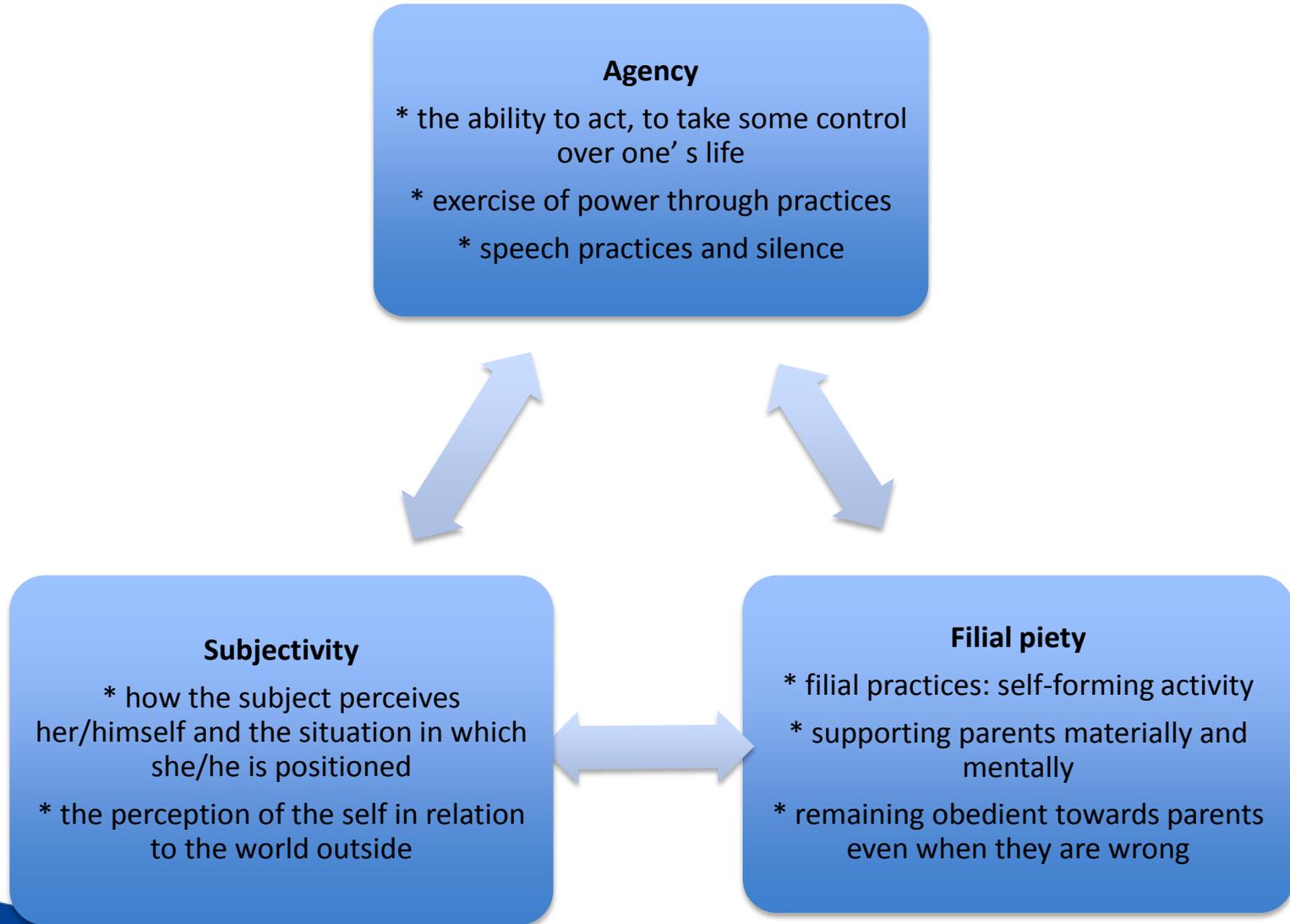


# Research Questions

- How does migration affect rural women' s intergenerational and conjugal relationships?
- How do these migrants exert agency and express subjectivity in intimate relationships?



# Conceptualising Agency, Subjectivity and Filial Piety



# Methodology

- Primary methods of data collection
  - Participant Observation (250 hundred fieldnotes)
    - Worked as a waitress and a pantry helper, lived in the dormitory
  - Interviewing (60 interviews)
- The restaurant and the informants
  - Five-storey, 300 staff; rural hukou: 98%; more than 50% were from Anhui Province
- Fieldwork timeline

Time Fieldwork	2011					2012						2013					2014		
	Mar-Apr	May-Jun	Jul-Aug	Sep-Oct	Nov-Dec	Jan-Feb	Mar-Apr	May-Jun	Jul-Aug	Sep-Oct	Nov-Dec	Jan-Feb	Mar-Apr	May-Jun	Jul-Aug	Sep-Oct	Nov-Dec	Jan-Feb	Mar-Apr
Pilot interview																			
1st fieldwork																			
2nd fieldwork																			
3rd fieldwork																			
4th fieldwork																			
5th fieldwork																			





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# Empirical findings: unmarried women

