Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

"Changing Fate"

Education, Poverty and Family Support in Contemporary Chinese Society

Helena Obendiek

LIT

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This book gives an ethnographic account of educational aspirations among the economically deprived of rural Gansu Province. It combines descriptions of everyday life in the family, villages, and local schools on the arid Loess Plateau in north-west China with an exploration of the realities of university life and life histories of graduates from the region. Together, these materials show how local farmers’ educational hopes and their children’s educational engagement are shaped. Cross-generational belief in the efficacy of education as a means for social mobility is rooted in long-term cultural beliefs about education, legacies of high socialism, reform-socialist policies in the field of higher education, the contemporary labour market, availability of social welfare, and norms of family planning, as well as conditions specific to the region.

The study finds educational aspirations among rural dwellers as being strongly motivated by an urgent need for social support. The policies of reform-socialism have turned university education into an extraordinarily expensive endeavour for the local population, while high academic unemployment rates have put into question the return of such educational investments. Yet, with few other options to secure future social support, rural families have increased their educational ambitions, even at the risk of bringing whole families into heavy debt. Students and recent graduates understand their education and their resulting rural-to-urban mobility as part of a mission to change not only their personal life chances but also their family’s ‘fate’.

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Cover Photo:
Senior high school in Huining County (Photo: Helena Obendiek, 2007).

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Contents

List of Illustrations

Figure

Map

Plates

(all photographs by author, 2006–2007)

Table

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Note on Transliteration

In order to protect my interlocutors' privacy I use pseudonyms throughout the text.

Transcriptions of voice-recorded communications and interviews have been made by my field assistants in China. All translations from Chinese have been made by me.

Chinese terms are given in Pinyin, the Chinese phonetic writing. Chinese characters are given at the first occurrence.

Map. The research area.

Prologue: Two Champions

During several visits to three of the five senior secondary schools in Huining County, a rural region on the arid loess plateau in China's north-western province of Gansu, I learned that it was common to have a showcase at a central location in the schoolyard that displayed a list of the school's best examinees during the latest national college entrance examination. The lists publicly announced not only the pupils' names, but also the scores they had achieved in the examination as well as the university at which they had enrolled. Each year the handful of candidates from Huining County who managed to enter one of the top two national universities, Tsinghua University (with a focus on the sciences) and Beijing University (with a focus on the humanities), became well known all over the county. Their names, scores, enrolment procedure, and family background were often brought up when education became the topic of everyday conversations, especially in their home townships. People retold their stories and followed up successful career paths with considerable interest. Moreover, the names, exam scores, and university degrees of the most successful examinees of the last 30 years were listed in local chronicles, such as the county gazetteer published by the county government (Huiningxian 2007).

In the national college entrance examination of early summer 2007, Ma Zeqiang, a pupil from rural Huining, achieved the highest scores among all examinees in the science specialisation for the whole of Gansu Province, and the whole county seemed to burst with pride. Everywhere people were discussing the case. I heard the story told by the bus driver and his passengers during my ride from the Huining county seat to the village; and by old women who stopped for a chat as they passed the threshing ground in the village where my host family was busy with the lentil harvest. Again and again the topic was brought up in everyday conversation, and new bits of information and gossip about Ma Zeqiang's family background and the details of his university enrolment procedure were eagerly shared. Students from rural Huining County, especially those who had graduated from the

same senior high school as the successful candidate, shared their excitement and pride over their schoolmate's success. I received phone calls and short text messages, such as 'Long live Huining Senior Secondary School No. 2!!' from many students I knew.

One student reminded me that I probably had seen the famous examinee before. She presumed that Mr. Wang, whom I had gotten to know when strolling around the schoolyard of Huining Senior Secondary School No. 2, must have been Ma Zeqiang's class teacher. Alongside his pupil's outstanding success, Mr. Wang had in the meantime gained considerable reputation as an excellent teacher. When I had met him by chance on an afternoon in early May 2007, he had asked me to give his pupils the opportunity to talk to a foreigner. I had agreed and he had brought me to the classroom, where about 80 pupils were sitting in narrow rows between their piles of books, silently indulging in their afternoon self-study. After Mr. Wang left the class so I could talk with the pupils alone, I introduced myself and invited the students to ask any questions they had. A number of them were eager to ask about German history and the German educational system; tips on how to learn English properly; and my opinion about the upcoming 2008 Olympic Games. Most of the students had never talked to a foreigner. To have me there was surely an exceptional event, and most pupils were obviously excited about the occasion. It was thus all the more striking to see three students in the first row who seemingly took no notice of the German woman standing in front of them, who tried to be funny with her strange foreign accented Chinese. Instead, they continued to concentrate on their books, doing their exercises without ever raising their heads. Enjoying the privilege of a place in the front row, these students were surely the best achievers in the class. Obviously, they had more important things to do than waste a couple of their precious minutes reserved for preparation for the all-decisive college entrance examinations less than one month ahead. It thus was no surprise for me to later learn that Ma Zeqiang had been among these extraordinarily diligent three.

Four years earlier, Xu Tiaodi had become famous for passing the national college entrance examination at the age of only 16, and enrolling at Tsinghua University as the first female student from Huining County. I met Xu Tiaodi, a short and slim young woman, in Beijing in early summer 2007. When I thanked her for agreeing to spend the afternoon with me, she explained with a friendly smile that talking to me was a matter of local patriotism, since it meant supporting a project dealing with her dear home county. During our conversation we came to talk about her motivation to study. She told me her story:

Even before she was born, her parents, both locally-employed elementary school teachers (*minban xiaoxue laoshi* 民办小学老师), had decided that their child should become a student at Tsinghua University. In pursuit of this goal, they had supported her studies in every possible way. They quit their jobs, opened a small book shop in Huining county seat, and consulted books on pedagogy and learning techniques. They also often discussed these issues with the brother of Xu Tiaodi's mother, who was a high school teacher. Since early childhood Xu Tiaodi was thus tutored at home by her parents and maternal uncle. With the support of some personal connection among the elementary school's staff, she then was able to skip the first two grades and enter school directly, joining the third grade at the age of six.

In the competitive and exam-oriented atmosphere at school, Xu Tiaodi, as a high achiever, felt much liked by teachers and classmates. Teachers praised her as a role model of a diligent and successful student, and classmates seemed to like being with her for the same reason. Given the engagement and high aspirations of her parents as well as of her teachers, the fear of disappointing their hopes became an important motivation for her to study hard. During early childhood, her educational diligence thus was very much connected to the wish not to arouse her parents' anger or sadness, but to make them happy. Studying became more self-directed during junior high school, Xu Tiaodi claimed, when self-discipline turned out to be less of a problem for her.

Shortly before the senior secondary school entrance examination, she recalled, her teacher had taken her to the board in the schoolyard that publicly announced the previous years' best examinees. Pointing at the board he had expressed his and the school's expectation that she would appear as the champion not only of their school but of the whole county in the upcoming exam. However, in the examination she failed that goal. To have disappointed the hopes invested in her by her teacher and the school administration made her feel so ashamed that she broke off all contact. After all these years, she told me, it still left her with a bad feeling that she had never visited that teacher or the old school again. After all, especially high-achieving students were expected to show respect to their former teachers for their whole lives.

Large parts of her educational motivation, she explained, had derived from taking on the role of fulfilling her parents' dream, who themselves never had the chances she enjoyed. Moreover, her parents had raised her to believe that she was endowed with special capabilities that made her stand out from the masses. Such a destiny, her parents constantly reminded her, was one she should always strive to live up to.

When the all-decisive exam scores in the national college entrance exam had turned out to be considerably lower than expected, the family was alarmed. Her father had rushed to the provincial capital to check the problem and see whether there was anything that could be done about it. It was the short essay in the Chinese language exam that had scored so astonishingly low. For Xu Tiaodi, this news did not come as a complete surprise. During the examination, she had been desperate to achieve some extra points. That, she felt, would only be possible in the sole free text part of the exam. She thus decided to show some creativity when writing the essay, and to go beyond the usual, repeatedly exercised framework of argumentation. However, such boldness was not rewarded by the anonymous test reviewer. Her exam results thus turned out to be disappointing, but repeating the exam a year later appeared unbearable for her. After all, her scores were still high enough to get enrolled at Tsinghua University, albeit in a subject that little interested her.

Xu Tiaodi's story is exceptional. Yet, in at least three respects it is representative for the experiences of other students from rural Huining County families. In such families, parents and other family members hope to motivate the children by delegating their own unfulfilled hopes to them; they believe that every child can be a 'winner' in the race for educational credentials; and self-discipline, competition, and serving as an educational role model are all aspects of the high-achieving child's experience.

Chapter 1
Introduction

'Education changes one's fate' (*jiaoyu gaibian mingyun* 教育改变命运) was the statement I heard again and again during my inquiries about the remarkable striving for educational credentials among villagers who live on the arid loess plateau in China's north-western province of Gansu. In this book I explore the meaning that rural dwellers in one of China's poorest regions invest in higher educational attainment. What do their educational aspirations tell us about the life goals of these people? How are their goals shaped by the condition of living at the periphery of China's rush for development and prosperity? And, not least, to what extent does educational achievement change people's lives and fates?

'Educational desire' (Kipnis 2011) has been identified as a striking phenomenon in China and other East and South East Asian countries that share a history of Confucian cultural influences (e.g. Ho 1994; Rao, Moely and Sachs 2000; Schlecker 2000; Li 2001; Seth 2002; Thøgersen 2002; Fong 2004; Ho and Rinbow 2008). Confucian valuation of education has been demonstrated also to be at the core of high educational aspirations among immigrants from these regions to the West (e.g. Zhang and Carrasquillo 1995; Hui 2005; Clark and Gieve 2006; Yang 2007). When I set out to explore the phenomenon of high educational aspirations in rural north-west China, my experience concurred with that reported by Andrew Kipnis (2011: 1) from his research in the eastern province of Shandong: most interlocutors met the question about why they value education with a certain kind of incomprehension; they simply found the issue to be all too self-evident. By pursuing the theme of educational aspirations, thus putting into question a core cultural value, the foreign researcher risks being seen as totally ignorant about China and what it means to be Chinese.

However, purely cultural explanations of the pivotal influence of China's longstanding tradition of Confucianism do not convince the social anthropologist, all the more so since China has also been the location of the most radical attack against this very tradition during its period of high

socialism. Nor do purely economistic arguments based on calculations of the material return from educational investments suffice. In recent years, job perspectives for university graduates in China have become too insecure and salary differentials between qualified and unqualified labour too small to justify the economics of high spending on educational credentials. When trying to understand educational aspirations in poor rural regions of China, more must be taken into consideration than either profit maximising economic calculations or the Confucian tradition, although both certainly feature in the complex motivations for educational striving.

I found the phenomenon of educational 'fever' to be at least as strong in China's economically deprived north-west as what has been documented for urban regions (Fong 2004) and for more affluent rural regions on China's east coast (Kipnis 2001b, 2011; Hansen 2015). This raised a question of why there is so little evidence of anti-intellectualism or of an educational 'counter culture' among the economically deprived in contemporary rural China.[1] For the case of England, Paul Willis (2000 [1977]) famously documented the educational 'counter culture' among working class youth. In the German context, the existence of an educational counter culture is evoked in public discourse by the label of 'academically non-inclined' social strata (bildungsferne Schichten), which implies that parents with a low level of education (and usually also low income) place little emphasis on the education of their children. Chinese media, however, report about how poor parents who have a low level of education themselves struggle in order to be able to afford their children's education. In extreme cases, the inability of Chinese parents to do so has even driven them to suicide, a phenomenon frequent enough to have warranted the label of 'tuition suicide' (*xuefei zisha* 学费自杀).[2]

This book is based on fieldwork conducted mainly in Huining County, a rural county located at the eastern end of the Hexi Corridor in China's arid north-western province of Gansu. It sets out to understand why rural families living at the bottom of China's vastly disparate socio-economic hierarchy strive for educational attainment and spend their scarce resources on higher education. These families continue to do so even though increasing difficulties in the employment market put into question the monetary return

[1] Kipnis (2001a) described educational 'counter culture' as a widespread phenomenon, albeit not in China, of academically unsuccessful youth who adhere to ideals of an oppositional youth subculture that glamorises academic failure.

[2] The frequency of such reports in the Chinese media particularly in the early years of the 2000s may also be understood as a moral appeal towards the government after it allowed dramatic increases of tuition beginning in the late 1990s. For a discussion on suicide as a means to engage in a moral power struggle, see Wu (2005).

that such expenses can bring. Rural Huining parents spend six times the average annual per capita cash income on one year of university education for their offspring.[3] In such a context, it seems pertinent to ask not only why these parents strive to realise their children's tertiary education. It also raises the question of how the various support transactions that are mobilised on behalf of educational attainment shape local social relationships. Rural residents enjoy almost no social welfare schemes to protect them against their life risks, so high educational spending inevitably impacts local support arrangements. At the same time, educational attainment may be targeted towards improving local conditions of social support. After all, educational credentials are expected to facilitate the graduate's upward social mobility, raising his or her status from that of a local 'peasant' to that of an urban professional who, hopefully, gains access to new social support resources. Under poor local living conditions, educational attainment thus is closely intertwined with qualitative changes in local social support networks and the kinds of relatedness produced therein.

In this book, I also follow students' educational pathways – that is, their social and spatial mobility away from their region of origin. I ask what motivates students to study in the first place. I then try to understand how students who have grown up in a particularly impoverished region cope with finding themselves at a clearly disadvantaged starting position with university classmates from more prosperous regions of the country. Moreover, I scrutinise the degree to which students remain entangled in the support networks of their place of origin during the various stages of their educational pathway. Do they experience their struggle for a 'change of fate' as an individual or as a continuously socially embedded endeavour? And, finally, which conditions render their struggle for a 'change of fate' a success?

Education and Social Support

Educational aspirations certainly are not cultural givens, but are influenced by various discourses and practices relating to changing policies and conditions in different domains, such as schooling, labour, social welfare, and family and population planning. I explore local educational aspirations

[3] According to statistical data provided on the official website of the Huining County government, per capita cash income among the county's rural residents was 1,310.19 yuan (1 yuan approximates to 0.1 euro) in the period between January and October 2007. http://www.huining.gov.cn/zfxx/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=1737 (last accessed on 15 February 2010). Tuition fees may vary according to the kind of university and study program. In 2006 and 2007, annual costs for tertiary education usually amounted to roughly 10,000 yuan (including tuition, accommodation, and basic living expenses).

as situated in these contexts, thus looking at educational aspirations as a 'total' social phenomenon in the Maussian sense – that is as a phenomenon in which 'all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral, and economic' (Mauss 1990 [1924]: 1). This will allow me to show how aspirations for higher education came to feature prominently in the lives of rural dwellers. Moreover, it will become clear what a 'change of fate' means for the local population and why such a change is considered to deserve considerable investment by the students as much as by their supporters.

Since the early 2000s, there has been increasing anthropological interest in the enormous drive for educational credentials in China (e.g. Kipnis 2001b, 2011; Fong 2004; Hansen 2015). Before delineating how my research fits into this discussion, I will first give a very brief summary of some macro-structural and micro-economic conceptual frameworks of the function and effects of formal education. Although these frameworks look at schooling from quite a different angle than the anthropological approach followed in this book, they still provide an important background for understanding the role that education plays in the daily lives of the people I studied. For readers less familiar with the Chinese context, I then will shortly introduce some aspects of China's educational history which impact education-related aspirations, hopes, and imaginations. Finally, I will explain the extent to which the ethnographic case described in this book contributes a new perspective to the discussion about China's educational drive. In this context, I will particularly highlight the entanglement of formal education with issues of social support and relatedness.

The Education-Society Nexus

Mass education is a social as much as a cultural project of industrialised and industrialising societies. As the 'official site of cultural transmission' (Liu 2002), secular educational institutions are central to the functioning of modern industrialised economies. In his model of the historical development of industrial society, Ernest Gellner (1983) posited that – unlike earlier agrarian empires which tolerated significant ethnic and religious plurality – industrial society is bound to forge congruence between polity, culture, and economy within the confines of a modern nation-state. Only nationally standardised educational institutions, he argued, can disseminate the common standards of a single homogenous 'high culture' necessary for the labour force to be highly mobile and ready to adjust to the flexible complex labour markets that are indispensable for realising industrial society's promise of incessant economic progress. By facilitating new divisions of labour, institutions of mass education and their inherent value of

egalitarianism thus serve as a precondition for a developed industrial society.[4]

As a fundamental constituent of state formation, formal education entails 'individualising' and 'totalising' effects. Through schooling – as French sociology has noted since Emile Durkheim's foundational writings – the state removes children from their families and local communities and engages in their social and cultural shaping by inculcating certain forms of knowledge and discipline to making them fit a particular vision of society (Levinson and Holland 1996:16). While state-sponsored mass education often entails the promise of equal opportunity and social attainment, the factual nature of the education-society nexus, in particular the coupling between schooling and social advancement, has been a matter of scholarly debate (e.g. Levinson and Holland 1996; Brown 2003). After all, state formal education implicates core social values including equality, merit, and fairness, but also hierarchy and privilege – thus providing a playground for ideological struggle (Pepper 1990: 1-6).

Within the meta-framework of functionalism, formal education has been interpreted as central to industrial society's efficiency and cohesion because it inculcates the skills, subjectivities, and discipline that undergird the modern nation-state (e.g. Durkheim 1956, 2009 [1893]; Gellner 1983). It selects people in accordance to their intellectual ability for suitable places in an occupational hierarchy that mirrors the importance of the different functions for society (Davis and Moore 1945: 243). Such a meritocratic view of education maintains that under conditions of fair and efficient competition, formal education provides equal opportunities to all and will level out social inequality. At the same time, it legitimates inequality as being rooted in achievement, not in social origin.

In economics, human capital theory argues that investment in education translates into increased worker productivity, which, in turn, is conducive to economic development (Schultz 1963; Miller 1967; Hallak 1990; Meyer, Ramirez and Sosyal 1992; Becker 1993 [1964]).[5] On the level of the individual or the family, the micro-economic model of homo oeconomicus posits that individual investment in education is spurred by rational calculation of the costs and benefits of schooling (e.g. Becker 1982: 3, 7; Robbins 1994 [1935]: 85). However, economic anthropologists long

[4] Chris Hann (2014) applied Gellner's model of a homogenised nationalised modernity to the discussion of Chinese minority policies and suggested that the proclaimed goal of a harmonious society may turn out to be incompatible to the covert goal of development of a 'homogeneous' society.

[5] For a brief history of international academic discussion about educational development, see the introductory chapter in Pepper (1990).

have argued against the neo-classical assumption of the universal 'utility' maximiser. They, moreover, have pointed out that by declaring any kind of benefit actors may gain from their behaviour as the 'utility' they intended to maximise, actors' preferences remain unexplained and the model becomes circular and tautological (e.g. Davis 1992; Wilk 1993: 197, 2007; Hann and Hart 2011: 7). Instead, economic anthropologists have argued that the diverse motives underlying human behaviour should be identified in empirical practice.

Contrary to meritocratic and economistic views of the function and effects of formal education, critical social theorists have attacked liberal models of capitalist society as masking the central role played by formal education in class reproduction. Subscribing to the ideal of distributive and curricular justice, critical educational theory identifies credentials as a means of deception and exclusion from access to privileged position (e.g. Althusser 1971: 85-126; Bowles and Ginits 1976).

One of the best known works on the relationship between social structure, class, and education is that by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu differentiated and complicated the economistic determinism inherent in Neo-Marxist reproduction theory. In his view, the reproduction of social hierarchy is above all an effect of unequal family backgrounds. Families possess diverse types of capital that are then reproduced in the next generation through the games played in various social fields. Taking the example of France, he maintained that when the intergenerational transfer of economic capital came under social scrutiny, elite families turned to education ('cultural capital') as a less visible resource; such capital was disguised to appear to be the meritocratic reflection of individual achievement. Thus Bourdieu argued that in France, schooling had become a core site for the production, reproduction, and certification of social hierarchies (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979: 26-39; Bourdieu 1984, 1986, 1998: 132; Bourdieu and Passeron 2000).

It has to be noted that critical educational theory has been developed mainly in and focused on advanced capitalist societies of the West. In rapidly developing countries, for example, the social effect of mass schooling on upward mobility and the interaction between education and families, schools, and communities may play out quite differently (e.g. Levinson and Holland 1996; Buchmann and Hannum 2001). Yet research on social stratification often confirms that educational expansion tends to preserve families' class position, rather than loosening class boundaries (Hannum und Fuller 2006: 2).

When adopting Western models of formal education, sociologist Ronald Dore (1976, 1997) warned that late developing countries are likely to

face the problem of the 'diploma disease' caused by the income gap between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' sectors of the economy. When educational credentials serve as the 'passport' for entry into modern sector employment (with its numerous benefits), increased social pressure forces governments to expand educational opportunities even though the economy cannot offer sufficient opportunities to absorb the growing number of graduates. Dore stated that increasing competition on the labour market leads first to a 'qualification escalation' (i.e. an increase in the academic requirements for entering modern sector employment); second to a concentration of the educational system on exam-preparation; and third to frustration among the educated unemployed whose ambitions remain unfulfilled.

The unusual capacity of socialist bureaucracy to actively shape opportunity structure in accordance to its ideology – and to allocate career rewards to the politically loyal – has been interpreted as an important foundation of the Communist Party's power in China and in other communist regimes (Walder 1995: 325; Zhou 1998). Empirical research in 'real existing' socialist societies, however, has found little evidence that educational attainment patterns were altered by institutional change.[6] Since both socialist bureaucracies and capitalist markets reward technical and cultural knowledge, occupational prestige remains comparable (Bian 2002: 103).[7] Andrew Walder (1995: 311) thus concluded: 'Educational effects in mobility models are just as great there [in socialist bureaucracies] as in market economies'. Moreover, he maintained, socialist bureaucracy may have even tightened the fit between educational credentials and occupation through linking up the educational system with state job-assignment (ibid.: 325).

With respect to Kyrgyzstan, Sarah Amsler (2009) argued that pre-socialist, socialist, and postsocialist modernisation projects have linked formal education incessantly to technological and social progress. Because education is ascribed with the potential to enable individuals and groups to self-consciously shape and improve their future (thus gaining competitiveness in the global word), education has come to be understood as an inherently transformative and progressive practice. Particularly in times of major social change, Amsler argued, such developmental views about education and its assumed transformative capacity may gain particular

[6] Hans-Peter Bossfeld and Yossi Shavit (1993) reviewed research on stratification in 13 countries, including 3 socialist countries (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland), and found no evidence of a systemic difference between the socialist and capitalist countries.

[7] Even under the radical de-stratification policies of China's Cultural Revolution, children of high rank cadre continued to enjoy considerable educational advantages. Educational inequality based on family background thus was never fully abolished (Zhou 1998; Wu 2008).

pertinence. Formal education then turns into a 'symbolic resource of hope'. Even more, it may become an idée force – an idea invested with certain beliefs that gains impressive social force (Bourdieu 2001: 34).

Most of the aspects described by Amsler certainly are also relevant in the Chinese context. During its socialist as well as its reform-socialist modernisation projects[8], China has been characterised by a strong belief in techno-scientific planning and control of the future (Bakken 2006; Sigley 2006). Moreover, developmental views about formal education and its transformative power can be expected to be extraordinarily intense in the Chinese context. After all, China's long imperial history was characterised by particularly close links between education, morality, and political power in Confucian social philosophy as well as in the social practices of imperial social order.

Legacies of Confucian Philosophy and the Imperial Order

Throughout China's imperial history, education has played a crucial role in the political, social, and cultural reproduction of society (e.g. Elman 1991; Lee 2006). Particularly since the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the imperial civil service examinations turned the mastery of the Confucian classics into the main selection criteria for the social, cultural-moral, and political elite. Confucian trained literati-bureaucrats became the ruling class and monopolised this position until the abolishment of the civil service examinations in 1905, shortly before the downfall of the imperial order in 1911.

For almost a millennium, passing the imperial civil service examination was the main, if not only, viable access to political power. In consequence, Confucianism, even though it was never the only influential school of thought in imperial China, remained the dominant intellectual force, penetrating virtually all dimensions of social life (Lee 2000). Successful candidates who had proven persistence in the study of the Confucian curriculum and passed the 'examination hell' (Miyazaki 1976) were highly respected for their knowledge and wisdom, as much as for their career prospects. Moreover, they were seen to have developed high levels of morality in the self-cultivation that accompanied the intensive study and internalisation of the Confucian classics.

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[8] The contemporary Chinese system, a distinctive socialist variant of modernisation and nation-building, has been labelled variously as 'late-socialist', 'market-socialist', 'postsocialist', 'post-reform', and 'neo-socialist'. I prefer 'reform-socialist' since, as Chris Hann (2009: 257) has pointed out, this term concurs with the point of view of the majority of the Chinese population who usually refer to as the present as 'the reform era' but still see their country as being socialist.

According to Confucian thinking, human beings are born with the ability – and duty – to strive for moral perfection. Only through self-cultivation and self-rule are they able to move beyond self-centeredness and become (moral) persons (*zuoren* 做人, lit. doing or making a person). The moral behaviour that is central to 'making' a person implies a constant striving for the core Confucian virtue of humaneness or humanity (*ren* 仁) by following the rules of propriety (*li* 礼). All good behaviour thus is derived from education, which is not only an end in itself, but also a moral program of proper social interaction aimed at safeguarding social harmony. The level of morality that one has achieved is exhibited through relationships with family, kin, community, and society. Filial piety (*xiao* 孝) toward parents and ancestors is the core principle of moral behaviour; it upholds the order and harmony of the patriarchal family, and its extension to higher levels of community serves to maintain the social order and harmony of the country and the universe. Personal moral perfection based on education thus is the foundation of good society and a harmonious political order (Tu 1985; Lee 2000; Bakken 2006)

While primarily aiming at inner spiritual self-transformation and moral accomplishment, Confucian education also entails the explicit social imperative for the student to contribute to society. Ideally, education should not be pursued out of careerist motives. Yet Confucian state philosophy also posits that the state should be governed by virtuous officials and a virtuous emperor (*tianzi* 天子, lit. son of heaven). Confucian learning and tenure of a government position thus are understood as twin activities, as illustrated by the famous saying: 'those who are good officials should continue to indulge in studies, those who studied enough should engage in officialdom' (*shi er youzexue*, *xue er youzeshi* 仕而优则学, 学而优则仕).[9] Such a tight link between educational success and worldly power was viable in social practice when men who had successfully proven their Confucian learning were awarded lucrative and honourable careers in the imperial government. Literary masculinity thus was highly valued and cultural capital was more directly lucrative in China than elsewhere (cf. Kipnis 2011), even though there were historical periods when the number of successful candidates far exceeded the available government positions (Miyazaki 1976).

In principle, the road to becoming a Confucian 'noble man' (*junzi* 君子) of moral and social import via continuous study of the classics was open to every man, irrespective of his social background. There is an oft-quoted saying that testifies to Confucian philosophy as the originator of meritocracy: 'There being instructions, there will be no distinction of

[9] *The Analects*, Chapter 14/Book of *Zi Zhang*, No. 13, translated by Legge (1861: 334).

classes' (*youjiao wulei* 有教无类).[10] Any man who was able and willing to exert sufficient effort thus had the chance to qualify for a government position and all the privileges that accompanied it.

For centuries, the institution of the Chinese civil service exam and the numerous rags-to-riches stories surrounding it have sustained the popular myth of a meritocratic system that provided a fair chance of social upward mobility, at least to all males (Harrell 1987). In practice, only the upper social strata had the means to support a son in the extensive educational endeavour of exam preparation from earliest childhood onwards (Miyazaki 1976). Yet, the vision of educational effort having the potential to change the 'fate' of an individual and, by implication, that of his family and lineage has dominated the popular imaginary (Elman 1991).

Fate

The notion of effort as the basis of success was also sustained by an understanding of 'fate' as only being partly predetermined. In the long tradition of Chinese philosophical writing of various schools of thought, *ming* (命, fate) has almost always been understood as only partially predetermined, and human agency has been ascribed a definite power to influence the cause of events (Eberhard 1966; Harrell 1985, 1987; Raphals 2003; Lupke 2005). In the Confucian world view, heavenly virtue has to be realised through constant human striving for moral perfection. At the same time, an understanding of fate as both predetermined and changeable makes people constantly question which components are given and which alterable. It never relieves them from the responsibility of influencing the course of events through their individual action or for striving to advance their situation. Even though they are not responsible for the social status into which they are born, people remain liable for their actions and consequences; 'for the Chinese, man has no excuse' (Eberhard 1966: 153).

Deities are believed to have some power to influence events by blessing the good and punishing the bad, but their help cannot be guaranteed. The ways of heaven remain mysterious to human understanding (Lupke 2005: 6), not least because divine retribution works on a family basis and through a chain of lives (Yang 1957: 229). The numerous Chinese divination techniques that aim to acquire knowledge about fate's predetermined course therefore serve less as a directive for individual action than as *ex post facto* explanations for those things that are beyond human agency to change (Eberhard 1966: 159). Such 'post-hoc rationalization' (Harrell 1987: 101) helps to sustain people's belief in the efficacy of their agency, even though

[10] *Lunyu*, XV.XXXVIII, translated by Legge (1861: 169).

they may fail to reach their goals. Knowing fate through fate-figuring, or 'calculating fate' (*suanming* 算命), thus gives people a feeling of security and relief (Stafford 2007), and encourages them to accept existing power relations by offering 'a comfort to those who lost, and an admonition to others to keep trying' (Harrell 1987: 104, 107). Effort is incited by the belief that diligence should be rewarded by the divinities, while one is reconciled to failure by the fatalism of life being – partly – determined by the afterworld.

Educational Policies of the CCP

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) deliberately set out to change the fate of the Chinese people. Against the fatalistic aspects and hierarchical order of Chinese tradition, the party advocated active social engineering to create an egalitarian society. In the revolutionary endeavour of overthrowing the traditional social order, however, the party made use of certain other strands of Chinese tradition, such as the particular worldly rationalism of Confucianism and the belief in the power of human agency (Chong 2005).

Similar to developments in other socialist countries, the history of Chinese socialism has been characterised by the antagonism between an utopian and a pragmatic road to communism, with education playing a central role in both. Accordingly, the CCP's educational policies echoed the recurrent shifts between the two general policy directions of egalitarianism and industrial development (Hoiman 1992; Pepper 1996; Hannum 1999; Tsang 2000; Andreas 2009). With a vastly illiterate population on the eve of the communist rise to power, the party's emphasis on utopian egalitarianism implied support for the rapid expansion of mass education. When industrial development became the central concern in the 1950s, China copied the standardised and centralised educational model of the Soviet Union. Yet, criticism against the elitist tendencies inherent in any standardised and centralist educational system continued within the CCP. With the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), the utopian socialist way reached its apex. Formal education was radically attacked for its inherent 'bourgeois tendency' (*zhongchan jieji hua* 中产阶级化) of perpetuating class privileges by discriminating against children of workers and peasants with an examination system that 'treat[ed] students as enemies'.[11] Instead, the 'virtuocratic' system (Shirk 1984) cherished ideological purity and permanent class

[11] The widely known saying, '*yong duifu diren de fangfa*' (用对付敌人的方法, lit. to use the method of confronting an enemy) originates from Mao Zedong's *Speech about the Educational Revolution* from 13 February 1964, available at http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66673/4493704.html (last retrieved on 14 July 2015).

struggle. Formal education as an independent social institution was to be abolished and fully integrated with work. Education was not only to become part of the revolutionary endeavour, but revolution itself was to become the proper way to educate the people (Hoiman 1992). In rural areas, the Cultural Revolution was accompanied by an expansion of educational opportunities for the peasantry that brought about a considerable rise in basic literacy among the rural population and narrowed rural-urban educational differences (Thøgerson 2002; Hannum and Park 2007).

The sharp turn away from radical socialist policies immediately following Chairman Mao's death in 1976 was marked by the reintroduction of the national college entrance exam and the return to a meritocratic educational system. In reform-socialist China, formal education has been elevated to become a core pillar of the entire economic development project. With the reintroduction of the exam-based educational system – followed by the abolishment of the system of class labels in 1979 – educational credentials became rehabilitated as the main precondition for social achievement, including positions in the political arena (Pepper 1996; Hsu 2007). As a still nominally socialist country, reform China thus fully committed itself to a pragmatic version of social engineering. By emphasising development goals, social discrepancies have proliferated. Today, China is one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of income distribution across regions as well as between the rural and the urban population.[12]

In general, the reform era witnessed considerable expansion of educational opportunities in China. The 1986 Compulsory Education Law instituted a system of nine years of compulsory education, comprising six years of primary school and three years of lower middle school. According to Ministry of Education statistics for 2008, the goal of implementing this compulsory education and eradicating youth illiteracy had been met for 99.3 per cent of the population, with the exception of some residents in extremely poor rural regions (Ministry of Education 2008, quoted in Hannum, Xuehui and Cherng 2011: 269). In 2011, the Ministry of Education reported that of the 17.5 million junior high school graduates in 2010, more than 50 per cent (8.3 million) continued schooling in regular secondary high schools (Hansen 2015: 17). Moreover, there has been an enormous increase in tertiary education since the late 1990s. By 2008, China had achieved a tertiary gross

[12] China's GINI coefficient (a standard measure of income disparities) was less than 0.30 in the early 1980s. Within just 25 years it reached its peak in 2008 at 0.49 and fell to 0.47 in 2013, thus approaching the coefficient held by Nigeria and Brazil, but still higher than that of the United States. On average, the per-capita income of China's rural areas is less than one-third of that of its cities (Yeh, O'Brien and Ye 2013: 916).

enrolment ratio of 23.3 per cent, nearly 7 times the corresponding figure of 3.4 per cent in 1990, according to 2010 UNESCO statistics (Hannum, An and Cherng 2011: 272). Ministry of Education statistics from 2011 indicate that about 10 million candidates take part in the annual national entrance examination, while each year about 6 million students graduate from tertiary education (Hansen 2015: 21). In the fierce competition for higher education, students from economically deprived rural backgrounds do, however, face a number of disadvantages.

In rural areas, the end of the Cultural Revolution brought a reduction in educational opportunities as local schools were closed. Decentralisation policies delegated financial and administrative responsibility for schooling to local governments, thus linking resources available for schooling to local economic circumstances. In the following decades, increasing socio-economic disparities between the regions thus caused access to schools and the level and quality of education offered to vary considerably across the country. Financial decentralisation moreover meant that parents had to contribute to local educational costs via numerous fees. Rising public dissent in rural areas about the burden of school fees led to their abolishment in 2003 (for primary education) and in 2007 (for junior middle school). Yet, government investment in education remains highly unevenly distributed along the rural-urban axis and between different regions (Hansen 2015: 20). Accordingly, school resources and teacher qualifications vary dramatically.

Particularly since the early 1990s successive market reforms and school finance policies have aggravated economic inequalities and the disadvantages of the less developed rural areas. In consequence, place of residence has become ever more important for schooling opportunities. With educational attainment having been restored as an important factor for social mobility and life-outcomes in reform-socialist China, social disparity in educational attainment has become central to the reproduction of current as well as future economic inequalities (Hannum and Park 2007).

A central gatekeeper of equal opportunity in China's educational system is the national college entrance exam (*gaokao* 高考). Although the exam is often accused of disrupting students' creativity because of the intense preparation in rote learning that it necessitates, any reform to the exam is challenged because it is seen as guaranteeing fair access to higher education. Local reforms that allow some universities to use their own recruiting tactics have already stirred up public discussion about the negative impact such reforms will have on equal educational opportunity, particularly in terms of geographic discrimination (e.g. Hannum, An and Cherng 2011; Hansen 2015: 22). Obviously, reforms in the educational sector are not only an academic issue but also implicate important social effects. The national

college entrance exam is generally interpreted as supporting political stability because it is considered to alleviate dissatisfaction with the inequalities which pervade so many domains of daily life in contemporary China.[13]

Peasants and the Hierarchy of Suzhi (素质)

For understanding the basic underpinnings of socio-economic inequality in reform China, and particularly what it means to be a 'peasant' in this system, it is necessary to take account of the strict administrative divide between urban and rural society that was installed by the household registration (*hukou* 户口) system in the late 1950s and thereafter has separated the population into rural/agricultural and urban/nonagricultural residents (Cheng and Selden 1994; Smart and Smart 2001; Chan and Buckingham 2008; Whyte 2010). During the Maoist period, the *hukou* system institutionalised vastly divergent living conditions between the cities and the countryside. Eligibility for 'cradle-to-grave social welfare' (Croll 1999: 684), including allotment of work, highly subsidised housing, pension schemes, free medical care, and good quality schooling, was confined to urban residency only (e.g. Bray 2005).

Being assigned a bureaucratic category of household registration and class status (on the basis of former landownership or occupation) marked the 'fate' of each individual and his or her life trajectory. Spatial and social mobility from the status of rural peasant to urban worker or cadre was strictly curtailed by the *hukou* system. From the late 1950s, with the exception of some years during the Cultural Revolution, education has been one of the few and narrow paths of mobility across the internal 'citizenship divide' between rural and urban society (Cohen 1993; Smart and Smart 2001) and its 'caste-like' division into two hereditary groups (Potter 1993: 168). In the wake of ongoing reforms since the mid-1980s, comprehensive urban welfare, known as the socialist 'iron rice bowl' (*tiefanwan* 铁饭碗), has been abolished. Yet China's unevenly distributed government investment and economic development has caused rising socio-economic inequalities that continue to sustain urban privileges. While reform socialism unleashed massive rural-to-urban labour migration, the *hukou* system has remained in place. This has produced numerous unofficial (non-*hukou*) rural-to-urban migrants, labelled with the somehow paradoxical term 'peasant labourer' (*nongmin gong* 农民工). Although often eligible for some

[13] Further discussion can be found in Hannum, An and Cherng 2011, as well as the various contributions to two special issues on *gaokao* and educational inequality in *Chinese Education and Society* 2012 (1) and 2013 (1).

kind of temporary urban residence rights, the *hukou* system excludes such migrants from long-term urban residence and citizenship rights, like equal access to medical treatment, education, and housing. Moreover, due to their rural background, such migrants face a number of discriminatory discourses about the 'low quality' of China's allegedly homogenous peasant population.

Notions about the 'backwardness' (*luohou* 落后) of the peasantry already featured in discussions about how to modernise the country during China's reform and revolutionary movements of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1990s, these notions re-emerged as part of the discourse on *suzhi* (素质) that came to dominate official and popular discussions about how to accelerate the nation's development and quest for modernity (Bakken 2006: 75-97, 117-37; Kipnis 2006). Literally meaning 'quality', the new discourse applied the term also to people, meaning something more like 'human quality'. The criteria of the quality entailed in *suzhi* is undefined and ambiguous (Yan 2003a; Anagnost 2004; Jacka 2006: 41). Yet Chinese interlocutors usually have few problems judging who has *suzhi* and who does not (Hsu 2008: 29). *Suzhi* is related to the level of formal education, but also goes beyond it. It denotes 'a wide range of standards of morality, knowledge, education, style and skills' (Fong 2007: 102) that makes reference to broader notions such as 'civilization' or 'modernity', as represented by the 'urban, well educated, cosmopolitan and rich' (Hsu 2008: 29; Jacka 2009).

Suzhi discourse thus is imbued with the assertion of a defined and morally justified structural hierarchy related to place and space. While the possibility of increasing one's *suzhi* makes the social hierarchy seem permeable, some aspects of a low *suzhi* environment are inscribed immutably on a person's body (Yan 2003a; Gaetano and Jacka 2004). For example, specific aspects of peasant appearance – like clothes, speech or bodily posture – are interpreted as valuable clues for judging the person's overall 'capital Q quality' (Kipnis 2006; Woronov 2008). By naturalising social hierarchy and rooting it in geographical space, the notion of *suzhi* reinforces and disguises the causes of social inequality. *Suzhi* tells people 'their place' in society (Jacka 2009: 525), even though the ambiguity of *suzhi* criteria also opens a certain space for contestation of *suzhi* hierarchy (Zhang 2001: 143; Fong 2007). *Suzhi* discourse can be interpreted as having displaced class discourse (Anagnost 2004), making it possible to speak 'explicitly about class without using the word class', thus providing a 'politically correct language of social snobbery' (Kipnis 2007: 390, 393).

Suzhi discourse also draws on neoliberal ideologies of self-improvement for the sake of raising one's market value as much as it draws on Confucian and socialist narratives that link individual responsibility for

self-improvement to morality and to the need to contribute to collective welfare. It thus legitimates both individual striving for advancement and the party's role in facilitating *suzhi* development (Murphy 2004; Sigley 2006).

The description of educational mobility away from a rural place of origin in this book thus may be interpreted as an exploration of a paradigmatic case of actors climbing up the *suzhi* hierarchy from the low *suzhi* position of a peasant to the high *suzhi* position of a graduate. Yet, while tertiary education certainly improves what is considered to be their *suzhi*, students from poor rural family backgrounds may also experience the 'hard' side of *suzhi*; they often remain stigmatised by their low origins in the *suzhi* hierarchy. Tamara Jacka (2005) described how female rural-to-urban migrants avoid referring to *suzhi*, since for them the term is confined to its derogatory meaning. It thus remains to be explored in how far the notion of *suzhi* features in local people's educational aspirations and the meanings invested in their educational endeavours.

