

# It's Not Just About the Money: Gender and Youth Migration from Rural China

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*Abstract: Statistics suggest that young men and women in China migrate at almost equal numbers, but we know less about gender differences in the decision to migrate. We examine the factors associated with migration decisions and the rationales given by young migrants. Our results are consistent with previous figures and show no overall gender differences in susceptibility to migration. However, we find that a sibship structure operates differently on the decisions of boys and girls. We also found that young men were more likely to report that they had moved for purposes of starting a business or personal development than young women, while young women were more likely to report that they had moved to support the tuition of a family member. We argue that, despite the gender parity of the migrant youth population, gender shapes migration decisions by affecting the family circumstances and migration motivations of men and women.*

## Introduction

Approximately one-fifth of the Chinese population are migrant workers, among which a sizable proportion consists of single, childless, and gender balanced youth from rural China (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011, 2013), and this number is likely to continue to increase. Although national statistics show that young men and women migrate in similar

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numbers, this does not eliminate the importance of gender in affecting youth work migration, and we know little about how gender shapes the rationales for migration among youth. The impact of gender in determining youths' chances of work migration are likely reflected through other characteristics, such as family resources and sibship structure (explained in detail in the next section), and young men and women may hope to achieve different ambitions through their decisions to migrate for work.

Understanding motivations for migration is important in part because the rationales migrants have for their migration decisions are likely to be linked to other migration behaviors, such as assimilation behaviors and remittances (Gui et al. 2012; Agarwal and Horowitz 2002; Hu 2012). Much research in other settings and in China has characterized work migration as the result of cost-benefit calculations, made especially by migrant men (see Lu and Song 2006; Taylor et al. 2003; Todaro 1969). Perceived benefits of migration may accrue to the individual himself or herself, or to other family members, in the case of altruistic migration decisions to support households in the sending communities. While there is little doubt that economic gains motivate migration, there are other contributing factors as well. Qualitative studies both within and outside China have demonstrated that women's noneconomic aspirations, which include the pursuit of cosmopolitanism, urban experience, modernity, and gaining new knowledge, also motivate migration (Chang 2009; Constable 2008; De Jong 2000; Jacka 2006; Lan 2006; Ma and Jacobs 2010; Mills 1997; Wong and He 2008; Zhang 1999). Yet, these two bodies of literature on migration motivations are not well-integrated with each other, and we know less about the relative importance of noneconomic pursuits on the decision to migrate.

In this paper, we examine migrants' pursuit of modernity, cosmopolitanism, adventure, and new knowledge (Chang 2009; Ma and Jacobs 2010; Mills 1997; Zhang 1999) in the term "personal development" (*ziwo fazhan*). This concept means individual development or cultivation. In the dictionary definition, *ziwo* means ego; *fazhan* denotes to grow or expand (Xia and Chen 2002). *Ziwo fazhan* connotes growth in individual ability or developing ideal personal characteristics that are unrelated to fiscal gains. We expand this idea by exploring the importance of personal development in the rationale of young men and women migrants.

Comparisons of noneconomic desires against other rationales are needed to assess the degree to which noneconomic considerations shape migration. Further, while much is known about migrant women's reasons for migration, research has yet to examine migrant men's approach toward noneconomic gains. This study uses data from the Gansu Survey of Children and Families (GSCF) to investigate gender differences in household factors associated with migration and in the rationale expressed for the migration decision by migrant youth. To answer these research questions, we first

examine gender differences in rural youth's family background, especially sibship structure, which reflects an underlying gender preference in Chinese families (Hannum et al. 2009; Yu and Su 2006). We then investigate individual economic, family economic, and individual noneconomic rationales that may be associated with migration, and pay particular attention to the importance young men and women attribute to each rationale.

### **Gender, Migrant Characteristics, and Migration Rationales**

While the typical migrant worker in China is a less educated, rural, and working-age man (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2013; Rozelle et al. 1999; Wan 1995), among young migrants, the gender ratio is balanced. The National Bureau of Statistics of China (2011) shows that, while the proportion of women who migrate decreases by age, young women account for almost half of the migrant work force among youth ages sixteen to twenty. In view of the balanced gender ratio and similar likelihood of young men and women to become migrant workers, gender may not seem to significantly influence young people's decision to migrate. However, despite the balanced gender ratio among migrants, the factors that motivate migration likely vary by gender.

Studies on gender in Chinese societies show that, compared to men, women's educational opportunities are more responsive to family resources (Hannum 2005; Wu et al. 2014), and girls often have more siblings to dilute family resources (Hannum et al. 2009). In cases where the family has limited resources to support their children's education, families not only tend to prioritize their sons' education over that of their daughters, thereby increasing their daughters' chances to become workers, but sisters may even become providers of the family (Brown and Park 2002; Greenhalgh 1988; Lee et al. 1994; Parish and Willis 1993; Yu and Su 2006). To investigate how men and women's migration decisions are differently affected by family resources, especially sibship structure, we first ask: (1) Does family background affect the likelihood of work migration among young men and women?

The decision to migrate for work also varies for men and women, as men are shown to emphasize business-related gains, while women are responsive to family concerns (see Hao 2013; He and Gober 2003). Here, because we will be working with retrospective rather than prospective reports by young migrant youth, we refer to rationales given for migration. We distinguish between economic and noneconomic migration rationales. Further, because existing literature differentiates between individual- and family-based economic reasons for migration, we subdivide the economic consideration into individual and altruistic rationales. Thus, in total, we employ three

categories of migration rationales: (1) an *individual economic rationale* refers to the desire of an individual who migrates to improve his or her own economic position; (2) an *altruistic family-support rationale* refers to an economic rationale in which the primary beneficiaries of gains from migration are family members of the migrant; and (3) a *personal development rationale* refers to the pursuit of self-cultivation through the act of migration.

