The Gendered Reflections of Stayers in China's Migrant Sending Villages

Abstract:

This article draws on my interviews with middle-aged stayers in rural China's eastern interior in the early to mid-2010s to explore interactions between gender and non-migration. I use the concept of 'spatial reflexivity' – individuals' reflections on their potential for (im)mobility – to examine how different stayers' reflections about their non-migration were affected by both wider mobility imperatives and by attachments to family, each of which is gendered. I find that my respondents' spatial reflexivity was inseparable from their perception of their villages as home fort, stepping-stone or sanctuary, with these perceptions partly reflective of their households' non/involvement in migration and economic conditions. At the same time, stayers' views of their villages interacted with context-specific gendered ideas about space, obligation and competence, to affect what staying meant to them. This article concludes that even as staying in China's rural interior was an actively worked out process, individuals' spatial reflexivity was mediated and constrained by multi-scalar inequalities, which were in turn naturalized by a pervasive gendered moral geography.

Key words: gender, stayers, China, motility, migration, spatial reflexivity

1. Introduction

This article draws on research in villages in China to contribute to literature on rural non-migrants in the global South (Kothari, 2003; Stockdale and Haartesen, 2018; Ye, 2018), focusing on the gendered dimensions of individuals' reflections about their villages and staying (Gray, 2011; Chan 2017; Somaiah *et al*, 2020). Non-migrants include individuals who are on the staying side of a translocal or transnational relationship and individuals in

households where no one has migrated (Kothari, 2003; Carling, 2008). Existing literature mostly examines left-behind non-migrants, especially women who stay in villages while their husbands work elsewhere (e.g. Menjívar and Agadjanian, 2007; Archambault, 2010; Leinaweaver, 2010; Reeves, 2011; Wu and Ye, 2011; Mata-Codesal, 2015). However, less is known about stayers in households without migrants or about how stayers' reflections on (im)mobility compare for stayers in families with and without migrants.

This article examines the interrelationships among stayers' perceptions of their villages and their 'motility' – that is their *capability* to be mobile (Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006), in the light of context-specific gender relations. It focuses especially on the implications of such interrelationships for how middle-aged (aged thirties to mid-fifties) stayers in households with and without migrants reflect on their possibilities for (im)mobility given their rurality. China is instructive for this exploration because a 'mobility imperative' prevails within its rural interior such that vast numbers of stayers are affected by the outmigration of kin, friends or neighbours. In 2016 over 170 million[1] rural people had migrated within China (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019) while the same year 388 million people remained in the countryside. Of these, 158 million were non-migrants in households where at least one member had migrated while 230 million were non-migrants in households where no one had migrated (Ye, 2018).

This article explores the 'spatial reflexivity' of stayers in rural migrant sending regions in Anhui, a province in China's eastern interior. 'Spatial reflexivity' refers to 'individuals'

[1] China's National Bureau of Statistics states there are 281.71 million *nongmingong*. English language publications often translate *nongmingong* or 'peasant worker' as 'rural migrant worker.' But *nongmingong* incorporates those who work within the administrative borders of their townships and the 170 million individuals who work outside their townships' borders.

reflections on their motility' (Cook and Cuervo, 2020). Cook and Cuervo's (2020) understanding of 'spatial reflexivity' builds on a concept of 'reflexivity' proposed by Cairns (2017) to examine how a requirement for individual development … 'creates and sustains desires to be geographically mobile.' Pertinently, though, Cook and Cuervo (2020) extend Cairns's (2017) concept of 'reflexivity' to refer also to stayers' reflections about their motility given their aspirations to accomplish the personal projects integral to their development. Cook and Cuervo (2020) demonstrate with reference to respondents in rural Australia that one axis of stayers' spatial reflexivity is their awareness of a wider *mobility imperative*. Meanwhile, inspired by Halfacree (2004a), Cook and Cuervo (2020) further emphasize non-instrumental *emotional attachments to family*, people and places as a concurrent axis of stayers' spatial reflexivity. In this article, I emphasise that these two axes of spatial reflexivity are each embedded in gender relations. This research thereby contributes to literature which recognizes (a) that staying in rural areas is not a passive default situation, but a situation that individuals actively work out as much as for migration (Stockdale and Haartesen, 2018; Cook and Cuervo, 2020), and (b) that individuals' working out of staying is a gendered process (e.g. Gray, 2011; Chan, 2017, Somaiah *et al* 2020).

My analysis of the gendered spatial reflexivity of stayers is based on my interviews with middle-aged respondents in households with and without migrants in two rural counties in Anhui. These middle-aged stayers all had school-age children. I interviewed these respondents in their homes over five fieldwork trips between 2010 and 2015. Drawing on these interviews, I address the questions: How did stayers engage in spatial reflexivity when differently affected by the migration of others? How did middle-aged women and men differ in their spatial reflexivity? How did stayers' experiences of mobility imperatives and family

attachments vary by their gender? What gender differences existed in how non-migrants negotiated their staying identities in rural migrant sending regions?

2. Rurality, Gender and Staying in China

In China, mobility imperatives gain meaning in relation to a wider moral geography whereby rurality denotes backwardness, stasis and a lack of ambition while urbanity denotes modernity, action and personal development (Liu, 2000; Sun, 2009). This geography is 'moral' because it conflates the 'development' of places and the worth of individuals, with rural residents depicted as less capable, innovative and of lower 'quality' (*suzhi*) than urbanites (Liu, 2000; Sun, 2009). Echoing some geographers' observations about how spatial inequalities in political economy are cast in temporal terms (e.g. Agnew, 1996), this moral geography is concurrently overlain by a moral temporality whereby rurality connotes 'lagging behind' and the past while urbanity signifies a progressive future to which all responsible persons *should* aspire (Liu, 2000: 6). Meanwhile, this moral geography obfuscates the structural underpinnings of limitations in rural individuals' capabilities.