Educational Striving in Reform-Socialist China

Several studies published since the early 2000s have described an enormous drive for higher education in China. In her analyses of high educational aspirations among urban (lower) middle class in the north-east city of Harbin, Vanessa Fong (2004) concluded that the educational aspirations of urban Chinese parents and their children are closely related to the state-mandated fertility transition brought about by the one-child family planning policy. In addition, she listed a number of historical developments that contributed to the educational hopes among urban parents. These include the pre-revolutionary value of education in China; the levelling of socio-economic differences brought about by the Communist Revolution; and the 'meritocratic ideologies of the capitalist world system [that] created a powerful cultural model that promised upward mobility for all youth, regardless of their gender or socioeconomic background' (ibid: 101). These developments, Fong claimed, all made single urban children and their parents cherish high educational aspirations, based on the hope that educational success would bring about an upward mobility to enable 'First World living under Third World conditions' (ibid: 158).

Concerning China's rural regions, both Andrew Kipnis (2011) and Mette Hansen (2015) documented respectively that in north-east and south-east China almost all parents, irrespective of their own level of education, share the strong wish that their children continue schooling as long as possible, ideally becoming a university student. While Kipnis had encountered a certain 'anti-intellectual' climate in his field site in rural Shandong Province in the mid-1990s, the educational atmosphere in the

region turned within a few years, allowing him to subsequently witness an 'astounding educational discipline' among the local peasants (2001b). He interpreted this change as having resulted from the region's rapid economic development that allowed villagers to envision their children's futures as independent from agriculture (2011: 38).

There exists some evidence that the drive for educational credentials may be less pertinent in other regions of rural China. Research in a rather remote rural area in one of China's rapidly developing coastal provinces (the location not being further specified in the publication), for example, found that few parents feel the necessity for their children to complete higher education (Chi and Rao 2003: 339f). In this region, parents seem to prefer spending their money on ancestral halls and gift-giving. Jin Chi and Nirmala Rao thus suggested that local contextual characteristics may have a more important impact on parental beliefs about school learning than traditional cultural beliefs. Similarly, a study about educational aspirations in rural Hunan Province found that problems in the employment market for those with university credentials have made rural parents reconsider spending family resources on higher education (Peng 2007). Such findings highlight the need for systematic comparative research across different regions and social strata in order to document and explain variances in the pertinence of the phenomenon of 'educational fever' in contemporary China.

Regional variations notwithstanding, the sheer number of students from rural family backgrounds nationwide suggests that high educational ambitions are relevant for many rural families beyond those in the provinces of Shandong and Zhejiang on China's east coast (as evidenced above) and in Gansu Province to the north-west, where my research was conducted. There is some public concern that rural students remain underrepresented and that their enrolment levels are dropping. For example, Peng (2007: 143, 147) reported that although two-thirds of China's population holds rural residency, only about one-third of students enrolled in higher educational institutions are of rural family backgrounds.[14] The percentage of rural students admitted to top-level universities has also decreased considerably since the late 1990s (Hannum, An and Cherng 2011). Nevertheless, 60 per cent of the 10 million participants at the national college entrance examination had rural family backgrounds in 2011 (Hansen 2015: 22). Such a figure means that – in any given year – roughly some six million rural families are actively pushing their children towards university studies.

[14] Rapid urbanisation has characterised the post-Mao period, and in 2011 the percentage of China's 1.34 billion citizens living in cities reached 50 per cent. Yet, an estimated one-third of the urban population does not hold long-term residency rights for the respective city (Yeh 2013: 915).

Many factors that contribute to 'educational desire' within the general population, and in rural areas, have been described by the previously mentioned authors. These works tend to describe the continuing influence of 'traditional' understandings of the value of education, and how these understandings are both supported and co-opted by the (socialist) state. For example, Kipnis (2011) focused his attention on the implication of formal education in 'governmentality', as conceived by Foucault. He pointed out that governmentality theorists have tended to overlook non-Western traditions of governance, such as those long-present in China. Thus, he attempted to remedy this lack by documenting the contemporary configuration of Confucian traditions of governing and education. Yet, his comprehensive study of 'educational desire' in China also described a number of governing processes of more recent and universal origin which comprise social, economic, demographic and cultural phenomena like late development, competitive dynamics, demographic transition, nation-building, social desire, and hierarchy. Accordingly, Kipnis's analysis explained educational desire in the relatively affluent rural Zouping County in Shandong Province; it also explained aspects of this desire at the national, regional East Asian, and even universal levels.

Many of the dynamics described by Kipnis certainly are also relevant to Huining County and Gansu Province. Particularly pertinent is his concept of an 'imperial government complex' that integrates four main governing techniques rooted in Confucian tradition: exemplarity, examinations, nation-building, and holistic hierarchy. By exemplarity, Kipnis meant that models are promoted as ideals that everyone should attempt to imitate. Following Bakken (2006), he argued that the very terms for 'studying' and 'education' in Chinese convey the importance of imitation to establishing and maintaining order: *xue* (学, to study) connotes learning by imitating – and thereby internalising – a model (whether a Chinese character or a particular person), while *jiaoyu* (教育, education) connotes 'teaching' as well as 'ruling' (Kipnis 2011: 91). The culture of examinations conveys imaginations of meritocracy and rule by the most capable, thus countering corruption and nepotism. Moreover, it implicates building a common culture among the ruling class. Nation-building is facilitated through the mass education of both genders and national exams. And an ideology of holistic hierarchy, which entails the assumption that those in high positions are superior in all ways, plays out in the above-discussed notion of *suzhi*. All these governing techniques, Kipnis argued, add to the intense valuation of education in contemporary China. Although these techniques are sometimes in contradiction to each other, they generally overlap and mutually reinforce educational desire as an intrinsic and 'nonreducible form of value' (ibid:

147). Moreover, multiple and intertwining effects of rapid industrialisation, socio-economic differentiation, and the birth control policy further reinforce strong educational desire in contemporary China.

Other studies document additional aspects of the drive for education relative to China's changing conditions. For example, Mette Hansen (2015) investigated an average middle school in Zhejiang Province on China's comparatively rich east coast. She found that educational practices and the lives of both students and teachers are being shaped by broader processes of individualisation. These processes attribute to the individual full responsibility for success or failure – as measured by attainment of work, welfare insurance, and standard of living – but remain restricted by the confines of political authoritarianism. Hansen claimed that the organisation of schooling and curriculum development aim to fashion 'neo-socialist' subjects who 'uncritically accept political authorities while making the choices and taking the risks that the increasingly individualized society requires' (Hansen 2015: 68). Like Kipnis, Hansen found the continuation of 'traditional' moral values influential in contemporary education. Specifically, she argued that filial piety has persisted as a strong moral value, and now entangles the emphasis on the student's individual responsibility for self-improvement with his responsibility towards his parents and their expectations. Processes of 'authoritarian individualisation' at school thus seek to turn the individual into 'a striving, innovative, filial, responsible person who leaves authorities and power relations unquestioned' (ibid: 150).

The aspects of China's educational system and the drive for educational credentials described by these two studies are certainly relevant for many regions and social strata across contemporary China. They are also relevant in the economically deprived rural region described in this book. This book, however, highlights several facets of the intense 'educational desire' experienced by rural inhabitants that have not been explored by other authors.

Specifically, this book provides a detailed ethnography of how the value of education plays out in everyday life. It documents the micro-processes through which 'educational fever' (Seth 2002) is inculcated in children in the settings of the family, the village, and school. In addition to exploring parents' hopes, it also describes the children's outlook on life; their educational experiences inside the school system and at home; and the way these experiences impact their educational engagement and aspirations.

This book also provides an ethnography of the inequalities related to educational striving in contemporary China. As noted above, educational achievement entails an official '*hukou*-migration' and a change of status away from that of being a 'peasant'. I therefore also explore how

'educational migrants' from the region experience upward social mobility, and how they cope with the numerous experiences of inequality and discrimination they encounter on their way into the urban labour market. How do these students negotiate the meaning of *suzhi*? Do they feel the 'choice' to fashion themselves as entrepreneurs in accord with market needs, as has been claimed in previous research about Chinese university students (e.g. Hanser 2002; Hoffman 2006; Liu 2008)? Or do they continue to experience what has been described for high school students: that is, that they do not give 'their future working careers much thought beyond the general idea that they should "study in a university" in order "to find a better job" than their relatives or friends who had no such education' (Hansen 2015: 81).

A number of anthropologists see contemporary Chinese society as being characterised by the rise of neoliberal subjectivities (e.g. Yan 2003a; Anagnost 2004; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). My findings suggest that such a diagnosis is too simplistic. In part, claims of China's neoliberal characteristics are based on the application of ill-defined notions of 'neoliberalism' to local conditions of governance (see Kipnis 2007, 2008). But there is more to the problem: as Donald M. Nonini (2008) has argued, it is necessary to reject claims that market logic is hegemonic in China, and to remain aware of 'the diversity of class backgrounds, alternative discourses to market logics … and the way in which personal ties and social relations define and mediate boundaries between state, the market and the everyday life of the population' (ibid.: 146).

Accordingly, this book brackets the question of neoliberalism and looks instead at the specific socio-structural and politico-historical contexts of educational aspirations and experiences. What is clear is that rural life in contemporary China is marked by the lack of state social welfare, a rapidly developing economy, increasing socio-economic discrepancies, and the continuation of an officially, if nominally, socialist regime. It is also marked by a strong tradition of valuing educational success and considering an individual's education as an asset for a family's upward mobility. In these two contexts, schooling is an endeavour that decisively reconstitutes family relations of social support.

Educational Support and 'Relatedness'

Broadly defined as the giving and receiving of help between human beings, 'social support' relates to the core human condition. It is central to human survival and well-being. Social support is thus closely related to achieving 'social security', as it has been defined by the legal anthropologists Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann. Social security comprises 'the numerous

ways in which people perceive of and cope with the various material and immaterial insecurities pertaining to their existence' (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 2000: 7). It includes all 'dimension[s] of social organization dealing with the provision of security not considered to be an exclusive matter of the individual' (ibid: 14). If 'social security' describes what people strive for, 'social support' describes how they do it. Both concepts include ideational, organizational, and relational dimensions; taken together, they indicate a dynamic process in which social interaction turns potential resources into actual provisions against need.

Given the lack of comprehensive social welfare schemes in rural China, the family is still the main provider of support. Within the family, the main axis of social support runs between generations. Demographic transition theory holds that industrialisation and urbanisation brings about reduced fertility due to parents' economic calculations of the increasing costs of children as well as a reversal in the direction of intergenerational resource flows to the benefit of the younger generation through – for example – prolonged periods of formal education (Thompson 1929; Caldwell 1976). But Elisabeth Croll (2000, 2006) has pointed out weaknesses in this general model when it is applied to China and other Asian countries. For example, the gender of children has not been considered a factor in parental calculations of the costs and benefits of family size. Moreover, the dynamic is changed when experiences of familial and filial obligations remain 'robustly intact' (Whyte 2003: 89), as they have in China.

Social support within and by the family is, however, both changing and filled with difficulties. Some analysts, like Charlotte Ikels, have highlighted the difficulties produced by the effects of 'modernization theory with Chinese characteristics' (Ikels 2006: 388; see also 2004). As Ikels explained, the attack on most aspects of the expression of filial piety (except the obligation to care for parents) modernised family values during the Maoist period, while the *hukou* policies kept families together by restricting migration of the younger generation. The reform period unleashed rural-to-urban migration. But, the ageing of China's population was accelerated by the state-mandated fertility decline before the economy generated the necessary surplus for providing public institutions to care for the elderly. Reform policies thus have repositioned the elderly into supplicants of the younger generation, with delivery of family support becoming increasingly problematic. The crisis in care for the elderly has led parents to reconstitute their role in the intergenerational contract by preparing to care for themselves as long as possible (Thøgerson and Ni 2008), or by re-evaluating the role of daughters in elderly care (Zhang 2005, 2007).

Some ethnographies of rural life in reform China have diagnosed the prevalence of moral uncertainty (e.g. Liu 2000; Steinmueller 2013), with social relationships characterised by increasing selfishness and instrumentality (Yan 2003b, 2005, 2009). In his ethnography of family relationships in a village in north-eastern China, Yan Yunxiang (2003, 2005) showed how the rise of romantic love and notions of privacy empowered the conjugal bond at the expense of extended families and wider kinship networks. As part of this development, he found that rural youth in particular learned to emphasise their individual rights at the expenses of respect for the interests of others, thus exhibiting an 'unbalanced egotism'. Based on ethnographic research in rural Shaanxi, Liu Xin (2000) concluded that there was a full demise of the moral order, leading to an atmosphere of moral arbitrariness.

Social support need not be conceptualised exclusively in terms of family and morality. It can also be seen as a key component of economic life. For example, economic anthropologist Stephen Gudeman (2001, 2008, 2009) proposed that all economies consist of two distinct but dialectically related spheres – 'the market' and 'the base'. The 'base' is the community realm of economy; it is 'culturally distinctive, morally cohesive and ultimately sacred' (Hann 2006: 209). In industrial society, the market increasingly 'cascades' into the base, but because no market can exist without a 'base', people always have to negotiate a tension between both realms. Even societies described as 'market economies' exhibit this tension. When organising a decent and secure present and future for themselves and others, people continue to rely on the connectedness of non-market forms of commitment rooted in the base, where the principles governing 'economic' transfers do not apply. Thomas Hauschild (2008: 205-22) proposed the term 'reserve' for those aspects of local community that persons or groups can use against the destructive forces of the market and which they can draw on and revert to in times of crisis. 'Reserves' may include the physical space and tacit local knowledge as much as relationships that are sustained through exchanges, moral obligations, and feelings of relatedness.

By putting a particular focus on educational support across and within the generations as a kind of 'reserve' for the student as well as the supporter in their effort to organise a secure future, this book contributes to the broader questions about the making, maintaining, and severing of social relatedness in contemporary rural China. By documenting education-related support within extended families, I not only highlight education as a strategy of reconstituting the implicit 'intergenerational contract'. I also examine how this reconstitution particularly reshapes the role of daughters within families. And, I show how education mediates other forms of relatedness beyond the

parent-child bond. Both intergenerational and intragenerational relations of education-related social support in families testify to the continuous importance of the extended family in terms of support provision and facilitation of educational attainment. As Kipnis (2009) pointed out, anthropological approaches to formal education offer an opportunity to scrutinise changing notions of relatedness because schools are 'institutions that explicitly bridge the divide between the concerns of the state (assumed to be formal, public, jural, and male) and those of the household (supposedly intimate, emotional, private, nurturing, and female)' (ibid: 204). Education thus offers a site for linking realms that have been separated in classic kinship studies, and which newer approaches to kinship have sought to reconnect (e.g. Carsten 2000, 2004; Schweitzer 2000; Brandtstädter and Santos 2009).

Fieldwork Conditions

Long-term field research for this book was carried out between August 2006 and September 2007. Two short visits to the field site followed in 2012 and 2014. The choice of rural Gansu as a field site was based on my interest in the puzzle of strong educational aspirations among people living in poor rural regions of contemporary China. After all, with tuition fees for tertiary education being equally high for all citizens independent of their individual financial situation, people living at the bottom of China's socio-economic hierarchy spend a much higher proportion of income on education and experience a more insecure 'return' on this spending.

Located in China's arid north-west[15] and with an average annual per capita net income among rural residents of 1,980 yuan (approximately 200 euro)[16], Gansu Province is one of the poorest in the country.[17] Questions about why people choose to spend their scarce money on education; who

[15] Although the city of Lanzhou and Huining County are geographically located in the middle of the Chinese landmass, the province of Gansu belongs to the five north-western provinces which share the commonality of arid climate, increasing desertification, and low economic development.

[16] Such statistics relate to the year 2005. In comparison, in eastern China's Zhejiang Province the average annual per capita net income was 6,096 yuan, more than three times as high as that in Gansu http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/ProvinceView/164352.htm (last retrieved on 6 August 2010).

[17] In the year 2000 more than two-thirds of the 86 counties in Gansu Province were officially designated as 'poor'. In China, the international standard of 1 USD/per head/per day serves to mark the poverty line. 'Absolute poverty' in 2005 was defined as the annual per capita income of less than 683 yuan (68 euro). 'China in Numbers' in the *UNDP China Human Development Report 2005*, available at http://www.undp.org.cn/downloads/nhdr2005/NHDR2005_complete.pdf, last accessed 6 August 2010.

helps whom; and why – could thus be expected to be especially salient in this region.

Plate 1. Huining County in January.

I started research at Lanzhou University's new campus, located on a former military air base in the barren landscape. The university is some 40 kilometres outside the provincial capital of Lanzhou, and home to more than 10,000 undergraduates. The new campus buildings offered students everything necessary for their daily life: classrooms and laboratories, libraries, dormitories, canteens, small shops, and sports facilities. Some small shops, restaurants, food stalls, bars, and hostels along a narrow lane outside the campus were the only attraction beyond the campus walls, apart from the adjacent campus of the North-west University for Minorities. Beyond both campuses stretched plain fields and barren hills. Teachers preferred a daily commute from Lanzhou by bus or car, so that only a few members of the university staff lived permanently on campus. For most students, it was comparatively expensive to take the university shuttle to Lanzhou. Many therefore left the campus and its close surroundings only during university holidays.

After first exploratory conversations and interviews in Lanzhou and the university campus, as well as some trips to the nearby countryside, I soon decided to focus my research on Huining County, located about 150 kilometres south-east of Lanzhou. With an average annual income of 1,575 yuan in the rural areas in 2006, Huining County belonged to the poor regions of Gansu province (Gansu 2007: 100). Yet, the county was famous for sending a high percentage of pupils to institutions of higher education. People in the region thus talked much about the 'Huining phenomena' (*Huining xianxiang* 会宁现象) or 'educational myth' (*jiaoyu shenhua* 教育神话). Ethnographic research about both educational aspirations and social support faces the methodological problem of temporality (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 2000; Hann 2007: 5). The same is true when scrutinising social mobility, by definition a diachronic and usually also 'multi-sited' process. Certainly, extensive ethnographic research in a village in Huining County was indispensable for gaining a profound understanding of people's ideas, believes, and practices. At the same time, my research agenda faced the methodological challenge of capturing the perspectives of current university and prior university graduates who had originated in rural Huining.

During the first phase of my research, I socialised with undergraduate students at Lanzhou University; talked at length in very loosely structured interviews that sometimes lasted up to four hours with 26 students from rural Huining about their family history and their individual educational experiences; and went on some prolonged visits to Huining County. I later administered a questionnaire about family background, educational motivation, and education-related social support to 106 students from rural Huining family backgrounds at Lanzhou University. For comparative purposes, I conducted the same questionnaire among 55 rural Huining students at the Gansu Traditional Chinese Medical College. As a key university Lanzhou University is considered more prestigious, while the medical college is an average institution. The random gender ratio among all survey participants was about 40 per cent female.

Between January and September 2007 I lived with the family of a Lanzhou University student in a village in rural Huining and participated in family life for five months. During this time I visited almost all households in the village; participated in agricultural labour; was a guest at several weddings and celebrations of 'sending off students to university'; witnessed two ghost exorcism rituals held in my host family's courtyard; hung out with the members of my host family and in the village; visited students' families in other regions of the county; observed life at the local schools; talked to local teachers and government officials; and experienced the tense

atmosphere in the county seat during the two days of the national college entrance exam.

In order to get a diachronic perspective of the changes in educational aspiration and social support arrangements in the locality, I also conducted biographical interviews with 51 graduates (among these 13 female) from rural Huining family backgrounds. The graduates represented different age cohorts who had gone through higher education during the last three decades of reform socialism. And they all lived and worked in the Huining county seat, in the provincial capital of Lanzhou, or in Beijing.[18]

Field research thus was characterised by a combination of close-up participant observation of life in the family and in the village, of schooling in the county seat, and of university and campus life, complemented by focused conversations and semi-structured interviews with students and graduates, their siblings and parents, fellow villagers, teachers and officials, and the results of the above-described questionnaire. The central asset that facilitated the research was the fact that I spoke Chinese. The initial shyness expressed by pupils and students who were afraid of being forced to speak English when being approached by a foreigner, thus usually turned into relief and curiosity once it became obvious that conversation with me would be possible without language barriers.

When talking to students and graduates, my status as an outsider offered a number of advantages. I certainly benefited from the fact that for most of my interlocutors I was their first personal contact with a foreigner. Moreover, I came from Germany, a country with a particularly good reputation in China.[19] During conversations, I was allowed as a foreigner to question things that an 'insider' could not have questioned. In more intimate conversations, I could make use of local perceptions of family obligations being much weaker in the West. When I referred to my personal experiences, it seemed to build a basis of trust that allowed interlocutors to admit feelings or behaviour that did not conform to Chinese expectations. In some cases, interlocutors claimed they were revealing things about their life to me that they would never dare to share with anybody in their close surroundings, or, for that case, with any Chinese.

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[18] Interviews with students, graduates, and experts usually were voice-recorded unless my interview partner preferred not to give consent. In the village I did not use any voice-recording device, but simply took notes of conversations and observations in a field diary.

[19] People gave a number of reasons for this good reputation, such as Germany being the home of Marx, Hegel, Einstein, and Heisenberg; German work ethic and precision; Germans having come to terms with their history; Willy Brand's prostration in Warsaw; Germany's success in men's soccer; and Germany's status as a 'modern', highly developed, and economically and politically strong nation.

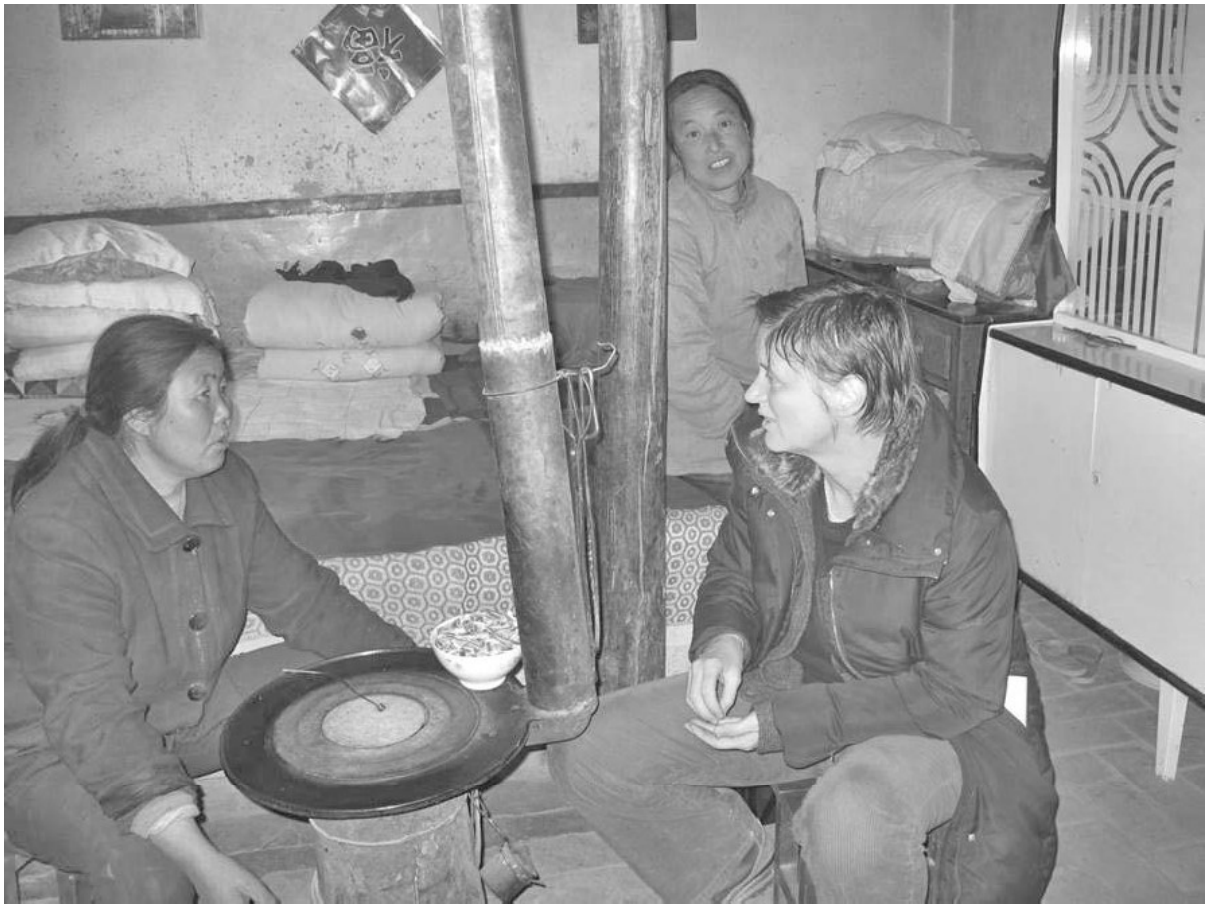

Plate 2. Doing fieldwork.

When talking to people in the villages, the help of pupils, students, and returned labour migrants with translation from the local dialect into Mandarin was often necessary. As the first foreigner having come to rural Huining County, so the locals usually claimed, I surely remained a strange outsider. My coming from a Western country, being affiliated with a key Chinese university, and doing research for a doctoral degree obviously made locals feel disadvantaged towards me in various respects. Especially when talking about educational issues such a constellation of personal characteristics surely bore the risk that conversations would become particularly biased by norm conformity. Yet long-term participant observation that allowed me to contrast people's statements with their actions and which provided numerous occasions to overhear conversations when nobody expected a foreigner to listen or to understand (like when working together in the fields or sitting on local busses) made it possible for me to reconfirm information and impressions I had gained in personal conversations. After a while, my continuous 'hanging out' in the village and my participation in all kinds of activities also seemed to reduce attentiveness to my presence. At the same time my unconscious, and sometimes also

conscious, violation of unspoken rules taught me a lot about how 'educated' people were perceived and expected to behave.

Since my research followed the pathway of the educationally successful, it inevitably bore the risk of being biased in favour of the perspective of the 'winners' in the competition for education-based mobility. Being aware of that risk, I always tried to counterbalance such an eventual one-sidedness by also capturing and integrating the perspective of those who were educationally less successful, like the students' and graduates' siblings and extended kin, classmates, school drop-outs, labour migrants, and all kinds of fellow villagers.

Research outside the county, among students and graduates from rural Huining, was facilitated by an aspect of social relatedness I had not reckoned with beforehand: county fellowship (*laoxiang* 老乡) (see also chapter 7). As somebody who had lived with a family in rural Huining County and had experienced the hardships of local agricultural labour and everyday life, I benefited from the credit of trust and support between those who had shared such experiences. Emotional attachment to their home region and feelings of relatedness towards me based on my local experience were especially emphasised when I met graduates from rural Huining County in circumstances as different as imaginable from conditions in their home region, such as in modern office buildings and classy restaurants in Beijing. The informal organisation among county fellows in Beijing, testified by a circulating address list of more than 350 graduates from the region in Beijing, facilitated my efforts to contact graduates originating from Huining County who now live in the capital. Most of the graduates I approached were surprisingly willing to participate in my research project.

There certainly was a tendency among my interlocutors to present daily practice as conforming to official norms when talking to an outsider, according to the well-known Chinese saying that 'family ugliness should not be exposed to outsiders' (*jiachou buke waiyang* 家丑不可外扬). Such an attitude seemed to be generally more relevant in conversations with graduates and officials than in the villages, probably because relationships with these interlocutors often were more impersonal and non-committal, sometimes limited to the interview situation only. Fortunately, my local experience in the village as well as the understanding gained in the course of long-term relations with some students and graduates from rural Huining County helped to qualify clichés that often tended to dominate conversations with people in more official contexts. Still, my research was accompanied by a constant apprehensiveness, and sometimes maybe also unjustified mistrust, that people felt obliged to portray the virtues of Chineseness and thus glossed over difficulties and conflicts when talking to me.

On the other hand data collection and writing this ethnography has, inevitably, been a process of reduction of 'unruly experience' through making 'strategic choices' that were – inescapably – also shaped by my personal perspective (Clifford 1983). Throughout field research the gap between my privileged position of being free from the urgencies of survival and local people's struggles to provide for their everyday life demonstrated to me clearly that 'the world in which one thinks is not the world in which one lives' (Bachelard 1940: 11; quoted also by Bourdieu 2000: 51). Certainly, any description of the social differs from practice itself. For Bourdieu, it is the distance between the theoretical logic of the researcher and the 'logic of practice' that bears the risk of the former presenting the world 'as he [the researcher] thinks it, (that is an object of contemplation, a representation, a spectacle), as if it were the world as it presents itself to those who do not have the leisure (or desire) to withdraw from it in order to think it' (2000: 51).

In the end, it is the complexity of my data sources – of quantitative and qualitative data; of numerous verbatim statements recorded, intimate and less intimate; of long-term and casual relations; of cognitive, emotional, visual, and physical descriptions; of attached and detached impressions, observations, reactions and insights documented in the material brought back from the field – and the constant reflection about the impact of my personal socio-economic and cultural situatedness during data analysis and writing, that give me confidence that I have avoided at least the most serious fallacies and have reached an understanding that does, at least for large parts, do justice to local people's experiences and their outlook on life.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 introduces the fieldwork region. A general description of the geographical, socio-economic, and educational environment of the county and village where I conducted field research is followed by a rough account of how changing educational and population policies have shaped the distribution of educational opportunities in local families. Life histories of graduates from the region show that during the radical changes after Mao's death the distribution of life-changing educational opportunities within often large sibling sets was often a matter of luck. Children who were the right age at the right time were educated as opportunities arose. The survey data collected among current students indicate that with shrinking family size, educational opportunities became more evenly distributed between children of one sibling set, although gender still remained an influential factor for parents' reproductive choices and in their offspring's educational attainment.

Chapter 3 looks at parents' attitudes towards formal education and at the ways in which they try to motivate their children to study. For the parents, their children's educational success entailed a number of immediate rewards, such as social honour and feelings of accomplishment. Not least it allowed for hope that at least the next generation would participate more equally in China's rapidly developing society. At the same time, parents' educational aspirations for their children also entailed considerations of their own old age security. In the absence of state programs of rural elderly care provision and with a reduced number of offspring from previous generations, parents increasingly invested also in relatedness with their daughters, thus causing a shift in the gendered intergenerational contract. Yet parents' expectations concerning co-residence during old age remained strictly gendered.

Chapter 4 shows that siblings as well as uncles and aunts often became important supporters for the educational endeavours of local pupils and students. Those graduates from the region who had attended university shortly after the Cultural Revolution and had benefited from the education and labour policies of the planned economy during the early reform period, often turned into crucial supporters of their nieces and nephews. When facing multiple support requests from their siblings in the countryside, these 'early' graduates usually opted for supporting the education of their siblings' offspring. 'Diagonal' intergenerational support between uncles and aunts and their nieces and nephews was expected to be reciprocated by the support 'vertically' offered towards parents. In this way, support obligations between siblings were disburdened via the next generation. Support relations between current students or recent graduates and their siblings were conditioned by gender as well as by level of education. Sisters' support for their brothers' higher education was often interpreted as the former fulfilling their obligations as daughters within the 'intergenerational contract' by indirectly investing in the parents' future support situation. Between brothers, education-based mobility determined each brother's support role towards the parents. Recent graduates usually felt the obligation to reciprocate the familial resources invested in them by supporting their younger siblings' education. Yet educational support could also be interpreted as a prospective 'insurance investment' for future times of need due to the reciprocal claims it entailed on a person who was (still) expected to gain improved access to urban social support resources in the future.

Chapter 5 scrutinises pupils' educational motivation to study during elementary and secondary school. It highlights how educational achievement made an immediate difference in children's daily life. In the competitive environment, educational achievement was rewarded with recognition and

with the experience of self-efficacy when changing one's own and one's family's situation for the better. The local status awarded to school achievers was based on the 'credit' of their prospective upward mobility. Such 'change of fate' was not understood as an individual matter only, but, in long-term perspective always implied the notion of a gradual rise of the whole family. The chapter also describes the period of status change from rural youth to university student, characterised by the uncertainties of the university application process as well as by celebrations of the separation from the village. University application was a process of decision about one's professional future only for those who had access to necessary information via familial support networks or through teachers' counselling, which usually was limited to top achievers only. For the majority, university application rather resembled a lottery on the future. Separation from the village was marked by farewell celebrations which sometimes included the whole community. The scope of such festivities did not necessarily correlate with the student's achievement, but rather with the family's social standing in the community. Given the social obligation of monetary gift-giving on such occasion, holding elaborate celebrations had become a matter of debate in the locality.

Chapter 6 depicts the experience of social inequality that students from poor rural family backgrounds faced during their time at a key national university. Diligence with study, the only 'reserve' these students could draw on in the competition with fellow students from economically better-off regions, could help to level out discrepancies in terms of knowledge. Financial disadvantages were coped with by temporalisation as well as by reference to an ethic of hard work and frugality. Lack of 'cultural capital' (or 'comprehensive quality') was, however, experienced as much more difficult to escape when comparing, and competing, with fellow students from richer urban family backgrounds.

Chapter 7 follows several pathways open to graduates when entering the labour market. Returning to the county and being assigned a job by the county government offered occupational security. Yet returning to the economically deprived home region and, due to recent 'diploma inflation', being assigned a job that often was of a level much lower than had been expected by the student a few years earlier, did imply a loss of face and self-esteem. Conditions of selling one's labour on the urban labour market depended on the marketability of the qualification attained. While hiring out one's labour could imply a certain amount of freedom of choice and the hope for further development, it also entailed the risk of insecure employment with little welfare provision and hardly enough resources for buying an urban home. Graduates from rural family backgrounds structurally had much

less access to the main resource for finding steady urban employment: personal relations (*guanxi* 关系). The only *guanxi* available to them were those uncles and aunts who had made their way into urban employment via educational attainment. It was through these graduates of the former generation that education-based social upward mobility in the family was perpetuated. *Laoxiang* (county fellow) ties seldom proved strong enough to help arrange qualified urban employment. They were, however, an important source of students' aspirations and fostered students' hope that their own fate was changeable.

The conclusion summarises the results of preceding chapters. All in all, strikingly high educational aspirations among the local population in the fieldwork region are explainable by a peculiar mix of legacies of imperial, socialist, and three decades of reform-socialist policies in China; by the region's disadvantaged position in the wide spectrum of socio-economic discrepancy in contemporary China; and, not least, by the prevalence of a long-term perspective that takes reference to future generations. With higher education having turned into an extraordinarily expensive endeavour from the local point of view, education-based mobility has become increasingly intertwined with and dependent on local social support arrangements. Ever more educational mobility thus was not only an individual but also a socially embedded endeavour. For the students, the educational pathway away from the region was characterised by experiences of socio-economic discrepancies and, not least, by the perpetuating effect of the inequalities caused by the household registration system that caused rural students' structural lack of guanxi in the cities. It was above all students' 'reserves' in their 'base', most notably the quality of their social support networks as well as their diligence and determination to 'change fate', that shaped their pathway of mobility.

During the socialist era, with the exception of some years during the Cultural Revolution, state planning guaranteed that the acquisition of 'cultural capital' would lead to long-term social upward mobility and a guarantee of lifetime employment, thus reconfirming classical Confucian ideas about a tight link between educational success and worldly power. When higher education turned into a financially risky endeavour with an insecure outcome in the late 1990s, the former guarantee that educational achievement would lead to a sustainable 'change of fate' became replaced by pure hope. The hope is that even under the changed conditions, higher education would still render possible long-term mobility away from a region that was experienced as stagnant, if not increasingly marginal. As long as people in the region do hope that educational achievement still will bring about the 'change of fate', all efforts put into the educational endeavour seem justified to them.

Chapter 2
Setting the Scene

This chapter first introduces Huining County and describes the general living conditions in the county's villages. Family histories collected among graduates originating from rural Huining County allow a reconstruction of how scarce educational opportunities were distributed within sibling sets during the late phase of the collectivist period and the early years of the reform-socialist period. Data collected among contemporary students from the region demonstrate the impact of family planning policies on family size and on the distribution of educational opportunities within the resulting smaller sibling sets.

On the Loess Plateau

Huining County is located on the eastern rim of the Loess Plateau (*huangtu gaoyuan* 黄土高原) that stretches across China's north-western provinces of Shanxi, Shaanxi, Gansu, and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Over the centuries monsoon rains have caused heavy erosion of the thick layer of fluffy 'yellow earth' (*huangtu* 黄土), carving out a 'moonscape' of steep gullies and elongated ridges. Centuries of deforestation, slope cultivation, over-grazing, and population increase are responsible for the region's environmental degeneration. The plateau records one of the world's highest rates of erosion. Not only does erosion strip the region of its fertile soil, it causes the severe sedimentation of the Yellow River which cuts through the region. Besides lack of level ground, water scarcity is the main restraint on agricultural development in the area. With an average of less than 400 millimetres of annual precipitation, the Loess Plateau is one of China's most arid regions.

Huining County is located at an altitude of 1,600-2,200 metres and shares the typical features of the Loess Plateau. About one-third of the county's 6,439 square kilometres of land are under cultivation. The population of 583,100 inhabitants thus has access to fields that are the size of about one half a soccer field per person (Huiningxian 2007: 1). Parts of the

county benefited from the large construction project of the early 1970s when water from the Yellow River was diverted to the region. The county thus can be divided into areas with access to irrigation water along the river beds, making up for about one-third of the land, and vast regions with solely rain-fed dry fields (*handi* 旱地). Better agricultural conditions in the southern part of the county due to access to irrigation water are an often mentioned issue among the local population in the dry north where people who 'depend on heaven for food' (*kaotian chifan* 靠天吃饭) show some envy of the situation in the better-off regions.

Plate 3. Huining County in May.

The dependence on precipitation as the only water resource is aggravated by its uneven seasonal distribution, as there is hardly any rainfall between October and March. Low or late annual rainfall inevitably causes drought and severe losses of farm output. Between 1990 and 2005 average annual rainfall in the county exceeded 400 millimetres only in the years 1990 and 2003 (*Huining xianzhi* 2007b: 49). In the years immediately preceding my fieldwork, the region suffered from continuous lack of rain, receiving less than half its average amount of precipitation each successive year. 'Nine out of ten years we suffer from drought' (*shinian nei jiunian ganhan*

十年内九年干旱) is a common saying in Huining County to describe the situation, and people tend to conclude: 'This place is not suitable for human survival' (*zhe ge difang bu shihe ren shenghuo* 这个地方不适合人生活).

Although the county is poorly suited for agriculture, there is almost no industrial activity in the region to compensate for loss in agricultural output in case of drought. *The Huining Gazetteer* listed only 55 industrial enterprises in the county as of 2005, and noted that they collectively employed only 2,849 workers (*Huining xianzhi* 2007b: 206). Since the reform period, increased male labour migration has provided additional income and has helped to guarantee basic living standards of the county's population, 97 per cent of whom are ethnically Han. According to local government estimates, in the year 2000 each migrant remitted or brought back home earnings of about 2,000 yuan, adding up to as much as one-third of the county's gross domestic product.[20] Nevertheless, 44 per cent of the county's half million inhabitants officially qualify as poor (*pinkun* 贫困).

Because it is listed as one of the nationally recognised 'poor counties' (*fupinxian* 扶贫县), the region is eligible for special government support. This support often comes in the form of development projects rather than financial aid. For example, one aspect of daily life the government has been active in is the improvement of access to drinking water. While many of my informants recalled a shortage of drinking water during their childhood, today most places can provide sufficient potable water due to improved water retention facilities. Every household I visited was equipped with a concrete-lined water cistern (*shuijiao* 水窖) for the collection of rain water. The cement necessary to cover the yard surface and line the cavity had been provided by the government. Even if rainfall was below average, the water collected in the water cisterns thus usually still was sufficient for domestic use.

A Village in Huining County

The village where I stayed was located in a township (*xiang* 乡) that was considered average or well-off by county standards. The township was divided administratively into eight villagers' committees (*cunmin weiyuanhui* 村民委员会) of about 2,000 inhabitants. These were further subdivided into 73 villagers' groups (*cunmin xiaozu* 村民小组) of 200-300 inhabitants; each group consisted of two to three hamlets (*she* 社) of about 40 households.

[20] http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com/node/238, last retrieved on 28 December 2010.

The township was located between 1,700 and 2,100 metres in altitude and was home to some 17,400 inhabitants. The population had access to about 6.5 *mu* of arable land per person, about one-third of which was on terraced slopes.[21] Although the township was located only about 60 kilometres from the county seat, the road was bumpy, only partly paved, and crossed several ranges of hills, making the journey by public bus last some three to four hours.

Plate 4. A typical courtyard house.

Being located in the northern part of the county, the village (officially 'villagers' group') had no access to irrigation, so that fields were watered by rain only. The village was situated at the bottom of a hill that ranged alongside a broad valley. Parts of the fields were thus level, if rain-fed, and villagers considered themselves better-off than the inhabitants of extremely poor and remote mountain villages who depend on sloped-field farming.