### ***Individual Economic Rationale***

Economic frameworks employ market mechanisms to explain migration decisions and regard migration as a product of cost-benefit calculation (See Borjas 1994; Massey et al. 1993). The individual-based economic model draws on large-scale survey data to determine migration propensity and argues that migrants decide whether to migrate based on utility functions, suggesting that migrants will migrate when the potential gains of working away is greater than the prospects of working in the village (Borjas 1993; Cerrutti and Massey 2001; Hunt 2006; Kanaiaupuni 2000; Massey 1990; Massey and Espinosa 1997; Mayda 2010; Todaro 1969; Zaiceva and Zimmermann 2008). Studies on internal migration in China often adopt the economic framework (see Lu and Song 2006; Otis 2008; Taylor et al. 2003; Zhao 1999), partly because migration in China increased drastically as a response to economic reform policies (Akay et al. 2012; Liang and Ma 2004; Liang and White 1996; Solinger 1999). Since the 1980s, agricultural decollectivization and the implementation of a form of family farming promoted greater efficiency in agriculture (Fang et al. 2009). This shift created a large surplus rural labor force, many of whom had to migrate to more urban areas in search of work. After this period of change, persistent urban-rural income gaps continued to create strong incentives for rural-urban migration (Akay et al. 2012; Li 1996; Liang and White 1996; Solinger 1999).

Changes in the economy are often viewed, implicitly or explicitly, as dominant factors in migration decisions (Wan 1995; Liang and White 1996).<sup>1</sup> There is little debate that most Chinese internal migrants are motivated by the promise of higher earnings in the city (He and Gober 2003; Lee 1998), yet the degree of importance young migrants attach to individual economic gains and the extent to which both men and women value this rationale is not entirely clear. Using the 1990 Census to analyze gender patterns of migration in China, He and Gober (2003) show that migrant men emphasize the importance of business-related economic incentives more than women do. In contrast, other studies indicate that both men and women in Shenzhen migrated primarily for economic reasons (Liang and Chen 2004), and young women increasingly participated in economic-oriented migration (Liang and Ma 2004). To address

the possibility for gender differences in attitudes toward individual economic rationales, our second research question is: (2) Does the importance attached to personal economic gains vary among young men and women?

### *Altruistic Family-Support*

While individual migrants are typically the unit of analysis in the economic framework, scholars point out that households are also likely the center of decision-making about migration. These researchers suggest that households expect that migrants will care for the members left behind and will remit a portion of their earnings to the household after they leave (Borjas 1993; Lucas and Stark 1985; Mincer 1977; Tcha 1996). In behavioral studies toward the population left behind, a common indicator of migrant's altruistic economic behavior is the amount of remittances given to the family (see Agarwal and Horowitz 2002; De Brauw and Rozelle 2008; Zhu et al. 2012). However, remittances are an indirect measure of altruistic values. A more direct way to examine altruistic values is to explore the narratives and experiences offered by migrant workers, such as migrants' desire to provide for the educational expenses of family members.

Studies of international migration show that migrant women report desires to support children and siblings' educational expenses as an important reason to migrate (Paul 2011; Schmalzbauer 2004). Migrant women in China also talk about their hopes of providing better educational opportunities for their children, younger siblings, and even sibling's children (Ma and Jacobs 2010; Song et al. 2009). While women report on the importance of education, the focus on women's migration decisions (with the exception of Schmalzbauer 2004) leaves open the question of whether such a rationale is gender-based: whether young men consider educational support of their remaining household members equally as important as women.

In addition to providing educational support, having family members whose health conditions require large amounts of medical expenses may raise the likelihood of reporting an altruistic rationale for migration. Studies suggest that sons typically contribute to parents' medical expenses (Giles and Mu 2003; Zhang and Wu 2003) and rural men are more likely than rural women to provide economically for their parents (Lei 2013). At the same time, ill parents require care. Studies point out that elderly parents in poor health negatively affect the odds of the son's migration, although children with siblings feel less obligated to care for their parents if they have siblings to share the responsibility (Giles and Mu 2007). Since young men and women may be susceptible to this kind of migration rationale, our third research question asks: (3) Does the importance of altruistic economic gains vary among young men and women?

### ***Personal Development***

While survey-based studies emphasize economic pursuits for migration, qualitative research on migrant women also points to the importance of noneconomic rationales. Noneconomic rationales differ from economic rationales in that migrants do not make calculations of monetary gains when making migration decisions. The idea of personal development is prominent in research on female migration across Asian contexts. Similar to migrant women in Southeast Asia who report that migration may help them become more modern, independent, and beautiful (Lan 2006; Mills 1999), Chinese migrant women report migrating to fulfill their curiosity about the outside world, learn new knowledge and skills, pursue freedom, and gain experience in the city (Hu 2012; Ma and Jacobs 2010; Zhang 1999).

We argue that because economic rationales for migration have often been used to describe the migration activities of men, while qualitative work points to the importance of aspiring to become more modern as a motivation for women to migrate, research is needed on the degree to which these factors matter to both men and women. To obtain a more gender-balanced understanding of migration rationales, it is necessary to examine men's noneconomic migration rationales in comparison to those of women. To address this missing piece in existing literature, our fourth research question asks: (4) Does the importance of personal development vary among young men and women?