Simultaneously, though, an alternative subordinate moral geography operates, whereby rurality connotes family, authenticity and tranquillity, while urbanity signifies alienation, corruption, and ruthlessness. This alternative moral geography resonates with the 'emotional attachments' axis of spatial reflexivity. As Halfacree observes with reference to the global North, these alternative imaginings of rurality serve to critique 'the character and direction of contemporary society' (Halfacree 2004b: 297), notably 'space-time compression, driven by the relentless demands of the capitalist system for capital acceleration…' (Halfacree, 2004b: 297). Meanwhile, considerations about individuals' (im)mobility that are not obviously

instrumentally geared towards competitive advancement point to motivations for action 'related to family or community', which 'may vary by gender or social group' (Schewel, 2020: 331). In rural China as in other patriarchal contexts (Mata-Codesal, 2015) a gendering of the non-economic considerations that shape (im)mobility are especially evident in expectations that women will prioritize their attachments to family and their family's needs for their caregiving (Jacka, 2014; Zhang, 2014; Chuang, 2016; Fan and Chen, 2020).

The intertwining of the spatial and temporal aspects of China's moral geography are expressed in part through lingering Marxist categories that discursively reinforce mobility imperatives. During the early years of revolution, Communist activists diagnosed the countryside as 'feudal', which translates into Chinese as *fengjian*, with *feng* meaning 'envelope, closed, sealed off' and *jian* meaning 'built construct'. *Fengjian* thereby signals the socio-economic and cultural stagnation of rural areas and the insular mindsets of rural inhabitants (Flower, 2004). However, after China's abandonment of class struggle in favour of marketization in 1978 and following the disbanding of the communes and the implementation of household farming in the early 1980s, the Party-state urged villagers to 'cast off' their 'feudal shackles', 'open' their minds, and improve their circumstances and themselves by working in new off-farm labor markets.

In China, overlapping rural-urban inequalities and regional (especially coast-interior) inequalities have affected how and where rural people work in off-farm labor markets. China's rural-urban inequalities were initially fully legally codified in China's household registration (*hukou*) system in the 1950s when *hukou* was instituted as an instrument of socialist planning. The *hukou* system designates individuals' occupational status as 'agricultural' or 'non-agricultural' while registering them at their place of residence (Mallee,

1995; Fan, 2003). Individuals inherit their *hukou* from either parent and gain access to public goods and services at the place where their *hukou* is registered. Meanwhile, rural *hukou* holders and non-local *hukou* holders are excluded from affordable housing, health care and school places for their children in major cities (Mallee, 1995; Fan, 2003). The household registration system also allocates rural and urban *hukou* holders to different welfare systems. Whereas urban *hukou* holders receive government and employer provided social insurance packages, most rural migrants do not receive such protection (Chan, 2014). Rather, the welfare net of individuals with an agricultural *hukou* comes from access to land in their villages to which they have cultivation rights (Fan, 2003).

Rural-urban inequalities overlap with regional inequalities. In the first decade of China's economic reforms, coastal provinces benefited from preferential economic policies and capital investment to promote industrialization and export-led development. This history translated into path-dependent regional divergences in if and where rural individuals worked in off-farm sectors (Song, 2017). Chiefly, after the 1980s many rural individuals in coastal provinces worked in local industries and commuted for employment to rapidly growing nearby cities, whereas rural individuals in interior provinces had little access to local off-farm work (Song 2017).

In the mid-1980s to early 1990s, government planners identified China's rural interior as a major source of labor for the economies of cities and coastal regions. Meanwhile, interior governments perceived remittances as a resource for rural development. Indeed, local governments in many of China's interior rural regions, including in Anhui, posted slogans on village walls proclaiming, 'the migration of one person frees the household from poverty' (Policy Research Office of Anhui Provincial Committee, 1994; Wang, 1994). Because of a

customary understanding that men work 'outside' the home and women work 'inside' the home, these appeals assumed that men would migrate without their wives and children. Certainly, rural migration has long been male dominated: in the late 1980s and early 1990s several Chinese survey-based reports estimated that men accounted for 70 to 84 per cent of rural migrant workers (Mallee, 1995: 114) while in 2015 men comprised 68.8 per cent of rural migrant workers (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

As men's work outside the home increasingly occurred farther away from the village, the agricultural tasks once shouldered by men became subsumed into women's 'inside, domestic' work (Jacka, 1997). Concomitantly, rural women took on an ever more pivotal role in nurturing the next generation of laborers for the national economy (Jacka, 2019), while providing livelihood insurance for migrants, many of whom faced precarious employment conditions and risks of injury, especially in the construction sector (Chuang, 2016). With young people's growing participation in labor migration, the agricultural workforce not only feminized but also aged, replicating a pattern observed in migrant sending villages in other urbanizing countries (e.g. Gisbert et al, 1994).

In China, the feminization and aging of villages compounded the devaluation of rurality. Chinese commentators describe the staying population with a numerical homonym meaning women, children and the old – the 386199 army (Xiang 2007: 180). Even as rural migrants were seen to be of lower quality than urban *hukou* holders, non-migrants were deemed to be the lowest quality of all (Zhang, 2014). This gendered moral geography has made it psychologically untenable for most young and middle-aged men to stay in interior villages (see Xiang, 2007), a dynamic observed also in migrant-sending villages in other countries, for instance, Mexico (Kandel and Massey, 2002). Indeed, as in other societies where a

modernization logic dominates, the idea that 'the person who is not mobile is a loser' (Kauffman and Montulet, 2008: 53) applies to men more than women (Choi and Peng, 2016).