Administratively, the village was divided into a northern and a southern hamlet. Topographically, however, it was divided into a western

[21] One *mu* (亩) equals one-sixth of an acre (.0667 hectares). The average of 4,335 square metres per person in the township thus was slightly higher than the average in the whole county.

and an eastern hamlet located on either side of an approximately 300 metre wide valley that stretched in a north-south direction. The small valley opened onto a broader plain at its northern reaches. At its southern end, the valley that separated the western and eastern hamlets was marked by graveyards and rather steep barren slopes. According to the memories of the elderly, people had first settled at the eastern rim. During the fertility friendly Maoist years, population had increased considerably, with families containing four to eight siblings. While daughters usually had left for other villages upon marriage, sons often had separated from their parental household (*fenjia* 分家) by building a house for their own nuclear families just next door, usually leaving the parental home to the youngest brother in return for the latter's (and his wife's) daily care for the elderly parents. The immediate neighbours of almost every household in the village headed by men born in the 1950s and 1960s were thus brothers. Since some sons had chosen to settle at the opposite end of the small valley, the village had gradually expanded westwards.

Plate 5. Paying respect to the ancestors' graves at Chinese New Year.

Economy

In recent years the majority of middle-aged men have left the village as migrant labour. Most of them return home only for the Chinese New Year, though some also return for a few days during the agricultural season to help their wives and elderly parents. The main reasons for labour migration, people claimed, were the lack of cash income from agriculture needed to cover educational and medical expenses and the decreasing need for labour in agriculture due to the scarce harvests caused by successive years of drought.

Due to the absence of most middle-aged men, agricultural work was left to be done by the women and the elderly. They grew wheat, corn, potatoes, lentils, linseed, peas, and alfalfa in crop rotation with one harvest per year. Yields depended very much on the amount and timing of the annual rainfall. People claimed that in years of drought the harvest was just enough to sustain their families, but that there was hardly a surplus to sell for cash income. Besides agriculture, each household usually kept one pig, a few chickens, one or two mules, and sometimes also a few sheep.

Plate 6. Harvest.

Since 2003 the township had been taking part in the national afforestation scheme of 'converting fields into forests' (*tuigeng huanlin* 退耕换林). Although the planting of new trees was not very successful due to the arid climate, the policy scheme was very much welcomed. Under the policy, the national government paid directly to the households an annual compensation of 160 yuan per *mu* of sloped-fields that were registered for afforestation – an amount that clearly exceeded the return possible from agriculture.[22] Initially, the scheme had been planned to last for eight years, aiming at enabling the villagers to sell the wood afterwards. But even the local Party Secretary admitted that the government was aware that afforestation was not likely to be successful in this arid region. In his view, the policy was thus more of an indirect subsidy to the rural dwellers. Since the policy meant a reduction in the number of fields that each household had under cultivation, it caused further migration of the population.

Middle-aged men who had not left the village were usually engaged in some kind of income generating non-farming activity, like running a mill or a small shop, or offering threshing, transportation, or craftsmen services. Such activity was, however, very limited in scope. Some women made use of the rare options to earn cash by joining the local road construction team or by hiring themselves out as day agricultural labour in one of the neighbouring villages.

When young parents both worked as labour migrants in the cities, they usually left their children in the village, entrusted to the paternal grandparents' care. Students enrolled in senior secondary education boarded in the county seat and only returned home during holidays. As in other parts of China (e.g. Zhang 2006), it thus was mainly women, the elderly, and children under the age of 15 who were permanently present in the village.

Education

Following the promulgation of the Compulsory Education Law in 1986, children must attend six years of elementary and three years of junior high school. In the village where I stayed, there was an elementary school at the edge of the village until 2010. After its closure, children attended primary school in the township seat five kilometres away, and continued their education at the junior high school there. Pupils thus could complete their compulsory education locally. Some pupils in other parts of rural Huining County took up boarding even during junior secondary school because their

[22] The amount of compensation differed considerably between regions in Huining County. The compensation paid in this township was considered to be comparatively high.

homes were too remote for a daily commute or because their parents preferred to send them to better quality schools.

The main criterion revealing discrepancies in terms of quality between the 53 junior high schools in Huining County was the quota of pupils passing the entrance examination to senior high school. Across the county, some 20,000 pupils competed annually for 6,000 places.[23] To attend three years of senior secondary schooling thus was an option for fewer than one-third of the children of the corresponding age cohort.[24]

Chances to pass the countywide senior high school entrance examination were clearly lower for pupils who had attended junior high schools in the rural townships. Rural families who could afford it therefore often tried to enrol their children at primary or junior secondary schools in the county seat to improve their chances to enter senior secondary school. Such enrolments required not only sufficient financial resources, but also efficacious relationships within the county's educational administration to overcome the legal hurdles engendered by the household registration system. Relatives or neighbours with positions in the county educational bureaucracy thus often were approached for support in getting a child accepted. Since primary and junior secondary schools in the county seat did not offer boarding facilities, the placement of a younger child in a better school also required a family member, usually the mother or grandmother, to live with the pupil in privately rented rooms in the city.

Since there were obvious quality differences between Huining County's five senior secondary schools, the results of the entrance examination for senior secondary schooling were decisive also for future educational attainment. Among the five senior secondary schools, named Huining Senior Secondary Schools Numbers 1-5, four were located in the county seat. Huining Senior Secondary Schools Numbers 1 and 2 competed for first rank in terms of their pupils' performance in the national college entrance examination (*gaokao* 高考), but children attending one of the other three schools had much lower chances of placing into a good university.

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[23] This proportion was recurrently referred to in conversations with teachers and headmasters at junior and high schools in the county as well as with officials of the county government. According to local statistics, in 2005 there were 17,373 participants in the countywide secondary high school enrolment exam (including 9,127 exam repeaters). Of these, 5,760 (approximately 30 per cent) were admitted the one of the five secondary high schools in the county (Yun 2007: 215).

[24] The national gross enrolment rate in senior high schools was 59.2 per cent in 2005 (2006 Education Statistics Report, quoted in *People's Daily Online,* http://english.people.com.cn/200703/09/eng20070309_356051.html, last retrieved on 28 December 2010).

Plate 7. 'Repetition class' preparing for a second attempt at the '*gaokao*'.

Once a child entered senior secondary school, educational aspirations concerning the outcome to be expected in the national college entrance examination three years later ran high. When exam results in the *gaokao* allowed for enrolment at tertiary vocational schools (*gaozhi* 高职), specialised colleges (*dazhuan* 大专), or even Bachelor programs (*benke* 本科) at average universities, some students and their parents felt dissatisfied.[25] They then opted for the student to repeat a year of schooling and re-take the *gaokao*, with the hope of obtaining a place in a key university (*zhongdian daxue* 重点大学). Repetition classes for exam preparation (*fuduban* 复读班) at the senior secondary schools were extremely crowded with up to 150 students per classroom. Such repetition years at senior secondary school also meant payment of increased tuition fees, the amount of which depended on the results in the first college entrance exam. However, this investment and the hardships of another year of disciplined and diligent study seemed merited by the hope that one would enjoy the

[25] *Gaokao, gaozhi,* and *dazhuan* are abbreviations for, respectively, *gaodeng xuexiao ruxue kaoshi* 高等学校入学考试; *gaodeng zhiye xuexiao* 高等职业学校; and *daxue zhuanke xuexiao* 大学专科学校.

reputation of having entered a good university, and that one would accordingly acquire better job possibilities. Financial calculations, however, also played a role in decisions to repeat the exam: more prestigious universities usually provide more scholarship opportunities and credit possibilities for students from poor families.

At the Turning Point (1977)

When the college entrance examination was re-installed in 1977, the first cohorts of exam participants had received their elementary and secondary education during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Those who passed the examination during the first two decades after its reintroduction benefitted from the country's shortage of qualified personnel to carry out its reform project. Taken care of by the state job allocation system, they made their professional careers on the government payroll in administration or academia. Even with such rosy prospects, the educational pathway out of rural Huining was narrow for the first cohorts, and has continued to be extremely narrow for later cohorts. Until 1986 only a few hundred students from the region passed the national college entrance exam each year.[26]

The parents of current students in rural Huining were in the age cohort for higher educational attainment in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but had not reached such high educational levels. In my survey, more than one-half of the fathers had completed no more than junior high school, and approximately one-third of the mothers had no formal schooling. Only one-quarter of the fathers and less than one-tenth of the mothers had attended senior secondary school.

Even though statistics on educational attainment during the Cultural Revolution are scarce (see also Deng and Treiman 1997), it seems safe to suggest that the national policy of expanding rural schooling by having each commune (equivalent to the contemporary administrative unit of 'township') set up its own elementary, junior, and even senior secondary schools boosted the educational attainment of rural youth in Huining County.[27] Many of the

[26] Participation at the exam was comparatively high in the first years after its reintroduction with more than 1,000 candidates taking part in the exam in the years 1977-79. After that, the annual number of exam participants decreased before it again reached 1,000 in 1986. It then increased to 2,000 in 1989 and 3,000 in 1996. The quota of candidates allowed to pass the exam was as low as 5 per cent in 1979-81, and oscillated between 15 per cent and 25 per cent in the years 1982-99. These statistics include students who were admitted into vocational institutions as well as universities (Wang 1989; *Huiningxian* 2007: 614; Yun 2007: 225).

[27] The junior and senior secondary schools established within communes initially comprised two years each of schooling. According statistical data for Huining County, junior secondary school enrolment in Huining County increased from 80 pupils in 1949 to 240 pupils in 1957. It reached its peak of 8,045 pupils in 1978. After that it decreased to 5,465 pupils in 1983.

graduates originating from rural Huining County had attended senior secondary schools in the commune or brigade (equivalent to the contemporary administrative unit of 'villagers' committee'), most of which were dismantled immediately after the Cultural Revolution. Unlike their elder siblings, rural youth who were the right age for high school during the Cultural Revolution thus benefited from local education which laid the base for education-based careers. Certainly, given the anti-academic ideology of the Cultural Revolution, school curricula during this historical period tended to emphasise physical labour over academic learning according to the slogans 'leave the classroom, leave the school building' (*zouchu ketang*, *zouchu xiaomen* 走出课堂, 走出校门) and 'take society as a classroom, take the three great revolutionary struggles as study contents' (*yi shehui wei ketang, sanda geming douzheng wei neirong* 以社会为课堂, 三大革命斗争为内容).[28] Moreover, in the newly set-up rural schools teachers seldom had attained more than high school education themselves. Several graduates from rural Huining County did, however, claim that the county's rural schools were less affected by political movements due to their remote location. Some pupils with 'bad class family background' (*chengfen buhao* 成分不好) had returned to rural Huining precisely for that reason.

Wang Bing, born in rural Huining in 1962, was a case to the contrary. In the 1970s, his father, a brigade leader, sent him from the village to attend school in the nearby city of Huining, the county seat. Wang Bing remembered the revolutionary campaigns propagating that 'it is useless to read books' (*dushu wuyong* 读书无用). He recalled that these campaigns criticising academic learning fell on particularly fertile ground among his classmates, who as holders of urban household registration were in any case entitled to state job assignments independent of their individual educational achievements. Students from rural family backgrounds like his own, claimed Wang Bing, valued schooling because it enhanced the probability of upward mobility. With education, he might be assigned an administrative position in the locality or be recruited as a worker.

During the Cultural Revolution 'class line' policies made students dependent on political recommendation instead of educational achievement

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Senior secondary school enrolment increased from 90 pupils in 1965 to a peak of 1,626 pupils in 1976. After the Cultural Revolution, the figures decreased to 1,369 pupils in 1984 (Yun 2007: 61).

[28] The three revolutionary struggles are class struggle, production, and scientific experimenting.

for admission to educational institutions beyond senior high school.[29] All graduates I talked to who had attended senior secondary or even tertiary schooling during collectivist times had a father, a brother, or an uncle who was either a cadre in the local administration, a teacher, a soldier returned to civil employment, or a worker recruited by the local government to work outside the community. All such employment opportunities had been open only to those with good relations with local officials. Moreover, almost all of the graduates in my sample who had gone through higher education during the Cultural Revolution or shortly afterwards had a father or a grandfather who had received some education in pre-socialist times, either in local private schools or with an itinerant teacher. Moreover, many of these graduates came from families labelled 'middle peasants' (*zhongnong* 中农).[30] At least for some families, it thus had been possible to convert pre-socialist economic-political as well as cultural capital into good relations with, or direct participation in, local socialist political power. This meant that their children had over-proportionally good chances to be recommended for educational attainment.

Education-related support was clearly gendered in pre-socialist and collectivist times. Grandmothers and mothers of current rural Huining students were less educated than their husbands. The numerous family histories I collected among students and graduates clearly show that in the parental and grandparental generations, it was unquestioned that formal schooling should be pursued first for the son(s) of a family, if it was an option at all. Lack of support for female education was commonly ascribed to the centrality of patriliny and patrilocality in the Chinese kinship system, implying that daughters were no source of support for their natal family after marriage. Moreover, freeing daughters from daily chores to educate them deprived the family of necessary labour in the household and fields. When the age difference in sibling sets stretched over a decade or more, sisters were often tasked with household chores, the care of their younger siblings,

[29] The proclaimed aim of class line policies was to eliminate the basic differences between mental and manual labour, peasants and workers, and city and countryside by giving privileged access to goods and services on the basis of one's class status (Andreas 2002: 468).

[30] Class line policies implied that every citizen was assigned a particular class label. For the rural population these class labels were to reflect the family's land holdings prior to land reform. Those categorised as landlords (*dizhu* 地主) and rich peasants (*funong* 富农) were considered the former exploitive class and thus belonged to the 'enemy of the people'. The category of 'middle peasant' (*zhongnong* 中农) included also rich middle peasants (*fuyu zhongnong* 富裕中农), small landholders (*xiaotudi chuzuzhe* 小土地出租者), and merchants (*shangren* 商人). They were considered 'middle class', the ally of the revolutionary class. Only those assigned the label of poor or lower middle peasant (*pinxia zhongnong* 贫下中农) were considered the revolutionary class.

and even looking after their elder brothers' children. However, some girls benefited from being among the youngest in large sibling sets; they experienced less pressure to help within the household and had higher chances of being supported in a bid for education by an elder brother who had access to the relevant resources. In some cases, too, brigade leaders had tried to persuade parents to have their daughters continue education. Some girls thus had attended senior high school during the Cultural Revolution, even though their numbers were much lower than that of their male peers.[31]

With the reintroduction of the college entrance examination, admission to tertiary education became based on educational achievement instead of political recommendation and class status. 'Political capital' thus lost its direct impact on educational attainment. This changed the situation above all for the offspring of 'bad class' families, who had been banned from recommendation to educational institutions.

During China's rapid and radical social changes, profit from new educational policies was sometimes a matter of belonging to the right age cohort. For siblings this meant that while some could take advantage of an historical period that witnessed newly emerging educational opportunities, others simply missed the benefit. With the reintroduction of a merit-based educational system, siblings with just a few years of age difference thus may have found themselves in very different educational and, by implication, professional circumstances. When the college entrance examination was reintroduced and with it the possibility of state-guaranteed upward mobility for everybody irrespective of class status, some parents hoped to educate all their children, including girls, while others continued to discriminate against daughters.

That some parents harboured high aspirations for their children's educational pathway became particularly clear when they made their children repeatedly participate in the national college entrance exam. Graduate Zhang Hua, born in 1962, was a case in point. As the eldest of four siblings, her father repeatedly persuaded her to take part in the exam, even though she failed each year. After eight years, she finally passed. Her

[31] In my survey, fewer than 10 per cent of mothers and about one-third of fathers had returned to the countryside after graduating from high school. These figures do not necessarily reflect the rates at which women were educated, however, because they do not include individuals who did not return to the village. Female senior secondary school graduates may have had better chances than their male counterparts to marry hypergamously into an urban family or may have been recruited for urban labour. A survey of youth in 100 rural villages in Gansu Province found that the father's level of education mattered consistently for predicting the attainment of higher education among children. The authors of the study concluded that 'each year of additional father's education is associated with an increase of odds of university attendance of 20% among local children' (Hannum, An and Cherng 2011: 299).

university education earned her a position as a junior high school teacher upon graduation, but she had failed her father's goal to serve as a role model to her younger siblings. None had been successful in terms of education and all thus remained in the village as local peasants.

Accounts differ concerning educational spending during the first phase of the reform policies. Generally speaking educational costs were taken care of by the state. In the 1970s and early 1980s, government subsidies were sufficient to allow students even to contribute to family budgets from their stipends. Since the mid-1980s, however, some extra financial support from the family to students has been necessary. The amount of familial support has depended on the course of studies (with highly subsidised teachers' training entailing the least extra costs), as well as the university's location (due to travel costs and discrepancies in local living standards).

Changed Conditions (after 1997)

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, circumstances changed dramatically. A new wave of reforms turned higher education into an expensive private endeavour, while the state gradually retreated from job allocation for the graduates. At the same time, the educational sector expanded rapidly, with enrolment rates in institutions of higher education quadrupling between 1998 and 2004 (Bai 2006: 130f). It was no coincidence that a 'users pay' system, with tuition fees rising to cover about 44 per cent of the daily operating expenses of higher education, was introduced in 2005.[32] This timing coincided precisely when the first generation of children born under the family planning policy came of age. In fact, the assumption that parents of only one or two children would be willing to invest more in each of them played an important role in the policy change (Bai 2006). Chinese demographers were convinced that 'reverse social engineering' could accomplish in China the same kind of increased parental investment in children that had accompanied lower fertility in other parts of the world when the costs of child-rearing were high (Kipnis 2009). Accordingly, reduced fertility brought about by the family planning policy was expected to induce increasing parental investment in their only child, thus improving the overall 'quality' of the children.

[32] Xinhua News Agency, 8 March 2006. According to the China Youth and Children Research Centre (CYCRC), tuition fees have increased 25 times, from 200 yuan in 1989 to over 5,000 yuan in 2007. During the same period, the incomes of rural and urban inhabitants only increased by 9 and 6 times, respectively; government expenditure on higher education shrank from 93.5 per cent of operating costs in 1990 to 42.6 per cent in 2006 (Wang 2011: 279).

The national policy that expanded enrolment quotas in tertiary education translated into rapidly increasing numbers of participants in the national college entrance examination also in Huining County.[33] With educational costs rising exorbitantly from the local point of view, students came to depend increasingly on their families' willingness and ability to support their educational endeavours, while they came to expect difficulties when entering the newly emerging but already saturated labour markets upon graduation.[34]

The students I met certainly had grown up in family structures different from those of their parents.[35] Local informants recalled how family planning campaigns had been carried out in Huining County since the 1980s, drastically changing the family patterns that had been customary during the 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, the average number of children had been about six, and families with up to ten children had not been unusual.[36] By the 2000s, the one-child policy had been relaxed slightly due to resistance against it; ethnically Han-Chinese families with rural household registration are allowed to have two children when the first one is a girl and if a certain spacing of several years between both births is kept. This policy is difficult to implement in rural Huining, as evidenced by the manifold

[33] In 1999 about 15 per cent of the 3,160 exam participants were accepted for higher education (including 771 pupils who enrolled at secondary level institutions). Within five years, the rate had increased to an 82 per cent acceptance rate for 6,482 exam participants (including 1,100 pupils passing for secondary institutions) (Yun 2007: 225).

[34] In early 2006 the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) estimated that 60 per cent of higher education graduates would face unemployment that year. Such a high percentage was to be blamed on the rapid expansion of college enrolment in the previous years. While in 2006 the number of graduates increased by 22 per cent as compared to 2005, reaching a total of 4.13 million, the job market was expected to absorb only 1.66 million new graduates that year. Moreover, university graduates were competing with millions of other newcomers entering the labour force, including high school and vocational school graduates, unemployed and laid-off urban workers, and large numbers of rural labourers looking for work in urban areas. Experts agree that poor standards in tertiary education that result in low level qualifications of the graduates are one of the main problems causing high graduate unemployment. Despite the rapid expansion in student numbers, government spending on education has hardly changed at all in the 1990s ('Bleak Future for Millions of Graduates', *The South China Morning Post*, 23 November 2006).

[35] China's total fertility rate was 5.81 per woman in 1970. With policies to reduce reproduction starting in 1973 under the slogan 'late birth, greater birth spacing, less births' (*wan xi shao* 晚 稀 少), the fertility rate had already decreased to 2.75 per woman by 1979. The official one-child policy was launched in 1980 (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005: 17-18; Zhang 2007).

[36] Genealogies collected among students and graduates as well as data collected in the village indicate that the fertility rate in rural Huining County is at or slightly above the national average.

announcements and slogans of the family planning offices that decorated buildings, walls, iron gates at village entrances, as well electrical cubicles at road crossings. While some slogans, such as 'girls and boys are equal' (*nan nü pingdeng* 男女平等) or 'also females pass on the family line' (*nü'er ye chuanzongren* 女儿也传宗人), aim at changing people's consciousness, others appeal more to their pragmatism. Parents meeting the policy demands were promised annual elderly support of 600 yuan per person. Women willing to undergo sterilisation after having given birth to one boy or two girls were offered a cash sum of 3,600 and 4,000 yuan. Children born within the legal framework were promised an additional 30 points in the countywide senior secondary school entrance examination or 10 points in the national college entrance examination (in case of enrolment at a tertiary educational institution in Gansu Province). This last offer clearly drew on the notion that a higher level of education for children would translate into improved conditions of elderly support for their parents.

Plate 8. Announcement of the village government ['If parents undergo sterilization after having a single child or two daughters, their children are awarded 10 extra points in the college entrance exam in case they get enrolled at a university within the province'].

University students of the early 2000s were born in the early or mid-1980s. Family planning policies probably had some, but obviously no breakthrough effect on their parents' reproductive behaviour. Only 6 per cent of the students in my survey did not have any siblings, while 30 per cent had one sibling; 41 per cent had two; and 20 per cent had three siblings.[37] Continuous preference for sons becomes evident in the following patterns: 20 per cent of all families had only sons and no daughter, while only 5 per cent had only daughters but no son. In case of female students, the probability that she had a brother was high, while male students did not necessarily have a male sibling. The fact that the eldest sister of the students was on average much older than the eldest brother suggests that parents continued to have children until they had at least one son. This hypothesis is further supported by the finding that the last child was male in about two-thirds of the families, and female in only about one-third of the cases.

Since the 1980s, the number of children in rural Huining families has declined even further. At the time of my research, the majority of village families with minor children had only two – usually one of each gender. One-third of the families had three children (most of them two daughters and one son), and only a very few families had more than three children. The only family with one child was the owner of the village drugstore, a woman who had been to medical college and had married her classmate, a young man from the village who was working as a doctor in the county seat.

As to whether students' siblings were also supported, it is clear that parents who support the education of one child also support the others. There is, however, a significant gender difference in educational attainment. Questions about students' brothers revealed that 80 per cent were attending or had attended senior secondary school or higher education. In other words, male siblings of contemporary students of both genders had a very high probability of educational success. The probability of educational attainment was, however, different for sisters. Among current students surveyed, only 63 per cent of their sisters had reached secondary school, while a full 37 per cent had achieved only junior high school degrees or had dropped out earlier. Given the estimated gender ratio among local senior high school students as 60 per cent male and 40 per cent female, this finding is not astonishing.[38] Yet such a finding puts into question the frequently heard claims that 'girls

[37] From later conversations with some of the survey participants I learned that biological siblings who had been given away due to violation of family planning policies had not necessarily been reported in the questionnaire.

[38] As gender sensitive statistics were not available, this ratio is an estimate based on my own observations and on the calculations of headmasters of local schools and other people responsible for education in the township and county government.

and boys are treated equally in terms of educational support' and that 'girls are not discriminated against any more'. Gender discrimination as evidenced by my survey thus seems to work in a rather subtle way.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a description of the particular physical conditions in the fieldwork region. The deprived environment offers few opportunities for earning cash income locally, so almost all men of working age are labour migrants. Government subsidies for local participation in an environmental protection and afforestation scheme has given further impetus to labour migration as more land is removed from cultivation. Under such tight economic circumstances, educational aspirations are high. Many local parents are determined to have their children receive better quality schooling than is available in villages, and send them to the county seat. Parents also frequently prefer their child to repeat the final year of schooling to achieve a better institutional placement from the national college entrance exam.

After the national college entrance exam was re-inaugurated in 1977, educational achievement was re-linked to state-guaranteed careers. However, this rapid policy change affected the fate of siblings in diverse ways. Even small age differences among siblings sometimes meant widely different educational opportunities and, by implication, highly divergent life chances and future careers.

Unlike the 'early graduates' who completed tertiary education between 1980-97, students of the 2000s grew up in smaller sibling sets, and their educational pathways necessitated high levels of spending. On average, the family planning policy of the early 1980s and the educational reforms of the late 1990s seem to have reached their common goal. Both policies calculated that the parents of fewer offspring would invest more into each child. Educational opportunities have been more evenly distributed among siblings born since the 1980s, even though the costs involved in educational endeavours may well amount to several times the parental cash income. The majority of contemporary students' parents had received comparatively little education themselves, but highly valued the education of their own children. Gender still influenced not only reproductive choices but also educational achievement, albeit to a much lesser degree than in the generation of the students' parents.

Chapter 3
Parental Hope

This chapter explores why and how parents supported their children's higher education. It looks at parents' educational aspirations and the pedagogical efforts they exerted to have their children succeed in schooling. Parents expected a mix of immediate and long-term returns from educational achievement. Above all, their high aspirations for their children's educational success were connected to the production of hope for a different life and a 'change of fate', if not for themselves, then at least for future generations.

One of the long-term returns that could be expected from investing in children's education is a return in the form of financial support and daily care in old age and infirmity. Even though the parents of current students were only in their mid-forties, the lack of alternative sources of elderly support certainly made the question of who was to take care of them in their old age worry them. After all, supporting a child's higher education meant spending substantial family resources or even going heavily into debt. In the second part of the chapter I therefore explore the extent to which parental support of children's education was also related to questions of a changing intergenerational contract. The traditional intergenerational contract in rural China places the primary responsibility for the care of elderly parents onto sons, while the services of daughters are considered 'lost' to their natal families after they marry. Increased investment in the education of daughters thus raises questions about how the gendered dimensions of the intergenerational contract are changing and the new roles that daughters are playing in the support of their elderly parents.

Dimensions of Parental Hope

Parents' Education and the Delegation of Hope

The extensive engagement with individualised teaching, such as that given to Xu Tiaodi, one of the two champions described in the prologue, was

certainly different from what peasant parents in the region usually offer their children. Most of the students from rural Huining with whom I talked reported that their parents, being peasants or labour migrants, neither had the time nor the capability to tutor them. Even if the parents themselves had attended junior or even senior secondary school, it had been during the Cultural Revolution, when curricula were dominated by manual labour and practical learning, instead of academic teaching.[39] The knowledge these parents had acquired thus was hardly sufficient for coaching their children beyond the level of elementary school.

Like most university students of the 2000s, Zhang Ruilin, a 20-year-old student at Lanzhou University, was self-tutored. 'I learned everything by myself', he said, 'What should my parents have taught me anyway? My mother cannot read a single character and my father dropped out of junior secondary school'. Many students from rural Huining family backgrounds offered similar descriptions of their educational experience. Indeed, my survey of these students indicated that two-thirds of their mothers and about one-third of their fathers were illiterate or had attained only elementary education.[40]

A not insignificant minority of parents of university students originating from rural Huining, however, had attended local senior secondary school when additional local schools were opened during the Cultural Revolution and provided educational opportunities for the peasantry in a historically unprecedented way.[41] Given the anti-elitist educational policies that aimed at mass education in accordance with local practical necessities according to the slogan 'elementary and junior secondary school students do not leave the brigade, senior secondary school students do not leave the commune'[42], their education from the start had been aimed at

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[39] During the Cultural Revolution, 'accelerated secondary schools' officially offered shortened curricula comprising two years of junior secondary school and two years of senior secondary school (Pepper 1990). In local practice, primary schools started to 'wear the hat' (*daimao* 戴帽) of junior high schools while junior high schools functioned as senior high schools (Yun 2007: 68). The role that 'practical education' had played in schooling was recalled differently by my informants. While some remembered that they had mainly worked in the fields instead of studying in the class room, others claimed that the teachers in remote rural schools had often ignored state policies and continued with conventional teaching.

[40] Since the survey was conducted only among students from rural Huining who successfully entered tertiary educational institutions, this ratio is in no way representative for the general population of rural Huining County.

[41] According to a publication of the Educational Department of the Huining County Government the number of junior and senior high school graduates in Huining County rose from 212 and 60 respectively in 1965 to 6,898 and 1,169 in the year 1976 (Yun 2007: 61).

[42] *Shang xiaoxue buchu shengchandui, shang chuzhong buchu shengchandui, shang gaozhong buchu gongshe* (上小学不出生产队, 上初中不出生产队, 上高中不出公社).

making them stay in the locality as peasants. Yet these parents had also witnessed how former senior high school classmates had passed the national college entrance exam after its reintroduction, and had made a professional career outside the locality. Some parents stated that they themselves had not taken part in the exam since their family, like most in the village, did not value education much at that time. Others reported that they had participated in the exam but had failed, by 'just a few points'.

It has been argued that the widening of rural education during the Cultural Revolution contributed to the accelerated economic development at the beginning of the reform period (Han 2001). Another often neglected impact of rural educational policies during the Cultural Revolution, I argue, is that the generation of children who were school-age during the expansion of local schooling during the Cultural Revolution developed a positive appreciation of the benefits of schooling. Although my data is not conclusive, it suggests that the effects of the educational policies of the Cultural Revolution were particularly strong within families headed by parents who had attended the newly-opened schools of the revolutionary period.[43]

At the very least, the children of the Cultural Revolution who had attended school but remained in the countryside became parents who cherished high educational aspirations for their children. Having been to junior or senior high school themselves and later witnessing the 'success stories' of some of their former classmates or siblings who benefited from the reintroduction of education-based upward mobility of the planned economy directly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, left a feeling that they themselves had missed only narrowly such chances. These reflections seemed unaffected by the degree to which the experience of schooling had been work-based, politically-oriented, or non-academic. Some parents often used these feelings and reflections on narrowly-missed chances to motivate children to study. Other parents emphasised that they had lacked educational ambition only because during the Cultural Revolution – education had been little valued as a means for upward mobility. Both arguments were equally deployed when parents explicitly delegated the fulfilment of their own hopes to their children.

The enormous socio-economic discrepancies in reform-socialist China were present in the village via satellite television in almost every household,

[43] I did not compare the familial educational backgrounds of less-achieving pupils and school drop-outs with those of successful candidates. However, as discussed in chapter 2, students at the national key university tended to have fathers with a higher level of education than students at the average provincial college. The educational level of mothers was similar for students at both educational institutions.

via new consumption goods at the market, via the appearance and attitude of returning students, graduates, migrant labourers and other former villagers, and through the experiences villagers themselves made during trips outside the locality for various reasons. These encounters made people realise the comparative poverty of their daily life in the village. A few labour migrants had managed to arrange permanent out-migration from the village. Most local parents, however, had no opportunity for changing their situation in a sustainable way. All they could do was to delegate that wish to the next generation and provide their children with the necessary preconditions, namely educational opportunities.

Liu Fanyu, the illiterate mother in my host family, connected her lack of education to feelings of helplessness in navigating the world much beyond the village. 'In contemporary society', she said, 'knowledge is important'. 'Look at me; I really have problems in getting along since I have no education. I cannot even go to the county town without getting lost there. I cannot read a single Chinese character, however big it is written'. Most women seemed to enjoy a regular trip to the township centre on market days because it offered chances for sociality and a diversion from everyday life. But visits to the county seat, as several local women admitted, made them feel uneasy. For villagers, society (*shehui* 社会) was far away and very different from their own rural life (*nongcun shenghuo* 农村生活). The same women told me that their children would have to face the complicated life 'out there' in society, where knowledge was increasingly important for getting along well. To prepare their children for the challenge of 'modern society' (*xiandai shehui* 现代社会), the women meant to provide them with as much schooling as possible. Fathers held a similar perspective. As the father of a senior secondary school student explained, 'in today's society you need knowledge. The higher your educational degree, the better you get along. What is enough today might not be sufficient tomorrow any longer. That is why I want my child to get as high an educational degree as possible'.

Yet pushing their children to pursue a life radically different and spatially distant from their own created a dilemma for parents. To encourage their children to leave the village was also to act against the parents' own interests of having their children remain nearby. Mothers, although proud of their children's educational achievement, often cried when they sent their children off to boarding school or university after holidays. Sometimes parents attempted to compromise by influencing their children to choose a tertiary institution that was closer to home. In general, parents felt that since current conditions made separation from their children inevitable in any

case, they would rather have the child leave for the securities promised by education than to send them into the uncertainties of labour migration.

For all the talk about the importance of education among parents, however, many did little more than verbally admonish their children to 'study earnestly' (*haohao xuexi* 好好学习).[44] As will become clear in chapter 5, it was often the children themselves who put all their efforts into striving for high levels of educational attainment.

Everybody Has Reason to Hope

Current college and university students were born in the early or mid-1980s. A high portion of those students originating from rural Huining recalled that their parents had – already at a very early age – explicitly set the goal for them to become a university student. More than half of the students participating in my survey remember that their parents had enunciated these expectations when the student was in elementary school or even earlier. Even before the reforms accelerated in the 1990s, these parents cherished high aspirations for their children's academic future.

It is interesting to speculate about how and why such high educational aspirations flourished among rural parents who had only a very low level of education themselves. It seems that even with the initially low quotas for passing the re-inaugurated national college entrance exam, the number of successful local examinees was sufficient to inspire hope among rural parents that their own children might be able to pass.[45] In every community I visited in rural Huining County, villagers recalled cases of students and families who in the early 1980s migrated from the region on the basis of their educational attainment. Such examples of students who became state employees obviously induced many local parents to set goals high for their own children's educational achievement. Such success stories suggested that educational advancement was a realistic option for all children, even those who had little or no familial support in terms of political, social, economic, or cultural capital.

In addition to the individual examples of those rural pupils who had passed the national exams, the exams themselves struck villagers as meritocratic. As in traditional Confucian education, the educational system

[44] The second part of the saying that is attributed to Mao Zedong and decorates school buildings and classrooms all over China is 'move upward day by day' (*tiantian xiangshang* 天天向上).

[45] The local quota of successful candidates among all exam participants was around 5 per cent in the years 1979-81. It then increased to about 20-25 per cent of all exam participants in the years 1982-88. In absolute terms the number of successful exam participants increased from 91 (1979) to 208 (1982) and 556 (1988) (Huiningxian 2007: 614).

of reform-era China is based on learning by rote and the passing of examinations.[46] Since the late 1980s, this approach has come under criticism in relation to the discussion about 'quality education' (*suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育); critics have argued that exam-oriented education (*yingshi jiaoyu* 应试教育) is unsuitable for preparing children for the challenges of a rapidly modernising society. However, given the sheer size of the Chinese educational system, as well as concerns about opening doors to corruption and rising inequalities, efforts to implement quality-oriented education have met with little success (Kipnis 2006, 2007, 2011). From the point of view of students from poor rural areas, the exam-oriented system is preferable to quality-oriented education. As they see it, rote learning is more equitable than forms of education that stress knowledge application or creativity because it enables pupils to compete independently of their familial cultural capital. Similarly, most pupils prefer to study the hard sciences in which answers are more clearly right or wrong than to study humanities which have fuzzy evaluation criteria.

For pupils and their parents, educational success was believed to be above all a matter of diligence and the capacity for memorisation. Local examples of educational success were frequent enough to prove that village children could change fate if they exerted enough diligence, determination, and self-discipline. In China, the image of education as a vehicle for upward social mobility that is open to every (male) person has a long history. For centuries, positions in the imperial state bureaucracy were non-hereditary, and assigned within the meritocratic system of the civil servant examination. In principal, any male could become a member of the literati and thus acquire a position as a civil servant. The theoretical openness of the examination system disguised the reality that success in the exam was severely constrained by the requirement to invest substantial time, effort, and training in preparation. Opportunities within the state selection process of its elite thus remained limited to the offspring of families with the necessary cultural and economic resources. Those men who succeeded also needed the personal stamina as boys and young men to study hard.

Since the reform period, the entrance examination to senior secondary school held on the county level as well as the nationwide unified college entrance examination, both marked by external auditors, made admission appear to function comparatively equitably, leaving little room for

[46] The minimum requirement for any aspirant to compete in the imperial civil service examination was the mastery of the Four Books and Five Classics (*sishu wujing* 四书五经). This meant that he needed to memorise more than 400,000 characters of classical Chinese text; such a feat required exactly 6 years of memorisation at the rate of 200 characters per day (Miyazaki 1976: 16-17).

corruption and nepotism.[47] Kipnis (2001b) points out that in contrast to Bourdieu's assertion that cultural capital is reproduced intergenerationally, there is another expectation in China. Namely, because they are assumed to have stronger educational motivations, poor rural students are usually believed to be higher achievers than their fellow students with urban and well-off families. Demographic patterns show that this expectation of 'poor children being better students' does not reflect reality (Fong 2004: 106). As elsewhere, parental economic and cultural capital impacts children's educational achievement in China. For example, I found that it was not uncommon for educated parents in Lanzhou or Beijing to teach their children English or pay for private language tutors from early childhood onwards. Such opportunities were unknown to rural Huining pupils, and even the English teachers in rural schools often hardly knew how to speak their subject language.

The notion that poor students are better achievers is partly myth, but also has some roots in reality. For example, Vanessa Fong (2004: 104) hinted that a certain portion of school placements are sold to low achievers, who would have no chance of admittance on the basis of their scores alone. When well-off families buy places for their low-achieving children at better schools, then most of the best students at each level of school do turn out to be poorer than the worst-achieving students at the same institution. This practice helps perpetuate the myth by disguising inequalities within the system. Yet, the myth of the highly achieving poor also functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy by encouraging educational motivation and self-confidence among rural pupils and their parents. Still, only the most self-disciplined students manage to overcome the obstacle of lack of family or regionally based (cultural) capital. Moreover, as Kipnis (2001: 21f) showed, if extraordinary diligent and disciplined students from poor regions succeed, they still may face discrimination by those who disregard the memorisation-based educational system and advocate educational reform towards the introduction of 'quality education'.

In Huining County, pupils being admitted on the basis of extra-tuition (*jiafei* 加费) to make up for low-achievement were common at junior as well as senior secondary schools. Some urban parents from other parts of Gansu Province even sent their children to schools in Huining County. According to the local school administrators, those parents aimed at having their spoiled urban offspring realise their privileged familial backgrounds and learn from poor rural students' diligence and goal-orientation. Similar to what has been

[47] In order to prevent hereditary transfer of social and political status, the imperial civil examination test papers were also graded by anonymous examiners beginning with the Song Dynasty (Elman 1991: 18).

described by Kipnis (2001) and Fong (2004), also students from rural Huining enjoyed a reputation within the province as being high achievers due to their poverty, to their lack of alternatives, and to their corresponding stronger motivation to 'change fate'. The case of 2007 provincial champion Ma Zeqiang from rural Huining, one of the two champions described in the prologue of this book, fits such an image and thus added to the myth's credibility.

The Good Child

Locally, the category of being a good student corresponded considerably with that of a 'good child' (*hao haizi* 好孩子). 'Good children' were supposed to behave respectfully towards their parents and help with chores. They were also polite towards co-villagers; good children greeted adults and addressed them according to the correct kinship grade and level of seniority. Formal education was seen by parents as positively influencing children to become good children, since schooling was expected to teach them moral behaviour. Yet, knowledge of moral behaviour was not considered dependent on formal education alone. Students often recalled how they had received their moral education from their illiterate grandparents who had used a variety of folk sayings to teach them.[48] Still, parents did expect schools to assist them in educating their children morally through textbook contents and teacher's instructions. Moreover, the diligence and self-discipline necessary for keeping up with educational competition was believed to inevitably prevent their children from hanging around idly in the village. Structurally, educational aspirations kept children dependent on their parents for corresponding support, thus governing their behaviour accordingly. Such dependency was, however, a double-edged sword. Parents' high educational aspirations also provided children with considerable power to blackmail their parents into spending on their behalf.

[48] A number of Chinese classical sayings emphasise the importance of learning and its connection to moral behaviour. For example, the *Sanzijing* (Three-Character Classic) compiled in the thirteenth century, summarises the essentials of Confucian thought in a selection of easily memorisable couplets of three characters each. Such sayings include 'If the child does not learn, this is not as it should be. If he does not learn while young, what will he be when old?' (*buxue, feisuoyi, youbuxue, laohewei* 不学，非所宜，幼不学，老何为); and 'If jade is not polished, it cannot become a thing of use; if a man does not learn, he cannot know his duty towards his neighbours' (*yubuzuo, buchengqi, renbuxue, buzhiyi* 玉不琢，不成器, 人不学, 不知义).Translations by Herbert Giles, http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?l= Sanzijing&s=1, last retrieved on 22 February 2015.

Plate 9. Senior high school students in their dormitory.