### **Data and Methods**

#### ***Gansu Survey of Children and Families***

To answer our research questions, we use data from the GSCF, a longitudinal survey of 2,000 rural children in twenty counties in Gansu province who were between nine and twelve years old in 2000. The GSCF contains questions of children's educational, health, and psychosocial development outcomes in rural, underdeveloped areas, and has detailed measures of household wealth and migration experiences. This dataset is particularly suited for the purpose of this paper because of its longitudinal design, which allows us to control for migrant's family background prior to migration and avoid potential reverse causation between household economy and migration. The children were re-interviewed between the ages of thirteen to sixteen in 2004. The 2004 survey (Wave 2) also contained separate surveys directed to the mothers and household heads and provided information on family background prior to migration. As of 2009 (Wave 4), the children surveyed were eighteen to twenty-one years old, more than half of whom had become migrants. The final sample used in this paper consists of

1,728 participants who participated in the 2009 survey and whose mothers and household heads were both successfully interviewed in 2004.

To address respondent's change in residence after migration, data collection in 2009 took place during Chinese New Year when migrants customarily returned home for the holidays. For the migrants who did not return home during the New Year, the research team asked proxy respondents (mostly family members) to complete the survey on behalf of the migrant children. In analysis not shown, the likelihood of having a proxy respondent is positively associated with father's education, but not with other characteristics. Proxy respondents only answered objective measures, such as gender, education, and job location, and did not provide answers for the questions on rationales for migration. In analyses that include responses from proxy respondents, we use a dummy variable to control for proxy status.

### *Measurements*

We define migrant workers as migrants who have lived and continue to live in other counties to work for more than three months. Variables for migrant status, sibship structure, and migration rationales are gathered from the 2009 survey. In this survey, respondents were asked to choose from "not important, somewhat important, and very important" for each of the questions on migration rationale. The question used for the individual economic rationale was "how important is starting a business for you to migrate?" This question echoes previous studies, which shows that the most important individual economic motivation for both men and women was "industry/business" (He and Gober 2003). As discussed earlier, men and women may differ in their values of altruistic economic support. Thus, we employed two questions to examine altruistic family support motivations: 1) "How important is supporting family members' tuition for you to migrate?"; and 2) "How important is supporting family members' medical expenses for you to migrate?" Personal development is measured by the question "how important is personal development (*fazhan he tisheng ziwo*) in the decision for you to migrate?" The four questions reflect the three dimensions of migration rationales described earlier. In a subsequent question that asked migrants to state the most important rationale, more than half of the migrant workers selected starting a business, supporting family members' tuition and medical expenses, or personal development.

We use the 2004 survey for measures of family socioeconomic status, including parental years of education, family wealth, and mother's perception of economic well-being. Family wealth is the sum of annual income in 2003 provided by the household heads. Our measure of family wealth contains detailed earnings from agriculture, livestock, forestry, and industry

participation by each household member.<sup>2</sup> After calculating the total wealth for each household, we divided families into quintiles to allow for the possibility of a nonlinear effect of family background. Mother's perception of economic well-being is reported by the mother in 2004; the answers are coded into three categories (1 = unsatisfied, 2 = neutral, and 3 = satisfied). Table 1 presents the descriptive tabulations for the sampled youth.

## **Methods**

The first analysis investigates the association of migration decisions with gender and family background. Migrant status is measured as a categorical variable: nonmigrants (reference group), migrant workers, and migrant students. We estimate models using multinomial logistic regression because it allows us to distinguish between categories in a variable. While there are three categories in the outcome variable (migrant status), our primary focus is on the comparison between migrant workers and nonmigrants. The second set of analyses examines rationales for work migration and gender differences in the reported importance of each rationale. We use chi-square probabilities to test gender differences in the importance assigned to each migration rationale. We then use ordered logistic regression to analyze the three migration rationales of migrant workers because participants, excluding proxy respondents, were asked to choose from "not important, somewhat important, or very important" for each question regarding migration rationales (0 = not important, 1 = somewhat important, 2 = very important).

## **Results**

### ***Gender, Family Background, and Migration***

Table 2 presents the determinants of migration status in multinomial logistic models. Model 1 shows that, prior to controlling for family background, gender is not significantly associated with the likelihood of work migration relative to staying at home, although women are less likely to leave home for school than to stay at home. Our results from rural Gansu thus resemble national migration trends reported by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2011) and shows that the gender ratio is balanced among migrant youth.