Moral geography impacts on individuals' wider life aspirations, with these life aspirations providing a contextualized basis for understanding individuals' aspirations for (im)mobility alongside their capabilities for (im)mobility (Carling and Schewel, 2018). In China's rural interior, individuals' wider life aspirations are influenced by how rurality signifies the attributes of not only place but also people (Liu, 2000; Sun, 2009). Notably, when villagers move to the cities, they carry the stigma of their rurality within them via their *hukou.* Meanwhile, their bodies often betray their structurally incurred 'human capital' disadvantages, manifest, for instance, in their demeanour, stature, and dialect (Sun, 2009). The middle-aged stayers I met had grown up in the countryside during years of economic austerity when their families' investments in their education were limited, with females especially disadvantaged vis-à-vis their brothers because as females, they would eventually marry into another family (Jacka, 1997). Given these historic disadvantages most middle-aged stayers perceived that it was too late for them to cast off rurality themselves, so they transferred this aspiration to the next generation. Specifically, the adults wanted their children to enter the cities not as menial 'rural migrant workers' toiling long hours for low pay (Chan, 2014) as so many of their own generation were doing, but as individuals with the education and white-collar jobs that would afford them full and dignified urban citizenship. Rural parents held such aspirations regardless of their children's gender, reflecting the increased emotional preciousness of all children in the wake of rapid fertility decline (Hannum *et al*, 2009). Confirming Cook and Cuervo's (2020) observation about the impact of life-course stage on spatial reflexivity, these middle-aged parents perceived their villages as places that they wanted their children to leave, by the high road of education.

3. Research Methods and Context

3.1 Research Methods:

My exploration of the interactions between stayers' spatial reflexivity and gender relations draws on my interviews with middle-aged stayers in thirty-five households in villages in Eastern County and Western County[2], Anhui. Interview-based research methods are well-suited to this exploration because they enable the researcher to better understand the meanings that people bring to a phenomenon – in this case, staying in migrant sending regions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011:3). When I first interviewed the respondents in 2010-2011, they were aged between 34 and 49 years. Indicative of the intersection of gender, generation and rurality, the middle-aged women in this study had on average approximately five years of education while the men had approximately seven. The breakdown of the respondents by household type is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1:

Household type	Number	Research Participants
Household with home alone wife and migrant husband	21	1. Left-behind wife (20 households) 2. Mother-in-law (1 household)
Non-migrant household	14	1. Both members of the couple together (6 households) 2. Wife and parent-in-law (3 households) 3. Wife (3 households) 4. Husband (2 households)

[2] Eastern County and Western County are pseudonyms.

I was introduced to the respondents by teachers in the four fieldwork townships, two in each county. Acting on my request, the teachers kindly introduced me to members of migrant and non-migrant households with different economic circumstances, with these respondents being the parents of the students in their classes. After my first visit to respondents' homes in 2010-2011, I revisited a subset of families in 2013, 2014 and 2015.

I conducted all the interviews in Mandarin accompanied by a Chinese research assistant from a provincial university who facilitated my entry into the field and interpreted between local dialect and Mandarin. I adopted semi-structured interviews to permit comparison between and within groups of principal respondents (Arthur and Nazroo, 2003), namely, stayers in migrant and non-migrant households. Questions to these respondents covered the household members' migration histories; the household's livelihood sources; daily routines; views of their village and migrant destinations; children's responses to their parents' migration; daily life; hardships and happiness; and aspirations. The interviews were digitally recorded and lasted 30 minutes to two hours, with an average duration of 55 minutes. Respondents were paid 30 *yuan* for their time, equivalent to local wage rates for half a day of casual laboring.

I transcribed the interview recordings directly from Chinese into English, then coded the transcripts thematically (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). In the first round of coding I identified sections of text where respondents gave meaning to staying and to their prior migration or intended migration. In subsequent rounds of coding I refined and thickened the analysis by identifying similarities and differences in the meanings that respondents gave to migration and non-migration, comparing stayers in households with and without migrants, and male and female stayers in different households. I additionally derive contextual insights from my supplementary interviews with local officials and teachers.

3.2 Research Context:

Anhui is one of China's major rural migrant sending provinces, a status partly attributable to per capita cultivated land allocations below the national average.[3] In 2010 over half of school-age rural children in Anhui had been left behind by at least one migrant parent (Duan et al, 2013). However, Eastern County and Western County were migratory even by Anhui's standards. Surveys conducted in schools in the four fieldwork townships, two per county, indicate that in 2010 more than 60 per cent of children in grades 4, 6 and 8 (typically aged 10-14 years) had at least one parent who had migrated without them (XXXX). Meanwhile, a prefectural government report states that in Western County in 2017 over half of children aged under 16 years had been left behind by two migrant parents (XXXX).

In the early years of China's economic reforms, Eastern County and Western County were renowned for their poverty. By 2015, though, Eastern County's and Western County's per capita rural incomes were approximately fifteen thousand *yuan* and fourteen thousand *yuan* respectively, higher than Anhui's rural average of 10, 821 *yuan* – but below the provincial and national urban averages of 26, 936 *yuan* and 31, 195 *yuan* respectively. For reference, rural income includes the value of in-kind income such as grain as well as cash.

In the 2010s rural households in Eastern County and Western County typically grew a single crop of rice and a second crop of millet, wheat or cotton, and vegetables for their own consumption, while many households also raised chickens and pigs. But the profitability of farming was undermined by the small size and scatteredness of land allocations, poor

[3] In 2015 67 per cent of rural migrants from Anhui crossed provincial borders (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Anhui's per capita cultivated land allocation is 1.3 *mu*, below the national average of 1.52 *mu* (Chen and Fan, 2018: 100).

irrigation infrastructure and consecutive years of drought, which all contributed to large-scale out-migration. The land in the fieldwork townships also did not provide rural households with dividends that researchers observe residents in some peri-urban villages in coastal provinces obtain from land rents or from compensation for land requisitioning (Kan, 2019).