The categories of being an achiever and that of being a 'good child' thus did not converge completely. In the village there were a few cases of pupils at senior secondary school or college who had a bad reputation for being either arrogant towards the villagers or cheating their parents for money that they spent on clothes and other forms of consumption. The latter was the case with student Liu Ping, whose family counted among the poorest in the village. Several times they had qualified for allotments of grain rations provided by government poverty relief schemes. Liu Ping was the youngest of four children and the only girl. Her three brothers had left the village as labour migrants. Despite their strained family budget, Liu Ping's parents tried by all means to finance their daughter's education. After all her brothers had failed educationally, she was their only remaining hope to change fate and gain some social recognition in the village. Hopefully, supporting Liu Ping's education would not only improve her job and marriage chances, but also strengthen her emotional commitment to her parents. Since she was no extraordinary achiever, this meant that they sent her to a rather low level but expensive senior secondary school outside the county. Liu Ping's mother thus was known in the village for always trying to borrow money from other families to finance her daughter's education.

When Liu Ping returned to the village during school holidays, other villagers gossiped about her, mainly because the clothes she wore seemed all too fashionable. Gossip accelerated when she started to use nail polish and lipstick and to wear earrings. Such consumption was interpreted as a sign that she was not studying hard, but instead enjoying her time at boarding school and, moreover, that she had come under morally questionable influences. It also qualified her as a 'bad girl' because it showed her to be inconsiderate of her parents' poverty, and suggested that she might be blackmailing them with their desperate hope for her educational success.

On the other hand, not all children who did not succeed educationally were considered to have a necessarily 'bad' character. Even though educational success was basically believed to be a matter of diligence and self-discipline, non-achievers who were otherwise well behaved could still be considered 'good'. It was then argued that their brain just did not fit schooling. At the same time, quite a number of parents had no problem in publicly cursing their educationally unsuccessful children as simply being stupid (*ben* 本). In both cases, the child's lack of achievement was blamed on nature. Responsibility was thus taken away from anyone engaged in the educational process.

Unlike girls, low-achieving boys often were excused as naturally naughty by character. If a male child was a 'man of action' (*shiganjia* 实干家) instead of a 'book worm' (*shudaizi* 书呆子), he could thus still earn some appreciation. This was obvious in my host family: the father preferred to hang out with Zhao Jun, the son of a distant cousin of his from the same village, than his own son. Zhao Jun was sixteen and had just dropped out of junior secondary school. The two spent time hanging around together, chatting and joking, and the older man let Zhao Jun ride his motorbike and smoke his cigarettes. The relationship was explained to me by others as friendship, and it was said that the older man had 'adopted' the young man. By contrast, his son, a diligent student of seventeen, was denied such fraternal closeness with his father. As a student, and a future 'man of culture' (*you wenhua de ren* 有文化的人) who would rely on his brain and not his body for survival, he was, like everybody of the opposite gender, excluded from the joys of masculinity such as smoking and riding a motorbike. Towards the foreign educated guest, the shy and reserved son was, however, much praised for being an achieving student and a 'good child', although not by the father himself.

Deploying Shame and Fright

When I entered a house in the village for the first time, parents or grandparents often rushed to show me with pride the red booklets that their children or grandchildren had been awarded at school. Although I always explained that I was interested in village life in general, a first focus of the conversation on the issue of education seemed almost inevitable. I was usually accompanied by my assistant Zhao Mei; she was the only student from the village attending a key university, and was widely known for this extraordinary achievement. Moreover, she introduced me as a teacher from Germany who was doing research for a PhD thesis.[49] Our academic backgrounds surely influenced our conversations, yet children's education was a much discussed topic in the village even when I was not in the conversational spotlight. I then overheard numerous exchanges of news and information about children's educational achievement, the schools being attended, tuition costs, and other similar topics. The fact that achieving children were a considerable source of pride not only before the foreign guest, but also among villagers themselves was also indicated by the colourful awards that often plastered the walls of living rooms. More often than not they were the only decoration in the otherwise plain rooms.

Apart from 'objective' attestations of achievement through school awards, children's educational accomplishment was often exaggerated towards me. Such was the case when two senior secondary school students in the village were introduced to me as extraordinary achieving students expected to be accepted by Tsinghua University. As became clear a few months later, such high aspirations had not been realistic. Close family members had almost certainly known that the two could not hope to enter Tsinghua; pupils' progress is constantly audited, and their actual level of achievement would have been known. Such bragging about their achievements in front of outsiders was thus aimed at giving social 'face' to the child and to the family. At the same time, it functioned as a method of educational encouragement by inculcating in the student a feeling of obligation to meet the expectations that people held of them. Such a dynamic, however, can also produce feelings of shame that are hard for the student to bear when he or she cannot live up to the expectations set by others. This happened, for example, with Xu Tiaodi, one of the two champions described in the prologue. Her shame over her national exam results was so strong that she broke off relationships with her former teachers.

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[49] Villagers knew that a PhD is a high educational degree and usually could tell stories about the holders of Masters and doctoral degrees from the surrounding villages.

Plate 10. Schooling awards decorating local homes.

Once I had the opportunity to observe how not only shame, but also fright was deployed in a pedagogical session in my host family. The session aimed at educating 11-year-old Zhao Rui, whose recent performance at school left much to be desired. Zhao Rui's parents and little brother lived in upland Qinghai Province. Because schooling conditions were difficult there, Zhao Rui had been sent to her father's natal village at the age of six in order to attend elementary school. She lived together with her 'second aunt' (i.e. the wife of her second paternal uncle) and her 15-year-old cousin in a courtyard house opposite that of my host family. Since Zhao Rui was a paternal cousin of my field assistant, Zhao Mei, she also came to live with us in the old family courtyard when my assistant returned from university. I was soon asked to tutor Zhao Rui in English. Since my participatory teaching methods seemed all too strange to everybody around, including Zhao Rui herself, Zhao Mei sometimes took over. On these occasions, Zhao Mei changed her usually jolly attitude towards her little cousin into a very strict one, grimly scolding and pinching or beating Zhao Rui's hand or shoulder when she did not know an answer. As soon as such educational sessions with its serious atmosphere were over, Zhao Mei returned to her loving and joking attitude towards Zhao Rui.

When all brothers of the Zhao family, including Zhao Rui's father, returned with their families to the village for Chinese New Year in February 2007, Zhao Rui's problems at school became a much discussed topic. One evening, when everybody was sitting around on the *kang* (炕)[50] and the sofa in the living room chatting, Zhao Rui was called forward by her fourth paternal uncle. As a government cadre in the neighbouring province, the fourth uncle was the most successful among the six brothers of whom Zhao Rui's father was the youngest. The fourth uncle moved a low stool to the middle of the room, sat down, and asked somebody to hand him a wooden hand-fan. Zhao Rui was ordered to stand in front of him and stretch her hands out towards him. Everybody in the room turned silent and started watching the scene. The serious atmosphere obviously horrified Zhao Rui; trembling with fear she could hardly hold her tears. The fourth uncle scolded her for her bad performance at school. He threatened her that if she continued to perform so poorly, she would end up as nothing better than a shepherd. This, and the additional remark 'you will be at the bottom of society, doing the dirtiest work, like we had to do during the Cultural Revolution', caused the surrounding people to laugh awkwardly. The reproaches to Zhao Rui continued for some time. The repeated accusation of her lack of diligence was followed by demands that she promise to improve. Each of her corresponding promises was accompanied by the fourth uncle beating her fingers heavily with the fan. Again and again she was asked to promise to improve. In the end, the fourth uncle publicly excused Zhao Rui's foster mother for not being able to take proper care of Zhao Rui's education due to her age and her obligations to work in the fields. Responsibility for Zhao Rui's educational advancement was instead assigned to Zhao Mei, the only university student in the family. Because someone from the group was chosen to share responsibility for Zhao Rui's educational achievement, the young girl was no longer left alone petrified in the middle of the room, but reintegrated into the family collective. The next day, when everyone set off to the market together, Zhao Rui naturally took part in the small excursion. Also in the following days, no one reminded her to study hard every day.

In daily life in the village, parents' high educational aspirations did not necessarily mean that these parents would free their children from contributions to household chores. Several students in my study did recall that they had used the pretext of studying to shun household chores and escape hard physical work in the fields. For the majority of the students from rural Huining, however, schoolwork was an extra burden. Fewer than one-third reported that their obligations to study had exempted them from

[50] A *kang* is an elevated platform made of bricks and heated from below during winter. It is used for sitting and sleeping on and is common in traditional northern Chinese houses.

contributions to household and farm labour as children. Moreover, rural Huining children seldom were provided a suitable place for fulfilling their study obligations. They thus usually crouched with their books on a corner of the *kang* in the kitchen or living room, studying in the midst of all other household activities. Parents' valorisation of education thus often remained verbal and disciplinary only, without being accompanied by the practical support of providing children with the time, attentiveness, or atmosphere necessary for daily study. However, when children managed to succeed in schooling, provision of the necessary financial means was seen to be an undeniable parental duty.

The Social Honour of the Family

In the village, high-achieving children brought glory (*guang* 光) to parents and the whole family. Families of such children were proud to have this aspect of their family affairs widely discussed in the community. The geographical scope of a family's fame depended on the level of educational achievement of the offspring. The more successful the candidate, the wider the stories circulated.

Parents of achieving students thus enjoyed prestige and trustworthiness in the locality and sometimes even beyond. When I visited the family of university student Ma Jinmei in a small hamlet about seven kilometres from a township centre in rural Huining, the father recalled how his position towards the local cadres had changed successively, when his three children, one after the other, succeeded in the national college entrance examination and enrolled in Bachelor programs at different national key universities. He explained:

> I was nobody before, just a local peasant. None of the township government cadres would even greet me. But that has been changing lately. I am more respected now and it became easier for me to deal with local bureaucrats. When my eldest son entered university, the Agricultural Credit Cooperative refused to give credit to me. But when I need credit now, it is no problem. I am well known in the community now, and township government cadres even stop to have a chat with me when we meet in the street.

Accordingly, when we were shopping in the township centre on a market day, the mother of my assistant Zhao Mei was introduced to others in the shop by an accompanying neighbour as 'the mother of Zhao Mei, the key university student'. Everyone within earshot nodded as if they already knew Zhao Mei. Perhaps they did not, but the fact that she was a key university student presented the most viable reference point to situate her mother within the relationship networks of the market.

Yet in the village, Zhao Mei's success was hardly surprising. For generations, so it was said, there had been at least one successful student in the Zhao family, known also for having been the family of a former landlord. Once during a visit in the neighbourhood, an old man from the Guo family complained about the lack of achievement of his own granddaughter, drawing a contrast with my assistant's success. He said, 'It is no wonder that this girl is educationally successful. Her family has always been successful. Probably that is because they buried their ancestors in the right way and attend their graves well'.

The old man's attribution of Zhao Mei's success to the intergenerational transmission of familial capital through powerful ancestors expressed an appreciation for the Zhao family's local standing. But in his claim, there also seemed to resonate a note of fatalism concerning the corresponding fate of his own family. According to the village history told by the elderly, all families with surnames different from that of the former Zhao landlords used to be day labourers working on the fields of the Zhao clan. During the land reform of the early 1950s, these landless peasants were allocated a piece of land in the western part of the village. Yet even in the early 2000s, families carrying the Zhao surname were the most respected – and educationally most successful – in the village.

The Zhao family did not rely solely on ancestral blessings for their contemporary success. Rather, as I saw in my host family, a branch of the Zhao family, the family's educational traditions were kept alive by retelling the stories of educationally successful kin of each generation. Individual family members (including those on the grandmother's side) were said to have achieved positions in the state bureaucracy from as far back as the imperial Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Since the family's status had seriously declined under the grandfather's father shortly before the communist takeover, they had the luck to be labelled as lower middle-class peasants, and thus had escaped heavy suffering during the various periods of purges against 'enemies of the people'.

After the dismantling of the communes, class labelling lost its influence and everyone in the village was equally allotted a piece of land. Under these circumstances there were few ways left for social differentiation within the village, except via family history, successful family members, or the educational success of children. Children's educational success thus became central to many local parents, who strove to increase their local standing and add meaning and value to their life as ordinary peasants. Via their children's success, peasant parents could achieve local recognition and glory.

When I asked students to recollect how their parents had explained the importance of formal education, issues of prestige and acknowledgement featured prominently. The majority of surveyed students stated that their parents had expressed a variety of wishes for their children, including that they would leave hard physical work; learn something; become moral persons; earn credit for oneself; and earn a steady income. But parents also had appealed to them to 'earn credit to the parents' (*gei fumu zhengqi* 给父母争气) and 'to earn credit for the lineage' (*gei jiazu zhengqi* 给家族争气).

Within the Zhao family, the social honour of the lineage functioned as an important pedagogical argument. When chatting with the teenage Zhao Jun, a paternal cousin of my field assistant, the young man stated that all his educational striving aimed at bringing glory to the lineage. Moreover, he claimed that it was especially important for him to win prestige for his direct family in the competition between the lineage's different branches. I later learned that shortly before our conversation Zhao Jun had dropped out of junior secondary school. His parents used personal connections to place him in another school, which he also dropped out of within a few weeks. His profession of striving to win glory for his family thus seemed to me in retrospect a reflection of his parents' arguments (and maybe his own wishful thinking). The competition between family branches, however, was almost certainly real: one of his cousins, of nearly the same age as himself, was experiencing exceptional educational success and was known countywide as one of the highest achievers at the most prestigious junior secondary school. In such a context, it is perhaps little surprising that Zhao Jun had given up. The goal of surpassing his cousin was simply too high.

For some parents, like the ones in my host family, the local prestige gained through educationally successful children was an opportunity to restore the family's pre-revolutionary status. For those local parents who had no prominent family history with which to reconnect, educational success meant an opportunity to overcome their nameless existence as ordinary peasants. With the social position of uneducated and 'backward' peasants ever decreasing with the country's increasing modernisation under market-driven reforms, children's educational success became especially valuable to local parents. The mother of Lanzhou University student Zhang Ruilin put it this way: 'When my child succeeds in school and becomes a useful person (*chengcai* 成才), it gives me the feeling that I have accomplished something in life'. Such statements demonstrated that parental investment in a child's education extends beyond materialistic considerations. A return of the investment is expected in terms of the child's enhanced capability to fulfil

his or her obligations to care for elderly parents, but it is not the only concern.

Gender, Education, and Elderly Support

When talking with local interlocutors about gender discrimination in China's history, the explanation was always simple. In the patrilineal and patrilocal family system, they explained, daughters were considered a loss to their natal family because they would belong to 'other people' (*bieren* 别人) after marriage. Sons continued the family line and had the duty to care for their parents in old age. People had thus 'valued male offspring and disregarded the females' (*zhongnan qingnü* 重男轻女). Most people claimed that such conventional notions had lost relevance in contemporary Chinese society. Indeed, gender discrimination in educational attainment has become much less prominent within a single generation. There was an extremely high rate of illiteracy among the mothers of the students in my survey, and females continue to make up a disproportionately high percentage of the illiterate in China.[51] Yet in my field site, some 40 per cent of the pupils in the local senior secondary schools were female.

The state requires nine years of compulsory education for all children. Supporting a child beyond the compulsory level, however, is a more or less private concern negotiated mainly within the family. In rural Huining, young women became sought-after marriage partners from the age of about 16 if they did not attend, or had failed, senior secondary school. The rural population remains overwhelming male, and parents could expect frequent visitors proposing marriage matches for teenage daughters who were not educationally successful. In light of historical explanations about gender discrimination, it is therefore more interesting to ask why families in the 2000s no longer marry-off their daughters (and rid themselves of the burden of the girl's financial support) as soon as possible. Why do parents instead favour supporting girls though senior secondary school and higher education, despite the tremendous financial burden this places on the family's budget?

In rural China lack of alternative sources of elderly support makes parents dependent on their offspring's support during old age.[52] According

[51] In 2000 about 9 per cent of China's rural population (above age 15) was illiterate. Illiteracy was 2.6 times more common among women than among men (UNDP China Human Development Report 2005, http://www.undp.org.cn/downloads/nhdr2005/NHDR2005_complete. pdf, last accessed on 14 August 2010).

[52] A basic system of old age security was introduced in Huining County in 2009. In this system local rural residents at the age of 60 years are eligible for a monthly pension of 55 yuan. Between the age of 45-60 people can voluntarily contribute a flexible amount of money

to the revised Marriage Law (1981) as well as the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interest of the Elderly (1996), both sons and daughters are equally liable for providing support to their elderly parents. In rural Huining County notions of elderly support responsibilities remained, however, clearly gendered. A son's obligation to support his parents was regarded as 'natural', a matter of 'heavenly rule and earthly justice' (*tianjing diyi* 天经地义). Daughters' contribution to their parents' elderly support, on the other hand, was seen to be based on feelings (*ganqing* 感情), not obligation (*zeren* 责任), and was thus considered to be unreliable (*bukekao* 不可靠). Local parents' support of their children's education certainly was not only a matter of rational calculation of the gendered 'return' in terms of elderly support to be expected from their children. At the same time, local parents were just not in the position to ignore the question of how to raise their children's capacity – and willingness – to support them when they became frail. Yet, given prevailing notions of a gendered intergenerational contract, why did local attitudes towards supporting daughters' education change?

Rural Daughters and their Contribution to Elderly Care[53]

During a conversation with 35-year-old Meng Jingyang, the second oldest among seven brothers who have no sister, I was reminded of the role daughters play in providing social support to their natal families. Meng Jingyang described how sad his mother was when she gave birth to one son after the other without ever having a baby girl. When I asked whether such a sentiment did not contradict the customary valuation of sons expressed by the famous classical saying 'more sons, more happiness' (*duozi duofu* 多子多福), he explained the importance of daughters in classic Chinese kinship structure. In the patrilineal system, daughters brought relatives (*qinshu* 亲属) to the family. Regardless how high the brideprice (*caili* 彩礼) had been, a woman's natal family always remained entitled to claim support from her marital family. Especially in case of a hypergamous marriage, the new affines might become a viable source of support for the bride's natal family.

While visions of the future lack of social support might have played a role in the sadness felt by Meng Jingyang's mother, female everyday life in

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to the pension system. The contribution will be subsidised annually with 30 yuan by the provincial government and 10 yuan by the county government. At the age of 60, the total of the additional contributions is divided by 139, and the resulting sum is added to the basic monthly pension.

[53] By 'rural daughters' I mean girls and women who have less than junior secondary level education.

the countryside suggested another reason for her laments. In the village some mothers were constantly accompanied by their daughters, who shared in household chores and were always ready to provide a helping hand. Relationships between mothers and their daughters seemed quite intimate with much physical closeness. When their daughters returned to boarding schools at the end of holidays, mothers often had a difficult time separating from them. Accordingly, daughters often referred to themselves as being 'very attached to the family' (*hen lianjia* 很恋家), and claimed to suffer heavily from homesickness during senior secondary school or university. Female students often expressed how much they missed their mothers, and were eager to buy special presents for them when returning home. This does not mean, however, that the same daughters would not sometimes get upset with their mothers when they kept them constantly busy with chores after school or during school holidays.

According to the historically dominant patrilocal and patrilineal kinship ideology prevalent in Chinese society, married daughters are cut off from their natal households when they assume their role as daughters-in-law and become caretakers within their marital family, notably for their parents-in-law. In rural Huining most family arrangements adhered to this model at least formally, with married women living virilocally with their parents-in-law or moving with their husbands to a separate house in close proximity to the parents-in-law. Everyday care for the elderly was usually provided for by those married women who co-resided with their parents-in-law. The contribution of daughters-in-law – although hidden by the overt discourse on the filial duties of sons – became most visible when husbands and children were absent. When husbands left as labour migrants and children studied in boarding schools, only women (often in-married daughters-in-law) remained to care for the elderly. Yet in the 2000s, many elderly had no younger adults to care for them: young women also left for labour migration, sometimes leaving their children with their parents-in-law; other young mothers accompanied their children to school in the county seat.

Several studies have shown that in contrast to presentations of official patrilineal and patrilocal kinship ideology, in practice married daughters often keep close relations with their natal families (Judd 1995: 197; Jacka 1997; Croll 2000; Yan 2003b). Also in rural Huining, relationships of rural daughters with their natal families often remained much closer than the official norm would suggest. In case of geographical proximity between the natal and marital households, married women in rural Huining frequently visited their natal families, brought agricultural produce and shares of meat, helped out with various household tasks, and provided significant support in the kitchen when other women were absent or during feasts. Similarly, some

mothers often left the village to visit and help their married daughters, sometimes leaving their husbands to care for themselves and any resident grandchildren for extensive periods.

While the ideal prescribes that one of the sons (and his wife) takes on the duty to care for elderly parents, daughters also contribute. Especially in times of crisis, a daughter might even be considered the more appropriate and better caretaker than a daughter-in-law. This became obvious to me during my stay in the village when 73-year-old Mr. Zhao, the grandfather in my host family, broke his leg.

When old Mr. Zhao broke his leg

When old Mr. Zhao broke his leg, there were two female candidates for providing care for him in the hospital. One was his daughter-in-law, Liu Fanyu, who ordinarily lived in the family compound and cooked and cleaned for the old man. The other possibility was his own daughter who lived in another village, had substantial responsibilities to care for her own husband and grown son, and yet nevertheless made regular visits to attend to her father at home. Below, I provide a brief sketch of the two women and their relations to Mr. Zhao.

In the early 1980s, Liu Fanyu married the fifth of six sons in the Zhao family.[54] Upon marriage she had moved to the Zhao family courtyard house. Over the years she had witnessed many changes in the composition of family members living in the house. When I stayed with the Zhao family during field research, little of the family remained in the house. Old Mr. Zhao's two eldest sons had separated from the family (*fenjia* 分家), and had built their own courtyard houses in the immediate neighbourhood. The third son had married and divorced without children, and now lived in the family house. But the fourth son had made a career in the government of neighbouring Qinghai Province, and he had arranged short-term jobs there for the fifth and sixth sons. Mr. Zhao's only daughter had married long ago into another village.

Liu Fanyu, however, liked to have her husband nearby, so she had arranged through her own brother to have her husband recruited to help the local government electricity department. This job enabled him to be in the village for a few nights each week, while he stayed at the electricity

[54] In Chinese kinship terminology people are addressed not only according to the kinship relation with the interlocutor, but also with respect to their position within their (gendered) sibling sets. The serial number according to birth order ('the eldest', 'the second', 'the third', etc.) is added before the term designating the kinship relation with the interlocutor (e.g. 'second uncle'). In the village, such way of addressing kin was more common than the use of personal names.

department two hours away by motorbike the other nights. Both their children had taken up boarding. Liu Fanyu herself usually shared the Zhao family courtyard with her widowed father-in-law, old Mr. Zhao, and the third son. Since her husband helped little with agricultural work, she shared those tasks with her third brother-in-law, usually in wordless cooperation.

Within in the courtyard, Mr. Zhao lived together with his third son in the main room (*shangfang* 上房). The men slept side-by-side on the *kang* which also served as a space for sitting, eating, and chatting. Since the late 1970s, a severe problem with his hips had left Mr. Zhao almost bedridden; he was restricted to hobbling with the help of two crutches the few metres between the *kang* and the courtyard, where he liked to sit in a chair enjoying the sun. The radius he could move by himself, however, did not include the latrine outside the courtyard.

As the only woman left in the household, it was Liu Fanyu's task to cook for both men and to clean their room. She also washed the old man's clothes, but her brother-in-law washed his own. The duty of cleaning the old man's bedpan was always passed to the youngest child in the family. In 2007 it was the turn of the 11-year-old daughter of the youngest of the Zhao brothers, Zhao Rui, who lived with the wife of the second Zhao brother and her cousin in the adjacent courtyard.

Old Mr. Zhao was a well-respected man in the village who was visited frequently by other elderly men for a chat or a game of chess. He was regarded as being well taken care of by his filial children. For her filial care towards her father-in-law, Liu Fanyu had been awarded a winter blanket and a red palette stating 'filial piety household' (*xiaojin laoren hu* 孝敬老人户), which decorated the room used by herself, her husband, and her children. For years, Liu Fanyu fulfilled her daily duties of cooking and serving food and cleaning for the other two men of the household. She did not do so very joyfully, but rather with a certain amount of resentment, if not disdain. Sometimes she aired her feelings by mocking the old man's looks when he tried to move his body on crutches or by commenting on her brother-in-law's big appetite. While neither her husband nor her children seemed to support her resentments against the old man, they did have openly-shared negative feelings towards her brother-in-law.

In contrast to her sister-in-law, Zhao Yan – who was 50 years old at the time of my fieldwork – expressed little resentment at caring for her father. She was the second child and only daughter of the Zhao family. Upon marriage she had moved to live with her husband in a village about two hours walking distance from her natal home. Although the agricultural yields of her household usually were sufficient to feed the family, she and her husband were said to live a hard life. Zhao Yan had given birth to a daughter

and a son. Her daughter had married back into the mother's natal village and lived within a few minutes walking distance of the old Zhao family courtyard. Zhao Yan's son, however, suffered from a serious mental illness which caused aggressive behaviour and required that he be supervised constantly. Moreover, Zhao Yan had to care for her mother-in-law, who after having lived in rotation between her sons' families, had returned to stay with her youngest son, Zhao Yan's husband, for the last bedridden years. In spite of her manifold caring duties, Zhao Yan often went to visit her father, old Mr. Zhao, in her natal home. At least once a month she stayed with her father for a couple of days, cooked for him, cleaned the room, washed his clothes, and sat beside him on the *kang*, keeping him company from morning till dawn. During these days of absence from her marital family, Zhao Yan's own daughter returned to her natal home to cook for her father and mentally ill brother and to care for her bedridden paternal grandmother.

In 2007, Zhao Yan could not celebrate the Chinese New Year in her natal home, even though it was the first time in years that all of her six brothers brought their wives and children to the family courtyard. As a married woman she was supposed to celebrate this festivity with her marital family. Neither could she visit a few days after New Year when daughters usually go to see their natal families. Due to her mother-in-law's recent death, piety rules inhibited her, as a member of the deceased person's family, to visit anyone outside the family for one hundred days. As soon as the mourning period had passed, Zhao Yan resumed her regular visits to her father.

In the summer of 2007 Mr. Zhao fell and broke his leg. After several unsuccessful attempts to get his leg cured at home with the help of the village doctor as well as in the township medical station, the old man was transported to the hospital in the county seat. With the help of a son of old Mr. Zhao's cousin, who contacted the surgeon responsible, the old man underwent surgery. The hospital offered medical treatment only, leaving caring obligations to the patient's support network. This meant that for the five weeks of old Mr. Zhao's hospital stay, continuous company had to be organised to help with feeding, washing, toileting, and turning his body once in a while. The fourth Zhao son, as the only brother with steady and prestigious employment, called from Qinghai Province to announce how the care should be distributed: Zhao Yan, old Mr. Zhao's only daughter, should take on the caring tasks and stay with her father at the hospital continuously, sleeping on a chair or on the floor. Liu Fanyu, who was now freed from caring for the old man at home, should fill the support gap in Zhao Yan's marital family. While Zhao Yan stayed at the hospital, Liu Fanyu thus shared the responsibilities with Zhao Yan's daughter of walking the two

hours to Zhao Yan's village to bring the husband and son steamed bread and to help with cooking and other household chores. During the old man's stay at the hospital, most of his sons and grandchildren came to visit the old man, but none of his five daughters-in-law visited.

Reimbursing the daughter's care

Zhao Yan's caring work at the hospital turned into a matter of discussion among her brothers. It was argued that her support was legitimated by the fact that she had no income and thus no ability to contribute to the financial burden her father's accident had caused. Income disparities between the six brothers were great, and tensions between them were reported to have a history going back at least to the early 1980s, when the brothers had to cover the costs for their mother's burial. Especially the eldest son was accused by the others as being stingy and selfish, and for contributing too little to family affairs. The question of how to share the financial costs of the old man's surgery and his stay in hospital was discussed at a family meeting in the *shangfang* of the old courtyard that extended late in the night. In the wake of the discussion the basic principle of equal sharing between brothers was adjusted according to income differences, as well as to the factual financial burden of each brother, notably expenses related to children's education.

The discussion took a new turn a few days later, when the influential fourth brother proposed to pay their sister for the caring work she had provided while the old man was in hospital. He argued that she was actually no longer a member of her natal family and thus really had not been obliged to contribute much. The suggestion to pay the sister for her care work aroused the fifth brother's anger; he claimed that paying for caring services was unacceptable. Moreover, such an arrangement would mean that his daughter, who had stayed at the hospital for a few days as well, should then also get paid, which would make the whole affair too complicated. The fifth brother did not mention the indirect support that his wife had offered. But he did take the opportunity to air his resentment against the bossy attitude that the fourth brother showed in arranging family matters. In the end, the brothers agreed that Zhao Yan should receive only a small sum of money as a token of gratitude for her help. At the same time, foreseeing Zhao Yan's difficulties in providing for her own elderly care given her lack of a healthy son, it was agreed that the fourth brother would use his position in Qinghai Province to find a possibility for Zhao Yan's son-in-law to work as a labour migrant there. This, so it was hoped, would contribute to Zhao Yan's old age support, since it would make her son-in-law feel indebted to his in-laws.

Summary: Rural daughters' role in elderly care

The case of old Mr. Zhao and his daughter illustrates how married rural daughters continued to play an important role in provision of social support for their natal parents. Structurally, rural Huining daughters' support for their natal family was impeded by virilocality and a woman's support obligations towards her affines. Rural Huining women's lack of visible financial contribution to the family budget, moreover, made it difficult for them to bargain in favour of financial support for their natal family. When spatial proximity allowed it, rural daughters did, however, frequently provide practical support and material contributions, such as food, to their natal household. Moreover, as can be observed in the case of old Mr. Zhao, when it came to intimate bodily care and emotional support, daughters could become an important source of support for the elderly, although such support usually was available to them only for a couple of days per month or in times of special crisis. With respect to intimate physical care, support by daughters, understood to be based on love (*teng'ai* 疼爱), was said to be more pleasant and to be accepted more fully by the elderly than support provided by daughters-in-law, understood to be based only on duty (*zeren* 责任). Especially in the case of elderly men, to have a woman with blood relations (*xueyuan guanxi* 血缘关系) taking over the tasks of physical care was seen to be less of an embarrassment for both sides. Only when the elderly became too fragile to care for themselves and daughters' help, limited by their other caring obligations, was no longer sufficiently available, would daughters-in-law have to take on the task of bodily care (*cihou* 伺候, lit. to wait upon or to serve).

When daughters took over an important role in caring for their parents, the gap such help caused in the fulfilment of their obligations towards their in-laws was in turn filled by other members of female support circles. In case no daughter-in-law or unmarried daughter was available to step in, married daughters or sisters-in-law might help. The Zhao case showed that paying kin for caring services was unacceptable in the rural context, where such debts were supposed to be settled in a more indirect fashion by non-monetary means.

However, as will become evident also in the following chapter, support relations between married women and their natal families seldom were unidirectional. Women sometimes made use of resources in their marital family to provide support for their natal family. But they also often continued to be recipients of substantial support from their natal family, notably from their mothers (and sometimes also fathers) in terms of child care, but also from their siblings who provided financial, material, and

informational support or access to valuable social relations. In the case of Zhao Yan, her fourth brother assigned her the care work at the hospital. But he later also made an effort to secure her support in her own old age by providing her son-in-law with a job. The latter gave evidence of the unbroken trust in indirect reciprocity and in the viability of long-term intergenerational support. Moreover, the arrangement was explicitly presented as a reciprocation of Zhao Yan's caring work for the common father. It may be argued that Zhao Yan's frequent care for her father was from the beginning motivated by anticipation of her brother's ability to support her reciprocally in times of need. Any assumption that Zhao Yan calculated reciprocal returns to her actions should, however, by no means rule out the possibility that Zhao Yan's provision of support and care may (as well) have been based on empathy and emotional attachment to her father and to her siblings.

In the following section I show how daughters' educational attainment changes their role in elderly care provision for their parents.

Sacrifice and Indebtedness

Everybody coming to rural Huining is likely to hear many stories of successful students from the region who attended university in the 1980s or early 1990s and later made a career in academia or government. With pride, people told anecdotes of how some of those former villagers now returned to visit their natal villages as high ranking and influential people. Every villager seemed to know at least one family in the vicinity with an educationally successful child who had attended university shortly after the reintroduction of the college entrance examination. The success of an early graduate was counted not only in terms of the ranking of the university he had attended and the prestige of the position he later held, but also in terms of the resources that had flowed back from him into the village. Most of the early graduates were said to have made 'change the appearance of the whole family' (*quanjia de mianmao gaibianle* 全家的面貌面改变了). With financial support, help in arranging jobs for other family members, and support for the education of the younger generation, those early students are said to have pulled their whole family out of poverty. Moreover, their families enjoyed high social standing in the community and sometimes also beyond. Some, but not all, of the early graduates had in the meantime taken their parents to the city to co-reside with them. In cases where none of the siblings had stayed in the countryside, the parental house in the village was sold, given away to kin, or just left empty.

All of the contemporary students with whom I talked were familiar with at least one such family in their village, and reported that these cases

had been referred to repeatedly by their parents as good examples of the 'return' to be expected from educational achievement. The fact that local parents often cited such 'good examples' of early university students' support for their families suggests that they themselves might hold similar expectations towards their own children's future contributions. Local parents were well aware that times had changed, that finding employment had become tricky, and that life in the city was expensive even for university graduates. They often expressed their understanding that graduates nowadays have to cope with a lot of problems in setting up an urban life which might render it difficult to also shoulder the burden of supporting elderly parents. Yet, factual dependency on their children's support as the only means of survival late in life makes it rather likely that those understanding parents would at the same time also worry about their children's future behaviour towards them.

Chinese parents have been reported as explicitly expressing towards their children the reciprocal dimensions of all the support they give to them (Croll 2000, 2006; Fong 2004). Such explicitness was much less commonly expressed by parents and their (educated) children in rural Huining. Here parental intentionality and anticipation that their investments in their children would yield a 'return' were played down, if not denied altogether. Only during longer conversations would parents admit to holding any expectations at all. Even then parents were eager to present their expectations as being minimal, and would often tell me, 'I do not need much. It is enough if they later remit some money and sometimes come home to see me'. When educated daughters and sons failed to send money home, however, parents were clearly disappointed, and complaints about their children's neglect were then widely known and discussed in the neighbourhood.

Everybody concurred that the support of someone's education entailed a somewhat 'natural' entitlement to a return. As much as parents' support for their children's education was part of their duty of nourishing and bringing up (*yangyu* 养育) their offspring, their children were obliged to reciprocate such parental kindness by keeping up the 'cycle of yang' (Stafford 2000a) (i.e. a cycle of nurturing [*yang* 养]), and to take care of their parents when the latter approached old age. The Chinese expression 'to provide someone with the opportunity to study' (*gong ... shangxue* 供 … 上学) conveys more than an awareness that education can only be gained with the support of others, whether in financial terms, by freeing pupils from other duties, or by providing them with the time to study. The verb *gong* 供 (to provide) also means 'to offer sacrifice'. The kindness entailed in such support is perceived of as equalling the parental benevolence (*enqing* 恩情) of nourishing and

bringing up the child, thus engendering eternal filial indebtedness towards the supporter. Such indebtedness does not only entail the obligation, but also raises the wish to reciprocate the support received. Yet, as an important, life-changing favour, *enqing* can never be fully repaid. An act of *enqing* thus should always engender the recipient's eternal gratitude (cf. Yan 1996: 143-45). By recurrently bringing up the question 'Who provided you with the opportunity to study?', people in the social environment thus helped to inculcate in students a sense of gratitude and indebtedness towards particular supporters.[55]

Students told me that although their parents would not primarily count on a return to the support they had offered, it was only natural that this was their parents' 'second thought'. Sometimes parental jokes betrayed the concrete and general wishes (e.g. a car or filial piety) that parents hoped would be fulfilled by their children. Or, a student might overhear his father bragging to friends during a drinking session that his educated son would later bring him to live in the city. But seldom would parents directly express such expectations towards their children.

On the contrary, parents seemed eager to present themselves as having minimal or no expectations at all. 'Everything for the children' (*yiqie weile haizi* 一切为了孩子) was the frequent description of parents' position towards their children. Parental sacrifice was conveyed by a common narrative. Since the life of a peasant was too hard to bear, parents wanted their children to live a different life. As parents, they were ready to sacrifice everything for that aim. Being themselves victims of the historical circumstances which had left them no option to change their own life for the better, they could only exert all their energy to support their children in obtaining a different life. Parental sacrifice was explicitly and recurrently verbalised in front of the students when parents explained their tight budgeting – saving on food, postponing house repairs, and even shunning medical treatment and important surgeries – as motivated by their preference to spend their resources for the children's education instead. The image of hard-working parents, who tilled the fields 'bending down facing the dry loess earth while the sun burned their back' (*mian chao huangtu, bei chao*

[55] Accordingly, in the 1980s and early 1990s the fact that the state offered tuition-free education was framed in the rhetoric of the state 'providing students with the opportunity to study'. The government thus endorsed a caring and parental attitude towards its citizens, calling on the latter to feel obliged to contribute to national construction. Graduates who had attended university during this period recalled how they had been constantly reminded of the amount of money the state had invested in their education. Graduate Hu Wenlan, born in 1964, remembered that when he attended university in the early 1980s he had been repeatedly reminded that the state invested 8,620 yuan into his university education.

tian 面朝黄土，背朝天), for the sake of their children's education and future, was, moreover, inculcated in the students by local senior secondary school teachers, who aimed to boost their pupils' motivation and efforts.

Rural Huining students usually reproduced the picture of their parents' sacrifice and ascertained that they felt a particular duty to fulfil the reciprocal claim such sacrifice entailed. They maintained that rather than being solely a matter of duty, it was their own deep desire to reciprocate the support they had received from their parents by way of taking good care of them during old age. Certainly, *ex ante* perspectives of anticipation of one's future behaviour in terms of providing support tend to have a strong bias towards normative expectations (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 2000: 24). Nevertheless, at least for those students I got to know better and whom I had the chance to also observe at home in their daily interaction with their parents, professions of gratitude and indebtedness towards parents and empathy to their situation was not a matter of hypothetical pretence. Nor were these students merely performing Chinese virtues in their statements to a foreign observer.

Parents usually would not directly articulate any wish to co-reside with their adult children in the city. Sometimes they explicitly stated that they would prefer to stay in the familiar rural environment (cf. Thøgersen and Ni 2008). On the other hand, most students, no matter how doubtful they were about their professional future, expressed their determination to later bring their parents to the city to live with them. It seemed as if for them the picture of co-residing with their parents in an urban environment had become a symbol not only of proper reciprocation of their parents' sacrifice, but also of having achieved a successful life of a modern citizen potent enough to provide for others. At the same time, the students might also have been attracted to the idea of bringing their parents to their expected future homes because they would gain freedom from the need to return to the village to fulfil their caring obligations.

Female students professed the same indebtedness towards supportive parents as their male counterparts. Some female students even claimed that, being aware of persistent gender bias in the intergenerational contract, they understood their parents' investment in their education to be even less instrumentally motivated than it was for their brothers. As university student Zhao Mei summarised: 'I have discussed this issue with my parents. Parents lose a lot of money when raising a daughter, especially when they have to support her, as in my case, from elementary school until university. In that case it is better to have a son'. In view of the feelings of gratitude such seemingly unselfish support engendered, it was hardly surprising that many female students planned later to support their parents financially, and, if

possible, to provide their daily care. Strikingly, many female students even professed a firm intention to have their natal parents co-reside with them in the city. They did, however, foresee that such arrangement would bring them into conflict with local notions of intergenerational co-residence being clearly gendered, implying their obligation to primarily care for their parents-in-law.

Educational Spending and the New (Gendered) Intergenerational Contract

In rural Huining, spending for higher education was an extraordinary financial burden for local parents. The rapidly changing job market also made highly questionable the ability of current students to make an appropriate return on their parents' investment. Indeed, the anticipated expenses that would follow tertiary education as children moved into urban society further decreased the likelihood that students would be able to support their parents in old age. The expenses involved in setting up an urban life were particularly high for male graduates, who conventionally were expected to provide housing as a precondition for marriage, and thus felt under high pressure to purchase permanent housing in the city. From the parents' point of view, it was unclear whether educated sons would have the possibility to bring them to the city in their old age. Nor were rural Huining parents convinced that they themselves would like to live in the urban setting. For these reasons, it seems that the intergenerational contract should have provided little motivation for parents to invest in their children's education. Yet this contract was still a motivating factor – why?

Similar to other rural regions in China, the situation of the elderly in rural Huining was clearly in crisis. This was not only caused by smaller numbers of offspring and their greater mobility, but also by a distinct power shift between the generations to the benefit of the younger as well as to the conjugal bond (Yan 2003b). Reasons for this power shift have been seen, among others, in decades of revolutionary attacks on Confucian patriarchal authority of the elderly (Davis and Harrell 1993), as well as in the effects of the collectivist period that left parents with few resources to transfer to their children (Ikels 2006). The latter was particularly relevant in the context of rural Huining, where inheritance of the house was of little value to the next generation because even those who did not pursue education-based mobility still strove to make a living outside the village. Under such conditions, rural Huining parents were prepared to live independently and self-reliantly in their old age for as long as possible (cf. Zhang 2005; Thøgersen and Ni 2008). Moreover, in view of examples of maltreatment of the elderly in the

village some pointed out that the contemporary power constellations between the generations sometimes made co-residence undesirable.