Examining the effect of family background, Model 2a shows the regression results for the total sample. We re-estimated the model separately for young men and women in Models 2b and 2c. Examining migrant workers, Model 2a shows that youth with fathers who were more educated are



Table 1

**Descriptive Statistics of Sampled Youth ( $n = 1728$ )**

| Variable  | Nonmigrants<br>( $n = 710$ ) |           | Migrant students<br>( $n = 369$ ) |           | Migrant workers<br>( $n = 649$ ) |           |
|---|------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------------|-----------|
|   | <i>M</i> or<br>Percent       | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> or<br>Percent            | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> or<br>Percent           | <i>SD</i> |
| Measures in 2009  |                              |           |                                   |           |                                  |           |
| Female  | 48.17                        | —         | 41.73                             | —         | 47.46                            | —         |
| Number of siblings  | 1.59                         | 1.35      | 1.47                              | 1.13      | 1.55                             | 1.18      |
| Number of younger brothers                                  | 0.40                         | 0.72      | 0.36                              | 0.61      | 0.45                             | 0.67      |
| Number of younger sisters                                   | 0.38                         | 0.75      | 0.34                              | 0.65      | 0.34                             | 0.68      |
| Number of elder brothers                                    | 0.31                         | 0.52      | 0.31                              | 0.55      | 0.35                             | 0.60      |
| Number of elder sisters                                     | 0.50                         | 0.82      | 0.46                              | 0.73      | 0.40                             | 0.70      |
| Proxy respondents   | 12.53                        | —         | 9.76                              | —         | 39.45                            | —         |
| Most important migration rationale <sup>^</sup>             |                              |           |                                   |           |                                  |           |
| Start one's business  |                              |           | 10.00                             | —         | 10.43                            | —         |
| Altruistic family support <sup>+</sup>                      |                              |           | 6.69                              | —         | 24.42                            | —         |
| Personal development  |                              |           | 19.69                             | —         | 22.13                            | —         |
| School/other/unspecified                                    |                              |           | 63.35                             | —         | 43.02                            |           |
| Measures in 2004  |                              |           |                                   |           |                                  |           |
| Father's years of education                                 | 7.17                         | 3.41      | 7.99                              | 3.30      | 6.61                             | 3.64      |
| Mother's years of education                                 | 4.39                         | 3.43      | 5.17                              | 3.46      | 3.84                             | 3.44      |
| Objective economic well-being: Family wealth in 5 quintiles |                              |           |                                   |           |                                  |           |
| First quintile (poorest quintile)                           | 20.00                        | —         | 13.01                             | —         | 20.34                            | —         |
| Second quintile   | 19.72                        | —         | 18.16                             | —         | 21.42                            | —         |
| Third quintile  | 20.99                        | —         | 18.70                             | —         | 20.65                            | —         |
| Fourth quintile   | 19.44                        | —         | 25.75                             | —         | 18.18                            | —         |
| Fifth quintile (wealthiest quintile)                        | 19.86                        | —         | 24.39                             | —         | 19.41                            | —         |
| Subjective economic well-being                              |                              |           |                                   |           |                                  |           |
| Not satisfied   | 18.03                        | —         | 16.53                             | —         | 16.02                            | —         |
| Neutral   | 38.59                        | —         | 40.65                             | —         | 43.91                            | —         |
| Satisfied   | 43.38                        | —         | 42.82                             | —         | 40.06                            | —         |

<sup>^</sup>Excludes proxy migrants:  $n = 330$  for migrant students,  $n = 393$  for migrant workers.

<sup>+</sup>Family support includes two questions on supporting family member's tuition and supporting family member's medical expenses.

Table 2

**Determinants of Migrant Status in Multinomial Logistic Regression Models**

| Independent variable                                  | Model 1           |                     | Model 2             |                     |                     |                   |                   |                    |
|---|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
|   | All               |                     | (2a) All            |                     | (2b) Male           |                   | (2c) Female       |                    |
|   | Migrant worker    | Migrant student     | Migrant worker      | Migrant student     | Migrant worker      | Migrant student   | Migrant worker    | Migrant student    |
| Female  | -0.055<br>(0.114) | -0.258**<br>(0.130) | -0.172<br>(0.121)   | -0.210<br>(0.138)   |                     |                   |                   |                    |
| Father's years of education                           |                   |                     | -0.045**<br>(0.018) | 0.054***<br>(0.021) | -0.064**<br>(0.025) | 0.051*<br>(0.028) | -0.030<br>(0.025) | 0.062*<br>(0.032)  |
| Mother's years of education                           |                   |                     | -0.026<br>(0.019)   | 0.032<br>(0.020)    | -0.022<br>(0.026)   | -0.000<br>(0.027) | -0.030<br>(0.027) | 0.070**<br>(0.031) |
| Subjective economic well-being<br>(base: unsatisfied) |                   |                     |                     |                     |                     |                   |                   |                    |
| Neutral   |                   |                     | 0.276<br>(0.169)    | 0.009<br>(0.191)    | 0.338<br>(0.248)    | -0.009<br>(0.266) | 0.253<br>(0.233)  | 0.054<br>(0.280)   |
| Satisfied   |                   |                     | 0.142<br>(0.169)    | -0.073<br>(0.190)   | 0.310<br>(0.245)    | -0.049<br>(0.262) | 0.025<br>(0.236)  | -0.063<br>(0.282)  |

(Continued)