Instead, in Eastern County and Western County, rural households were differentiated economically by their involvement in off-farm work. The 2010s saw the rise of a manufacturing sector in industrial zones near Eastern County's and Western County's county seats, spurred by the relocation of polluting industries from the coast to the interior. This development notwithstanding, labor migration still dominated in the fieldwork townships. One reason is that these townships were situated far from the county seat. So, whereas villagers who lived on the outskirts of an industrial zone could work locally off the farm, villagers from these townships who had jobs in an industrial zone either lived away from their families like longer-distance migrants did, or else they relocated with their families to the county seat. Importantly, though, villagers in these townships generally preferred to work in coastal cities than in the local county seats' industrial zones because the pay and environmental health conditions were reputedly better in the former.

Migration was further sustained by long-established migrant networks connecting the villages of Eastern County and Western County with certain economic sectors and destination areas. In the 1980s, Eastern County started to develop a specialization in the construction industry. By the 2010s migrant teams from Eastern County worked on construction projects in most provinces in China, while several thousand migrants also worked on two-year contracts on construction projects in African countries including in Angola, Algeria, Namibia and Cameroon. Men from Western County worked in Yangtze River Delta cities and in China's

coastal provinces and even in western provinces as construction workers, welders, chefs, security guards and drivers, while other men ran stalls selling lettuce, fruit, salt-preserved duck and snacks.

Women from both counties also migrated, many to Yangtze River Delta cities. Women from Eastern County worked in factories producing items such as cosmetics, clothes or electronics, while women from Western County worked in 'housekeeping' jobs, such as cleaning in hotels, supermarkets and restaurants, catering, and nannying, or else helping their fathers, brothers or husbands run food stalls. Crucially, though, similar to some other rural regions in China (Fan, 2003; Zhang 2014; Chuang, 2016; Fan and Chen, 2020), migrant women from these counties typically returned home after motherhood or when childcare was no longer provided by grandparents, usually because of illness or death.

In Eastern County and Western County, expectations around men's and women's complementary contributions to their households underpinned a situation where nearly all spouses on the staying side of migration relationships were women. Indeed, men rarely stayed while their wives migrated (see Xiang, 2007), which differs from the situation in some southeast Asian countries where more flexible gender norms and longer histories of feminised migration streams underpin increased social acceptance of left behind 'mothering fathers' (Lam and Yeoh, 2018). In 2013 when I told an education bureau official in Eastern County that I wished to visit more households where the man stayed at home and the woman had migrated, he laughed, saying:

> You don't understand China's conditions. In China, a man wouldn't let a woman go out for fear that she would not come back, and others would say that he had no ability.

When I later asked the principal of a junior high school in a township in Eastern County for introductions to households where a wife had migrated while the husband was at home, he similarly laughed, explaining:

> There are no such cases. Such a woman wants to run away…The husband in such a case would be so disgraceful that he should go to prison. Even if there were such cases, no-one would admit to it.

In contrast to the preponderance of middle-aged women stayers in households with migrants, stayers in households without migrants comprised both men and women. Like the situation Ye (2018) discusses for other rural regions in China, a few staying couples living in the villages I visited had access to decent income from local off-farm work. Better-off stayers ran shops in the townships, engaged in transportation, operated brick, timber or fireworks factories or provided farming-related services. At the other end of the spectrum, though, were couples who eked out a living mostly from farming, with their earning capacity impaired by the illness or disability of at least one member or by other disadvantages. Meanwhile, yet other middle-aged stayers I met sat somewhere in-between, supplementing farming with casual work, for instance, on local construction sites, in fireworks factories, or on migrant households' farms. As the analysis shows, though, alongside the influence of household economic circumstances, the spatial reflexivity of all these stayers was shaped by mobility imperatives and family attachments, each of which was mediated by gender relations.

4. Findings

Different stayers' perceptions of their villages and their motility existed within the immediate microcosms of their households, which as mentioned previously, included their household's non/involvement in migration and its economic situation. Simultaneously, stayers'

perceptions of their villages and motility were refracted through a gendered lens. Below, I discuss firstly the spatial reflexivity of women who were on the staying side of a migration relationship, and their view of the village as home fort. Thereafter, I examine the spatial reflexivity of stayers in households without migrants, with one subsection on stayers who saw their village as a stepping-stone where they would stay for several years, and a further subsection on stayers who intended to remain indefinitely in their village sanctuaries.

4.1 Village as Home Fort

Women whose husbands had migrated without them perceived their village to be the home fort where they contributed to their families' pursuit of intergenerational mobility. The Chinese term for individuals 'left behind' by migrant household members is *liushou.* As Xiang (2007) explains, *liushou* differs in meaning from the often-used English language equivalent 'left behind': whereas 'left behind' implies that the stayers have been abandoned, *liushou* indicates that the stayers hold the fort while awaiting the migrants' return. In this regard, Reeves' (2011) term *staying put* better approximates *liushou*'s meaning, with *staying* conveying the sense that the non-migrant women she met in rural Uzbekistan got on with their lives after others had left, including working and *waiting* (for their children to grow up), while *put* recognizes that many of these women 'saw their husbands' absence and the need to stay in the village as a choice that was imposed on them' (Reeves, 2011: 557). Indeed, several women in Anhui talked about *liushou* as 'slowly passing their days' or 'slowly raising children', conveying their patient resignation at the repetitive work routines that they endured alone and at the long time-horizons of their children's escape from rurality. At the same time, though, as Jacka (2014) observes, *liushou* and 'left behind' both connote rural stayers' vulnerability, backwardness, lower 'quality' and lack of agency vis-à-vis migrants.