Against this background, increased spending of local parents for their children's education affected the intergenerational contract in various ways. Most notably, accompanied by recurrent narratives of parental sacrifice and the explicit and repeatedly verbalised understanding that according to Chinese *renqing* ethics[56], giving creates relatedness, educational support was seen as a kind of pre-mortem inheritance that would foster the emotional bonding between parents and their children (Goody 1973; Zhang 2005; Kipnis 2009). Some rural Huining parents thus even persuaded their children not to make use of the opportunity to apply for a study loan offered by the universities. The loans were meant to be paid back by the students, but the parents preferred to struggle themselves to collect money from all possible sources instead of allowing their children to disburden the intergenerational relationship by taking responsibility for their own educational costs. With tradition having lost its binding force and inheritance of the parental house having lost any value for the next generation who struggled to set up a future somewhere else, parents had to find other ways to keep their children attached. Moreover, under contemporary conditions of increasing loneliness and desertedness of life in the villages, with all young people leaving the place, emotional attachment seemed to be the most sustainable basis for bridging the increasing spatial and social gap between the generations that a rapidly developing society inevitably brought about. Yet given the local understanding of the intergenerational contract being gendered, investment in the emotional attachment with their offspring still entailed different consequences for the elderly support situation.

The increasingly disparate gender ratio within the age cohorts born since the early 1980s and the continuous impact of women 'marrying up' has left rural males with increasing difficulties in attracting a marriage partner. Men in economically disadvantaged regions such as Huining County face

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[56] *Renqing* (人情) ethics is the popular version of the Confucian theory of proper social relations and reciprocal gift-giving. *Renqing* has three meanings. Its first meaning is 'human feelings', by which it refers to the distinctively human capacity of empathy for another's emotional responses in social interaction. Secondly, *renqing* refers to the social norms and moral obligations that should guide the social interaction of reciprocal exchange. The third meaning adds a dimension of rational calculation, with *renqing* denoting the medium, a favour or a gift, transferred in social exchange and accountable in terms of credit, debt, or balance (Yan 1996: 122-46). The notion of *renqing* thus by definition assumes a congruency between material exchange and the feelings that bind people together (Kipnis 1996: 309; 1997). Exchanges, such as giving a gift or doing a favour, are seen not only to be expressive of the good feelings between people, but are also seen as a way to create, maintain, or intensify such good feelings because gifts 'embody the desired closeness of a relationship, which they help to construct' (Kipnis 1997: 67).

even greater difficulties. From the point of view of rural Huining parents this meant that supporting a son's education would increase his chances of finding a spouse. Because the marriage market is stratified not only in terms of a spatial hierarchy that reflects socio-economic disparities, but also in terms of the level of education of the prospective spouses, an 'educated' son from a disadvantaged region might still attract a bride from the same region. If he failed to do so, he might find a bride among women of comparatively lower educational level. On the other hand, it was rather unlikely that even an educated rural male would attract a wife whose family could provide an apartment in the city. Male graduates from rural family backgrounds – and their parents – thus faced the particularly heavy financial burden of buying urban housing as a precondition for neo-local marriage. Moreover, parents of a male graduate usually could expect their daughter-in-law to have attended tertiary schooling as well. This meant that this daughter-in-law was most likely to feel quite indebted towards her parents for their sacrifices towards her education. Moreover, such a daughter-in-law could be expected to contribute financially to the conjugal budget. She thus would have considerable bargaining power in favour of translating her feelings of indebtedness into actual support for her parents (and siblings).

Rural Huining parents thus could anticipate that supporting their sons' education would put the intergenerational contract at particular risk. Considerable resources would be needed to help a son set up his urban life, so that hardly any resources could be expected to flow back to the village. Moreover, like the urban elderly, the next generation of rural elderly could expect to be confronted with empowered daughters-in-laws. For the urban context, 52-year-old Tong Weibin, a graduate from rural Huining working in the administration of Lanzhou University and father of a single daughter, summarised the situation as follows:

> In urban China things have changed. Even though sons usually still have the wish to care for their parents, the daughters-in-law do not care anymore [laughs]. Actually, nowadays it is better to have a daughter than a son. It is easier to communicate your needs to a daughter when it comes to health care or other problems. With a daughter-in-law things are more difficult. Relationships with daughters-in-law are not easy to handle. Nowadays daughters usually care more for their parents, and sons care less. Sons only listen to their mother-in-law.

In the urban context, popular discourse claimed the conventional intergenerational contract had reversed into its opposite, with daughters having become the main care givers of elderly parents. However, in terms of co-residence with the elderly, practice has remained strikingly gendered in

the customary fashion also in the cities.[57] Having only one child, but being eligible for pension payments and health care insurance, conditions of elderly support were certainly much easier for the majority of urban residents of Tong Weibin's generation, as compared to what my informants in rural Huining expected to face. Yet, when it comes to emotional and physical care, rural Huining parents did, at least, often have the advantage of having a second option. If empowered daughters-in-law did not care, they could still turn to their own daughters. Strikingly, for both rural as well as urban parents, sons were considered unreliable when it came to fulfilling the needs of emotional and physical care taking.

Compared to their male peers, female graduates can more easily convert academic achievement into upward mobility on the marriage market, sometimes even marrying into urban families. Such a union could ease financial burdens and add considerably to their natal family's access to support resources. Yet, as several cases of broken relations between female graduates and their natal families in the village showed, such an option also entailed the risk that a bride's in-laws would look down on her natal family and that the young woman would sever her own relations with them. If female graduates maintained relations with their natal families, they could be expected to have a good bargaining position with their spouse and to be able to support their natal family from the marital budget. Moreover, due to a common understanding that their parents' spending for their education had been less instrumentally motivated than similar spending on sons, educated daughters could be expected to feel even more indebted to their parents than their brothers. From the parents' point of view, investment in the emotional bonding with a daughter thus may well make up for the diminished filial piety that could be expected from their daughter-in-law. After all, while the gendered intergenerational contract had not changed on the level of representation, in practice many daughters-in-law felt empowered to question their customary duties towards their husband's parents. For rural parents, investment in the emotional bonding with daughters thus became an increasingly important back-up strategy of securing future support in times of need, and particularly in times of emotional distress.

The Essence of Parental Hope

In her study of urban middle and lower-middle class parents and their single children in China's north-eastern city of Harbin, Vanessa Fong (2004)

[57] According to the 2002 Chinese Health Longevity Survey conducted among 15,000 elderly in 22 provinces, more than two-thirds of urban parents who live with an adult child co-reside with a son (Zeng 2003).

highlighted the role played by the state-mandated fertility transition (i.e. one-child family policy) in creating a strong educational drive. Moreover, she identified China's long pre-revolutionary tradition of valuing education; the toppling of China's socio-economic order in the wake of the Communist Revolution; and the meritocratic ideologies of the capitalist world system as important factors in the rise of education as a central source of hope. These factors were equally relevant for the population in rural Huining, with the exception that – unlike their urban compatriots – rural Huining parents had benefited from the policies of the Cultural Revolution that extended rural mass education. Yet, like their urban counterparts described by Vanessa Fong, rural Huining parents blamed their lack of social mobility in rapidly developing reform-socialist Chinese society rather on particular historical circumstances than on structural constraints of class (cf. Fong 2004: 211). This, in turn, allowed them to cherish high educational aspirations for their own children.

Since the 1990s, rapid socio-economic development in some parts of China has marginalised further the already economically disadvantaged regions like Huining County. Huining County has become increasingly remote and its population has come to feel increasingly backward, as local living conditions have stagnated and prospects for development are bleak. Accordingly, from the local point of view, the future seemed to happen somewhere else. After all, the physical environment in rural Huining had nothing to offer to its inhabitants but the reproduction of poverty. In view of an increasing disjunction from national development, local conditions were experienced as more and more distressing. Since local parents saw no way to improve their own living conditions, they delegated all corresponding hopes to their children. Children became their parents 'only hope' for a future they themselves could not realise. Moreover, with elderly support in crisis, these parents hoped that their sacrifices for their children's education would foster an emotional attachment strong enough to bridge the increasing spatial and social gap between the generations. At the same time, education became their children's 'only hope' for achieving a future different from that of their parents. Also for people in rural Huining, high educational aspirations thus were closely connected to the production and upkeep of hope. In their case it was the hope for a secure life and participation in the country's rapid development, in other words for a 'change of fate'.

When focusing attention on the future-orientation inherent in the present, educational aspirations become understandable differently from being solely characterised by rational calculation. After all, recent conditions of the employment market have made the 'return' to educational spending far too uncertain to be calculable. Instead, the crumbling of formerly

guaranteed educational 'investment security' of the planned economy that used to promise steady and privileged positions to all graduates, has left a vacuum that has been, I would argue, filled with local people's hope. Visions of educational achievement bringing about a different future for their children allowed local parents to understand the present as changeable. Constant re-evocation of former cases of educational achievement in the family, in the village, and in the county served to invigorate hope for future fulfilment also in one's own family. For rural Huining parents, educational achievement of their children meant the possibility to focus on the 'yet-to-be' (Bloch 1959), the prospective moments immanent in all presence. For these parents, motivating their children to study thus was a way of producing hope. In their otherwise grim situation, the peculiar mix of legacies of Confucian ideas and recent experiences of reform-socialist education and its attendant mobility helped to fuel parents' hopes.

Yet the hope for a different future was likely to be realised only by some. For others such a change remained an unrealistic illusion. Bourdieu (2000) stated that for people below a certain threshold of objective chances, the link between the present and the future is cut. Such a break, he assumed, could induce unrealistically high illusions. Like Bourdieu's 'millennium vision', the hope that rural Huining parents connected with their children's educational achievement seemed to help to make 'bearable the unbearable situation of in fact having no future at all' (2000: 221).

Conclusion

This chapter described various aspects that contributed to high educational aspirations among rural Huining parents. It also depicted some pedagogical methods to which local parents resorted when trying to motivate their children to study. Having themselves remained in the countryside as peasants or become labour migrants, rural parents had witnessed how some of their siblings, fellow villagers, or classmates had made an education-based career outside the locality. Feeling unable themselves to improve their own situation, rural parents delegated that hope to their children, whom they pushed for educational success. In the context of the role of education in China's imperial as well as in the socialist past, education-based mobility was believed to be principally open to every child and educational achievement above all a matter of diligence and discipline. In addition, the myth that poverty induces high educational motivation became a source of hope that even their children had a chance. Not least such a myth may at the same time have also worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

From the parents' point of view, schooling would help educate their children to become moral persons, not least by teaching them to how to live

up to the challenge of competition at school as much as by keeping them dependent on their parents' support for their educational endeavour. Local methods of motivating children to study resorted to the experience of shame in case one did not live up to the high educational goals set up by the social environment as well as the fright of being exposed to beating and shaming in front of others. Parents' manifold sacrifices for their children's education were brought up recurrently in conversations, thus inculcating feelings of indebtedness in the children. In village life, children's educational achievement was rewarded by high social standing for their families. Educational success thus was not only a reason for the parents to be proud, but also earned esteem from within the community, thus turning into an important source of symbolic capital.

In a system based on the family as the only source of elderly support, the question of spending scarce family resources on a child's education was evidently, although certainly not exclusively, connected to the value of children in terms of their future role as providers of care. Contrary to national law, local understanding of the intergenerational contract remained undoubtedly gendered. Daughters were still expected to leave the family upon marriage, and were thus an unreliable source of elderly care for their parents. Still, despite such notions about the gendered intergenerational contract, local parents increasingly invested in their daughters' education.

Also socially non-mobile daughters who stayed in the countryside (i.e. rural daughters) could be important sources of support for their natal parents, especially in terms of practical assistance and intimate bodily care when the latter got frail. Yet, their ability to support their parents was dependent, among other factors, on the proximity of residence and support obligations towards their in-laws.

Parental support for higher education was an often successful means of fostering children's indebtedness and inculcating obligations of filial reciprocation in them. Since daughters were aware that the gendered intergenerational contract involved fewer reciprocal claims on them than on their brothers, they tended to feel even more indebted to their parents. For their part, parents supported their daughters' education knowing that such support promised to foster this intensified emotional bonding. They also calculated that such educated daughters were likely to have better access to cash income in the future and an improved bargaining position over the use of family resources. Combined with the prospect that an educated daughter would marry up, parents suspected that in view of reduced number of offspring, in case their sons failed, their daughters would lend financial, material, and emotional support in old age.

In the end, in view of the younger generation's ambitions to leave the village, a village house was not a particularly attractive asset in the intergenerational contract. Parents could best provide for their own future by investing all possible resources in relatedness with their few children of both genders by exhibiting parental sacrifice and inculcating indebtedness for educational support. Even though the intergenerational contract remained precarious, provision of educational support gave parents the mental peace of having accomplished their part of the contract.

For rural Huining parents, educational achievement of their children was above all a matter of hope. The object of hope may be explicit or open-ended. What contemporary rural Huining parents hoped for was the achievement of local prestige, social distinction, and a feeling of accomplishment. Not least, they hoped for a 'change of fate' of their family away from the poor, insecure, burdensome, outmoded, and disrespected peasant life by ensuring the social mobility of the next generation. The hope that one's children would attain higher education was also crucial to parents because it was cherishing any hope at all in such an otherwise hopeless environment that made life bearable. In the region, cultivating the fields yielded little in terms of produce, economic gain, or social standing. It was 'cultivating children' that gave hope to parents and meaning to their lives.

Chapter 4
The 'Backbone of Support': Siblings, Uncles, and Aunts

This chapter broadens the perspective on education-related social support beyond the parent-child bond by taking into view the axes of support between siblings and those between uncles and aunts and their nieces and nephews. Decisive policy changes of the late 1990s, when China transformed its state-regulated labour market for university graduates into an increasingly market-oriented system, deeply affected local practices of intragenerational relatedness between siblings as well as those of diagonal intergenerational relatedness between uncles and aunts and their nieces and nephews. Changed policies thus generated two distinct generations in post-Maoist rural China, whose kinship experience mediated by schooling differ decisively.[58]

The first part of this chapter looks at educational support mainly from the perspective of those graduates who passed the national college entrance exam between 1977 and 1997 (i.e. 'early graduates'). During this early reform period, steady employment in the state bureaucracy was allocated to all graduates of secondary vocational schools and tertiary institutions. The level of job allocated and the amount of social welfare attached to it depended on the level of the educational degree achieved. Yet for all graduates from rural family backgrounds, educational achievement guaranteed a decisive change of living conditions because their official residential status changed from rural to urban. Such *hukou* mobility was necessarily perceived as a 'change of fate'. Social support relations between early graduates from rural Huining County and their village families thus bridged considerable socio-economic differences.

The second part of the chapter focuses on intragenerational support between siblings in the second generation of reform-era graduates. This generation took the national college entrance exam after 1997, and includes

[58] I use 'generations' here in the sense of age cohorts sharing a particular historical experience. According to Karl Mannheim (1964) different 'generational contexts' are defined by rapid political and cultural changes that distinguish them from each other.

those who were still students at the time of my research. I scrutinise how under the condition of smaller sibling sets and higher educational costs, intragenerational sibling support became decisive for the realisation of individual educational mobility. At the same time, these second generation graduates have negotiated with their siblings the obligations and opportunities of their shared, albeit gendered, responsibility for the future living conditions of their parents.[59]

The Early Graduates

Visitors to Huining County could expect to hear numerous stories about successful graduates of the first two decades after the re-instalment of the national college entrance exam in 1977 who had left the region and pursued a state-guaranteed professional career in government institutions or in academia. In the 2000s, the official slogan 'escape poverty through educational attainment' (*yi jiaoyu tuopin* 以教育脱贫) was still widely cited. Villagers often demonstrated the truth of the slogan to visitors by pointing to the empty houses left by those whose children's success spurred the departure of the whole family.

The importance of education for changing fate was explained to me repeatedly. Zhao Wenrong, a distant relative of my host family, explained it this way when I met him working in the fields one day:

> There certainly are differences between the families here in the village. But such differences do not derive from the fact that some go for labour migration (*dagong* 打工) and the others stay at home. It is also not the kind of job you do as a labour migrant that makes the difference. You cannot earn much money as a labour migrant anyway. Labour migration thus will not change your situation. What really makes a difference is whether you have relatives outside the village who have got a steady working position (*wending gongzuo* 稳定工作).

My assistant Zhao Mei later attempted to correct this information. 'My uncle [Zhao Wenrong]', she said, 'is right about the importance of having relatives who hold steady employment. But actually, the fact that someone from your family has such position alone does not necessarily make a difference. Some villagers have relatives who have steady work elsewhere, but they do not benefit from that at all'. Yet her family, which hosted me in the village,

[59] It should be kept in mind that my data are mainly, but not exclusively, collected among students at Lanzhou University, a national key university. Key university students can be expected to have much better chances of finding employment than graduates from average universities or short courses at specialised colleges.

presented an example of precisely the benefits that a whole family might receive from the education and subsequent placement into a steady job of a single individual. It is said locally that 'one university student in the family will change the appearance of the whole family' (*jia chule yige daxuesheng, quan jia de mianmao jiu bianle* 家出了一个大学生，全家的面貌就变了). A closer look at developments in the Zhao family made clear that sharing the return to education was not only a matter of intergenerational filial reciprocation towards the parents, but that also siblings of both genders were likely to benefit both directly and indirectly.

The Zhao Family

As mentioned in chapter 3, Zhao Wen, the fourth brother among the seven Zhao siblings of the middle generation (born between 1956 and 1970) enjoyed a higher social standing than the others. He had the luck to be just the right age to attend the local senior high school that opened in the village for two years between 1974 and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Within the sibling set, he was the only one who made an education-based career outside the village. At the time of my research, he held a higher-level position in the government of neighbouring Qinghai Province that secured him a number of welfare benefits as well as the privilege of permanent urban residency. None of his siblings had achieved a similar change of status and remained ordinary 'peasants'.

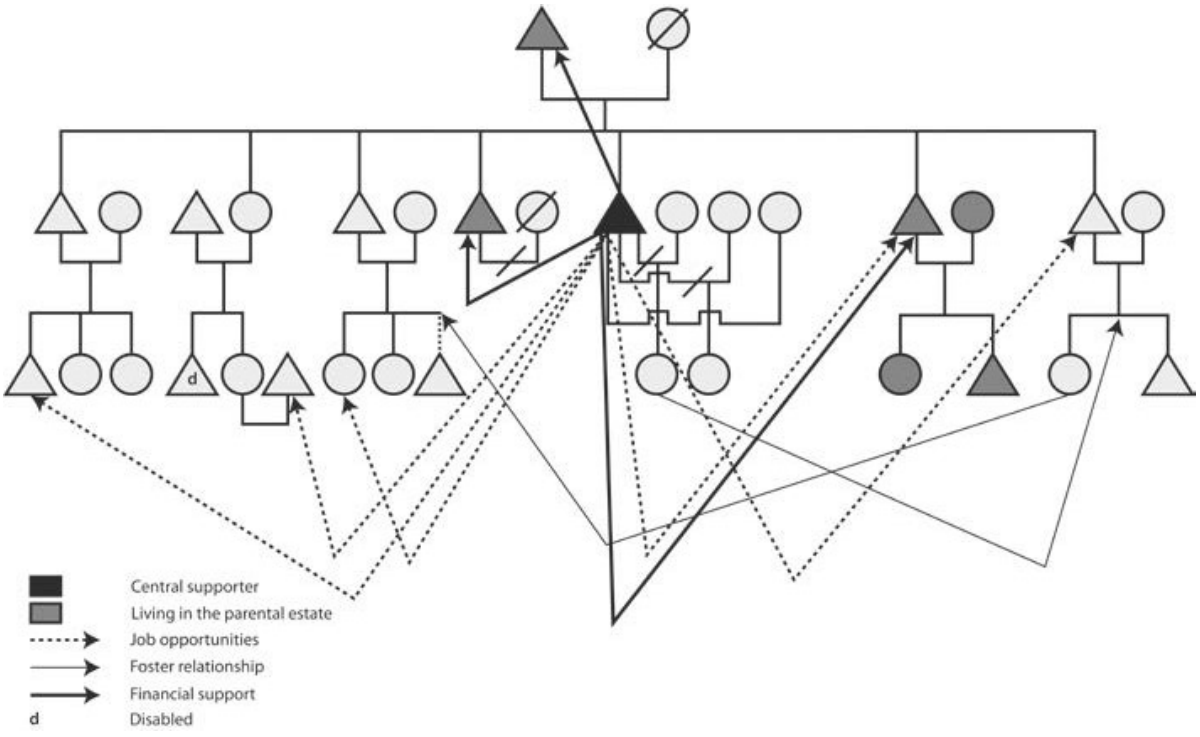

Figure. The Zhao family geneaology.

The first and second Zhao brothers had officially separated from the family by taking their share of the common family property and giving up any further claims towards the patrimony. The one sister also had no official place in the family following her marriage. The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth brothers were considered to still be members of the joint family; but only the third and fifth brothers lived in the family compound. The fourth and sixth (or little) brother permanently lived with their conjugal families in Qinghai Province.

As a government cadre, the fourth brother enjoyed a high status amongst his siblings, and acted as the family manager (*dangjia* 当家).[60] Any major event within the family had to be discussed first with him, and he decided on further proceedings.

How the Fourth Brother Supported his Siblings

Over the years, the fourth brother had contributed to the living expenses of his 73-year-old father with regular money gifts. He had also supported each of his six siblings in various ways. Primarily, he had arranged job opportunities in neighbouring Qinghai Province. After his elder brothers and his brother-in-law had become too old to take on the hard physical jobs of migrant labour, the fourth brother had helped their sons or sons-in-law to acquire such jobs. At the time of my research, the second brother's adopted son was still too young to become a labour migrant, so the fourth brother had supported the second brother's daughter by arranging her education and later helping her to obtain a position as a primary school teacher. The divorced and childless third brother, who was believed to be mentally retarded, had remained in the village to do agricultural work. He was supported by the fourth brother with annual gifts of clothes and some minor cash. The fifth brother had benefited from the fourth brother's arrangement of opportunities for work in Qinghai Province, but had returned to the village when he got a better paying local job. Since the fifth brother's daughter, Zhao Mei, had proven successful in her education, the fourth brother also contributed substantially to her living expenses and tuition fees. For the sixth brother, the fourth brother had arranged a comparatively well paid and steady contract job at a state grain distribution station in upland Qinghai Province.

[60] The official representation of the family towards government bodies as the family head (*jiazhang* 家长) is assigned according to the most senior brother resident in the household. In this case, this should have been the third brother, but since the third brother had almost no financial resources of his own, the day-to-day proceedings of the household in terms of consumption were decided by the fifth brother and his wife.

The fourth brother thus had supported all his siblings and some of their children. The kind of help arranged for each, however, varied considerably in terms of amount and quality. Moreover, his support had not been unconditional. When the sixth brother dropped out of school early, the fourth brother accused him of counting too much on his help instead of working out the future by himself. The father too was concerned about his youngest son's unsteady life, and intervened to settle the quarrel between the brothers.

What the Siblings Gave Back

Certainly, the fourth brother had become the backbone of social support for his natal family. His supportive attitude was not only much praised within the Zhao family, but also, sometimes with a smack of envy, among other villagers. When taking a closer look, it became evident that the fourth brother's support for his siblings was not entirely unilateral. The position of having the decision-making power in family affairs and being treated as the honoured guest with all his rural kin at his beck-and-call during visits to the village could be considered a symbolic repayment for his support. Yet, reciprocity also took more material forms. At the time of my research, the fourth brother was married to his third wife, a woman with an urban family background. Because the wife strictly refused to tolerate any contact between her husband and his two daughters from earlier marriages, the fourth brother relied on his brothers to fulfil his legal obligations, including the payment of alimonies to his ex-wives and his daughters, all of whom lived near his parental home. The fourth brother sometimes ordered the fifth brother to effect these payments, but did not always repay him properly. Other monetary transactions with the fourth brother's former classmates and friends in rural Huining, such as loans and debt collection, were also effected by his brothers.

Because the fourth brother had secured him a relatively steady income, the sixth brother was also obliged to contribute substantially on occasions that required financial contributions greater than what the fourth brother could afford alone, such as old Mr. Zhao's hospital costs detailed in chapter 3. Moreover, when the fourth brother's elder daughter faced problems at senior high school in Huining County, and he could not bring her into his own household on account of his wife's objections, he sent her to be fostered by the sixth brother's family. In this way she could attend school in Qinghai Province and improve her chances at the national college entrance exam.

The fourth brother's support for his rural siblings served as a reserve of even less tangible benefits for the fourth brother. When his third marriage

failed to produce children, which also meant that he was to remain without male offspring, for example, the fourth brother returned to the village to have his wife cured by the ritual specialists at the local shrine. Obviously, in times of personal crisis, local spiritual order still was very meaningful for him. By supporting his siblings, the fourth brother remained integrated in rural society as an honoured person of considerable social standing. This status seemed to be a significant factor in the fourth brother's personal sense of security and mental peace.

When chatting with the fourth brother during one of his visits to the village about his motivation to support all his siblings, he explained the social expectation that accompanied social advancement:

> If you have the capability (*benshi* 本事), but do not help others, you are not a good person. People will talk badly about you. If you help others, you are a good person in other people's eyes. In China, people evaluate others only according to the power (*quanli* 权利) they hold. If you have the ability to help others, like your family, you prove to be trustworthy and to have integrity (*xinren* 信任). You demonstrate your good character (*renpin* 人品) and that is why people trust you. In the urban context the famous saying that 'If you have made your way up, all the chickens and dogs follow and fly high with you' (*yi ren de dao, ji chou sheng tian* 一人得道, 鸡犬升天) somehow smacks of nepotism.[61] But I still think that to help your family members is a Chinese virtue (*meide* 美德).

However, later the same day he made clear that his support was not necessarily motivated by the Chinese virtue of sharing one's success, when he whispered me: 'Concerning your question today why I support them all, I tell you, after my father's death, I will support none of them any longer'. Besides reconfirming the centrality of the filial bond, this statement also revealed the exhaustion and frustration of being the only socially mobile actor in the family. Like a patron, the fourth brother cared for his clients. With no other source of support available, the latter always turned towards their successful brother to solve the numerous financial problems generated by their poor and insecure living conditions.

Compared to other local families the case of the Zhao family is characteristic in many respects. Of these, the most noticeable is the way the

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[61] The proverb refers to the notion of *zhanguan* (沾光, lit. to share the light) which indicates the moral obligation to let others share in the benefits of one's achievement. It relates to a famous folk story about a Daoist man who after years of self-cultivation ascended to the immortal world. All his chickens and dogs flew up with him, shared in his merits, and became immortal as well (Yan 1996: 129).

fourth brother became the backbone of support for all of his siblings. Like the fourth Zhao brother, most successful graduates of the first two post-Maoist decades usually had several siblings with rural family registration who did not benefit from higher education. The reasons that the latter had remained ordinary peasants included their gender, position in the sibling set, physical condition, educational capabilities, parental preferences, and age when rural collectives briefly opened secondary schools in the late period of the Cultural Revolution. These siblings thus had neither steady income nor were eligible for any kind of social welfare. As adults, these siblings constantly turned towards the graduates within the family for support in financing their children's education and marriages, or covering other major expenses, such as health treatment. Besides financial support, the educated sibling usually provided information and social contacts that were essential for arranging urban jobs, educational opportunities, and hospital treatment.

Relatedness and Conditions of Sibling Support

Family histories collected in rural Huining County exposed numerous cases of broken sibling relationships. Nevertheless, people subscribed to the naturalness of solidarity and mutual help between siblings. 'Natural' sibling solidarity was explained locally by biological arguments of descent, such as relatedness through blood (*xueqin* 血亲), bones and flesh (*qin gu rou* 亲骨肉), or having come from the same womb (*tongbao* 同胞). Mutual obligations between adopted or step-siblings were similarly interpreted as based on shared substance, albeit not a biological one. What was believed to be shared in these cases was the attention and care of the parents (see also Stafford 2000a).

Irrespective of the level of emotional attachment between siblings, there was a clear moral obligation to support one's siblings in cases of emergency. For the villagers, the norm of sibling support, especially for brothers, was backed up by strong social sanctions in the community. Obligations of sibling support even outweighed the tragic consequences they might cause for one's own conjugal family. Such was the case with Zhu Jinyan's father, whose brother had caused a lethal accident. Only payment of a large compensation sum would save the latter from going to jail. Given the high social pressure of sibling solidarity, Zhu Jinyan's father had little choice but to sacrifice the educational opportunities of his children and provide the money to save his brother from such a grim fate. 'Had my father behaved differently, it would have been his social death in the village', 20-year-old Zhu Jinyan commented.

Most graduates of the early reform period explained their feelings of obligation towards their siblings by the support they had received from them in the past. Stories of siblings contributing their labour or income to the family economy or sacrificing their own educational opportunities in favour of the graduate were frequently recalled.

When talking about her own education Yu Zhenyan, the youngest among ten siblings who grew up during the 1950s and 1960s, expressed deep gratitude towards her third brother, whom she called the 'central figure of the family' (*hexin renwu* 核心人物). During the collectivist period, the third brother had been recruited as a worker outside the locality, and it was his income that supported the second sister's education. In turn, the third brother had ordered the second sister to support the fourth sister's education, and finally, he had ordered the fourth sister to support Yu Zhenyan's education. What made Yu Zhenyan especially grateful to her brother was the fact that he had continued to support her even in the face of heavy quarrels with his wife, who disliked fostering Yu Zhenyan during the latter's years at the senior secondary school. Later, when Yu Zhenyan had achieved an economically secure and privileged life in Beijing, she reciprocated her siblings' support by regularly inviting them to travel around China. Moreover, she had paid the tuition fee of 20,000 yuan for the daughter of her fourth brother and had hosted her during senior secondary school. She also contributed 5,000 yuan annually to the educational costs of her fourth sister's daughter.

Other graduates of the early reform period, however, felt they owed their success solely to their own studiousness. These graduates stressed how they had supported their families by living frugally and sending home portions of their state student stipends.

The burden of having siblings in the countryside was perceived variously. Some graduates claimed that, as beneficiaries of rural-urban economic disparities, it was no big deal for them to support their siblings; what was a small sum of money in the urban context meant a lot in the countryside. Other graduates experienced their support obligations towards rural siblings as more burdensome. 'We graduates with rural family backgrounds have to support all our family members in the countryside. We therefore just do not dare to spend our money for ourselves and enjoy the pleasures of urban life like the real urbanites do', commented Zhang Jun, a teacher from Huining County who lived in Lanzhou.

Given the great disparities in living conditions, early graduates often expressed feelings of pity and bad conscience towards those siblings who had remained in the village. At the same time, they also reported emotional alienation from and awkwardness with their rural siblings. After leaving the

village, I was commonly told, 'one does not speak the same language anymore' (*meiyou gongtong yuyan* 没有共同语言). Visits to the countryside thus often were kept as short as possible, with graduates sometimes staying in the village for just a few hours.

The actual range of support provided by graduates to their rural siblings is difficult to assess. Aside from variations within each family, the amount and kind of support given across the lifespan varies considerably over time. Also, siblings interpreted the level of support differently. In fact, the general claim that 'I support my siblings' often reflected normative expectations or referred only to occasional and emergency situations, and sibling support was hardly unconditional.

Plate 11. Five sisters.

In more intimate conversations, graduates sometimes admitted that support obligations towards their siblings caused quarrels between them and their spouses. This was especially the case in rural-urban marriages, when familial support obligations were considered to be all too unevenly distributed between the partners. In rural-rural marriages, female graduates often complained about the asymmetry of support in favour of their in-laws over their own natal kin. While supporting parents usually was reported to be only

a minor matter of debate between the spouses because it was based on the norm of filial piety, support for siblings and their families often stirred up greater disagreement.

Graduates often considered the financial demands of their rural siblings to be unrealistically high. Graduates admitted that 'to give nothing is impossible', but they usually negotiated requests for financial support to a lower sum than initially requested. They also preferred not to give money, but instead to offer help that would enable siblings to support themselves such as arranging income-earning opportunities like financing the start-up of a small business, or, most favoured, by supporting their siblings' children.

Job opportunities that graduates arranged for siblings in the city usually involved hard physical labour under insecure working conditions. Moreover, such labour was only a short- or medium-term solution since rural migrants would be forced to return to the countryside once the marketability of their physical labour deteriorated. Supporting educational attainment was, however, believed to facilitate long-term rural-to-urban mobility and access to mental instead of manual labour. In addition, graduates faced a particular moral pressure to pass on their cultural capital to other family members. Since their siblings usually were too old to attend higher education themselves, graduates often accomplished support for their siblings diagonally by supporting the education of their siblings' offspring.[62] They expected their nieces and nephews to fulfil both customary ethics of filial piety and jural obligations to provide elderly care for their parents. As graduate Song Zhuomei summarised: 'Supporting my brother's children means supporting him'.

Graduates often reported several reasons for supporting their siblings' children, as in this conversation with 35-year-old graduate Zhang Liping, who worked in university administration in Lanzhou:

> HO: Why do you support your niece's education?
>
> Zhang Liping: Thinking of these children [in the countryside], I feel that if we do not help them, nobody else will do so. Being an older sister, I cannot change the situation [that both younger brothers are local peasants]. All I can do is to help the children, to help them get a good job…. If they [the brothers] need money for supporting their children's education that is a proper purpose (*zhengshi* 正事). If they just want to borrow money [without special purpose], I do not necessarily give it to them.

[62] The term 'diagonal' for referring to relations between paternal and maternal uncles and aunts with their nieces and nephews comes from historical demography (e.g. Campbell and Lee 2008).

HO: Why is it more important to help sending the child to school than to just lend money to your brothers?
Zhang Liping: Because education is for the future, it changes a person's way of life (*gaibian shenghuo fangshi* 改变生活的方式), it means following a pathway [towards a future]. And it necessitates support.
HO: Why do your sister and you support your niece's education?
Zhang Liping: Because I also made my way out of the countryside based on my parents' support. We are [descendants] of the same father and the same mother, we are related through blood; there is a feeling of kinship closeness (*qinqing* 亲情). Therefore we have the responsibility to support her [the niece] and provide her with the opportunity to live a better life…. I always feel the children have no chance, so we should give them one. It is a matter of generations. We should help them grow up, so that they later can get a good job with a steady salary. This will help the whole family, won't it? If we help the niece to attend a good school, and then help her to get a good job, we will provide the whole family with a backbone (*yikao* 依靠) of support. It will improve the situation of the whole family (*bang qilai* 帮起来).

Current Students, Recent Graduates, and their Siblings

Current students and recent graduates who took the national college entrance exam in the late 1990s grew up with first-hand impressions of their predecessors, the 'backbones' of the family, who were held in high esteem. As role models, if not as actual supporters, graduates of the early reform period helped foster local children's educational motivation. However, for the latter conditions of study as well as employment prospects were rather different from what their predecessors had enjoyed.

Unlike the early graduates, recent graduates and contemporary students were born into smaller families with an average of two or three children. Moreover, they faced drastically different circumstances in the educational sector and in the labour market. Enrolment expansion on the national level in the late 1990s also characterised Huining County, and within less than a decade, higher education admission had increased tenfold in absolute terms.[63] While such increase in the enrolment rate certainly has

[63] The number of participants at the national college entrance exam more than doubled from 3,081 pupils in 1997 to 6,482 pupils in 2005. At the same time the ratio of students passing the exam for at least junior or specialised colleges (*dazhuan*) increased from 16.4 per cent in

boosted local educational ambitions, tuition fees also have risen spectacularly. Moreover, the labour markets for qualified workers are now saturated. In short, education is more expensive and opportunities for good jobs are fewer; students depend more heavily on their families for support, but with diminished prospects of being able to serve as future backbones.

Because rural Huining parents' incomes usually are insufficient to support the higher education of even a single child and because the state has reduced its financial support for individual students, educational opportunities have become more dependent on sibling support, both diagonal and horizontal. The second generation of graduates thus feels that their own 'fate' has become closely intertwined with that of their family in intergenerational and intragenerational terms. They are aware that sibling support entails an obligation of later reciprocity. They know that educational spending has put whole families into severe financial risk. And they recognise that the absence of elderly national pension system for the rural population means that they have responsibility for the future living conditions of their parents.

In the following, I first highlight how, for current students and recent graduates, educational attainment interconnects with the (gendered) intergenerational obligations siblings share towards their parents. I then show that for this generation, sibling support in the field of education may also be interpreted as an intragenerational investment into the supporter's own future social security, even though the outcome of such investment has become increasingly insecure.

Educational Attainment and (Gendered) Intergenerational Support Obligations

As described in chapter 3, villagers in Huining County continue to expect sons to have greater responsibilities than daughters to care for elderly parents even though national legislation stipulates that elderly care should be shared equally between siblings regardless of gender. Customarily, the duty of caring for the elderly parents was assigned to the youngest son, who in turn inherited the family estate. Yet, in contemporary rural Huining County responsibilities are now divided based on the level of educational attainment.

1997 to 81.3 per cent in 2005. The absolute numbers increased from 506 pupils being admitted in 1997 to 5,269 pupils in 2005 (Huiningxian 2007: 614).

Brothers' shared obligation

A case in point was 26-year-old graduate Fang Yubo, with whose family I stayed with for a few days during my time in rural Huining County.

Fang Yubo had graduated from university in 2004 and had been lucky to attain a position in a government department in Lanzhou, where his 27-year-old brother worked as a labour migrant. During their childhood, the financial situation of the family had been too tight to pay the costs of both sons' education. Fate between the brothers was sealed when Fang Yubo's elder brother failed in the secondary high school entrance exam twice, while Fang Yubo himself passed the exam in his second attempt. The elder brother then left the village as a labour migrant. After a few years, the elder brother brought home his new wife, who remained in the village with her parents-in-law. From his earnings the elder brother remitted money home to support his parents, to contribute to Fang Yubo's daily living expenses at university, and to pay the expenses of their little sister who attended secondary high school.

From the day Fang Yubo graduated from university, the social support situation in the family changed drastically. The elder brother stopped all payments towards the parents, towards his younger brother, and towards the sister as well. Since the parents earned no money from their agricultural labour, Fang Yubo thus became responsible for paying his parents' expenses of 1,500 yuan for their annual portion of coal and fertilizer. He also had to provide his younger sister's tuition and living expenses of about 9,000 yuan annually, for which he had to take a high-interest loan. Besides these familial support obligations, he still had to pay back his own student loan of 24,000 yuan. Since graduation, Fang Yubo had thus been borrowing from friends and juggling bank loans. He was comparatively lucky to have steady employment with a monthly salary of 1,400 yuan. In order to save as much of his income as possible, he lived in the triple-bed dormitory provided by his company. However, he could not yet see a way to manage his ongoing family obligations and marry his girlfriend because marriage would require the purchase of an apartment in the city.

Fang Yubo's case shows that the level of education eventually determined the different obligations brothers were to take over in terms of family support, particularly elderly support for the elderly parents. School drop-outs had to act as financial supporters of the family as long as their brothers were still in school. After the latter's graduation, financial obligations shifted to rest on the graduates' shoulders. Labour migrants (and their wives), expected to return to the village sooner or later, were assigned the future duty of daily care for the elderly parents by co-residence or by living in proximity, while substantial financial support for the elderly was expected to be provided for by the graduate.

Sisters' contributions

Sisters' role in family support, particularly elderly support for their parents, differed from that of brothers. A considerable number of informants recalled that in times of financial shortage, it was the sisters who had dropped out of school in order to facilitate a brother's education. Accordingly, if sisters migrated for labour, their remittances home were often used to help finance a brother's education. Such sisterly support was locally explained as a daughter's repayment of the debt accumulated by the parents in her upbringing, which was being invested indirectly to improve the parents' future living conditions.

A case in point was Han Bing, one of Huining County's more than 6,000 participants at the national college entrance examination in early June 2007. Since he had attended a senior high school in a township seat, he had to come to the county seat for the two days of the examination. His mother had joined him to care and cook for him during these important days. In the mornings she sent him into the school building where the examination took place and then, like hundreds of other parents, waited patiently outside the closed iron gates for three hours until the lunch break. After lunch, she again waited until the evening break.

'It is worse for the parents', one examinee commented on the crowd of parents enduring the heat all day long in front of the school with little more to do than look at the silent building where their children sat for the exam.

> We examinees know what to expect, we are perfectly aware of the level of accomplishment we possibly can reach. We just hope to perform well during that day and maybe to meet some good luck. But for the parents it is different. They often hope for a miracle. All the hopes and worries that accompanied them for years condense in these hours of decision that determine whether their efforts in the end will have been worth it or in vain.

When I met Han Bing's mother waiting in the crowd, she was also full of worries. She explained, 'My son is taking part in the national college entrance examination for the first time, but he has to pass it by all means. There is no way he can repeat the exam next year. His elder sister is already 26 years old and she is still unmarried. She cannot wait any longer; she has to get married this year. That is why he has no other option, but has to pass'.