Table 2

## Determinants of Migrant Status in Multinomial Logistic Regression Models (Continued)

| Independent variable            | Model 1        |                 |                   | Model 2             |                   |                     |                   |                  |                 |
|---------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|
|                                 | All            |                 |                   | (2a) All            |                   | (2b) Male           |                   | (2c) Female      |                 |
|                                 | Migrant worker | Migrant student |                   | Migrant worker      | Migrant student   | Migrant worker      | Migrant student   | Migrant worker   | Migrant student |
| Family wealth in five quintiles |                |                 |                   |                     |                   |                     |                   |                  |                 |
| 2nd quintile                    |                |                 | 0.022<br>(0.181)  | 0.297<br>(0.226)    | 0.231<br>(0.260)  | 0.497<br>(0.313)    | -0.162<br>(0.257) | 0.018<br>(0.335) |                 |
| 3rd quintile                    |                |                 | -0.036<br>(0.182) | 0.223<br>(0.226)    | -0.021<br>(0.262) | 0.149<br>(0.318)    | -0.044<br>(0.256) | 0.206<br>(0.326) |                 |
| 4th quintile                    |                |                 | -0.109<br>(0.188) | 0.594***<br>(0.220) | -0.090<br>(0.271) | 0.878***<br>(0.299) | -0.139<br>(0.263) | 0.153<br>(0.336) |                 |
| 5th quintile                    |                |                 | -0.001<br>(0.189) | 0.471**<br>(0.224)  | -0.002<br>(0.266) | 0.437<br>(0.308)    | 0.056<br>(0.275)  | 0.478<br>(0.331) |                 |
| Number of younger brothers      |                |                 | 0.166*<br>(0.093) | -0.063<br>(0.114)   | 0.182<br>(0.146)  | -0.249<br>(0.193)   | 0.186<br>(0.121)  | 0.054<br>(0.149) |                 |
| Number of younger sisters       |                |                 | -0.079<br>(0.085) | -0.006<br>(0.099)   | -0.068<br>(0.123) | -0.078<br>(0.137)   | -0.062<br>(0.119) | 0.041<br>(0.148) |                 |

(Continued)

Table 2  
Determinants of Migrant Status in Multinomial Logistic Regression Models (Continued)

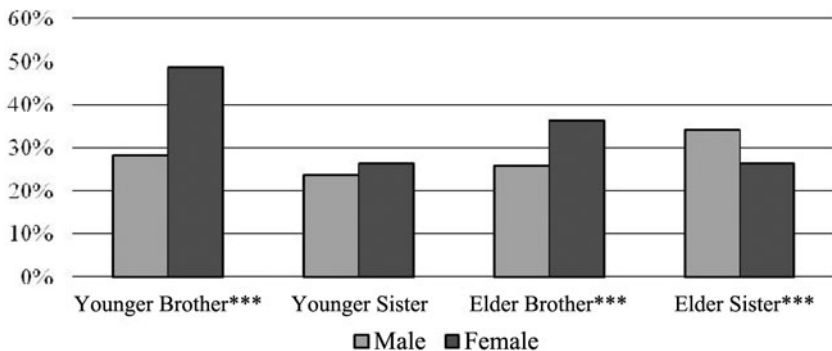
| Independent variable     | Model 1              |                      |  | Model 2             |                      |                     |                      |                     |                      |
|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
|                          | All                  |                      |  | (2a) All            |                      | (2b) Male           |                      | (2c) Female         |                      |
|                          | Migrant worker       | Migrant student      |  | Migrant worker      | Migrant student      | Migrant worker      | Migrant student      | Migrant worker      | Migrant student      |
| Number of elder brothers |                      |                      |  | 0.225**<br>(0.111)  | 0.013<br>(0.134)     | -0.002<br>(0.158)   | -0.068<br>(0.181)    | 0.425***<br>(0.159) | 0.109<br>(0.202)     |
| Number of elder sisters  |                      |                      |  | -0.147*<br>(0.080)  | -0.078<br>(0.091)    | -0.227**<br>(0.103) | -0.039<br>(0.110)    | -0.042<br>(0.132)   | -0.206<br>(0.173)    |
| Proxy Respondent         | 1.515***<br>(0.139)  | -0.276<br>(0.209)    |  | 1.518***<br>(0.141) | -0.278<br>(0.211)    | 1.682***<br>(0.206) | 0.034<br>(0.281)     | 1.382***<br>(0.197) | -0.590*<br>(0.333)   |
| Constant                 | -0.431***<br>(0.084) | -0.508***<br>(0.088) |  | -0.159<br>(0.229)   | -1.342***<br>(0.286) | -0.119<br>(0.321)   | -1.223***<br>(0.383) | -0.434<br>(0.311)   | -1.715***<br>(0.413) |
| Observations             | 1,728                | 1,728                |  | 1,728               | 1,728                | 924                 | 924                  | 804                 | 804                  |

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.  
\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

less likely to become migrant workers than to stay at home. We find that family wealth is not significantly related to young people's chances work migration, though wealth is positively linked to migration for education. Model 2a also shows some evidence of son preference related to sibship structure. Compared to the option of staying at home, youth with more brothers, whether younger or older, are more likely to migrate for work, while those with more elder sisters are less likely to become migrant workers. A closer look at the results in Models 2b and 2c shows that family background and sibship structure are differently associated with outcomes across gender. Young men with less educated fathers are more likely to participate in work migration; however, this relationship is not found between fathers and daughters. Men with elder sisters in the family are less likely to become migrant workers, and women are more likely to become migrant workers if they have elder brothers. This pattern supports the perception from existing studies that girls and boys have distinct chances of working away from home depending on their relative positions in the sibship structure, as well as the gender composition of their siblings.