My analysis of *liushou* women's spatial reflexivity differs from other research on these women's experiences (e.g. Jacka, 2014; Wu and Ye, 2016; Chen and Fan, 2020) in highlighting that even as these women did not want to be *liushou*, they attributed their circumstances to 'rurality' rather than to their husbands' migration *per se*. Women's perceptions of their villages as lacking possibilities for a decent material life could be seen in their answers to my question, 'What do you think about your husband's migration?' Usual replies were: 'I've no thoughts because there's no money in the countryside' or 'There's no other way because farming doesn't provide enough.' Some women also observed that although villagers could eat their fill, parents still needed to help their children prepare for a 'way out' of the countryside and a 'way out' in life more generally. They had to do this by accruing funds for their children's post-compulsory education costs and for later helping them purchase urban-based housing. Meanwhile, remittances were one of the few sources of income available for doing this.

These women's feeling of living in a rural backwater with few opportunities for either personal or family development was reinforced by the large-scale outmigration, which resonates with Lu's (2015) findings about the adverse effects on village society when nearly half the population has migrated. Several *liushou* women's sense of being stuck in their villages was indicated by their observations that the only households in their villages that contained at-home young or middle-aged adults were those where the men had severe illness or a disability. Exceptions noted by some *liushou* women were those non-migrant households that had access to decent local off-farm income. 'Everyone else has gone,' was a common refrain.

The *liushou* women I met all talked about their staying with reference to their need to 'bring up a studying child' while also emphasizing that their presence gave their children care and reassurance that would help them to concentrate on their studies. These women's view that mothers needed to stay was reinforced by the fact that schools in these counties seldom provided lunch or supervised the children at midday. Children went to school at 8:00 a.m., returned home at 11.20 a.m. then went back to school at 2:30 p.m. before returning home at 4:20 p.m. Some children walked or cycled between home and school, some mothers escorted their children on the school-run, while some villages collectively hired vans for this purpose. In several families, though, a grandmother rather than the at-home mother cooked meals and escorted the children to and from school. But even when grandmothers did such tasks, middle-aged women still said that they could not migrate because otherwise their mother-in-law's overall work burden would be too heavy. Furthermore, mindful of their aspirations for their children's educational mobility, these women also worried about delegating all childcare responsibilities to their parents-in-law because of the perceived deficiencies in the older generation's child-raising practices (see also Chuang, 2016: 67).

Notably, five middle-aged *liushou* women mentioned that besides caring for their children, they also looked after ailing parents-in-law, which resonates with accounts of these women's caregiving burdens both elsewhere in Anhui (Chen and Fan, 2020) and in China's other interior provinces (Wu and Ye, 2011). Based on her research in Peru, Leinaweaver (2010) proposes the idea of an 'intergenerational care slot' to conceptualize how adults' migration often creates meaningful absences in families that affect the care of not only children but also the elderly. Two *liushou* women in Anhui expressed in effect that they were staying to fill an intergenerational care slot with the rhyme 'above is the old, below is the young, I can't go' (*shang you lao, xia you xiao, zou bu liao*). Importantly, though, *liushou* women only saw

themselves as being the caregiver for an old person if that person was infirm, reflecting that in rural China old people typically work for as long as possible to help their families and to avoid burdening them (Pang, de Brauw and Rozelle, 2004; Chen and Fan, 2020).

In addition to *liushou* women's acceptance of their responsibilities for home management and intergenerational caregiving, most women calculated that there was little point to them being the migrant for their household because they would not be able to earn as much their husband. For instance, in 2011, a 39-year-old woman in Eastern County whose husband worked on construction sites in various cities in Anhui explained that:

> In our village usually one parent stays at home, usually the mother stays because many mothers are illiterate, but the fathers can do bitter manual (*kuli*) work. If the mother went out it wouldn't be economical for the family because she would only earn around 20-30 *yuan* a day, but a man can earn 70 *yuan*. Plus, mothers can earn a bit of money at home.

Certainly, wage discrimination against rural migrant women has long prevailed in China's urban labor markets, remaining significant even after controlling for educational and sectoral differences (Magnani and Zhu, 2012). Gender relations therefore impacted on both women's capabilities for migration and on generalized perceptions of women's capabilities for migration, with each affecting these women's spatial reflexivities.

Nevertheless, four *liushou* women stood out in asserting that they could migrate if they wanted. These women reasoned that they could pass urban employers' numeracy and literacy recruitment tests. They also thought that they would be able to arrange substitute childcare from parents-in-law with whom they had a good relationship. But these women still chose to stay for and with their children. For instance, one woman aged in her early forties from

Eastern County whose husband had worked on construction projects in China's cities and then in two different African countries used the word *diu*, meaning 'to put to one side', to express her prioritization of her children over her own migration. In 2015 when contemplating the growing emotional distance between herself and her teenage daughter, she said:

> I've never put her to one side. Not like many children in our village whose mothers have put them to one side. This emotional distance, her not talking to me as much, maybe it's just part of adolescence.

A couple of other high motility women likewise used *diu* in this way.

At the other end of the spectrum, though, were two women who felt stuck in a *liushou* situation over which they had little control, not only because of their own limited motility, but also because their husbands' gambling made them the sole supporter of their family (see Choi and Peng, 2016:74). However, these *liushou* women were still committed to holding the fort and to motherhood. For instance, in 2011 I met a forty-year-old woman from Western County whose family was mired in poverty because of her husband's gambling. She explained that her sixteen-year-old daughter ate noodles soaked in a cola bottle at school each day to save on lunch money. She said that the least she could do was to protect her daughter and younger son from doing housework and farming tasks so that they could concentrate on their studies. Meanwhile, in Eastern County in 2011 and 2013 a partially sighted woman in her early thirties who cared for her two daughters endured a similar situation. Yet remarkably, by 2015 her husband had turned over a new leaf, which enabled her to find renewed purpose in holding the fort.