The relation between these two events became clearer to me when I came to know the family better. Some years previously Han Bing's father, a local peasant, had died. The family had four children: three daughters and Han Bing, their only son, who was the youngest. Han Bing's mother claimed to favour her son: 'Of course I favour my son. He is the one I will depend on

later. He will have to care for me and I will live with him. On the daughters I cannot count; they will have to care for their mothers-in-law'. The two eldest daughters had married local peasants and begun their own nuclear families. The youngest of Han Bing's sisters, Han Hua, had undergone a one year vocational training as a cook at a private school in the provincial capital of Lanzhou. Then she had returned to the township centre in Huining County where her brother attended senior high school. Together with her mother she ran a restaurant next to her brother's school, thus providing food, accommodation, and tuition for him. The mother was not completely happy with the situation. She often felt insecure and helpless with running the restaurant. It happened that customers got drunk, did not pay their bill, damaged restaurant furniture, and harassed her daughter.

At the age of 26, Han Hua was regarded already as late for marrying. A few months before her brother's exam, she had met a boyfriend from among the guests at the restaurant and planned to marry. The prospective husband was the son of a high-level county official, and Han Hua's mother regarded him as a very good choice. She was eager not to let her daughter's chance pass.

> It should be her turn now. She had boyfriends propose marriage before, but she never could agree, because she had to care for her brother. But now she cannot wait any longer. Her prospective husband is employed at a local bank; he has already bought an apartment in the county seat and might help my daughter to get a job there. The only reason we had the restaurant was to support my son. But now he has to pass the exam and enter whichever school he is admitted to, even if that school is not very good.

When I asked if the brideprice (*caili* 彩礼) expected upon her daughter's marriage, normally between 10 – 20,000 yuan, was a consideration in marrying her daughter as quickly as possible, Han Bing's mother answered: 'I do not dare to ask for any brideprice. If the groom is willing to give some, he shall do so. But in case my daughter had to shoulder the burden of supporting her brother for another year of high school by keeping up the restaurant that would for sure inhibit the marriage'. I then asked how the family would pay for Han Bing's tuition if they gave up the restaurant as a source of income. Han Bing's mother answered that the two elder sisters would need to increase their contribution to their little brother's education. But when the issue of brideprice was mentioned again in a later conversation, the mother's expectations towards the new son-in-law became more outspoken. 'When the eldest daughter married, we received a brideprice of 2,000 yuan. At the second daughter's marriage it was 4,000 yuan. We used that money to buy a motorcycle for the youngest daughter.

When she gets married, I do not want to receive a brideprice from the groom, because he will have to take on the burden of supporting my son's education'.

Although she often felt awkward in the restaurant due to her illiteracy, Han Bing's mother had become the central figure in the family after her husband's death. For her future, she expected support to be provided by her only son, who thus also became the focus of his sisters' attention. From the sisters' point of view, supporting Han Bing's education meant doing their part in providing for the mother's future living conditions. In other families, sisters had a similar role, and it was common to learn that sisters had withdrawn from their own studies or undertaken work as a migrant labourer to support brothers in the second generation of graduates. A sister's financial contribution did not necessarily terminate with marriage. As Han Hua's story shows, the financial burden of a brother's educational costs might also be reckoned as part of a sister's marriage arrangement, and a groom with a regular income might well be expected to contribute substantially to the education of his wife's brother.

Sibling order

In addition to gender, sibling order also shaped support obligations among siblings. When familial resources had been spent on elder siblings' education, these students and graduates felt an obligation to support their younger siblings in turn. During our conversation in a restaurant in Beijing, graduate Zhang Shuhua from rural Huining County explained: 'It is normal [that we support our siblings]. Our families do not have any other economic resources. As a graduate you already spent all the money the family has, so it is your turn to support the others. If I did not pay my sisters tuition, who else would do so?'

Moreover, students and graduates usually felt they had to function as role models, supporting their younger siblings' educational success with tutoring and advice on how to cope with educational pressure. Especially when it came to major educational decisions, such as filling out the university application form after the national college entrance exam, educated siblings were important sources of information. They were expected to provide the insider knowledge rural parents lacked.

Being aware that younger siblings were dependent on them, students often felt forced to compromise their educational opportunities, thus sacrificing their own future life chances. Such missed opportunities included resigning from repetition of the third year of senior high school in order to improve the outcome of the national college entrance exam, or refraining from post-graduate studies. Student Meng Wenhong summarized his

situation accordingly: 'Who would pay for my brother's education if I went for Masters studies?'

For male students, at least, supporting a younger brother's education might also be motivated by personal considerations. Such was explained to me by student Wang Baoquan.

> HO: Do you give him [the younger brother] money when he wants it?
>
> Wang Baoquan: Usually I do, but I give him less, only about half of the amount he asks for.… I also tutor him. If we both go to university, we can later share the responsibility to support our parents. But if he does not manage to attend university, and has to stay in the village, I will have to return there often, and I will have to give him money, or other material help.

As Wang Baoquan acknowledged, his own future obligations would be substantially eased if his brother also gained financial stability and moved out of the village.

Intragenerational Aspects of Sibling Support

When in the late 1990s costs for higher education rose dramatically, parents in rural Huining faced serious problems in financing their children's educational endeavours. Under these circumstances siblings often turned into crucial supporters of their brothers' or sisters' higher education. While most university students perceived it as being natural that their siblings supported them, they at the same time were very aware of the reciprocal obligation such support entailed.

Such was explained to me by Yu Lan, a university student who had lost her father in the aftermath of a serious traffic accident that also had left her elder brother handicapped. Yu Lan seemed to worry little about how to repay her student loan after graduation. She expected her brother, who ran a comparatively successful local bus company, to support her in that respect.

> Yu Lan: My debts do not pose a big problem. My brother earns cash. He will help me to repay my debts of about 20,000 yuan.
>
> HO: Will he lend the money to you?
>
> Yu Lan: No, he will not lend the money to me; he will give it to me. Relations in our family are very close. He will help me to repay the debt, but that does not mean that I will borrow the money from him. His help will be based on feeling, the 'feeling of closeness' (*qingan* 亲感). Such feeling implies the principle of 'if you help me now, I will help you at a later occasion'. It means that one does not count the exact amount of money transferred. In other words, it implies that if you need my help and it is within the reach of my possibilities

> to help you, I will do so. Sometime in the future there will surely be an occasion when I will be in need of help and then I can expect you to help me within the reach of your possibilities. My brother has an income now, but compared to me he is clearly disadvantaged in terms of his lower educational level and his being physically handicapped. It is therefore very likely that in a few years I will be better-off than him and then I will have to help him.

Like in other cases of students who were financially supported by their siblings, a record of the exact amount of financial support received was said to be unnecessary, since debts between siblings would not be repaid in a direct and equivalent fashion. Instead, the students claimed, receiving siblings' financial support evoked a deep gratitude, a natural feeling of obligation to help the supporter in return in the future. A frequently quoted saying in this context employed the locally pertinent metaphor of water as a scarce resource: 'The benevolence of being provided with a drop of water should be reciprocated with a bubbling fountain' (*di shui zhi en dang yi tong quan xiang bao* 滴水之恩当以涌泉相报). With respect to educational support Tong Weibin, a recent graduate, summarised: 'As a graduate you are very much aware that you owe your social position to other people's support. As long as you have a conscience (*liangxin* 良心, lit. good heart), you surely wish to reciprocate'.

There was a clear local understanding that financial support for educational endeavours was neither a 'pure gift', nor a straightforward credit. Instead, as explained to me by Zhao Mei, support created social relationships and incommensurable obligations:

> The money he [the uncle] gave for paying my tuition was a present only in appearance. In fact these kinds of presents are used to draw human relationships closer (*lajin ren yu ren zhijian de guanxi* 拉近人与人之间的关系). So when they [the uncle's family] will need money in the future, my family has to do everything to help them. Anything else would be really embarrassing for us (*buhaoyisi* 不好意思).

Early graduates achieved social upward mobility on the basis of a fully state-financed educational system. A supportive attitude of at least one family member surely had been indispensable. But in the second generation, students and graduates have been dependent on substantive financial contributions by particular supporters. In the village, the issue of educational support was constantly brought up in everyday conversations. Reminding the students and recent graduates of their supporter's contribution certainly aimed at inculcating feelings of gratitude that led to the desire – as well as the obligation – to reciprocate.

In the Confucian classics an explicit notion of reciprocity (*bao* 报) was codified as the core principle of ethical conduct and proper social relationships (Yang 1957). In the Confucian cultural world it has thus long been taken for granted that a good person always interacts with others in a reciprocal way (Yang 1957; Yang 1994; Yan 1996: 122). Such an ethic of reciprocity assumes a congruency between material exchange and the feelings that bind people together (Kipnis 1996). Exchanges, such as giving a gift or doing a favour, are thus not only regarded as expressive of the good feelings between people but are at the same time also seen as a way to create, maintain, acknowledge, or intensify such good feelings, since gifts 'embody the desired closeness of a relationship, which they help to construct' (Kipnis 1997: 67). In view of such unity of emotional attachment and instrumentality, it is no contradiction that educational support may be motivated by both feelings of closeness and calculation of a future return.

When 20-year-old student Wang Yalong at Lanzhou University explained to me why his sisters supported his education, he explicitly referred to the double nature of sibling support.

> Wang Yalong: I pay my tuition with a student loan. For my living expenses I depend on money sent from home. Basically all that money is provided by my two elder sisters. The eldest one is already married, the second sister is about to get married soon. Since I went to senior high school, all my clothes and the money I needed has been provided for by my sisters. If we leave aside the role the feeling of closeness (*qinqing* 亲情, lit. kin feeling) plays, then I think their motivation is not only an emotional investment (*ganqing touzi* 感情投资), but also a monetary investment (*jinqian touzi* 金钱投资). We have this tradition (*xiguan* 习惯), and I feel it is very natural. My sisters provide me with the opportunity to study (*gong wo shangxue* 供我上学) and when I shall have money, as soon as I earn a little bit of money myself, I will give it for sure to my parents or to my elder sisters. Unless I become a person of bad character (*bianzhi le* 变质了) in the future…but I think I will not…. I think it will be like that, because of this feeling between us. There is a famous saying in Chinese to describe deep-felt gratitude 'carved into the bones and inscribed into the heart' (*ke gu ming xin* 刻骨铭心). That means if an incident leaves a deep impression on you and arouses really deep feelings, you will never forget it your whole life….
>
> HO: Why do you think your sister gives you all that money?

> Wang Yalong: Well, one reason is maybe the close feeling between siblings, but she probably also has a [second] thought (*you xiangfa* 有想法). It is surely only a minor aspect, [but she thinks] when she helps me now, then later, when I will have work and a social position, I can help her, or I can help her son, my nephew. She probably thinks that way. But it is not her main motivation, the most important is still the good feelings between siblings, this feeling that you cannot measure with money. Between siblings there does not exist any borrowing of money, relatives could lend money for education, but between siblings we do not lend and borrow money.

Wang Yulong's explanation makes clear that support may be originally motivated by considerations that are emotional, instrumental, or a mixture of both. It does not really matter, he says, because the dividend from the support is never a direct return on the monetary value involved, but the relatedness that the transaction creates (see also Brandtstädter 2003). It is this relatedness that might pay off in the future.

Labour migrants could assume that their student siblings would feel a strong moral obligation to reciprocate the support they had received since such support had been indispensable for facilitating their education. Moreover, even though the difficulties contemporary graduates faced in the labour market did not guarantee that each of them would end up in high-level employment, graduates still could be expected to have access to an enhanced net of social support resources they could revert to in times of emergency, for example via former classmates. Helping to finance a sibling's education thus (also) served as an investment in the protection against one's own future needs.

Labour migrants, however, did not always support their student sibling in a direct fashion. Remittances sent to their parents were often diverted to siblings. These indirect support relations between labour migrants and their student siblings were not always smooth or without resentments.

Conclusion

In this chapter the diachronic view on education-related support transactions between siblings as well as between uncles and aunts and their nieces and nephews highlighted how not only the effects of family planning policies, but also rapidly changing policies in the fields of education and the labour market shaped local practices of relatedness. After all, those students who graduated before and after the decisive policy changes in the later 1990s faced fundamentally different conditions of education-based socio-economic

mobility and, by implication, of constellations of diagonal intergenerational as well as horizontal intragenerational education-related support.

During the first two decades of reform socialism, when graduate employment still remained centrally planned, the educational achievement of a small minority of rural youth caused divergent life trajectories and decisive socio-economic differences within sibling sets. These early graduates, because of their social mobility, often turned into backbones of support for their siblings in the countryside. Many became entangled in relations of mutual dependency with their rural siblings. Such relations were unequal, with a power imbalance that rendered the early graduates patrons to their village-dwelling siblings. Early graduates shared a general feeling of obligation to help their siblings in times of emergency. Moreover, they all faced a distinct moral obligation to contribute to the educational costs of their nieces and nephews. Since it was assumed that these nieces and nephews later would take good care of their elderly parents, graduates' diagonal support was locally interpreted as being ultimately targeted horizontally towards their siblings. Quite ironically, socialist educational policies intended to expand mass education combined with the many benefits entailed in educational achievement in the planned economy, thus also sustained conventional beliefs (and practices) that 'cultural capital' was transmitted intergenerationally within (extended) families.

Since the late 1990s, the combined changes in family size, educational policy, and the labour market have decisively changed local conditions of relatedness. Siblings have increasingly supported each other's education. Sisters' financial contributions to their brothers' education are interpreted as reciprocation towards their parents for their upbringing. As responsibility for the care of parents shifts from the youngest son to the most financially stable son, men's support for their brothers' education is sometimes also motivated by the aim to divide more equally these responsibilities.

In the field site, sibling relations were not a mere side effect of a central parent-child bond. Instead intragenerational sibling relationships are important in their own right. In distinction to the disruptive effects of market-oriented society on kinship support documented in other ethnographies of village life in contemporary China (e.g. Liu 2000; Yan 2003b), siblings in rural Huining County remained valued reserves of support.

The relationship between siblings in rural Huining County was rarely defined primarily by competition. Students as well as their migrant siblings both faced the pressure to carve out a future that was, ideally, different from that of their parents. Having been born into one of the country's most economically deprived regions meant, above all, finding a pathway out of

their native villages. Students relied on the support of their migrant siblings. Migrant siblings gave, well aware that – with the insecurity of their employment – they themselves could expect to be soon in pressing need of financial support. Migrant siblings hoped that if their siblings succeeded, they might also gain access to urban resources of social support. Increasing mutual dependency did not prevent conflict between siblings, and it amplified the multiple pressures faced by rural youth. But investments in sibling relatedness offered more in both emotional and material terms than could be gained through pure selfishness.

Chapter 5
Motivations to Study

This chapter describes current students' educational experiences and their motivation for studying throughout their years at school, particularly during the period that was most central to their educational career – senior secondary schooling. During all three years of senior secondary school, pupils focus on one goal: preparing for the *gaokao*.

Local pupils' motivation to keep up with daily pressure at school with what Kipnis called a 'disturbing educational discipline' (Kipnis 2001b) is central for understanding the local meaning of educational achievement. After all, pupils were the main actors in the local race for educational credentials. It is on their shoulders that all hope rested.

Formal education removes children from the family and the community. As a state institution, it disciplines school-goers and inculcates the values of the national community as well as the skills and competences necessary for labour formation. At the same time, it promises advancement and enhanced life chances as well as liberation from conventional restrictions (e.g. in terms of gender roles). Schooling potentially provides individual achievers with a positive sense of self-worth connected to being successful and knowledgeable, and of being 'educated persons' in a specific socio-cultural context. Lack of achievement is likely to cause feelings of individual failure (Levinson and Holland 1996). In marking the border between those who succeed and those who fail by awarding the former with credentials that legitimate power and social standing, formal education thus is crucial in defining personhood (Bourdieu 1998: 37).

In the following sections, I highlight how school-goers in rural Huining confront formal education and interpret its significance. Children in rural Huining are socialised into a local order that rewards educational achievement in myriad ways. The symbolic capital successful students may attain is shared by their family and kin; in case of extraordinary achievement, individual success is also shared by higher levels of collectivity, such as the school, village, township, or even county. At the

same time, educationally successful pupils undergo successive spatial, social, and intellectual dislocations from their place of origin. At school they are constantly disciplined to monitor themselves, develop competitiveness, strive for achievement, and focus on the goal of becoming a different social person. This chapter describes these conflicting tendencies, and aims to understand how they bear on students' view of themselves, their life, and their social embeddedness and support responsibilities. In this context the chapter will also describe the ambiguities of the university application procedure and the local celebrations of student enrolment (*nuan xuesheng* 暖学生) that mark students' definite change of status and separation from the village.

I begin with a glimpse of the experiences that students recall from elementary, junior, and senior secondary school. I then discuss two aspects that turned out to be crucial to local students' educational motivation: 'earning recognition' (*zhengqi*) and 'changing fate' (*gaibian mingyun*). Both notions reinforced achievers' positive self-identity, yet also implicated continuous integration in the family network.

The chapter also explores how the status change from rural youth to university student was organised and experienced locally. Which factors determined pupils' educational decisions in the uncertain but decisive university application process, locally referred to as the 'second university enrolment examination' (*di erci gaokao* 第二次高考)? Were students actually in a position to fashion their professional self in accordance to individual capabilities and the interests or needs of the labour market? Did they pursue their own individual goals, or did they reckon with the needs and wishes of their families and other supporters? How was their change in status in the family and community? What motivated enrolment celebrations, and why did some families prefer not to invite anyone to such an occasion?

Impressions of Early Schooling

Contemporary university students and graduates reported that their elementary schools had been located in simple village buildings.[64] Often several grades had shared one classroom, taking turns receiving the teacher's attention. With school buildings in walking distance, the majority of pupils had returned home for lunch. Yet some stayed at school during the days,

[64] In addition to general observations that included occasional visits to primary and secondary schools in the region and everyday contact with pupils of various age groups, the impressions given in this section are based mainly on the memories of students and recent graduates. In terms of primary schooling these thus refer to the period of the early and mid 1990s; in terms of secondary schooling these refer to the mid- and late 1990s.

passing the lunch break by playing or taking a short nap with their head down on the table. Looking back at the six years of elementary school, most students recalled times of untroubled happiness. Some students, however, remembered their early schooling experiences as less idyllic. These students had taken over household chores after returning from school, such as attending younger siblings or preparing the family meals, and their homework often had kept them busy until late at night. Some students also recalled having been afraid that the teachers would beat them if they had neglected their homework.

For many rural pupils, junior secondary schools had been beyond daily walking distance. These children began boarding in school dormitories from the age of about 12 or 13 years. This usually meant that they carried their weekly food rations (mainly bread, flour to be used for making noodles, and potatoes) on their walk back to school after weekend visits home. Memories of boarding during junior secondary school usually were dominated by accounts of the poverty of living conditions. Students often recalled how they had lived in rooms that hosted about thirty children sleeping side-by-side on a row of wooden planks. The planks were covered by single-padded cotton mattresses that some children brought, and two or even three children would squeeze onto each mattress. Lack of heating and water, sometimes even drinking water, and the malodour of all the little petroleum stoves used for cooking in the dormitory aggravated the poor conditions. Nevertheless, quite a number of students recalled these times of early self-reliance as joyful rather than full of hardships. After talking at length about his experiences at boarding school, a first-year student at Lanzhou University, Li Qianlong, summarised: ‘Only when looking back one realises how hard our living conditions were. During that time we did not feel any hardship, because it was the same for all of us, everybody faced the same conditions. We just did not realise that we were living in a closed up and dreary environment’.

While stories about the poor living conditions in junior secondary school dormitories were plentiful, experiences with learning were less vividly recalled and usually summed up in one or a few sentences. ‘I was still very young and very simple minded then. I just did what everybody did’; ‘I did what the teacher wanted me to do’; ‘junior secondary school just passed like that’ – were frequent comments. Others stated that they had ‘grown up’ during junior secondary school, meaning that they understood how to behave well and how to live up to their parents’ expectations. Some stories revealed heavy study pressures already beginning. For example, students recalled how they and their classmates had tried to prolong study time at night by gathering where there was light: at the entrance of the toilet

rooms or by the window of the teachers' dormitory. Only in a few cases was learning remembered as having been interesting in itself. Although these cases were few, they were still strikingly more frequent in descriptions of junior schooling than in those of senior secondary school. Students who had been tutored by an educated sibling or relative often reported more joy than others – a sign that such relationships had a positive impact on achievement.

Not all pupils who became educationally successful had been achievers during junior secondary school. Of those I surveyed, 34 per cent reported that they had to repeat at least once the entrance exam for senior secondary school. By the late 1990s, this exam had become all decisive for a pupils' educational career. It created a bottleneck in the student body, as ambitious pupils attempted to enter the college preparatory secondary high schools that had high rates of student success in university enrolment. The secondary high school entrance exam thus had turned into the first watershed in a pupil's future. In the late 1990s, vocational secondary schooling lost all attractiveness to the local peasantry because jobs were no longer allocated to vocational graduates. Then, the educational race for admission to college preparatory secondary schooling intensified. All educational striving during junior secondary school became directed towards the entrance examination to college preparatory high schools. Failure in this exam usually terminated a pupil's educational career. Those who had only nine years of schooling found the only options open to be labour migration, marriage, and agricultural labour.

Over the last three decades the proportion of local teenagers entering senior secondary schools in the county has been constantly on the rise. According to local school officials the proportion reached more than one-fourth of the corresponding age cohort in the early 2000s. Given the huge discrepancies between the five local senior secondary schools in terms of their pupils' success in the college entrance exam, the choice of secondary school seemed to be almost decisive for the teenagers' future. Extra tuition could open ways into the better schools if achievement was not sufficient, while the best schools (Huining Senior Secondary Schools No. 1 and 2) were able to offer scholarships to good students.

Even though the quality of schooling differed, life was equally tough at all five senior secondary schools in the county. The three years of teaching aimed only at preparing students for two days of college entrance exam. During these three years, pupils studied seven days a week, taking off only one half day on Sunday afternoons. A daily schedule in the summer term at Huining Senior Secondary School No. 1 looked like this:

Time	Activity
5:30	Get up, breakfast in the dormitory or in a small restaurant on campus
	Self-study
7:00	Morning gymnastics and flag ceremony (Some students are ordered to clean classroom and schoolyard)
7:30-8:15	Early morning study (15 min. free reading, 30 min. teacher tutoring)
8:25-9:10	1st lesson
9:20-10:05	2nd lesson
10:05-10:20	Gymnastics
10:20-11:05	3rd lesson
11:15-12:00	4th lesson
12:00-15:00	Lunch break (prepare lunch or go to small restaurants, take a nap)
15:00-15:45	5th lesson
15:55-16:40	6th lesson
16:40-17:25	Extracurricular activities (play basketball, football, or table tennis; walk and chat in the schoolyard; fetch hot water; clean the dormitory; wash clothes; participate at sports competitions organised by the school)
17:25-18:15	Afternoon self-study in the homeroom (without teacher tutoring)
18:15-19:00	Dinner (prepare dinner or go to small restaurant)
19:00-21:00	Evening self-study in the classroom (with teacher tutoring)
21:20	Light turned off in the dormitory

Table. Daily schedule at secondary high school in Huining County.

During the lessons (including self-study lessons) the dormitories were locked and students had to be present in the classroom. Dormitory rooms were shared by ten students, with no space to store belongings except the space under the five bunk beds. Those students who could afford it rented a private room outside the school. The main reason stated for that choice was the wish to have access to light until late in the night for further studies.

More than 70 students usually were squeezed into one classroom. The best students of each grade were grouped in special classes and allocated the best teachers. Such classes were awarded particular names, like Hope (*xiwang* 希望), Magnificent Willpower (*hongzhi* 宏志), or Humanity (*bo'ai* 博爱). During the first two and one half years at senior secondary school, pupils underwent two exams per term in each of the main subjects. The

frequency of exams then increased to become monthly in the last term before the college entrance exam. After each exam, the results were ranked and the names of all students (excluding those who had performed worst) were publicly listed on a centrally-located board. Lists with students' rankings were also put up in each classroom. In the last term, the list included only the names up to a certain level of achievement. Such lists marked the boundary between students who were expected to pass the college entrance exam and those who were expected to fail.

Memories of three years of tight schedule during senior secondary school were similar. Moreover, overestimation of one's capabilities in an atmosphere that promoted diligence as the main source of achievement was common, often with tragic results. Students who repeated the exam following disappointing results often failed to improve or even performed more poorly, disappointing all their own hopes and those of their families.

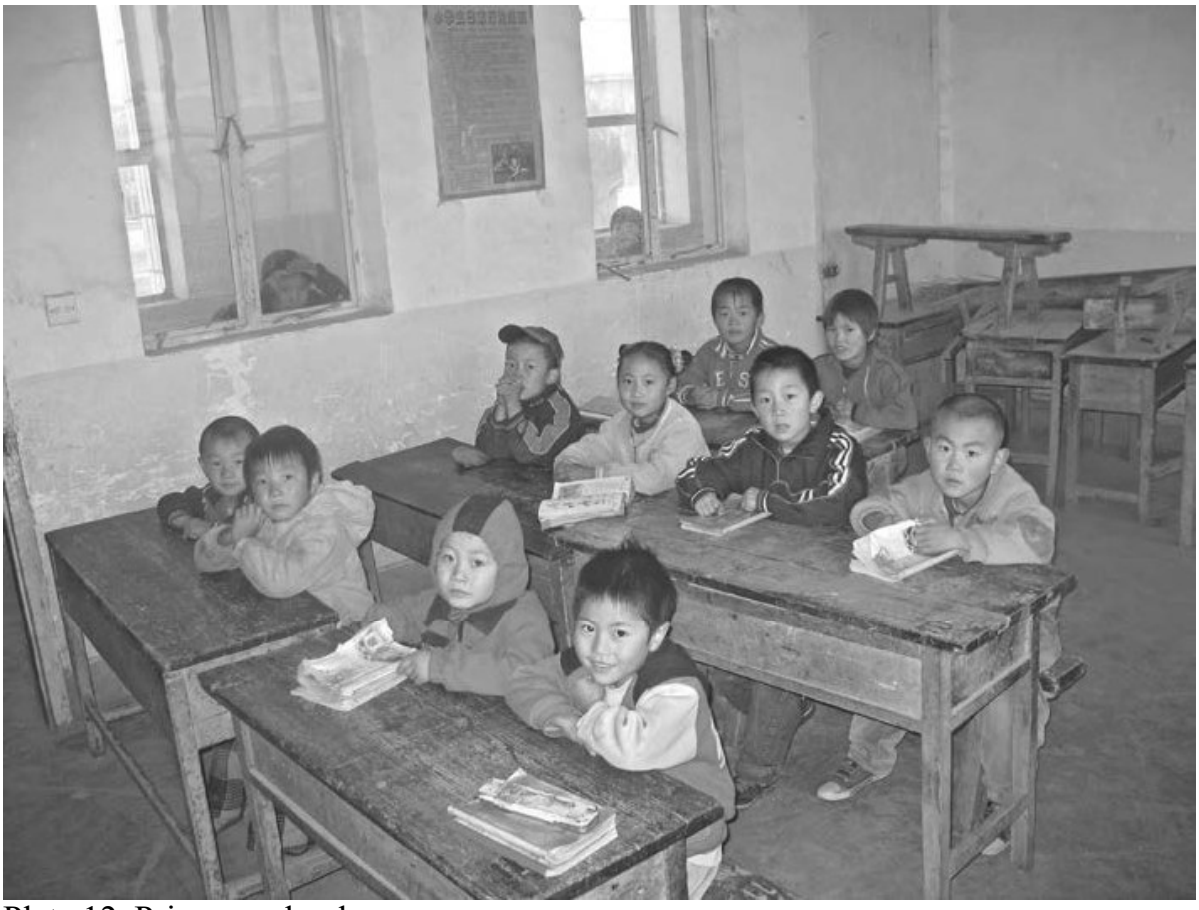

Plate 12. Primary school.

Listening to stories of daily life and witnessing study habits, one begins to wonder how these pupils managed to motivate themselves to study so diligently day after day and year after year. There was the silent concentration of pupils studying in the classroom, and also during what was

supposed to be their study break. The general mumbling of students reading texts to themselves filled the air in the schoolyard. Some pupils even walked backwards to better memorise the texts they read. Only a strikingly small minority of the pupils and students I met actually claimed to be or to have been interested in the contents of the knowledge memorised. For the majority, learning was solely directed towards achievement in the exams. The students reduced themselves, as student Zhao Mei illustratively put it, 'to copy machines that copy all the teaching material into the brain and reproduce it during the exam'.

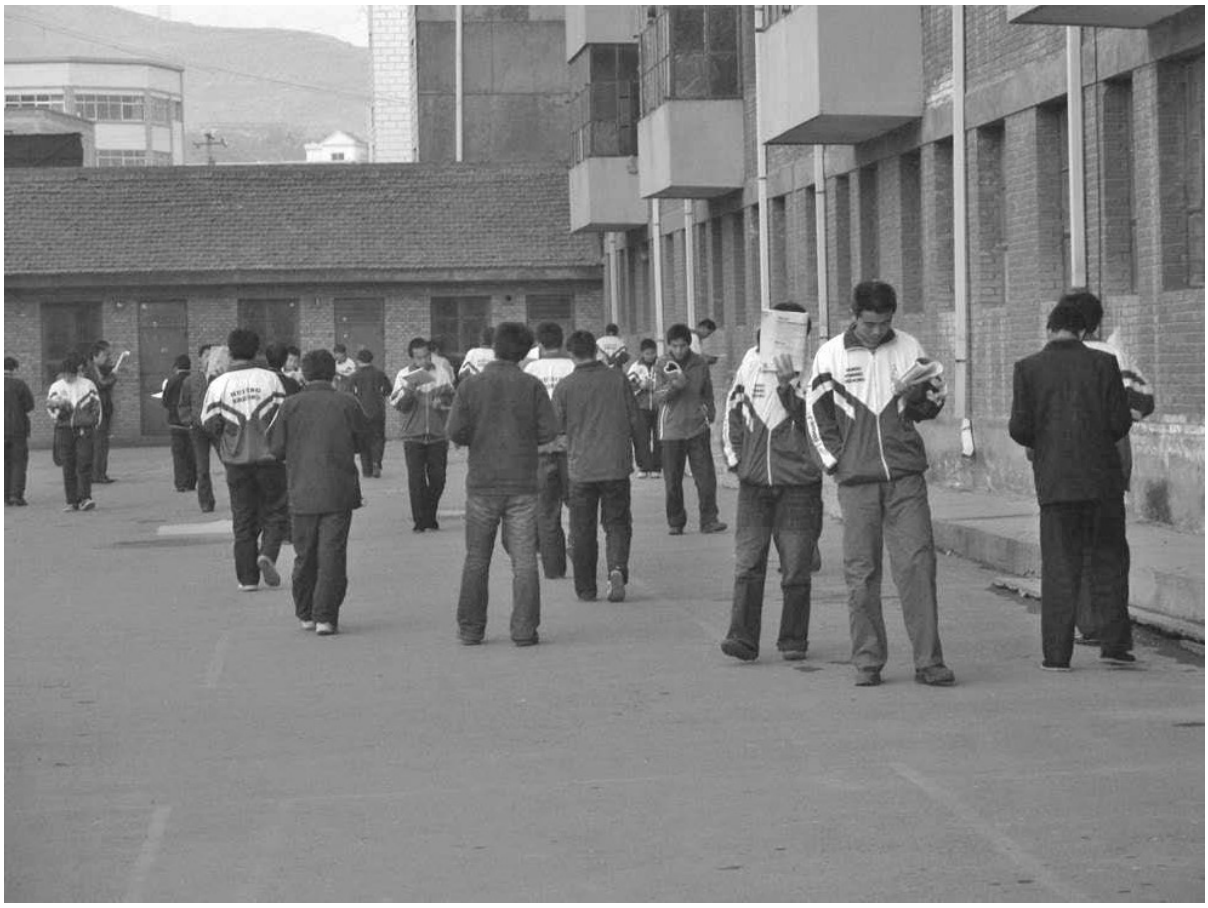

Plate 13. Reading aloud in the schoolyard during the break.

'Earning Recognition' and 'Changing Fate'

Asked about their first impressions of the meaning of educational achievement during early childhood, students and graduates often referred to new consumption goods suddenly appearing in their environment. Lanzhou University student Wu Jiang remembered how it had become obvious to her that having 'educated' kin who were employed outside the locality made a difference when the children from those families turned up at school with beautiful, colourful pencils and notebooks, things she had never seen before and that she could not dream of having. Graduate Duan Yunhe recalled that

her admiration for the beautiful clothes her cousin wore during senior secondary school made her mother promise the same clothes to her the day she became a senior secondary school student. Photographs sent home to the village by university students, depicting them in the middle of beautiful flowers in the campus garden, left considerable impressions in the dreary village environment. Returning students and graduates were admired for the light colour of their skin and their fresh and lively attitudes, which contrasted with the sun-burned skin and exhausted bodily comportment of the villagers.

Yet what had left the deepest impression on students during their childhood was the attitude with which educated returnees were treated. Duan Yunhe remembered:

> Everybody came running to our house when my uncle [a university graduate] came to visit. He was treated with great respect; as if he were a big statesman, almost as if he were somebody like … Hu Jintao [China's president from 2003 to 2013] was visiting! That impressed me very much when I was a small child and I really wanted to become an honoured person like him in my future life.

It had been this kind of attention and respect educated persons enjoyed that impressed the children most, and they learned early that their own educational achievement could win them corresponding recognition.

Earning Recognition (zheng qi 争气)

From early elementary school onwards, Wu Jiang, a fourth-year student at Lanzhou University, had perceived studying as a tiresome task she had to fulfil in addition to the household chores for which she, as the eldest of four siblings, had responsibility. Her only positive memory of learning involved situations during her early schooling when her taciturn and distant father occasionally had guided her hand to show her how to write a character. Moreover, Wu Jiang had been impressed by the police academy uniform of her cousin as well as the attention and praise this cousin recurrently enjoyed from her father. What had stirred up Wu Jiang's educational diligence was, however, the fact that a similar reward appeared close at hand also for her. She explained:

> I was good at school. In the countryside, if you study well, everybody likes you. They say that you are a good child, that you understand morals (*dongshi* 懂事, lit. to understand things). That is why they like you. Everybody treats you well. They even take you as a model to educate other children. They praise you as being well behaved and scold their children for not living up to such standards. All parents do that. As a child you are always compared with well-

> behaved children. If you study well, the teachers praise you and are nice to you. When you meet people in the village they always address you as a good student and praise you for that. You thus earn recognition for yourself (*gei ziji zhengqi* 给自己争气). When you are a small child such recognition makes you feel conceited (*jiao'ao* 骄傲) and proud (*zihao* 自豪) [laughing].

Children who were liked by the teacher also were not beaten but rather excused for the same minor misbehaviours that brought punishment and scorn to non-achievers. Being liked by members of the family similarly meant enjoying their forgiving attitude, as well as being spared work at home and in the fields.

However, most crucial in stirring up children's educational motivation had been the fact that achievement would win attention, recognition, approval, and appreciation as a person within one's family, by teachers, and in the community. All this is implied in the expression *zhengqi*, 'to earn recognition', which is composed of the verb 'to struggle for' (*zheng* 争) and the object (*qi* 气) which refers to a complex concept of 'vital energy' or 'spirit'. The status children earned through educational diligence and achievement added to their vital substance, turning them from a nameless child into a recognised person worthy of other people's attention. Such attention was expressed in such forms as being addressed in a friendly manner in the village or becoming the topic of everyday conversations. 'People only talk about children who are striving for progress (*shangjin* 上进). Nobody talks about those who do not study well or drop out of school', Zhao Mei explained.

She recalled how gaining recognition not only for herself, but also for her parents became an important motivation to study:

> During junior secondary school I was very ignorant; I was not aware at all of the importance of the entrance exam to senior secondary school. People said I should attend secondary school. But during the last year at junior secondary school I did not care much about studying. I was not too bad a student, but I was not aware of the importance of studying and kept a very relaxed attitude. It thus was no wonder that I did not pass the senior secondary school entrance exam…. When I failed the exam, they [my parents] were very disappointed; it was quite a setback for them. And when the other children left for senior secondary school I also became very sad. In my heart I felt destitute. Especially since the parents of those classmates who had passed the exam always bragged about their children in front of others. That made me feel like someone without capabilities (*wuneng* 无能) and hard done-by (*weiqu* 委屈). I did not

> want other people to talk badly about me. I just did not want to give them an excuse to do so. I also wanted my parents to be happy. That is why I started to study hard. In fact, at that time I just knew that there existed something like senior secondary school, but did not know in detail why it should be good to attend such a school. Until then I had never thought about my future (*meiyou kaolüguo woziji* 没有考虑过我自己). But when I realised that I had hurt my parents' feelings (*shangxin* 伤心), I became sad as well. My mood changed. I became a silent girl, I ate less and lost weight. My parents were under big pressure, but they did not put that pressure on me. They just persuaded me to continue studying and repeat the exam a year later. They did not criticise me for having failed the exam, but rather comforted me, and asked me to work hard for another year. At that time I started to reflect about a lot of things, about myself, my parents, my family, and the lineage. And then I started to study hard. The next year I passed the exam and got enrolled at college preparatory senior secondary school.

As Zhao Mei's story makes clear, to 'earn recognition' through educational credentials is not an individual asset only. Parents and the family also share the social esteem achieved.

Zhao Mei also told me, 'I wanted to "earn recognition" for my mother, so that she as someone without education would not be looked down upon by others any longer'. 'Earning recognition' thus was perceived as a way to compensate for various social deficiencies. Zhao Mei, for example, felt that by earning recognition through educational achievement she also could make up for not being very pretty. Families with daughters but no sons also hoped for the educational success of at least one daughter to restore their social recognition. Girls and young women without brothers thus often felt under special pressure to be educationally successful.

An extreme case in this respect was Fan Guoyin, the third among seven sisters. When I met her while she was taking the *gaokao* she explained that it was her third try. She would have been admitted to a junior college also after her first two attempts. But for her parents, especially for her father, nothing except a regular Bachelor program was acceptable. Her two elder sisters had dropped out of school and had become labour migrants, and none of the four younger sisters showed educational promise, so all the family's hope rested on Fan Guoyin's shoulders. Only she was in the position to win

back some of the recognition her family had lost in the community due to their large number of daughters.[65] She explained:

> My family is poor and therefore nobody in the village respects us. My father has an elder brother and two sisters, but the relationship between them is not close at all. Our relatives do not want to have any contact with us; they are just rude and contemptuous to us. They treat us like air, as if we were strangers. If I passed the exam for Bachelor studies, they might be less cold towards us; if I earned that credit for the family they would perhaps become a little more warm hearted and nicer to us.

Thus it was all the more tragic that Fan Guoyin also failed to realise her father's goal in her third attempt at the exam.

Those who did succeed could take pride in 'earning recognition' for themselves and people around them. Lanzhou University student Wu Jiang, for example, explained that long ago her family branch had broken off contact with her paternal grandparents due to a quarrel. The grandparents had humiliated her family branch and Wu Jiang herself by neglect as long as she could remember. When she enrolled at Lanzhou University, villagers attested that she had won recognition for those very grandparents, and she anticipated that her grandparents would begin to feel pressed to speak with respect about her.

Recognition earned by educational success was also a matter of social distinction between different family branches. This became obvious to me during the Zhao family reunion during Chinese New Year when the six Zhao brothers of the parental generation brought their families to celebrate together with the grandfather in the old family estate. At the beginning of the common meal, the fourth uncle (already described in preceding chapters) gave the welcome speech because his social status was highest. He mentioned by name only other family members of status: the grandfather (due to his seniority), the fourth brother's wife (of urban family background), me (a foreign guest), and Zhao Mei (a university student). The fourth brother also praised Zhao Mei's mother for her daughter's educational achievement, and Zhao Mei's younger brother, still attending senior secondary school, was ascribed the prospect of becoming a university student in due time. No other family members seemed to have accomplished anything worth note on that occasion.

That educational success obviously empowered the position held by Zhao Mei and her family within the extended family at a later family

[65] Disrespect in the community was based on a contradictory mixture of traditional ideas (i.e. the shame of having no son) and modern ideas about family size (i.e. that trying repeatedly for a son was 'backward' if it resulted in a family's impoverishment).

meeting when the brothers discussed how to divide the costs of the grandfather's hospital bill (see chapter 3). During that meeting, 20-year-old Zhao Mei actively participated in the discussion, a behaviour that no other females in her generation would have dared to display. Her act was contested: one of her uncles uttered resentment about her active role. Zhao Mei nevertheless felt fully entitled to participate because of her education; she was angry at her uncle's objection for several days after.