It should be noted that sibship structure in China is not exogenous, but rather reflects the gender preferences of parents. Figure 1 depicts the sibship structure of migrant workers and shows that women are more likely than men to have either older or younger brothers. On the other hand, men are more likely than women to have elder sisters. This may be because parents in rural Gansu often continue to have children until they have a son (Han-nun et al. 2009). The greater likelihood of female migrant workers having brothers and the slighter chances of men to migrate for every additional elder sister suggests that gender norms in the family may be linked to migration likelihood indirectly. In sum, the findings in Table 2 show that,

Figure 1. **Proportion of Migrants Workers with Siblings.**



Note: Gender differences are shown using Chi-square tests. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

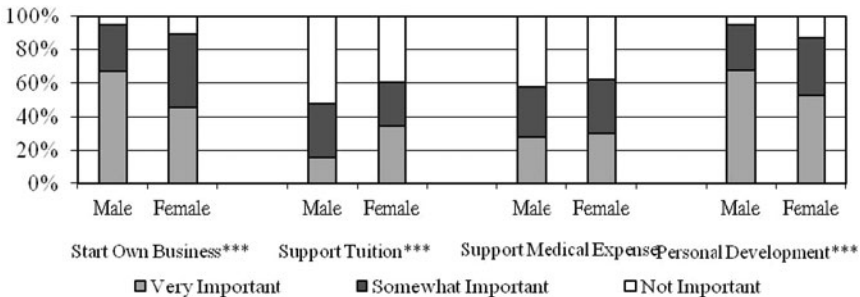
although youth migration is gender balanced, men and women's migration decisions may be associated differently with family background, especially sibship structure.

*Rationales for Migration: Individual Economic Rationale*

Next, we turn to the analysis of rationales for migration. For each migration rationale, Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution and results from chi-square tests of the distribution across categories by gender. Investigating the individual economic rationale and gender differences related to this rationale, our results show that, while both migrant men and women consider personal economic gains an important migration rationale, young men are more likely than young women to report personal economic gains as a rationale. Figure 2 shows 68 percent of men and 45 percent of women consider starting a business very important. Results of our chi-square tests also reveal significant gender differences in the importance assigned to the individual economic rationale.

We test this gender difference in Table 3, which presents the results of ordered logit analysis of migration rationales. Model 1 includes gender alone; Model 2 controls for family background except for sibship structure; and Model 3 includes all variables that measure family background. Consistent with Figure 2, men are more likely to cite an individual economic rationale than women (Model 1). The gender disparity found in Model 1 remains significant when controlling for family background and sibship structure in Models 2 and 3. Overall, the models about individual economic rationale in Table 3 tell a consistent story of young men giving greater weight to economic rationales than young women.

Figure 2. Percentage Distribution and Gender Differences in Migration Rationales (Excluding Proxy Respondents)



Note: Gender differences are shown using Chi-square tests. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

Table 3

### Migration Rationales of Migrant Workers in Ordered Logistic Regression Models

| Independent variable                               | Start own business   |                      |                      | Support tuition     |                     |                    | Support medical bills |                    |                     | Personal development |                      |                      |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|  | Model 1              | Model 2              | Model 3              | Model 1             | Model 2             | Model 3            | Model 1               | Model 2            | Model 3             | Model 1              | Model 2              | Model 3              |
| Gender (Female = 1)                                | -0.849***<br>(0.203) | -0.899***<br>(0.209) | -1.038***<br>(0.222) | 0.680***<br>(0.191) | 0.643***<br>(0.194) | 0.468**<br>(0.203) | 0.147<br>(0.186)      | 0.129<br>(0.190)   | 0.034<br>(0.200)    | -0.649***<br>(0.204) | -0.657***<br>(0.210) | -0.758***<br>(0.220) |
| Father's years of education                        |                      | -0.001<br>(0.030)    | -0.001<br>(0.031)    |                     | -0.012<br>(0.028)   | -0.015<br>(0.028)  |                       | -0.045<br>(0.028)  | -0.048*<br>(0.028)  | 0.065**<br>(0.031)   | 0.064**<br>(0.031)   |                      |
| Mother's years of education                        |                      | -0.076**<br>(0.032)  | -0.068**<br>(0.032)  |                     | -0.028<br>(0.029)   | -0.028<br>(0.030)  |                       | -0.001<br>(0.029)  | 0.000<br>(0.029)    | -0.063**<br>(0.032)  | -0.058*<br>(0.033)   |                      |
| Subjective economic well-being (base: unsatisfied) |                      |                      |                      |                     |                     |                    |                       |                    |                     |                      |                      |                      |
| Neutral  |                      | 0.001<br>(0.323)     | 0.017<br>(0.327)     |                     | 0.086<br>(0.299)    | 0.100<br>(0.305)   |                       | 0.707**<br>(0.288) | 0.758***<br>(0.291) | -0.289<br>(0.313)    | -0.272<br>(0.316)    |                      |
| Satisfied  |                      | -0.509<br>(0.322)    | -0.524<br>(0.325)    |                     | 0.084<br>(0.301)    | 0.045<br>(0.305)   |                       | 0.328<br>(0.290)   | 0.329<br>(0.292)    | -0.063<br>(0.319)    | -0.080<br>(0.322)    |                      |
| Family wealth in 5 quintiles                       |                      |                      |                      |                     |                     |                    |                       |                    |                     |                      |                      |                      |
| 2nd quintile                                       |                      | 0.422<br>(0.315)     | 0.403<br>(0.318)     |                     | -0.302<br>(0.296)   | -0.270<br>(0.305)  |                       | -0.061<br>(0.286)  | -0.080<br>(0.288)   | 0.355<br>(0.311)     | 0.310<br>(0.314)     |                      |

(Continued)