A few migrant men's waywardness notwithstanding, though, most *liushou* women reported that their husbands were doing their best for their families. These women perceived that rurality was trapping not only them but also their husbands in ceaseless toil. Fifteen of the *liushou* women I met in Anhui were married to construction workers, with these men typically enduring long working hours, the withholding of their wages till the end of the year (Chuang, 2016) and accommodation in patrolled worksite compounds. Many of these women's understanding of their construction worker husbands' experiences 'outside' reinforced to them their mutuality purpose with their husband. This can be seen in the words of a 43-year-old-woman from Western County who looked after her 14-year-old son and 87-year-old mother-in-law. In 2011 she explained:

> It's good that my husband earns money outside, but it's bad that he can't help me and sometimes, we both feel lonely. My husband works on a construction site in Jiangsu … Nearly all the households in our village have someone working outside except for the family with the combine harvester.… I think his life outside is even more tiring than mine is at home. He's extremely tired. He really thanks me. He says: 'You at home do great in raising the child for me.'

In Anhui, *liushou* women's awareness of their husbands' 'outside' conditions was often such that, contrary to the 'left behind' rural women observed in some other countries (Menjívar and Agadjanian, 2007), they did not think that their husbands were freer or more empowered than they were. Instead, these women perceived that both they and their husbands were constrained by the work regimens that their gendered spatial locations demanded of each of them. This can be seen in an extract from my 2011 interview with a 45-year-old woman from Eastern County who cared for her 13-year-old son, 14-year-old daughter and 86-year-old mother-in-law. She said:

There is 5 *mu* (0.33 hectares) of land and I'm tired to death. But I'm used to him being out. He's been out since we married but back then he worked in Hefei and he'd come back for the 'double snatch' [a time in July when one rice crop is harvested, and another crop is planted in quick succession]. Angola is like Hefei city, but I don't know anything else about it.

Author: Are you ever curious to go to Angola to have a look?

Woman: Why would I go there? I need to look after an old person with bad eyes and two children.

Author: Do you mind if he stays away longer?

Woman: If he wanted to stay there longer it'd be fine because after junior high it is senior high and then there is university, which all needs money. I'm used to him being away, so I don't miss him. I've lots of work to do and when I'm working, I don't think about him.

This woman also said that her husband was confined to his work compound. Rather than wanting to migrate herself, this woman's spatial reflexivity centred on her caregiving and farming tasks and on supporting her husband to earn for her children's education.

4.2 Staying Couples

Unlike the *liushou* women discussed previously, adults in non-migrant households did not stay to support another person's migration and nor did they receive remittances. Carling and Schewel (2018) propose that the reflexive processes underpinning individuals' realisation of either staying or migration can be understood through a dual focus on their capabilities and aspirations for (im)mobility. When applied to households without migrants, this capability-aspiration lens highlights variation in adults' spatial reflexivity across households, incorporating households where the adults could adopt migration strategies but didn't want

to; households where the adults couldn't migrate and didn't want to; and households where the adults had limited motility but still wished that at least one household member would migrate. In the next two subsections I examine the spatial reflexivity firstly of stayers in couples who had suspended their migration, and then of stayers in couples who intended to stay. I highlight the gendered implications of both these sets of stayers' views about their villages in relation to their capabilities and aspirations for (im)mobility, while recognizing that stayers' efforts to reconcile capabilities and aspirations interacted with mobility imperatives and family attachments.

4.2.1 Village as Stepping-Stone

Two couples I met in Western County in 2011 stood out among the non-migrant couples in this study because they perceived their village to be a stepping-stone. Specifically, the adults in these two couples envisioned that their children would move from the village to an urban destination by means of education while the adults would set up a small business or do trade in a provincial city. The men in both these couples earned decent income from village-based entrepreneurial undertakings, which they ran with their wives' help. Table 2 below outlines the basic circumstances of these two couples.

Table 2

	Couple 1	Couple 2
Livelihood	Run a village-based fireworks factory employing 20 people	Run a village-based brick factory employing several people
Age	Mid-forties	34 and 36 years
Children	18-year-old daughter at the key school in county seat. She rents a room in a retired teacher's house and returns home weekly. 13-year-old son studies at the township primary school.	Son aged 13 and daughter aged 6, both study in the village primary school.

Staying permitted the members of both these couples to prioritize their material, caregiving and emotional investments in their children's education while also pursuing mobility aspirations. The man who ran the fireworks factory said:

> When we were young, we both had many siblings so we could only study to year five… But we use our bitter labor to earn money to help them study. … … I want my son to study in Western County like my daughter. If that happens, I might buy a house for him in the county seat. …

This couple had also recently purchased a house in the township where they intended to live after their son started at the township-based junior high school.

These couples especially emphasized compatibility between their joint staying and their caregiving and emotional support for their children. Indeed, these adults planned to stay in the rural area until their youngest child had finished junior high school: like many rural parents, including *liushou* women, they thought that parental presence was most consequential for children in the school years. The influence of family considerations on staying couples' spatial reflexivity can be seen in the following quote from the man who ran the fireworks factory. He explained:

> We live close to the village primary school, but [my son] goes to the good primary school in the township. The children who go to the village school, their parents are both out and their grandparents are too old to send them to or fetch them from the township if it's raining. [On weekdays] my son eats breakfast with his mother and lunch with his grandfather …. Their mother is at home with the children on Sundays. We both used to be out working, but my wife can't be at home by herself looking after the children. We came back home to take care of the children… I returned home

at age 32 after being out as a construction worker for ten years. Life is better at home because then I'm not alone…

The wife later added: 'If it wasn't for the children, we'd have left here long ago…' Certainly, staying permitted the adults in both these couples to maximise the perceived gendered complementarity of each spouse's contributions to their households' practical and emotional functioning. At the same time, though, these stayers also felt that their suspension of their longer-term migration was a 'sacrifice' that they were undertaking for their children. Indeed, much as these stayers saw family togetherness as having an intrinsic value, they simultaneously recognised that their sacrifice in delaying their migration would benefit their children's development and the family's longer-term mobility and viability.