- Ru Nan: 如男, 'like a man'
  - Son preference of her parents
  - Save money for her brother's tuition fees
  - Arranged matches: father's advice - put insoles into the shoes and whiten herself with make-up
  - a responsible sister and a filial daughter
  - patriarchy is still being perpetuated, albeit in transformed ways



# Empirical findings : women in a relationship

- Migration enlarges the pool of potential partners; but parents still have a say in their adult children's marriage

## Yue

- Parents' opposition
  - *We [Yue and her boyfriend] were caught by my father on the street. My dad beat me and scolded me on the way back home ... after going back, my dad said that he firmly disagreed with us being together, asked me to break up with him, and told me not to go to work tomorrow. I lied to him. I said I would quit on the 10th, the day I got paid. He said that was fine. Actually I didn't wait until the 10th; I eloped with my boyfriend on the 8th.*



# Empirical findings : Yue

- Elopement

- *We moved to Jing'an district 静安区. For the first two days we stayed in his friend's flat, then we rented a flat on our own. He found a new job, and I found a job as well, so we started work ...The first day, I switched off my mobile phone, but I was worried about my parents so I gave them a call. I said: "I won't be back until you agree." My dad was angry and started to scold me. So I ended the call. I was frightened and began to cry. Later on, I called back from time to time. Each time my dad asked me where I was living. He said he agreed to us being together and wanted to come and visit us. But I didn't dare tell him where I was. My boyfriend quarrelled with me every day. He tried to stop me calling home for fear that my parents would find us. I always cried and said that I missed my family, so I kept calling them.*



# Empirical findings: Yue

- Elopement

- *At that time I earned 1,200 [yuan]. I usually gave my parents 1,000 and kept 200 to spend...if it was not enough, my boyfriend paid the rest. Before elopement, I left behind all my wages and savings for my parents, I didn't keep a penny. Rent and everything else was paid for by my boyfriend. My family is not well off, and I have a younger brother. My elder brother had just got married, and my parents were still in debt. I have known how difficult it is for my parents to save money since I was a child. So, I gave all my money to them.*

- Pregnancy

- *After four months, I became pregnant, and I told my parents. My parents agreed to our marriage because I was pregnant, and asked his [her boyfriend's] parents to come to Shanghai to have a meeting. My brother said that he wanted to visit me, and I told him my address. After my brother's visit, my dad came the next day. We were still sleeping when my dad knocked on the door. I was scared. Oh my God! I didn't dare say much, although my dad had agreed over the phone to us being together. Later, my boyfriend's dad came to Shanghai. At first we required some money from his dad to have the wedding ceremony in his home village, but he said their family didn't have that much, and disapproved. My dad asked me to get an abortion if they didn't agree to the amount of money. I thought for a while. My dad's insistence was right, you see, I eloped with him, but his parents didn't agree to this amount of money. I was angry and called my boyfriend: "If your dad cannot give that much, I will get an abortion tomorrow." That night, he called me and asked me not to go to the hospital and said his dad would be coming to Shanghai soon.*



# Empirical findings: Yue

- Elopement and pregnancy
  - Pursuing romantic love; negotiating with the parents
  - Redefining the embodiment of “filial piety”
  - reveal the complexity of her subjectivity mediated through filial piety





# Empirical findings: Yue-post-marriage life

- Paradoxical implications of women's empowerment
  - Rising power in conjugal relations
  - The perpetuation of filial piety
    - *I am in charge of money.* Sometimes, I give pocket money to my mum, 500, 1000 [yuan]. Sometimes, I use our mutual savings and I will let him [her husband] know, sometimes I use my secret stash (sifang qian 私房钱) so he doesn't know.



# The complex empowerment process of married women

## Empowerment

- Decision-making process
  - *Men are the masters of the house in most of the families in China. In my family, important decisions are made by my husband whereas trivial decisions are made by me. However, **what is considered important or trivial is defined by me** (Interviewee: Qin Zhang).*
- More gender-egalitarian conjugal relations in a non-patrilocal residence
  - Avoid complex relationships with the husband's family
  - Avoid farmwork and childcare
  - Long working hours & limited living space: little housework

**But!**

## Perpetuation of feminine subjectivity that valorises the gender division of labour

*I do all the housework and he doesn't do any. I feel like men should not wash clothes and cook. I think men should prioritize their career. After he comes home, I wash his socks and shoes, he doesn't wash them. I don't allow him to do the washing. And he's not in the habit of cooking or washing the dishes.(Yue)*



# Conclusion

- Sending remittances, while contravening social norms with respect to cohabitation, reflects the ambivalent subjectivity of the female migrants.
- Empowered in the sense that that they have control over what they earn and have less housework to do; however, they are still constrained by their filial obligations and therefore feel obliged to contribute to their natal families.
- Migrant women' s interactions with their families are complicated, and it is naive to dichotomize the conduct of these women as either rebellious or filial. The intersection of filial piety, conventional gender norms and migrant women' s rising power are factors that these women have to reconcile; how they do so is influenced by, and in turn exerts influence on, their subjectivity.





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Thank you!