Table 3

**Migration Rationales of Migrant Workers in Ordered Logistic Regression Models (Continued)**

| Independent variable       | Start own business |                   |                   | Support tuition   |                     |                   | Support medical bills |         |         | Personal development |                    |         |
|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------|---------|----------------------|--------------------|---------|
|                            | Model 1            | Model 2           | Model 3           | Model 1           | Model 2             | Model 3           | Model 1               | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 1              | Model 2            | Model 3 |
| 3rd quintile               |                    | 0.380<br>(0.316)  | 0.421<br>(0.319)  | -0.242<br>(0.294) | -0.236<br>(0.303)   | -0.250<br>(0.286) | -0.258<br>(0.289)     |         |         | 0.625**<br>(0.318)   | 0.682**<br>(0.323) |         |
| 4th quintile               |                    | 0.075<br>(0.328)  | 0.076<br>(0.331)  | -0.297<br>(0.311) | -0.259<br>(0.317)   | -0.142<br>(0.309) | -0.165<br>(0.311)     |         |         | 0.653*<br>(0.343)    | 0.635*<br>(0.346)  |         |
| 5th quintile               |                    | 0.639*<br>(0.334) | 0.634*<br>(0.338) | -0.372<br>(0.307) | -0.436<br>(0.317)   | -0.257<br>(0.304) | -0.301<br>(0.307)     |         |         | 0.637*<br>(0.331)    | 0.637*<br>(0.334)  |         |
| Number of younger brothers |                    |                   | 0.314*<br>(0.184) |                   | 0.592***<br>(0.167) |                   | 0.250<br>(0.161)      |         |         |                      | 0.171<br>(0.175)   |         |
| Number of younger sisters  |                    |                   | 0.140<br>(0.169)  |                   | 0.297*<br>(0.157)   |                   | -0.121<br>(0.150)     |         |         |                      | 0.002<br>(0.165)   |         |
| Number of elder brothers   |                    |                   | 0.307<br>(0.212)  |                   | 0.136<br>(0.201)    |                   | 0.282<br>(0.190)      |         |         |                      | 0.447**<br>(0.217) |         |

(Continued)



Table 3

**Migration Rationales of Migrant Workers in Ordered Logistic Regression Models (Continued)**

| Independent variable    | Start own business   |                      |                      | Support tuition     |                     |                     | Support medical bills |                     |                     | Personal development |                      |                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                         | Model 1              | Model 2              | Model 3              | Model 1             | Model 2             | Model 3             | Model 1               | Model 2             | Model 3             | Model 1              | Model 2              | Model 3              |
| Number of elder sisters |                      |                      | -0.021<br>(0.155)    |                     |                     | -0.455**<br>(0.152) |                       |                     | 0.094<br>(0.135)    |                      |                      | 0.136<br>(0.155)     |
| Cutoff point 1          | -2.904***<br>(0.223) | -3.201***<br>(0.412) | -2.964***<br>(0.447) | -0.109<br>(0.395)   | -0.216<br>(0.350)   | 0.156<br>(0.134)    | -0.171<br>(0.372)     | -0.317*<br>(0.135)  | -0.319<br>(0.337)   | -2.029***<br>(0.426) | -2.670***<br>(0.212) | -2.272***<br>(0.388) |
| Cutoff point 2          | -0.691***<br>(0.146) | -0.932**<br>(0.372)  | -0.677<br>(0.414)    | 1.291***<br>(0.400) | 1.093***<br>(0.355) | 1.453***<br>(0.154) | 1.153***<br>(0.377)   | 0.966***<br>(0.144) | 0.993***<br>(0.341) | -0.039<br>(0.406)    | -0.741***<br>(0.146) | -0.299<br>(0.363)    |
| Observations            | 394 <sup>^</sup>     | 394                  | 394                  | 393                 | 393                 | 393                 | 393                   | 393                 | 393                 | 393                  | 393                  | 393                  |

*Note:* Standard errors are in parentheses.

<sup>^</sup>One respondent only answered the question for individual economic rationale and did not respond to other questions on migration rationales.  
 \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

### ***Rationales for Migration: Altruistic Family-Support***

We revisit Figure 2 and Table 3 to address the importance of altruistic economic rationales. Using tuition support as the indicator, Figure 2 indicates that 15 percent of migrant men and 34 percent of migrant women report tuition support as very important. Chi-square results show significant gender differences in distribution across responses for this rationale. Our findings in Table 3 is consistent with Figure 2 and suggests that young women emphasize the importance of supporting family members' tuition more than young men. The results do not change after controlling for background characteristics in Models 2 and 3.

As suggested in the literature, Model 3 shows that tuition support is significantly related to sibship structure. The number of younger brothers and sisters are both positively associated with the importance assigned to tuition support, though the coefficient for younger sisters is only marginally significant. Figure 1 shows that migrants are more likely to have younger brothers than younger sisters. Thus, we can extrapolate that families place more value on providing tuition support for their sons than daughters. Having more elder sisters, conversely, seems to reduce the burden of supporting family members' tuition as a migration rationale.

The other measurement we employ to investigate altruistic rationale is supporting family members' medical expenses. Figure 2 shows 30 percent of men and 31 percent of women consider supporting family member's medical expenses to be very important. While studies suggest that sons more often contribute to parents' medical expenses than daughters, migrant young men and women from Gansu assign similar degrees of importance to supporting family member's medical expenses. We do not find significant gender disparities in medical support as a motivator for migration in Table 3. The finding of no significant difference between men and women's medical support rationale does not change after controlling for family background and sibship structure. One explanation for this pattern is that less than 15 percent of migrant workers had parental illness. Given the small number of youth who experienced parental illness, some respondents may consider this question a hypothetical one and not a genuine migration rationale.