4.2.2 Village as Sanctuary

Whereas the couples discussed above were suspending their migration, the members of twelve other non-migrant couples intended to stay in their villages indefinitely. When I asked them what they liked about living in their village, a few answered, 'there's no place like home'. The Chinese original of this saying translates literally as, 'a gold den, a silver den is not as good as the dog's den of my home', expressing the idea that regardless of one's material foundation, home offers feelings of comfort and belonging not found elsewhere. The couples who intended to stay in their villages differed from each other in how their 'home village' was a sanctuary for them. Four couples with secure off-farm income saw the 'home village' as a place where family attachments could be protected and nurtured. However, stayers in four other couples saw their 'home village' as more of a refuge. They thought that even as their home-based material conditions were flimsy, staying still represented a less bad option – especially for the men - than denigration 'outside', while as discussed previously,

married women's lone migration was largely untenable. Additionally, four other staying couples sat somewhere in between.

The four couples with decent local off-farm earnings had a secure material base from which to prioritize family togetherness. An individual in one of these couples was a woman in Eastern County aged in her forties, a mother to two teenage sons. Her non-migrant husband drove a truck between their township and Hefei city on night shifts, with her accompanying him to keep him awake at the wheel. In 2013 she explained:

> We stay at home in the countryside because otherwise our two sons might not be close to us. Like some of these left behind children, when they're older, they say to their parents: 'You were never by my side, you never raised me when I was younger.' They've no feeling for their parents. For us, closeness is more important than money. Others may earn more than we do, but that's their concern.

This woman came the nearest out of any of the stayers I met in Anhui to detaching herself from the prevailing mobility imperative, even saying of her two teenage sons that it was more important to her that they grew up to be 'good people rather than necessarily great talents'. Nevertheless, if her sons did not excel in milestone exams, she and her husband still planned to help them set up repair shops in the township.

In two other households – which were economically middling and with members who reported staying to prioritize family, the wives demonstrated higher motility than their husbands. These women had worked 'outside' for a few months to a year before their husbands had persuaded them to return home. One was a 40-year-old mother of a 12-year-old boy in Western County who showed me her raw hands when explaining that she spent six days a week rolling tubes in the village fireworks factory. In 2011 she said:

> I once worked in Beijing for three months when my son was in first grade. I cried all the time because I missed my son and family. I kept saying to myself 'I only have one child' and my husband used to phone me all the time to say that my son's grades had fallen dramatically, so I came back. I don't want to go out again. Some left behind children in our village wash their own clothes in the pond and cook their own food and I don't want to let my son do these things. Neither me nor my husband will go out. We'll stay together. This is more important than renovating our house. We want our son to get into university.

This woman's account resonates with Mata-Codesal's (2015) observation that in patrilineal societies, 'the construction of female immobilities as being socially desirable is a way to control and discipline women in contexts, that are, nonetheless defined by high mobility' (p.153). Her reflections also exemplify Gray's (2011) insight that the feminisation of staying carries a positive valence, which women use as they reconcile themselves to remaining in a rural setting. Like some women interviewed by Chuang (2016) this woman accepted that she needed to stay to make the rural home a sanctuary of care for her family.

However, some stayers in households with no or limited off-farm income saw the family members' co-presence and their uneventful lives in the village as a kind of consolation for their exclusion from the 'development' that mobility implies. For instance, a few stayers in economically below average to middling households said that they 'just wanted' their families to pass *ping ping dan dan* days, which means 'ordinary and mediocre' days. This saying plays on the phrase *ping ping an an*, which means 'safe and sound' or 'without mishap' – and often features in Chinese New Year songs and celebration posters - expressing the idea that true prosperity lies in a peaceful family. Hence, even as individuals' non-economic considerations around (im)mobility may 'bring out into the sunlight elements of an

alternative universe of values and understandings', in rural Anhui in the early to mid-2010s it was difficult to catch glimpses of respondents aspiring for an alternative life or indicating any 'radical edge' in their choice of a rural life (Halfacree, 2004a: 249).

Meanwhile, stayers in the poorest households perceived that they had no real options vis-à-vis (im)mobility, which resonates with Cairns' insight that reflexivity can be 'oriented towards coping with limited opportunities' (Cairns, 2017: 415). Indicative of the gendered evaluations inherent in (im)mobility, the women in these poor households saw their staying husbands as deficient. But if or how they accepted their husbands' immobility depended on family circumstances. For instance, in 2011, a 42-year-old woman in Eastern County with two older teenage girls and a younger teenage boy explained:

> We're illiterate so all we can do is a little farming at home, and sometimes my husband will catch some eels and sell them…All the other households in this village have someone working outside except for us. We've never been out. My husband is not fit for going out because he has no skill and he doesn't want to go out and be a 'bitter laborer'. If I wanted to go out, my husband wouldn't be able to look after the two younger children. … I'd like to go out to earn an income but there's no way for me to go … If the eldest daughter is hardworking, if we support her, when she starts work, she can help her siblings. …

This woman was encouraged in reconciling herself to her husband's immobility despite her family's economic hardship partly by an alternative source of hope for intergenerational advancement, namely, her anticipation of her eldest daughter's future support.