It took me some time to understand that Zhao Mei's educational success also implied that she had won a competition with her paternal cousin of the same age, the fourth brother's daughter from his first marriage. The young woman had not been present at Chinese New Year, so I had not suspected a difference in status between the two cousins. But one afternoon, Zhao Mei explained:

> People change their attitude towards you when you are educationally successful. My sixth paternal uncle, he is that kind of person. He always looks up to successful people. He used to favour my cousin before me, because she is the daughter of my successful fourth uncle. But now, since I am educationally more successful than she is, his attitude towards me has changed. Suddenly he recognises me and is very attentive and nice towards me. People in China often are like that, they only look upwards; they only acknowledge successful people.

Competition was actively employed by parents as well as teachers and schools to motivate children to study. Parents constantly tried to educate their children by directly or indirectly comparing them with well-behaved children, admonishing them to learn from these examples. However, as some graduates admitted to me, these parental methods did not always have the intended effect. On the contrary, they sometimes rather induced feelings of resentment, especially when the performance of the model child was considered to be out of reach. Yet, in school, competitive methods often reached their motivating effects, at least among those who managed to move ahead in the competitive race.

Wu Jiang remembered how her competitive attitude had been fostered soon after she had entered senior secondary school:

> Wu Jiang: In China it is very important which rank you hold among the pupils in your class. The rank is determined by your exam results. Sometimes seating order in the classroom is organised in correspondence to the ranking list.
>
> My scores in the senior secondary school entrance exam had been just enough to get admitted. I remember that when I went to the classroom at the new school for the first time, I was seated in the

second last row. I was of very short body size and all these students were sitting in front of me. Some of the boys were really tall. Sitting in the back I simply could not read any of the Chinese characters on the blackboard. I asked the teacher to let me sit further in the front. He asked me which row I preferred and I told him that the third or the fourth would be perfect. He answered in a very harsh tone that everybody wanted to have these favourite seats, and [asked] who I would suggest to sit in the back.

This instance fostered my determination to study diligently (*haohao dushu* 好好读书). I made quite [good] progress in mathematics and in foreign language [English]. I still remember clearly what a surprise it was when after more than two months the results of the first mid-term exam were made public. I was the third best in the class! I had advanced that much within such a short time! The teacher immediately took me from the second last row and let me sit in the third row. You cannot imagine what a big change that was for me! My classmates also understood that it obviously was worth it to study hard.

After that event my exam results always remained quite good. In second grade I once was the second best in class, in third grade I was third best once, but usually I was among the first ten.… I think my main motivation to study hard was that the teacher had first looked down on me, only because I wanted to sit in front. I was really small back then, only one metre and fifty-three …. and I was heavily short-sighted. The situation made me determined to study hard, I had to 'earn recognition' for myself. I wanted to be among the ten best in the exam by all means, so that when I would talk to the teacher next time, he would acknowledge my capacities and potential, and would let me sit in one of the front rows. That is how I thought. At that time I did not mind taking hardships (*chiku* 吃苦, lit. eat bitterness). When the others were playing, I went to study. I was convinced that I was more stupid than the others. There is this saying that 'stupid birds have to start flying early' (*ben niao xianfei* 笨鸟先飞). So I thought I had to study longer hours than the others, otherwise I would not be able to surpass them (*xuebuguo ta* 学不过他). I wanted to 'earn recognition' for myself, that was all. And I succeeded and was allocated a seat in the front!

If you are a good student, the teachers often address you. If the others do not know the answer they will turn to you and ask you to help out. As a student that is what you hope for most, you want the teacher to hold you in high esteem. When the teachers address you,

> you feel they are nice to you, you feel that they value you. It gives you confidence in your studies.… I was very competitive. I always compared myself with the others and wanted to be the best. I always strove for recognition. That was extremely exhausting. I was always working hard and felt strained.
> HO: Did your classmates like you?
> Wu Jiang: The male classmates liked me; they said that I was very much forging ahead (*jinqu* 进取). The girls said that I was very masculine, not like a woman should be. Of course I do not know what other bad things they said about me behind my back.

Wu Jiang's story shows how educational achievement directly translated into the improvement of present circumstances. The material advantage of a better place in the classroom as well as the recognition she earned from her teacher proved her self-efficacy. Her study discipline changed her standing at school and before her teacher, and won her the self-esteem for which she had been struggling. Compared to these rewards, the negative reactions of some of her classmates seemed almost irrelevant.

Plate 14. Preparing for national college entrance exam (*gaokao*) at secondary high school.

Achievement at school went along with competition and the desire to surpass others in the ranking list. Those who had passed secondary high school successfully recalled that precisely this competition had been an important motivation for them. They usually saw themselves as being competitive by nature, focused on surpassing others (*haosheng* 好胜). Yet, they also believed that the will to surpass others, to always strive for advancement, was 'just natural'. And in fact, a few hours of study discipline could make a difference, clearly visible in the public ranking lists. In this system, rewards seemed great enough to keep those struggling who had not lost the hope to have a chance – however minimal it in fact was.

In addition to the immediate returns of educational striving, like a reduction in tuition fees, teachers' recognition, and other students' respect (or envy), there were even more important rewards waiting in the future, the longing for which was inculcated in local pupils already in early childhood. Those whose names appeared in ranking lists of the final exams at senior secondary school were likely to live up to the expectation of making a difference, for their own life, for the life of their parents, and for that of their wider family. All the recognition earned along the way during elementary, junior, and senior secondary schooling was *zhengqi*.

That the social esteem earned by pupils was also shared by their family and other levels of community was crucial in fostering children's educational motivation. They engaged in activities and exhibited qualities that were socially defined as meritorious and beneficial to themselves and others (see also Hatch 1989). This gave them an inner sense of accomplishment and fulfilment and advanced their self-identity as valuable persons. An important 'return' from educational achievement was the feeling of leading a meaningful and well-spent life that was not merely focused on individual interests but also catered to the interests of others. After all, educational achievement empowered children to become their family's 'rescuers'.

Changing Fate (gaibian mingyun 改变命运*)*

As discussed in earlier chapters, local esteem attached to formal education was clearly connected to the idea that educational achievement would bring about a 'change of fate'. Corresponding notions about education have a long history in China, and even in the imperial period access to positions in the bureaucratic elite had been theoretically open to men of all strata of society who proved successful in the examination system. A Confucian ideal held that 'those who are good officials should continue to indulge in studies, those who studied enough should engage in officialdom' (*shi er youzexue,*

xue er youzeshi 仕而优则学，学而优则仕). In rural Huining County, it was the second part of this saying that was frequently cited. A similar classical saying quite popular locally was that education meant 'getting rich and becoming an official' (*facai dangguan* 发财当官).

Graduates of the early reform period who had grown up during the Cultural Revolution recalled how they had become aware of the value of education, even though radical policies aimed at decoupling educational achievement from social upward mobility. In the remote countryside the general level of education had been too low to cause any political troubles. On the contrary, the need for local personnel with basic skills in writing and calculation for administrative tasks of 'bureaucratic collectivism' (Peterson 2001) meant an unbroken valuation of these skills. Hu Wenlan, a teacher at a Lanzhou secondary school who was born in rural Huining in 1964, remembered:

> At that time [during childhood and youth] only few people in the village had received any formal education at all. People with some education clearly enjoyed other villagers' respect. Their families usually were economically better-off than the average. And they had to do less manual labour. It was common knowledge that educated people were better-off (*dushuren hao* 读书人好). I also came to realise that. I was a good student. From Monday to Saturday we worked in the fields from early in the morning until half past nine o'clock when school began, and then again after school finished at five o'clock. During holidays we had to participate in agricultural work. Some of the 14- or 15-year-old pupils were just too weak to do heavy agricultural work, but I was physically strong. Because I was good with numbers, the brigade technician secretly had me rest from work. He asked me to help him with the counting he had to do after the others had finished their work. This meant calculating the daily harvest of wheat by measuring the size of the bundles with a rope. Because I was good in mathematics, I had to work less manually, but still earned the same amount of work points as the other villagers. Those few villagers who were literate were respected by the others. It [to understand the value of education] is a slow process, [experiences] add up successively.

His contemporary, Cai Fujun, a 40-year-old man holding a leading position in a government department in Beijing, told another story about what had motivated him to study during early childhood in rural Huining:

> Cai Fujun: As a child, I was very innocent. I just knew that if I studied well, I would pass the exams. If I did not, it would not matter much. But I also had another idea. People in the countryside were

> very poor, they fought and quarrelled much and some people were always discriminated against. Therefore I got the idea that I wanted to go to university, and then I would come back as a brigade leader, and I would discriminate against all those people who had discriminated against my family. Such was my childish plan.
> HO: Why would people discriminate against your family?
> Cai Fujun: Rural people quarrel because of the most trivial things. They quarrel because their neighbour's chickens have run into their yard, or because their children got hurt while playing there, or what not. I was a rather small child and could not beat up the others. I thus developed the plan to study and then come back as a cadre. Then I would be in the position to subdue them, those who had discriminated against us. That was my naive idea.

Cai Fujun did not return to the countryside but made his career in Beijing after graduating from university in the late 1980s. In fact, he never returned to the village after graduation, even when his father died and was buried there a few years prior to our interview.

During collectivism, achievement of basic literacy thus could bring the advantage of less physical work and a position of some power in the local government. Yet the customary relation between educational achievement and upward social mobility was re-installed only with the reform policies, when higher education and a career on government payroll again became – theoretically – achievable to all. Until the late 1990s, employment was allocated in congruence with the level of education achieved. Usually, graduates of secondary specialised education were sent as a teacher or local cadre to a village or rural township; graduates of junior colleges were sent to the county seat; and university graduates were sent to the provincial capital. Some early graduates who attended university outside their natal province managed to make their career in another province. In any case, achievement of steady state employment with a number of social welfare benefits attached (*gongzuo* 工作) meant that one had changed social class and 'jumped out through the gateway of peasantry' (*tiaochu nongmen* 跳出农门).[66]

In view of increasing rural-urban discrepancies, the notion of 'leaving the peasant lot behind' has shifted in meaning in recent years. It used to refer

[66] The saying is a play on the famous classical saying 'the carp jumped through the dragon's gateway' (*liyu tiaochu longmen* 鲤鱼跳出龙门) that refers to the capability and strength that may enable a carp to turn into a dragon. It is a metaphor for the career of an official based on his achievement in the exams. In Huining Province, the term *longmen* (龙门, gateway of the dragon) was replaced by the similar sounding, almost homophonous expression *nongmen* (农门, gateway of the peasantry).

to leaving hard agricultural work and enjoying the security of a regular state salary; it meant to 'eat food provided for by the government' (*chi guojia de fan* 吃国家的饭), or to eat 'an easily earned bowl of rice' (*chi yidun qingfan* 吃一顿轻饭). Yet recently, 'changing fate' has come to mean enjoying the numerous advantages of living in a 'modern' urban environment. Graduates of earlier generations who worked as village teachers and local cadres felt as if they only jumped half way out through the gateway of peasantry because their living conditions were still rural. Most eventually hoped for a 'second jump out through the gateway of peasantry' (*di er ci tiaochu nongmen* 第二次跳出农门) and looked to get promoted to the county seat, if not somewhere outside Huining County.

The image of life outside villages as being radically different had accompanied all contemporary students since early childhood. Recent university graduate Chang Binyan remembered:

> Since I was a small child, my parents told me that I should study hard so that I would not have to live like them and suffer hardships all my life. If I studied diligently and managed to leave the region by passing the national college entrance exam (*kaochuqu* 考出去), I would be able to live in the city for the rest of my life and would not have to bear any hardships any longer…. My parents often reminded us that there was 'only one way out' (*weiyi de chulu* 唯一的出路). Labour migrants had to return sooner or later, however hard they tried to find their luck elsewhere.… Look at my little [three-year-old] nephew. My mother tells him all day long [that he has to become a university student]. When you ask him what he wants to do when grown-up, he answers: I want to be a university student!

Most students recalled that although they had been brought up with a vague notion of 'university' as the goal they should strive for, it was only during the later years at senior secondary school that they began to reflect about their personal futures. The publicly displayed lists of successful college entrance exam candidates and their destinations had stirred their imaginations. But an even more important motivation had been the dreary consequences waiting for them if they did not succeed. Wang Xiyao, a 20-year-old student, summarised:

> Of those of my age who went for labour migration, less than one-third does well. Most will go for a few years, find a wife, marry, bring her to the village, work in the fields, have a son, raise the son, and that's it. Life will pass like that until it is over. University is a springboard for us to leave, to leave at least the village. Both my father and my mother do not want me to stay here; they want me to go to a better place.

Plate 15. List of pupils of Huining Senior Secondary School No. 2 who achieved more than 600 points in the 2007 *gaokao* publishing their names, exam results and the university they got enrolled at.

It should not be astonishing that urban living used to be perceived as a different world from that of the villages. During collectivist times urban residents benefited from social welfare schemes ('cradle-to-grave' security) while rural residents were only entitled to government social support in times of emergency (Hebbel 2004). In the wake of reform policies, urban residents have lost many of their previous entitlements, but discrepancies in living standards between rural and urban environments have simultaneously been on the rise. Urban life thus still appeared to be the better option.

Not all parents actively supported their children to continue education beyond junior secondary school. Some female students, for example, reported that they had to persuade their parents to let them continue schooling. Student Ma Jinmei explained why continuing her education was so important: 'If I had not been a good student I would have had to return home. In that case I would have gotten married two or three years later. Since I did not want that, I had to succeed in getting enrolled at university. It was as simple as that'.

Young women who remained in the countryside after marriage usually had to stay in the village alone, bring up their children, and undertake agricultural work, while their husbands were labour migrants. Young women's strategies to avoid such a fate by convincing their parents to support them further in education, included begging and crying, earning the money for the first tuition by themselves with odd summer jobs, or turning into diligent achievers.

The problems contemporary graduates faced in finding urban employment were of course known to the students. Yet, the students' motivation to reach the goal of entering university by all means also lay beyond purely economic calculation of better job perspectives. Second-year university student Sun Baoquan recalled his motivations to study diligently:

> If you are a university student, a student at a good key university, it means that you have passed the watershed (*kan* 槛) [between being a peasant and being a university student]. From the villagers' point of view (*xinmuzhong* 心目中) this changes your whole person. People are still very traditional in this respect, like in old China. They think that once you passed the exam, you have a future, you have the potential to 'get rich and become an official' (*facai dangguan* 发财当官) and have a career in front of you. That is why people respect you. If you stay the same as them, they look down on you…. [When attending senior secondary school] I asked myself whether I wanted to be a peasant for my whole life.… It [children's educational success] is also a great mental consolation for the parents. When the child attends university, the parents' hard work has not been in vain, because future generations will live a better life. That is the most important thing for my father…. When a lot of tragic things happened in my family [Sun Baoquan's sister died in an accident] the only way to change the grief atmosphere in my family was for me to succeed in getting enrolled at university (*kaoshang* 考上). My parents had invested a lot. I had to account for that. So I had personal and familial reasons to succeed. There was no reason for me not to succeed.

If a change of fate from a peasant to an urbanite, from a manual to a mental worker, was not achievable within a single generation, the efforts to gain some education would still not be in vain. There was a conviction that cultural capital would accumulate over generations. Key university student Li Qianlong explained:

> People value university students because they are the hope of the family. A lineage comprises several generations. In our family I belong to the fourth generation. Our family wants to *fanshen* (翻身,

> lit. turn the body). An intellectual (*boshi* 博士, lit. PhD holder) from rural Huining County once said that local people should strive for two basic changes in their life. First, they should strive to turn from rural to urban. Second, they should strive to turn from someone with a comparatively low level of education (*dideng zhishi fenzi* 低等知识分子) to someone with a high educational level (*gaodeng zhishi fenzi* 高等知识分子). Many people struggle for these goals. So do I. In my family everybody is a peasant. If my younger brother manages to enter university as well, our family will have changed fate entirely. Then our family situation will have become promising (*guangming* 光明). Even if I do not make it to the big city, I will live at least in the county seat. In any case, I will not have to work in the fields anymore. The education my children will receive may be of lower quality than that in the big cities, but I will still be able to give them individual tutorage and support them developing their talents and getting a qualified job (*peiyang rencai* 培养人才).

Even though educational credentials were no longer a guarantee of secure employment by the state, educational achievement still opened a future of hope to school-goers and their families.

When looking at the social world into which students were socialised, we find striking similarities to Harrell's concept of the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic (Harrell 1985). Harrell pointed to the importance of the Chinese historical experience of a non-hereditary, mobile social system, in which the well-being of the family has always been highly dependent on successful economic strategies as well as on people's diligence. He thus identified three characteristics of the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic: its future-orientation based on an understanding of the family situation as a matter of generations; the idea of security, meaning to favour securing available resources instead of striving for short-term maximisation; and a group orientation, directed towards family members and potential descendants. He concludes that Chinese will work hard when they see possible long-term benefit in terms of improved material conditions or security for the group with which they identify.

Accordingly, rural Huining families' educational investments may be understood as a strategy aimed at 'playing the entrepreneurial game successfully' by 'skillfully investing available resources (land, labor and/or capital) in a long term quest to improve the material well-being and security of the group to which one belongs' (ibid: 216). As the main agents in this endeavour, students learned to understand themselves as both acting on behalf of their individual future but also on that of their family, their kin group, and future generations.

However, high valuation of formal education was not solely a matter of longstanding cultural traits, but also an effect of contemporary socio-economic policies and local ecological conditions. People often referred to Confucian notions and the historical experience of educational diligence. Yet, what made formal education a pervasive model for changing fate in contemporary society was the more recent experience of the socio-political divide of Chinese society into two 'castes': the urban and the rural. Local people experienced this administrative divide above all in terms of the blatant differences it entailed as concerned entitlement to state social support during high socialism, when the easiness of urban life (eating from the 'iron bowl') contrasted sharply with peasant hardships (eating from the 'clay bowl'). The particular valuation of educational credentials in rural Huining reflected the lack of alternative options of social distinction and upward mobility in the region. Moreover, even though their educational spending certainly was connected to expectations of material return, local people at the same time took extra pride in upholding 'traditional values' when pursuing the goal of high level of education for their children.

The Application 'Lottery'

For two days in early June, life in Huining's county seat seemed to be devoted solely to a single event: the national college entrance examination. All secondary schools stopped regular operation in order to host the more than 7,000 examinees. During the examination, mobile phone waves were blocked in the schools' surroundings to prevent students from cheating. Red banners decorated the streets to remind the population – and the examinees – of the importance of the event. Cars and busses passing near the examination locations were ordered to refrain from honking. Restaurants were prepared to serve the healthiest and most nourishing food to the examinees, since a good meal was believed to help lift the spirits and improve performance. Shortly before and after exam time thousands of young people carrying nothing with them but the little transparent pencil bags they were allowed to bring into the exam rooms rushed through the streets to and from the exam locations.

The generally tense atmosphere in town continued also for a couple of days after the examination. On the exam days, promotional material from various private tertiary institutions was distributed among the parents who waited outside the schools' closed gates. On the second day, people returned to crowd the school gates, impatiently waiting for sale to begin of freshly printed booklets with the correct exam results. As soon as these booklets were available, counting and guessing of the examinees' scores began. Since the deadline for university application was long before the exam results were made public, university application depended on pure guessing of the exam

scores. Candidates asked as many people as possible to help check and recount their possible results. Elder siblings came rushing to the county seat to offer such support and anyone else believed to possess an adequately informed opinion was sought for advice and as an extra eye on the estimation. The probable exam results of individual students were widely discussed and compared within the family and among friends, neighbours, and colleagues. Gossip about that year's minimum score for enrolment in a Bachelor program began to circulate.

To have passed the national college entrance examination with a reasonably good result did not guarantee successful enrolment at a university of equivalent ranking. On the contrary, the process of university application was complicated and full of risks. In the worst case a successful examinee might not succeed in enrolling anywhere. The whole procedure of choosing a suitable university and adequate subject thus became known as the 'second national college entrance examination' (*di er ci gaokao* 第二次高考) every candidate had to pass. In the second exam, the application form had to be filled out correctly.

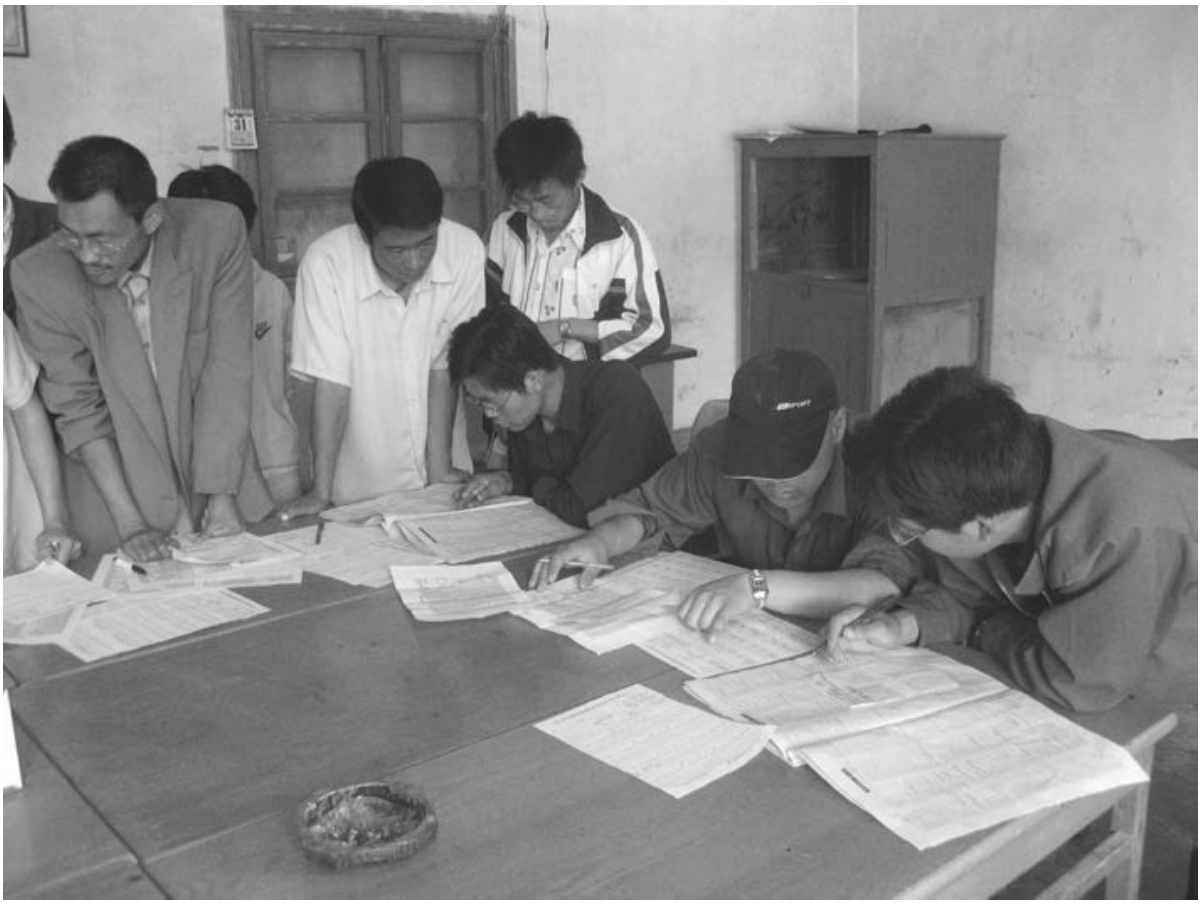

Plate 16. Filling out the application form.

Adequate estimation of one's exam results as well as a portion of good luck was necessary at various stages of the process. Although pupils from Huining County generally had acquired a good understanding of the scoring system, there still was plenty of room for miscalculation. Second, admission requirements at the individual universities were not fixed beforehand because they varied according to regional quotas and the number of applications received. The only information available locally was a list of the previous year's admission scores for all subjects at universities and colleges under state administration. Yet counting on the stability of admission requirements could easily lead to failure since admission requirements changed from year to year when certain subjects became fashionable and attracted more applicants, or when there were unforeseen changes in regional quotas. Moreover, application and enrolment procedures varied widely across the country and were under constant reform. Third, although three wishes could be named in the application form, it was rather unlikely to get admitted at an institution of second or third choice. After all, the latter usually had no problem filling their places with applicants who had listed them as a first choice. Miscalculating the chance of enrolment in the first choice institution thus bore the risk of receiving no letter of enrolment at all. To evade such risk, students often agreed to have the enrolment offices adjust (*tiaoji* 调剂) subjects. This meant that in case students were not admitted to the subject they had chosen, they would still prefer to get enrolled in any other subject at the same university instead of not getting accepted at all. In addition to the generally very low level of understanding about the various subjects from which one could choose, this adjustment option was another reason why students often ended up in study programs to which they could hardly relate.

More advanced students and recent graduates often stated that they had not cared very much when their letter of enrolment showed that their subjects had been adjusted. They had filled out the application rather randomly, with little understanding about the contents and future prospects of particular subjects. For their age cohort, meeting the requirements of a labour market after graduation was a completely new phenomenon. When they had applied for university, hardly anybody in rural areas yet had an understanding that it could be necessary to choose a subject with good prospects for future employment. Only after they entered university did they realise that the subject they studied might determine their professional future. More recent students had started to care if their subject had been adjusted. In fact, students from rural Huining often told how they had been downgraded to enrol in subjects with lower admission requirements, while fellow students with comparatively lower exam scores were admitted to

more desirable subjects. Such cases gave rise to the suspicion that other students had used 'back doors' in the application process. Yet, students from rural Huining generally felt too powerless to openly protest such practices. They rather submitted to what they summarised as being their 'bad luck' (*yunqi bu hao* 运气不好).

When filling out application forms, many examinees preferred to take no risk and underestimated their examination results. Yet, when they later found out that their actual result would have allowed them to enrol at a much higher ranking university, they could be bothered for quite a long time. This insight left them with the feeling of having been bilked of a deserved level of self-esteem, acknowledgement, and social status, as well as of better future chances. An all too cautious attitude during the enrolment procedure thus often was regretted thoroughly later. Such was the case, for example, with my field assistant Zhao Mei. Although she had enrolled at a key university, she time and again reminded me that instead of being a student at Lanzhou University she could have enrolled at a more prestigious university outside of Gansu Province. Her scores had turned out to be 30 points higher than she had estimated, and would have allowed her entrance into even a famous university in one of the eastern metropolises, such as Beijing or Shanghai.

Parents usually had little knowledge beyond very general impressions about the differences between a key university, average Bachelor program, or junior college. They often advised their child to become a teacher or medical doctor because 'there always will be children and sick people who need care'. Teachers were reluctant to offer counsel to pupils other than top achievers because they feared trouble from wrong advice. Pupils without any source of special information were rather desperate, and repeatedly skimmed through the catalogue that listed the previous year's enrolment requirements for each subject. Some filled out their application form like a lottery ticket, choosing any subject at any institution in any part of the country that matched the examination scores which they had estimated themselves to have achieved. It was not infrequent that such uninformed choices produced surprises in terms of unexpectedly high tuition fees. Other examinees with rather low scores were persuaded by advertisements in front of the local schools and along the main roads to enrol in a private college with high tuition fees.

When filling in their applications, students had to ponder to whom they should listen. Should they follow the advice of their parents, who often advocated having them stay near, at least within the borders of Gansu Province? Should they believe the gossip that certain subjects which had required low scores the previous year would attract too many applications in the current year? Was it in fact wiser to choose a subject that had high scores

the previous year and would thus be less popular in the current year? And what about the general gossip about certain subjects having good future prospects, or the reputation of each university and college?

In the end, quite a number of students exercised agency and decided on their own, sometimes against their parents' or other people's wishes or advice. Especially those students with high accomplishment often reported that their parents long ago had started to trust (*xiangxin* 相信) in them. Educational success thus early had strengthened these pupils' position towards their parents. In other cases parents and other relatives tried to have a word in the application decision, but in the end the students decided differently. These students obviously felt sure that neglect of their parents' wishes would not affect the latter supporting them financially during their studies. Other students compromised on their ideals and listened to their parents' and other counselors' arguments. While successful pupils could expect teachers to support them with expert knowledge, average pupils or non-achievers would often fill out their application forms rather randomly, sometimes leaving the decision to one of their favourite classmates.

Some students, who had performed insufficiently but had high aspirations and clear goals of enrolling at a certain university, deliberately overestimated their scores when filling out the application form. They stuck to their initial ambition and often also refused adjustment of the subject they had chosen. They rather hoped to 'meet good luck' (*pengdao yunqi* 碰到运气) and still get accepted against all odds. Instead of compromising, these students preferred to spend another year preparing to repeat the exam. If they were achievers with good prospects who just had failed their high aspirations during the exam, their schools offered them repetition of exam preparation free of charge, or at a considerably reduced tuition fee. Those who had failed the exam due to their general lack of achievement, but wanted to have another try had to pay repetition fees (*fudufei* 复读费), the amount of which depended on the level of their previous performance. Exam repetition was frequent, and students who sat for the exam more than twice were not unusual.[67]

In recent years repetition classes (*fuduban* 复读班) had become more and more crowded. Increasing demand for educational credentials obviously had induced the kind of 'diploma inflation' described by Dore (1976; 1997). Rising educational aspirations also reflected changing local notions of who could be labelled a 'university student'. Until the late 1990s, even students at specialised (vocational) senior secondary schools (*zhongzhuan* 中专) had

[67] In 2004 about one-third of the rural participants in Gansu Province were not sitting the exam for the first time (Zhonghua 2006: 656).

been regarded as university students (*daxuesheng* 大学生). After all, these graduates had been eligible to job assignment on the basis of their educational credentials. Within less than one decade, local standards of who was considered a university student had escalated considerably. By 2007, even students at a junior college (*dazhuan* 大专) were no longer considered university students. Only those enrolled in regular or key university Bachelor programs were regarded as such. Pupils pursuing any other forms of higher education counted as losers in the educational race. Accordingly, the bus driver I talked to on my way from the village to the county seat shortly before the national college entrance exam in June 2007 explained to me that his son, who was to participate in the exam, had no prospects of becoming a university student, although he was likely to pass for a junior college. Quite disappointed, the father exclaimed: 'That is nothing. It does not count anything. He will be no university student'. For those whose exam results did not allow them to enter regular Bachelor programs, all efforts in terms of study diligence and financial investments during years of senior secondary school were thus considered to have been almost in vain (*baidu* 白读). These examinees expressed quiet heavy disappointment, frustration, and despair.

Fan Guoyin, whose educational achievement so far had given rise to some hope, explained the pressure of rising educational expectations:

> My father and all the other people in the region only value Bachelor studies. Families whose children attend a three year short course at a junior college or tertiary vocational programs (*gaozhi* 高职) are not respected (*kanbuqi* 看不起). Only students who attend regular Bachelor programs (*benke* 本科) are valued, because as graduates they can get assigned a working position (*fenpei* 分配) by the local government.[68] For the others people are afraid that education will be just a waste of money, because these children might not find a job afterwards. Concerning technical schools people think that China develops rapidly and knowledge easily loses its value. Therefore, even though graduating from a technical school may be good enough to find work today, the knowledge achieved might not be sufficient tomorrow any longer. Graduates from these schools thus might not be able to keep up with development and might not be able to get a

[68] Preconditions to get assigned a position in the county as a cadre in the local government or as a teacher have been steadily on the rise. In 2007 only key university students as well as graduates of Bachelor programs at teachers' training universities (*shifan daxue* 师范大学) who were willing to return to the county would get assigned a teacher position at a local senior high school after passing through an application procedure that included a teaching test and a job interview.

> job in the future. I tell people that technical knowledge is very much in need nowadays, but people in the village do not believe it. They are very backward (*luohou* 落后); they would not listen to me.
>
> My father is very stubborn [about the importance of the Bachelor degree]. The first time I missed the passing score for Bachelor studies he wanted me to repeat the exam [in 2005 she had achieved 480 points when the passing score was 498]. When I failed the second time I did not want to repeat the exam again [in 2006 she had achieved 490 points when the passing score was 512]. I already had developed this chronic headache. But my father insisted that I repeat the exam another time because he thought that otherwise everything would have been in vain. In his view I had to become a Bachelor student by all means (*fei benke bu ke* 非本科不可). Everybody, the teachers and the parents, they always tell you that only being a Bachelor student is acceptable.…
>
> Pressure is high. The family put all their hope in me. Before, that still was justified, because I used to be good at school. But now I cannot stand exams any more. I used to like studying, but now it just makes me feel afraid. I hate exams, they hurt people too much.[69]

Local inflation of the worth of educational credentials was of course closely connected to the national policy of enrolment expansion since the late 1990s, which also had translated into increased admission rates. Between 1999 and 2000 the admission rate tripled, and in subsequent years the rate rose from about one-seventh to about one-half (Huiningxian 2007: 614). This surely had its effect on local perceptions of the probability that a child could enter tertiary education. Yet, an even more important reason for the significant rise in local educational aspirations has been the devaluation of specialised secondary education (*zhongzhuan*). Such education had been considered a short cut to guaranteed employment as a local cadre, but it lost all value when job allocation for graduates was abolished in 1997-98. Without corresponding job allocation, graduates from these schools would no longer qualify for steady white collar employment (*gongzuo* 工作), and were expected to end up in manual labour, probably under conditions not much different from those of unqualified labour migrants.

Due to these developments local opinion maintained that contemporary society was characterised by an ever increasing demand for

[69] The day after the exam I witnessed Fan Guoyin's anxiety to call her parents and tell them that she was quite sure she had again failed the goal of Bachelor program enrolment. Since her bad physical condition and constant headache impeded further hope in her educational achievement, her parents finally agreed that she need not repeat the exam for a fourth time and allowed her to enrol in a junior college short course.

knowledge. In the insecure environment experienced by the peasantry, the simple equation prevailed that the higher the educational degree, the more secure were a student's job chances. The standards available to evaluate the utility of an educational pathway were the number of years of study, an institution's ranking as mirrored in its admission scores, and the local reputation of particular universities. The assumption that higher educational credentials would automatically translate into better job chances was backed up by experiences with the county government's job assignment practices. Since an increasing number of recent graduates had been willing to return to their home county for an allocated position, local government agencies had been able to raise the requirements for educational credentials needed for positions at the village, township, and county levels. In 2007, positions in the county seat were reserved for graduates of key universities or Bachelor teacher's training programs. Graduates of short-term courses could hardly compete.

In view of all the insecurities involved in the university application procedure, it is not surprising that a great number of students did not feel very much attracted to their major subject of study. Lack of reliable information, not to mention individual counselling, was severe and left students with the impression that they were alone, helpless and badly equipped to take any 'responsible decision' about their future. With the exception of a few top achievers who earned their teacher's support, the only students who were confident about their decisions were those who had social relations with someone who had insider knowledge of the educational system and prospective labour market developments. Such knowledge was crucial in this phase of decision making. For the rest, choosing a university and a subject was hardly a decision at all, but rather a matter of gambling on the future. In these respects, the university application process reflected existing social inequalities in terms of access to the 'cultural capital' of crucial information about education and the labour market, that only a very few top achievers could overcome.

A closer look at university application as a central aspect of fashioning a professional future shows that in the region this process was everything but a self-conscious decision about advancing one's market value. For the majority of students, the university application process was a lottery. The incalculability of the whole process left most students feeling powerless and desperate. The impossibility of taking an information-based decision even led some students with the lowest scores to apply to the highest level institutions. Their desperation turned into hope of meeting some luck against all odds. In these cases it seemed that, as Bourdieu diagnosed for the Algerian sub-proletariat, 'below a certain threshold, the

connection to the future is cut. Realistic future visions became overwhelmed by illusions' (2000: 221).

Enrolment Celebrations

From mid-July onwards, letters of enrolment were expected to arrive. Among those who had achieved their goal and felt that there was something to be celebrated, some would organise a festivity in the family or broader community. The scale of such events tended to depend more on the social and economic standing of the family than on the level of the exam results. In my survey, slightly less than half of the students reported that their families had organised an enrolment celebration. Celebrations were more frequent and a bit larger for students who enrolled at a key university as well as in those families where the father had steady employment.

Plate 17. Celebrating university enrolment.

Celebrating a student's exam has a long tradition that goes back to imperial times when successful candidates at the provincial examinations were obliged to present gifts to their home community. The costs involved in these rituals usually exceeded what was possible to be shouldered by average people. According to Ichisada Miyazaki (1976: 118f), it was precisely this

tradition of being obliged to organise expensive celebration festivities that kept poor families from holding educational aspirations for their offspring.

During the first decades after the re-instalment of the *gaokao* in 1977, enrolment celebrations in rural Huining County were reported to have been small-scale family events to which teachers were also invited in recognition of their efforts to educate the child. Accordingly, the celebrations were referred to as events to 'thank the teacher' (*xieshi* 谢师). The custom has, however, changed recently. Although some families restricted invitations to the event to the inner circle of the family and a few close friends, others organised celebrations directed towards the larger community, including relatives, friends, neighbours, students' classmates, and sometimes even the latter's parents. In my survey the students reported that in about one-third of the cases there were between 50 and 200 guests. Strikingly, graduates born in the 1970s had neither witnessed nor heard of such large celebrations during their youth.

A transformation of the custom is also indicated by the change of the festivity's name into *nuan daxuesheng* 暖大学生, literally meaning to 'warm up students'. The use of the verb *nuan* (暖, to warm up) was explained to me as deriving from the customary celebration of 'warming up the house' for a newly built house. The verb induces associations with the term *renao* (热闹), literary meaning 'hot and noisy', which is generally used to characterise the lively and enjoyable atmosphere produced when many people meet for common leisure. Sun Baoquan, a 23-year-old university student, explained:

> Actually, in some mountain regions [meaning remote and poor regions], like where my maternal grandparents live, they organise a *nuan*-event on various occasions. They do so for example when people have bought new electrical appliances like a TV set. Those who participate in the celebration bring some money. We call that kind of event 'to look for money' (*xunqin* 寻亲). When you receive other people's money on such occasion, you accumulate debts of *renqing* (*renqing zhai* 人情债). The principle is like this: When I have a good relationship with you, I come over to celebrate with you, and I will leave some *renqing* [here meaning a sum of money].[70] When I have a similar occasion later, you will do the same.

To organise a *nuan* for celebrating a student's enrolment served several functions. Above all, with a *nuan*, students were seen off to their new life

[70] Here *renqing* refers to 'gift money', but its connotation also comprises the debt that arises from receiving such a gift. *Renqing* also assumes a congruence between the material and emotional aspects of exchange (Yan 1996).

outside the community. The event therefore sometimes was also called 'seeing off students' (*song xuesheng* 送学生). The festivity marked publicly the pupils' successful change of social status away from the peasant lot. Of course, such occasion also gave prestige to the parents and the wider family. Commensality aimed at strengthening community and reaffirming the student's feeling of continuous integration in and belonging to this social circle. Charles Stafford (2000b) suggested that although separation is a universal human experience and fundamental existential constraint, it has a particular relevance to Chinese experience. He argued that the Chinese put special emphasis on reunion and unity because they understand human and spiritual relationships as being characterised by repeated partings and returns. Occasions of leave-taking are thus experienced as particularly frustrating and problematic. As in other festivities, like weddings and New Year's family reunions, the common meal of enrolment celebrations thus marked unity as a temporal suspension of a painful future separation between the student and his or her family and local community. Additionally, celebrating students' success also aimed to promote the students as models for younger children.

Plate 18. Counting and recording *renqing* money received at student enrolment celebration.

That enrolment celebrations also aimed at bringing profit to the host was widely acknowledged. People noted that 'to send a child off to study is an expensive endeavour' which justified the parents' search for financial support. The amount of money given by close relatives and friends on such occasions varied widely. The factual economic situation of the givers and the actual need of the receivers as well as the closeness between both were important factors determining the size of the gift. Moreover, giving a big sum on such an occasion could also be seen as an investment because such money gifts entailed definite reciprocal claims. Local standards, however, regulated the amount of money expected from guests who did not belong to the inner circle. Such guests gave a more or less symbolic amount, a *qingyi* (情意, a token of good relations), but when many people participated even such small amounts could add up to a considerable sum. Families with a good standing in the community (e.g. teachers) could be sure that many guests would show up to give them 'face', and that the token gifts would cover their expenses.

During research I participated in four such enrolment celebrations. One of these was a relatively small event in a comparatively poor family (the student's father earned some cash as a shoe repairman at the local market). In this family only the paternal uncles and classmates of the student were invited. The other three occasions were rather big celebrations, two of them held in a restaurant. Although the student's achievement had not been extraordinary in any of these three cases, the celebrations were still quite elaborate, with more than 100 guests attending each event.

The three big festivities resembled wedding celebrations. Relatives, neighbours, classmates, friends, teachers, work colleagues, and business partners were invited to eat together. On the day of celebration, the honoured student wore a piece of red cloth around his or her chest, similar to the sash of a bride or groom. All guests presented *renqing* at a table set by the entrance especially for that purpose. Here, a friend of the family recorded the giver's name and the amount given in a special little red booklet called a *qingpu* (情谱). Honoured guests – who in two of the events included representatives of the township government who were exempted from the duty of bringing a gift – were seated at a special table. The other guests occupied tables where food and drinks was constantly served for several hours. The guests came in shifts, and as some left, others replaced them.