Although family medical expenses do not seem to strongly shape migration decisions of either men or women from rural Gansu, gender is significantly associated with altruistic migration rationale in terms of supporting family members' tuition. Overall, women consider tuition support more important than men do, likely due to the positive association of sibship structure and migration behavior among migrant women.

### ***Rationales for Migration: Personal Development***

Our last research question regards the role of personal development as a migration rationale. Results in Figure 2 indicate that many migrants consider personal development to be very important. A closer look shows

that the percent of young migrants who cite personal development as very important is similar to the percent who cite individual economic rationales. Further, the distribution of responses regarding personal development across gender is particularly interesting: 67 percent of men, compared to 52 percent of women, consider personal development as “very important,” and gender differences in attitudes toward personal development are significant in a chi-square test. Turning to Table 3, Model 1 shows that women are less likely to emphasize personal development than men. The results do not change after controlling for family background in Models 2 and 3. Thus, our findings clearly show that personal development is regarded highly by young women and even more so by young men. In other words, both men and women are drawn to migration for noneconomic reasons, as well as financial ones.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study has investigated the relationship between gender and youth migration. In doing so, we emphasized gender differences in migrant backgrounds, especially sibship structures, and compared the importance of three rationales (individual economic rationale, altruistic family support, and personal development) between young men and women. Previous research suggested that young men and women have reached gender balance and migrated at similar numbers. Our analyses showed a similar result: there are no overall gender differences in the propensity to migrate. At the same time, our study pointed to the importance of the interaction between gender and family background, especially sibship structure. Girls with older brothers appeared more likely to migrate than those without, and boys with older sisters are less likely to migrate than those without. Migrants with younger brothers were more likely than those without to report tuition support as a rationale for their migration decision. Results were weaker for younger sisters. The presence of older sisters seemed to reduce the pressure on young migrants to provide tuition support to other family members. These findings suggested that gender continued to shape migration, even if not in a direct manner.

We also found that both young women and young men value economic and noneconomic migration rationales. Examining gender differences in migration rationales, men assigned higher importance to individual economic and noneconomic migration rationales than women; women considered altruistic family support more important than men. While it is well established in existing literature that the desire for personal development motivates female migration, many studies on this topic focused on women and did not discuss the importance of personal development perceived by men (Chang 2009; Jacka 2006; Lan 2006; Ma and Jacobs 2010; Mills 1999; Zhang 1999). Our results show that personal development is important not

only for migrant women, but even more so for migrant men. This finding implies that migrants' noneconomic pursuits should be taken into account to further our understanding of rural to urban migration in China. The finding that young men assign higher importance to personal development than young women highlights the need for scholars to further investigate migrant men's noneconomic rationales. Studies that touch upon noneconomic migration rationales for women have highlighted women's desires for cosmopolitanism, acquiring new knowledge, and city life experiences. Some of these goals may carry over to migrant men; others may not. We know little about the specific nature of personal development goals for rural young men who work in the cities. Further research is needed to identify young male migrants' noneconomic personal goals for migration.

We are aware that this paper has limitations. It is possible that migration rationales differ from the original intention prior to migration, and migration rationales may change as the duration of migration increases. However, the migrant youth from rural Gansu who appear in our sample have not been away from home for a long time. Considering the specificity of the sample, our study captures the migration rationale at a specific point of time when young migrants have recently left home and when their rationales may be relatively similar to their migration motivations. The external validity of findings from migrant youth from rural Gansu may be limited, since youth from Gansu may not hold identical characteristics or migration rationales with youth from other provinces. Coming from one of the poorest areas in China, young Gansu migrants might be expected to hold especially strong economic incentives. Yet, we find young men and women from Gansu stress personal development to a similar degree as economic motivation. If youth from less developed areas place such strong emphasis on personal development, it is possible that youth from relatively wealthier areas value personal development to a similar, if not higher, degree.

Despite the limitations, the findings in this paper have implications in addressing general concerns of migration in China. Migration rationales may affect sending communities through migrants' differential reciprocity (Agarwal and Horowitz 2002; Hu 2012). Our findings point to the possibility that migrant young men who emphasize the importance of personal goals may be less responsive to the demands of the sending communities. In contrast, young migrant women who hold strong values of altruism may be more responsive to the demands of families and assume the role of providing for the siblings and elderly parents left behind. Researchers have suggested increasing workers' wages as a solution to filling positions in the cities by surplus labor in rural areas (Chen and Hamori 2009; Knight et al. 2011). In view of the importance of noneconomic rationales, receiving communities could consider providing migrants with training related to personal development, in addition to increasing wages, to attract migrant workers.

Migration from rural areas to cities is increasingly commonplace in China. Among those who have decided to migrate, it seems obvious that they based their decision on the economic calculations of earnings. Yet, the strong desire for personal development is a substantial motivator and one that appears to carry implications. Incorporating noneconomic incentives into existing models could enable scholars to approach migration from an alternative standpoint that differs from pure economic considerations. The findings in this paper call for the examination of noneconomic motivations, especially among migrant men.

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### Notes

1. Some scholars point to noneconomic motivations in the history of Chinese internal migration (Gui and Liu 1992; Liang 2001).
2. Questions over household income includes detailed reports on the number, type, and value of all cattle, amount, type, and value of agricultural production, and wages or other sources of income by each family member. The questions were directed to the household heads who were likely responsible for household finances.

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