In two other poor households, though, gendered expectations bore down on low motility men. The pressures on these men can be seen in an exchange I witnessed in 2011 between a couple

aged in their thirties, parents to a thirteen-year-old-girl and ten-year-old boy in Eastern County, as follows:

> Husband: I know that the present situation isn't ideal, but I'm fine with it.
>
> Wife: We're not as good as other people, especially families that have someone working outside. I can't migrate myself because there are no paternal grandparents to look after the kids.
>
> Husband: I need to be at home because it's too much to leave my wife with the children and the heavy work of farming 8 *mu* of land. I can also earn some money locally collecting rubbish for recycling. But what's the point of going outside if you've no ability? You won't earn any money. There are also a few people like that from our village, who earn nothing outside.
>
> Wife: He's the only one in our village who collects rubbish. The good families all have someone working out.

The limitations on this man's spatial reflexivity recalls Carling and Schewel's (2018) aspiration-capability lens on (im)mobility. This man could not entertain an aspiration to migrate because of his lack of skill, indicative of his low capability for migration. At the same time, he struggled to negotiate a viable staying identity for himself because of the feminization and aging of the rural space and expectations that rural men demonstrate their individualized gender competence (West and Zimmerman, 1987) by earning for their children through migration if necessary (Choi and Peng, 2016). Hence, in summary, whereas the scope of rural women's spatial reflexivity was shaped by expectations of their caregiving duties and their attachments to home and family, the scope of rural men's spatial reflexivity depended on their earning capacity - a partial proxy for their motility.

5. Conclusion

This article applies Cook and Cuervo's (2020) concept of spatial reflexivity, namely, individuals' reflections on their motility as shaped by the dual axes of mobility imperatives and family attachments. It reveals that in the 2010s in China's migrant sending villages whether or how middle-aged stayers prioritized family attachments in the light of prevailing mobility imperatives depended on their households' non /involvement in migration and economic circumstances, and on gender relations. Meanwhile, households' non/involvement in migration partly reflected the members' capabilities to find work, with different members' capabilities simultaneously reflecting the impact of gender relations on inequalities in investments in their capabilities. Gender relations were further apparent in perceptions of interior villages as feminized sites of social reproduction and farming, which middle-aged men and the next generation should leave. Conversely, this conceptualization of interior villages naturalised the gender relations manifest in the two axes of stayers' spatial reflexivity.

The discussion helps explain why mobility imperatives so dominated the spatial reflexivity of middle-aged stayers in China's rural hinterlands in the 2010s. It demonstrates that mobility imperatives unfolded along two intertwined temporal scales. Consistent with Cook and Cuervo's (2020) insight that individuals' life-course stage shapes their spatial reflexivity, my respondents envisioned realising their aspirations for their families' escape from rurality over an intergenerational timescale. At the same time, these intergenerational aspirations generated an immediate pressure on middle-aged parents to work to invest in their children's motility. As noted previously, in villages with few local off farm jobs, middle-aged men needed to demonstrate their masculine competence by migrating for their children's prospects. Meanwhile, middle-aged women were expected to support the men's migration through

caregiving and farming (Choi and Peng, 2016; Chuang, 2016; Wu and Ye, 2016), with such expectations of them reflecting general assumptions about women's weaker capabilities as well as the naturalization of their domestic roles.

This research further reveals that mobility imperatives in China's rural hinterlands were intensified by narrow ideas about a worthwhile life and limited pathways for achieving this life. Indeed, even when stayers settled on 'a good enough life' at home, it signalled more their acquiescence to their low motility rather than their subordination of mobility imperatives to non-economic considerations. This differs from Somaiah *et al*'s (2020) analysis of young women's reflections on staying in Indonesia, whose staying for a 'good enough life' was informed partly by a desire to avoid the emotional injuries of migration that they had experienced from being left behind in their own childhoods or else had heard about from their social networks. Meanwhile, contrary to Halfacree's (2004a; 2004b) optimism about the potentially radical significance of people's choices of rural lives in the global North, the stayers I met in Anhui did not imagine alternatives to the dominant mobility-oriented socio-political and cultural order. Although some researchers note the emergence in the late 2010s of idealised representations of rurality as a panacea for Chinese urbanites' stresses (Qian, 2017; Li, 2020), I did not glimpse such visions of a rural good life emerging among the inhabitants of China's interior villages. Certainly, my respondents recognised that their staying protected their families from some of migration's harms, but their spatial reflexivities still unfolded in the shadow of mobility imperatives.

The strength of mobility imperatives in rural Anhui exemplifies Carling and Schewel's (2018) contention that in some contexts, non-involvement in migration is more in need of explanation than migration. This article contributes to such an explanation by bringing

stayers in households with and without migrants into the same analytical frame. It finds that middle-aged stayers' perceptions of their villages corresponded with their efforts to reconcile mobility imperatives and desires for family togetherness. These efforts at the same time both reflected and affected stayers' perceptions of their gendered competencies and gendered familial obligations. As discussed, for *liushou* women, the village was the home fort where they worked to complement their husbands' labors 'outside'. For a minority of couples, the village was a stepping-stone where spouses harnessed the gendered complementarity of their respective contributions in preparing household members for future migration. For yet other stayers, the village was a sanctuary of family togetherness, nurtured by a feminine presence, or else it was a refuge from denigration 'outside', especially for low motility men.

Finally, the analysis confirms for stayers in rural Anhui in the 2010s other scholars' insight that staying is an actively worked out process (Stockdale and Haartesen, 2018; Cook and Cuervo, 2020). In doing so, it emphasizes that stayers' spatial reflexivity was mediated and constrained by intersecting inequalities, manifest in and naturalized by a gendered moral geography. Notably, rural women's spatial reflexivity was underpinned by expectations that they prioritize family attachments and caregiving, but these same expectations also enabled them to negotiate viable staying identities for themselves, regardless of their motility. By contrast, only high motility men could pursue family advancement and prioritize family attachments through staying without forfeiting a dignified identity. In summary, multi-scalar inequalities intersected with gender relations to generate heterogeneity in individuals' agency, challenges and consolations as they stayed in their villages.

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