All hosts claimed that the received *renqing* 'just levelled out' the expenses of the event. Yet the guests were generally convinced that there was a distinct profit to the advantage of the organisers. For at least one of the festivities, the guests were correct. The host stated that the costs for the celebration amounted to about 2,600 yuan. I left the location long before the

festivity was over, but not before eight tables for ten persons each were filled in turns by several rounds of guests. At that time, the recorded gift money already amounted to more than 4,000 yuan.

Masters student He Tao, whose parents were successfully engaged in the melon seed trade in an economically better-off part of Huining County, gave the following account of enrolment celebrations:

> He Tao: Usually all the relatives attend and some neighbours come around, sometimes the whole village. Everybody who has good relations to the hosts will attend. And also the others who have no special relationship to the host would go, because [hesitating], because in fact such things are celebrated like weddings nowadays. Everybody brings a gift of courtesy (*songli* 送礼, lit. to send courtesy).
>
> HO: How much would they bring?
>
> He Tao: The amount they bring differs. Relatives give 50 or 100 yuan. The other villagers usually give 20 yuan. But it should not be less than 20 yuan. This is more than at a wedding, because sending off a student is an event of higher order. It is higher than a wedding because everybody holds students in high esteem (*zhongshi*). After all, becoming a university student is not easy! That is also why the family organises a celebration (*ban yi chang* 办一场).
>
> When I left for university and when my little brother later also got enrolled, my father organised a celebration for each of us. Many people were invited. At my celebration, people gave more than 2,000 yuan, but at my little brother's event they gave much more. When he was sent off, many of his classmates came. Many of my classmates had not passed the exam, so my celebration was quite small. Maybe it was also smaller because girls do not have as many friends as boys do. My brother's event was really big, with all the classmates' parents also coming along. This meant that when his classmates are about to leave for university, our family also has to go to their celebrations and reciprocate the gift received from them (*dali* 答礼, lit. return the courtesy). This is what we call *lishang wanglai* (礼尚往来) (courtesy demands reciprocity).[71] The amounts given at such events are noted down in the same way as it is done at weddings. So if you later hear that the others have an event coming up, like sending off a student or a wedding or something like that, you just check your booklet [to see how much the others gave you].

[71] The expression is also translated as 'personalised loyalties' by Steven Feuchtwang (2002: 202).

> Whenever the others celebrate, you have to go, that is how it works. It's fun (*ting haowan* 挺好玩)!

Not everybody had this kind of positive feeling about such large-scale events. A number of parents felt they were too poor and could not afford such festivities, since, moreover, 'nobody would come anyway'. In these cases, organising a large event would be a loss of money and of face. Chang Binyan, a 26-year-old graduate explained why his family had finally decided against organising a bigger event:

> Cheng Binyan: At that time [when he got admitted at a key university], my father thought about organising a celebration. But he gave up on the idea because relationships in the village, with our relatives and also with our neighbours, were complicated.
>
> HO: What does complicated mean?
>
> Cheng Binyan: Maybe you do not understand. I do not know whether it is the same in your country. If there are successful students in some branches of the family, this may make people in the other family branches feel inferior. So when I became the first successful student in my family branch, it caused bad feelings in those family branches who already had a student before. You know, nowadays relationships in the village are quite complicated [pauses]. My family also worried about something else. We had no money to pay for the tuition. Since those family branches with university graduates were comparatively well-off, they were afraid that we would try to borrow money from them. If we had organised a celebration, they might have felt that we just did so because we wanted to borrow their money. That is why we decided against inviting them.

As this example shows, a child's educational success was not a matter of unmitigated joy for everyone. It could also be a source of envy and status competition. For families with an already high social standing, organising a *nuan* was prestigious, but the situation was different for less well-off families who feared provoking others' jealousy or accusations of seeking financial support. Some less well-off families decided against hosting a *nuan* in order to avoid confronting possible resentment from guests or a loss of face if few guests attended. As some students pointed out, certified 'poor students' (*pinkun xuesheng* 贫困学生) at a national key university were eligible for study credit.[72] Such credits spared their families from the need to collect money to pay the tuition fee. At the same time, subsequent invitations

[72] The fact that such credit is easily obtainable only at the key universities certainly added to aspirations for admittance to a key university.

to enrolment celebrations have made some parents later regret their earlier decisions against hosting such a celebration. After all, each time they participated at the others' events they had to pay their contribution, without themselves ever having received any.

In general, the custom of celebrating student enrolment in the fashion of a 'happy event' (*xishi* 喜事), similar to a wedding, added to the widespread complaint in the village that the gift money spent on these occasions had become too high and had turned into a major burden on the budgets of poor local families. Moreover, since not all families could expect to have equal opportunities to celebrate happy life-cycle rituals like a student's enrolment, prospects for reciprocity were distributed asymmetrically in the community.

The problem of one-sided spending was even more severe in the urban environment. In Gansu Province, examination celebrations have flourished in the cities. There, people are invited sometimes even to elaborate festivities when a pupil enrols in junior or senior secondary school. Chang Binyan interpreted such events as a matter of the parents' commercial interest only, as a means of collecting money through unfair means (*liancai* 敛财). He complained: 'If there really was something to be celebrated, I would not mind. But if it is too much about only earning money, I do not like it. Then it is no matter of mutual help anymore. In the past everybody gave small amounts of money to express their congratulation (*biaoshi qingzhu* 表示庆祝). But nowadays the whole thing is overdone'.

Chang Binyan is now a young employee, and he is constantly invited to enrolment celebrations by elder colleagues. He finds that such invitations have become a heavy financial burden. On each occasion a considerable amount of gift money (about 100 yuan) was expected, and there seemed to be no way to evade such invitations. What aroused all the more anger in him about the flourishing custom was that in the urban context one could barely count on reciprocity. Work relations could be rather short-term and the chance of recent graduates to arrange corresponding celebrations on behalf of their own children still lay far-off in a distant and insecure future. Chang Binyan explained:

> Some children do not go to university. Their parents thus have no reason to celebrate. I do not have a child yet. I am not even married. But when my colleagues' children enter university, I have to go to their celebrations [laughs]. In fact it is like this: If I ask to borrow money from you in order to finance my child's education, you at least have the option to refuse. These celebrations are just a special form [of borrowing money]. I do not like it that way. You give money to them, but even if it actually means that you just lend the

> money to them, they do not necessarily pay it back to you later [laughs].

Extensive spending in ritual celebrations of rural southern China has been interpreted as a rational form of investment in kinship relatedness that is expected to pay off by producing reliability and predictability in an unstable business environment (Brandtstädter 2003). Yet, ceremonial reciprocity may also be experienced more as a burden than as a source of security. Yan (1996) described asymmetrical aspects of Chinese gift-giving that derive from the obligation for those in the lower position of hierarchical social relationships to give gifts to those with higher social standing, without any claim to reciprocity being attached. Asymmetry in ritual expenditure is moreover caused by the fact that not all families have the same number of 'happy events' to celebrate. Though true for marriages, social asymmetry is especially obvious in the case of student celebrations. Enrolment celebrations also point out that social asymmetries are exacerbated through celebrations: poorer hosts are more liable to suffer loss of face from accusations of instrumentality. Even if they decide against having a celebration themselves, they still have to contribute at the events of the others. And, failing to accept the invitation from a wealthier host will increase their social exclusion.

Conclusion

This chapter sets out to explain why children in rural Huining County studied hard. After a short sketch of daily life at local schools, I described the two notions that featured prominently in local students' reasoning about their educational motivation: 'earning recognition' and 'changing fate'.

I showed how students from rural Huining County learned early that educational achievement opened a pathway to a desirable life outside the region. Moreover, local children also found that educational achievement meant earning social recognition for themselves and for their families. Educational achievers could feel themselves to be empowered and rescuing their family from various forms of social disrespect.

As the main agents in a family's endeavour to change its fate, students were socialised to understand themselves as both acting on behalf of their individual future and on that of their family, kin group, and future generations. Their educational striving thus was guided by motivations that corresponded to what Harrell (1985) has described as foundational to the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic: future-orientation, long-term planning, and group orientation.

Rural Huining pupils exerted as much educational discipline as possible in order to avoid the possible futures of being a nameless and

disrespected peasant or labour migrant. The experience of self-efficacy, of being able to improve not only one's own situation, but also that of others, further strengthened pupils' diligence. Moreover, while their future adult lives were still far away, even young pupils experienced immediate returns in the social recognition of their teachers, fellow students, and family members. Educational success also gave pupils an important source of self-identity. It gave them the feeling of 'doing the right thing' for themselves, and for their families.

In the second section of the chapter, I also considered the crucial phase of status change from rural youth to university student. This phase comprised not only the all-decisive university entrance examination, but also the incalculable university application procedure, and the student's departure from home, often marked by separation festivities of different scope. In contrast to the earlier phases of educational achievement, entrance into university brought forward experiences of risk; participating in the future as in a lottery; luck; and uncertainty. Only a few pupils could count on adequate counselling from teachers or benefit from insider knowledge about tertiary education and the labour market beyond.

Students often felt empowered enough to act according to their own preferences, even in opposition to those of their parents. Their early achievement brought about an intergenerational power shift, turning them into the main actors of the endeavour to 'change fate'. In view of their lack of reliable information about further educational pathways and their inability to calculate even their chances of acceptance into particular courses of study or universities, however, it remains questionable whether we can talk of pupils engaging in a 'decision' process at all. Under local conditions, new students were hardly in the position to actively fashion their professional self in correspondence to any assumed market needs.

The recent fashion of enrolment celebrations marked the transition of a pupil to student, and more specifically of the individual's and, by implication, also his or her family's 'change of fate'. Such celebrations served to motivate younger children in their studies, and they spurred the general sense that changes in fate for individuals and their families are possible. Yet, in my final analysis, I also showed that such celebrations also perpetuate differences of social status between poorer and richer families, various family branches as well as rural and urban families.

Chapter 6
University – Experiencing 'Small-Scale Society'

In China, the status of a university student is regarded as a phase of transition before 'entering society' (*zoushang shehui* 走上社会) as a full-fledged adult upon graduation. From the point of view of students from poor rural family backgrounds, university is a transitional phase also in another sense. It marks the definite spatial and social separation from their place of origin and offers an intermediate sphere of experience before they face the challenge of beginning professional urban life.

This chapter highlights how students from rural Huining family backgrounds experienced life at a national key university. It is a truism that passing the *gaokao* and enrolling in university is a highly competitive struggle with 'ten thousand cavalry horses trying to pass a narrow wooden bridge' (*qianjun wanma guodu muqiao* 千军万马过渡木桥). In contrast, university life itself is seen to be comparatively relaxed, with little pressure in terms of academic accomplishment. The fact that almost all students graduate after their regular period of studies supports such image, summarised in the saying that 'entrance is strongly controlled, but the exit wide open' (*yanjin kuanchu* 严进宽出).

University life certainly may be experienced as untroubled and carefree by some students, particularly by those whose well-off and well-connected family backgrounds allow them to expect a smooth entry into a professional position. For students from poor rural family backgrounds, however, life at university was not only overshadowed by the financial burden it put on their family's strained budgets, but also by the uncertainties of future employment. Moreover, for them life on campus and in the classrooms entailed numerous experiences of discrimination that exhibited their manifold disadvantages as compared to their fellow students from urban and better-off regions of China. Such experiences were amplified at national key universities, where, due to regional (and ethnic) admission quotas, the student body tended to represent the diversity of the national population, though not in quantitative proportion.

University came to determine students' life in the classrooms, and their daily life within the 'small-scale society' of the walled and guarded campus. Administratively, students belonged to the university. Rural students thus lost their rural family registration.[73] By conferring the same administrative status to all students, irrespective of their widely varying family backgrounds, university began to fulfil the promise of social mobility for the formerly disadvantaged. Yet formal equality between students does not entail the eradication of inequality within the educational system. On the contrary, as in French society, the formal equalities of educational institutions in China disguise the subtle workings of continuous social differentiation and discrimination and thus contribute to the reproduction of existing social inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Bourdieu and Passeron 2000).

In the Chinese social sciences, studies about rural students (*nongcun daxuesheng* 农村大学生) often focus on the problems these students face when adjusting to the university environment (e.g. Wu 2000; Li 2003; Xu 2003; Zhou 2004; Dai 2005; Han 2005; Lei 2005). 'Rural students' are above all portrayed in terms of their deficiencies with regard to dominant standards, without giving room to see them as active social agents who negotiate and perhaps challenge these standards. On the other hand, a number of Western studies influenced by the concept of governmentality perceive contemporary university students in China as individual agents struggling with the challenge of developing a 'neoliberal self' (e.g. Hanser 2002; Hoffman 2006; Liu 2008). These studies make little reference to students' diverging social backgrounds and the way these may shape their outlook on life.

Contrary to both approaches, this chapter explores how university life for rural Huining students was shaped by the social contexts of their origin. I begin by describing the disappointment waiting for most rural students upon arrival at university. I then focus on their experiences of disadvantage in

[73] While attending university, a student's *hukou* is temporarily transferred there. After graduation, residency status depends on where the graduate finds employment. While it is comparatively easy to transfer one's *hukou* to smaller and mid-sized cities, access to long-term residence rights in big cities is severely restricted. Graduates usually manage to transfer their *hukou* to these cities only after several years of regular employment and payment of high fees for *hukou* transfer. Theoretically, the transfer of *hukou* implies the loss of the right to use a plot of land in the home village. While this could be seen as a drawback for the student's family – which would not receive additional land – in practice, land re-distribution may not be implemented in the village for several decades (the intervals between adjustments of land use rights due to changes in family composition varies considerably across the Chinese countryside). Moreover, at least during their time at university, students may continue to be eligible to a piece of land due to the financial burden their education causes for their families.

terms of study and describe their coping strategies. Thereafter I illustrate experiences of discrepancies with regard to various aspects of social life, particularly in relation to the complex notion of *suzhi* which comprises 'common' knowledge, consumption patterns, and communication styles.

How did rural Huining students cope with finding themselves at the lowest end of the national socio-economic spectrum as reflected in the university's 'small-scale society'? How did they position themselves in relation to better-off and urban students? How did they relate to their own rural backgrounds when confronted with the widespread prejudices against 'low quality' peasants and labour migrants? How did the notion of *suzhi* feature in their own reasoning about their disadvantages vis-à-vis other students?

For students from poor rural family backgrounds, university is the last institutional step before they face the difficulties of setting-up urban life. As a 'small-scale society', university offers students ample opportunities to confront and understand their position within contemporary Chinese society.

Disillusions

'University is a big disappointment' was the univocal judgment of rural Huining students. In view of the struggles they had undergone to enrol, it was not astonishing that reality lagged far behind imagination. For years, these students had been striving towards the goal of entering university, and in many cases they had been imbued since early childhood with the idea that entering university was the ultimate goal in life. All too rosy imaginations of university life had been reinforced by the idealistic narratives of their senior secondary school teachers who had tried to strengthen study motivation with visions of university as a place of refined living conditions and an inspiring intellectual atmosphere. Rural Huining students' disappointment with the realities of university life was, however, not only caused by their expectations. Disillusion was aggravated by the numerous and – unexpected – experiences of alienation and disadvantage that they faced in daily encounters with fellow students.

Wu Jiang, a fourth-year student from rural Huining studying at Lanzhou University, remembered her first impression of university life:

> Wu Jiang: University was completely different from what I had expected.
>
> HO: What did you expect?
>
> Wu Jiang: In my imagination university life was characterised by a very dense academic atmosphere. I had imagined that everybody would study diligently. After all, university students have already attained quite a high level of education (*xueshu* 学术). They have

> spent several years studying hard. But when I finally entered university, I realised that people here did not like studying. Everybody seemed to think that after having gone through senior secondary school there was no need to study any longer. Many students thus exposed a rather shallow study attitude. They neither studied, nor did they listen in class. They just were physically present in the classroom, but did not pay attention at all. Moreover, everybody, one after the other, started dating someone. I thought that university should not be a place for things like that. It just was not the right time to have love affairs. Such things should wait until one has a job and some economic security. Only when the material question is solved, should one start to think about having a partner. At least that is how I thought in the beginning. I understood university to be a place for studying only, for preparing one's future life (*guihua yixia ziji de rensheng* 规划一下自己的人生) and finding out what kind of work one could do. When I realised that it was not like that at all, I felt that I had been taken in (*shangdang* 上当). Especially in the beginning I felt like that. Teachers at senior secondary school often had told us how wonderful university would be. They had imbued us with imaginations of university being almost like paradise. And we had believed it. But when we came here, everything was different. Things were very pragmatic (*xianshi* 现实). One teacher had warned us that university would already be a 'small-scale society' (*xiaoxing shehui* 小型社会). He had told us that we would encounter all the problems that exist in society. Things like money and wealth (*jinqian* 金钱), reputation (*mingyu* 名誉) or status (*diwei* 地位), all these very pragmatic and important social phenomena with which we had no experience. Before I came to university I thought that the academic world was holy (*shensheng* 神圣), but now I do not believe so any more.

Wu Jiang's description of university life was in many ways representative. Lack of study atmosphere, dating in public, and a certain degree of 'pragmatism' that characterised relations between fellow students were issues that recurrently came up in conversations about university life.

For most students, the day of enrolment was the first time they had left familiar surroundings in Huining County. The city of Lanzhou, only a two-hour bus ride away from their home county, left quite a first impression – and in most cases not a good one. Life there was judged to be noisy, dirty, messy, and somehow frightening. Those who were to enrol at Lanzhou

University usually did not stop in the city to discover more, but travelled quickly on to the new campus outside town.

The first-year students usually appreciated the fact that Lanzhou University's new campus was located in bare countryside. They argued that its fresh air and peaceful atmosphere was helpful for concentrating. On campus, gender-segregated dormitories offered rooms shared by four students each. The rooms were equipped with heating and with a table, bed, shelf, and wardrobe for each student. Wash rooms were available on each dormitory floor; shower rooms and laundry service for a couple of yuan were elsewhere on campus. Canteens, various small shops and restaurants, as well as several sports grounds provided everything needed for daily life. A huge library was stocked with books and magazines, and students were entitled to one hour of free internet access per week, if they did not mind the long queue. All these provisions were experienced as luxurious, but the comforts of campus life also entailed a number of unforeseen difficulties. After all, university really was a small-scale society, with students from diverse regional and socio-economic backgrounds sharing not only classrooms but also dormitory rooms that measured only 12 square metres.

Inequality in the Classroom

'Fallen Angels'

Students from rural Huining had to cope with the fact that their position as top achievers, paraded as models to other children was confined to the context of their home county only. Compared to students from other regions, they suddenly found themselves at the lower end of achievement. On average they had been enrolled with lower entrance scores than students from other provinces because they had enjoyed a privileged enrolment status at the key university in their home province. They also discovered the lower quality of their senior schooling: the comparatively lower qualification of their former teachers (above all in English and standard Mandarin) and their schools' lack of facilities and equipment (e.g. libraries and computer rooms).

'When I came to Lanzhou University, I did not even know where to find the button to switch on a computer' was an often cited example that pinpointed the gap in the prior schooling conditions of rural Huining students compared to most students. The latter often had brought their own laptops for study and play in the dormitories. Lack of computing knowledge was, however, still easier to catch up with and less relevant for daily study than lack of knowledge in English.

Because teachers in Huining County usually had low proficiency in spoken English, and because classes were too crammed to allow for

extensive teaching dialogues between teacher and students, Huining students usually had difficulties with listening comprehension and speaking. At university they often failed their English classes repeatedly. Each failure challenged self-confidence, and those who were not able to pass the Level Four English Test for Higher Education (abr. *siji* 四级) also risked not being able to achieve the Bachelor degree. Moreover, proficiency in English was important for admission to the Masters studies which most students desired. English thus often was rural Huining students' central cause of worry. It also was the main reason they complained about their disadvantaged starting position.

Still, English tests were quite standardised, so diligent study could make up for much. However, students often blamed themselves for not keeping up the high study morals they had during senior secondary school. Without a teacher closely supervising their self-study, they had to learn how to sustain diligence without direct control. Moreover, most of them were not interested in the subject they studied. On the contrary, one of their greatest disappointments was the fact that subjects were fixed with enrolment. Only during the course of their studies did students usually gain a clearer understanding of their 'chosen' subject. Many developed divergent interests, but changing subjects was hardly possible.[74] Learning thus continued to be directed only towards examinations.

Hardships and Diligence

Despite their complaints about problems in getting used to self-determined study at university, most rural Huining students stated that they were still studying more diligently than their classmates from better-off regions. With hardly any financial means available to engage in leisure activities as well as the feeling that they needed to catch up, students usually made extensive use of the university library. Their study discipline felt little like a matter of free choice, but, as several students framed it, forced upon them by the circumstances (*bichulaide* 逼出来的). Doing agricultural labour had taught them early what alternatives awaited them if they failed. Moreover, achievement, some claimed, helped to overcome feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis their fellow students and to withstand the latter's derogatory attitudes. Not least, students hoped that their diligence would earn them some independence from familial support if they got a stipend awarded to achieving students. Diligence thus could bring about immediate economic return.

[74] The rare exceptions I encountered had required special 'backdoor' connections (*guanxi*) in the university administration.

Yet, the reason mentioned most frequently for poor students' higher level of study discipline was a slightly different one. Recent graduate Cao Jingzhu explained:

> Children from better-off families generally study less diligently than those from poor family backgrounds. The latter are very aware of the hope their parents cherish. They know that their families face economic difficulties and that it is not easy for the parents to support their education. Therefore they study diligently. In better-off families, children do not think about such things [like their parents' support and the costs involved in education]. That is why these students study less diligently. Apparently it is like that: The poorer the family, the harder the child studies.

According to such reasoning, it was the awareness about the burden of educational costs that engendered morality and study diligence. Accordingly, the contrary assumption was that wealth inevitably implies decadence and a relaxed study attitude. Rural Huining student Wang Xiyao argued in a similar way, when he described his well-off classmates:

> When I see how they spend their family's money, [it seems to me that] they have no idea about the value of money. They do not know at all how hard it is to earn money. They just know how to spend it. But this kind of attitude will have a [bad] influence on their life (*rensheng* 人生) and their future living (*yihou de shenghuo* 以后的生活). It will make it difficult for them to stand on their own feet and become a well-rounded person (*zhengge ren de wanshan* 整个人的完善). …
>
> That is why your system [in the West] is better. It is important to have the children make their own experiences, let them experience that earning money is not easy, let them be independent. I think that is a very good way.

Wang Xiyao also conveys another message here, namely that of independence from familial resources. The – assumed – Western practice of parents releasing their children into independence at the age of 18 by cutting them off from any kind of familial support was often brought up by local youth as well as their parents. Widespread admiration for such a practice demonstrated that it was not only seen as minimising the advantage of students with well-off family backgrounds, but that it was also seen – by both generations – as a kind of relief from familial obligations.

Reasoning about the close connection between poverty and morality also resonated with the classical Chinese understanding about the cyclical change between wealth and poverty. People quoted to me proverbs such as 'wealth does not last more than three generations' (*fu buguo sandai*

富不过三代). This means that while the first generation adds up wealth (*di yidai chuangye* 第一代创业), the second will only maintain the heritage (*di erdai shouye* 第二代守业). At the latest in the third generation, the family will be run down (*di sandai baijia* 第三代败家). Like wealth, poverty is also understood as intermittent, and also lasting for no more than three generations (*qiong buguo sandai* 穷不过三代). The temporality of poverty is believed to be caused by the fact that hardships engender a determination to change one's circumstances for the better (*qiongze sibian* 穷则思变). Poverty, it is said, 'makes people think of change'.

An attitude of striving for advancement (*shangjin* 上进) and bearing the hardships (*chiku*) entailed in the endeavour to 'change fate' was constantly propagated by Huining teachers. They counselled students individually and collectively with such advice, and it was a recurrent topic in official proclamations, such as the headmaster's speech during flag line-up. Students had been told repeatedly that being born into poor conditions did not mean that one was doomed to remain there. On the contrary, poverty should be a motivation for striving since determined struggle for advancement would surely be rewarded. The often quoted saying 'first bear hardships, then enjoy pleasure' (*xianku houtian* 先苦后甜) claimed that it was right to work hard when young, and that the fruits of early diligence would mature for later harvest. Accordingly, local teachers motivated their pupils to use every minute to prepare for the *gaokao* with the promise that one day of diligence would bear the fruit of ten years of leisure.

In their attempt to develop economically, the county government had officially designated education as an important resource. Prior to my fieldwork, the government had coined the widely cited slogan of a particular Huining 'spirit of three hardships' (*sanku jingshen* 三苦精神). The slogan was meant to foster local children's educational aspirations and their commitment to the home county, to which they later should reciprocate. The slogan was used to claim that there existed a special local spirit to endure all the hardships connected to striving for advancement. The three hardships were: those that students bear studying (*xuesheng kuxue* 学生苦学); those that teachers bear teaching (*laoshi kujiao* 老师苦教); and those that the government bears in taking charge of educational administration (*zhengfu kuzhua* 政府苦抓). Later the slogan was changed to comprise five hardships (*wuku* 五苦). The two hardships added were: the hardships parents bear when supporting their children's education (*fumu kugong* 父母苦供) and the hardship society bears when helping to support the students (*shehui kubang* 社会苦帮). But in the wake of the discussion about 'quality education'

(*suzhi jiaoyu*), two of the five hardships, namely those of studying and teaching, had been renamed into 'pleasures'. During my field research, people thus talked about the Huining spirit of 'three hardships and two pleasures' (*sanku liangle* 三苦两乐).

Common to all variants of the slogan was the notion that success was rooted in hardship (*ku* 苦). Such 'hardship' had a double connotation. On the one hand, it referred to the county's impoverished conditions. On the other hand, it also denoted a certain attitude, a fighting spirit and a determination to advance one's conditions, to 'change fate'. The latter was believed to be ultimately rooted in and fostered by the former. As the source of diligence and determination, poverty thus turned into a resource, the only 'reserve' local conditions could provide. Masters student Hu Shijun exemplified such an argument:

> Hu Shijun: Some Huining students complain that their families are very poor. But I believe that Huining's poverty is also its wealth (*caifu* 财富), it can be turned into a motivation, a motivation that helps to keep us [students] struggling. Only by struggling hard we can catch up with the children from better-off family backgrounds. Only if we struggle hard can we overtake them.
>
> HO: Overtake who?
>
> Hu Shijun: Those children from rich family backgrounds, those urban students.

In the planned economy, labour allocation granted all children of urban families the 'iron rice bowl' of steady employment. For these children, study diligence thus was meaningless, at least in terms of achievement of social privileges. In view of repeated purges against intellectuals during the first three decades of high socialism, the allocation of a regular worker's position was even regarded as the more privileged and secure option than employment based on higher education. For rural youth, graduating from an educational institution entailed the rather life-changing possibility of upward mobility into a permanent position with non-agricultural residence rights. Strikingly, the classical notion that poverty engenders diligence thus was reconfirmed by labour allocation and social welfare policies of the socialist planned economy that distinctively discriminated between urban and rural residents.

Nowadays, when being confronted with the disparities in living standards and quality of schooling within China, students from rural Huining County resorted to their sole 'reserve'. Accordingly, recent graduate Cao Jingzhu stated:

> I used to believe that to study diligently was just normal. Only after I became a university student I learned that this is not true. There was

> a clear difference. We students from north-west China studied diligently and spent less time with leisure. We went to the library and did our exercises. The others did not study at all after class; only we sat there doing our self-study. Even if we studied hard, we did not necessarily achieve better results than most of the others. But studying diligently at least relieved us from the feeling of guilt towards our parents. It made us feel worthy of the price the parents paid. We were not just wasting their money.

Here the moral argument that diligence indicates moral superiority gets another twist. In Cai Jingyhu's view, it was the disadvantaged position towards their fellow students that engendered rural Huining students' to study so hard. Even if the hope to draw level with the others seemed almost desperate, such diligence at least relieved students from feelings of guilt toward their parents. Poor rural students soon came to realise that diligence was no longer the only and perhaps not even the decisive source of achievement. Even with great diligence, they might not catch up with others. Faced with such knowledge, some rural Huining students gave up their diligent attitude, hung out in the dormitories, and tried to suppress any thoughts about the later consequences, but such cases were rather exceptional.

Most rural Huining students continued to resort to their sole reserve of diligence. Their educational striving was certainly geared towards achievement of high level scholarships. Yet their motivation to study hard was also very much engendered by the wish to overcome feelings of inferiority towards their well-off and urban classmates. This did not only imply the desire to catch up, but to overtake them. Recent graduate Gao Xinyu summarised: 'First these urban students looked down on us. But after four years at university it was us, the rural students, who looked down upon them'.

Experiences of Campus Life

All rural Huining students with whom I talked admitted that university life had engendered previously unknown feelings of inferiority. These feelings were not only caused by experiences of disadvantage in the classroom. It was rather the numerous disadvantages in social life in general that made rural Huining students realise and experience the wide range of social inequality in contemporary Chinese society. Even though their fellow students generally succeeded in setting dominant standards in campus life, rural Huining students also contested these standards and negotiated their meanings.

Comprehensive Quality (zonghe suzhi 综合素质)

Graduates from rural Huining who attended university in the 1980s and early 1990s recalled that even though there already had been obvious differences between rural and urban students in terms of their financial situation, these differences had been much smaller than they had become by the 2000s. Yu Zhenyan, a 46-year-old university professor in Beijing remembered, 'Everybody knew who was from the cities and who was from the countryside, but we did not make much fuss about it. Rural background sometimes made us feel inferior, but such feeling was not very strong. We did not at all think that urban people generally were more capable'.

Yu Zhenyan claimed that in the 2000s, rural students suffered from greater feelings of inferiority, related not only to economic differences but also to notions of 'comprehensive quality'. In fact, in conversations with rural Huining students, 'the others' ('urban students', 'southerners', or 'those from the eastern coastal regions') were often attributed a number of favourable mental characteristics. These comprised more knowledge and better study methods (*xuexi fangfa* 学习方法). But quite a number of Huining students were also convinced that 'the others' were simply more intelligent, that their brains were more lively (*huopo* 活泼), and their thinking more flexible. These attributes could be linked to the officially promoted notion of 'comprehensive quality' (*zonghe suzhi*); the goal for which students should strive in their individual development, and which would also advance the development of the nation. *Suzhi* became the catchword to denote differences in mental capabilities, and it captured all the features that rural Huining students felt they lacked, even though most of these capabilities were rooted in the better socio-economic circumstances the others had enjoyed before arriving at university.

Contemporary Huining students all claimed to suffer from a lack of 'organisational skills'. On campus, numerous student groups advertised their extracurricular activities, such as sports competitions, environmental protection projects, or speech contests, with eye-catching posters plastered at central places. Such extracurricular activities, as well as the various ways in which students contributed to official university events through public performances, were much admired by rural Huining students, who generally felt they lacked the competencies as well as the time and money for participation. Huining students felt that they lagged behind their fellow students even more in extracurricular activity than in academic performance. As Zhao Mei explained:

> In school we concentrated too much on textbook knowledge and theory only. We had almost no opportunity to gain practical

> experience. The only big events were the yearly sports competition and the ceremonies when students were awarded their certificates. If some important person held a speech in town we would also go and listen. Otherwise there were no events whatsoever. At university we are suddenly confronted with the opportunity to organise student groups and design posters. We have no experience with that because we have never seen, let alone done things like that at school. That makes us feel very weak [in regard to these competencies]. Students from the other regions have learned these things, they know how to perform on stage, their communication skills are very strong, and they easily adapt to new circumstances. Those from Beijing or the north-eastern provinces have really strong talents. They can recite poems and dance, they have seen a lot, they are open, they have received real 'quality education' (*suzhi jiaoyu*).

These feelings of inferiority based on informal competencies could not be made up for with diligence alone. Moreover, students felt they could not develop these informal skills because they lacked the time to do so while they studied to catch up in the classroom. Unfortunately for these students, the problem became compounded: organisational skills and activities were not merely a matter of leisure. The university administration also awarded participants with credit points in comprehensive quality. In turn, students who demonstrated comprehensive quality were considerably advantaged in competitions for stipends or tuition waivers.

Above all membership in the official Student Committee (*xuesheng hui* 学生会) was considered to prove comprehensive quality. Yet, rural Huining students experienced membership in this committee as rather exclusionary, since recruitment procedures clearly valued those kinds of informal competencies or, in other words, 'cultural capital' they lacked. Soon after enrolment the Student Committee advertised membership among the newcomers. Those interested had to hold a speech on their own behalf in front of the class. None of the Huining students I knew had dared to do so. The situation had intimidated them due to their lack of experience in holding such public speeches and, more importantly, because of their insecurity in using standard Chinese (*putonghua* 普通话). Most of their school teachers had used local dialect in class. Many had learned standard Chinese only from watching TV, but had hardly actively spoken it before they entered university. Moreover, Huining students felt put off by the plentiful experiences in all sorts of activities and the numerous skills professed by their fellow students in the application speeches. Even though they actually would have liked very much to join the Student Committee, they had not dared to enlist because they felt they lacked the necessary competencies to

contribute to the committee's work. What turned the Student Committee into an exclusive club discriminating against students from economically disadvantaged regions was the fact that the only chance to join was during early days after enrolment. When rural Huining students felt better adjusted to the university environment, for example in their second year of study, they had long missed the opportunity to enlist.

'Common' Knowledge, Consumption, and Money

Another important experience of disadvantage outside the classrooms concerned all kinds of 'common knowledge'. It was often claimed that, 'The other students have seen much more in their lives'. Students from well-off regions had a number of topics to discuss that were completely new to rural Huining students. These included issues like sports and fashion, internet programs and games, and recent movies and literature. In a mixture of pride and defensiveness, some Huining students stated that such topics did not interest them anyway; and first-year students especially professed a determination to keep their conservative (*chuantong* 传统) outlook on the world against what they interpreted as Westernised (*xihua* 西化) opinions and topics of their fellow students.

Yet these topics were an important part of university life. Some of the topics were relevant to the students' field of study. This was the case, for example, with knowledge about new novels and literature for students of Chinese language and literature, or acquaintance with fashion and brands for those who studied design or marketing. The topics set by 'the others' also set the social agenda on campus. As second-year student Sun Baoquan concluded: 'I think students from the big cities are more open and advanced not only in terms of way of life, but also in terms of the way they think. We imperceptibly learn from them. If you learn from somebody, that also means that you value that person, doesn't it?'. Better-off students managed to set conversational topics on account of their consumption power. How difficult it was for Huining students to catch up in this respect was vividly described to me by fourth-year student Wu Jiang:

> Wu Jiang: I hardly made any friends at university. I have good relations with two fellow students from my home county (*laoxiang*). Besides them I have no other friends for just chatting, or for discussing things. There are several reasons for that. First, I easily feel inferior. When talking to others I am always afraid to say the wrong things. That is why I prefer not to talk at all. Another reason is that the others are very rich. I do not dare to have contact with them, because I do not understand the things they talk about, like

celebrities, soccer stars, or cosmetics. I had no idea whatsoever about such things before I came here and even now I do not manage to keep up (*laibuji* 来不及, lit. to be late for something). When they, for example, talk about cosmetics or coffee, I still know nothing about these things. Therefore I avoid contact with them. Otherwise I would always be afraid that they find out how ignorant I am about their things and then look down on me. I am very afraid of people looking down on me. The best thing is to avoid them. Then they do not know what kind of person I am.

HO: Who are 'they'?

Wu Jiang: I mean those who come from big and middle size cities. Most of them are from the city. And they are rich. Their parents work in the government or in management positions. I mean those students who come from rather well-off families. They are the ones who discuss these topics. When I meet them on the campus I just greet them shortly, nothing more.

HO: What about the girls in your dormitory? You almost spent four years with them.

Wu Jiang: Relationships in my dormitory are still quite all right, because my roommates are not very rich. That gives me less pressure. If all three were very rich I could not stand the pressure. But as it is, it is still all right.… Last year, they always watched the matches of the World Cup in Germany. They discussed how everybody played and all the other things around it. I watched with them, but I did not understand anything. I had no idea what the difference was between one kind of pass and the other. Only when there was a goal I could comment that there was a goal; that was all. But I also tried to comment on fouls.

HO: The girls were also watching?

Wu Jiang: Yes, they also discussed things like the colour of the ball…. I did not understand these things; I just sat there and imitated them. I listened carefully to their comments, so that next time they discussed I would be able to join in. That is how I tried to learn.

They [the roommates] always discuss celebrities and these things. They would go to the movies with their boyfriends and then they would sit around and discuss the latest movies, the plot, and the way it was directed. Since I never saw the movie they were talking about, I had no right to speak (*mei you fayanquan* 没有发言权). Don't you think that made me lose face? It means being excluded. Imagine, the other three are discussing in high spirits and I sit there without being able to participate. Wouldn't that make you feel excluded?

HO: You would have liked to participate?
Wu Jiang: Of course. I really like to communicate with people. But if I do not understand what the others are talking about, how should I join the conversation?
HO: Couldn't you have learned from them? Couldn't you ask them to explain to you?
Wu Jiang: I did. I sometimes asked them to explain things to me. In the beginning they would do so. But after a while they became impatient. Then they started to call me *yima* (姨妈, lit. aunt), these child brides in traditional China who were married into their future husband's family already in early childhood. Calling me like that meant to say that I was such an ignorant girl who had no understanding whatsoever about anything. The first or the second time I asked them they would answer. But when I asked for the third or the fourth time they got annoyed. Who is willing to explain everything to you all the time? Nobody is. They started to say that they also were not sure, that they also did not know. They often just answered: 'I am not sure', 'I do not know'. Like that. The fifth and the sixth time I wanted to ask I already felt too embarrassed to do so. So I just stopped asking. That is how the situation slowly developed into what it is like now, that is how things work. They sit there and chat and there is no way I can join in.

Wu Jiang's description makes clear how consumption engenders discrepancies and connects to feelings of inferiority. Besides dominance in terms of economic ability and, by implication, of setting the agenda for communication, it was also the discriminatory remarks of their fellow students that would hurt and intimidate rural Huining students. Some of these remarks were deliberately aimed to bully students with rural background. Others would be voiced unanimously, with fellow students just taking up the dominant discriminatory discourse about peasants' and labour migrants' 'low quality' and propensity to illegal behaviour, without them being aware that those people they were talking about were precisely their fellow students' family and kin. Rural students seldom voiced their offence but rather resorted to silence. The atmosphere in the dormitories could thus sometimes be quite tense, with roommates cutting off communication with each other for reasons more or less unspoken.

Feelings of being discriminated against and the all too great distance from their richer fellow students also made county fellows move closer together. Among them anger about the others ('who do they think is building the streets they are walking on and the houses their parents live in?') could be shared. Being together with county fellows thus became an important

coping strategy. Graduate Li Wenzhong from rural Huining, who had attended a tertiary short course in Hunan province in the late 1990s, explained:

> Of course there was a great difference. These students from Zhejiang Province or other places all had their own laptop. We never had seen a computer! They would fly home, while we took a second-class hard seat in the train. We never had imagined that differences could be that big and that people could be so rich. Their way of thinking was also very different. We were quite conservative; we continued to study like we had done at senior secondary school. They were very open. They had been going out already during senior secondary school. They had a rich leisure life, we Huining students did not. Far from home we closed ranks. We often met among us students from Huining and sat together on the lawn and played cards. Relations among us were very good. The others often were astonished about how close we Huining county fellows were.… We felt close to each other because we were concerned with the same topics. We had grown up in the same environment and were in the same situation. If you leave home and find out there exist differences as great those between heaven and earth, you realise that there is no way to compete with the others. You should only compare yourself with those who are on the same level with you.… The fact that the others had much better conditions did not make us feel inferior. At that time, we hardly had any material wishes. We retained [a certain consciousness of being] people from Huining. Our special characteristic was that we were frugal (*pusu* 朴素).[75] If a fellow student from Huining began to dress fashionably, the others would have opinions about him or her. We maintained that Huining people should not try to change and would accuse those who did. We thought that everybody should keep to the habit of frugality.… We only compared ourselves with county fellows and just would not try to keep up with those well-off students. Even when students from Huining were awarded scholarships, they just would not spend the money on buying clothes or other things; even with scholarships they would continue to live frugally and eat cheap food only. When those students from the south got a scholarship, they invited their roommates for food. And then they would spend their money for a lot of other things. Huining students would save the money for their future living expenses. They would not boast about it.

[75] As the opposite of being ‘wasteful’ and ‘boasting’, *pusu* also implies a certain moral quality.

Consumption habits were of course an important aspect of experiences of inequality among contemporary students. 'I do not care if they talk about topics I have no idea about, but when it comes to spending money, that really makes me feel inferior', admitted fourth-year student Wang Yongqiang. At Lanzhou University, students with well-off family backgrounds spent several times the amount of money that rural Huining students had available for daily living. Most rural Huining students had to calculate their monthly expenses carefully. Those at Lanzhou University usually had about 300 yuan per month, of which most (about 7 yuan per day) was spent on cheap food in the canteen. This left a very little for other necessary items, but nothing for extra spending on fashionable clothes or leisure activities. Especially first-year students were thus quite astonished about the consumption habits of some of their fellow students. 'When they go out, they just buy whatever they want to have; we always only buy the things we really need and try to save as much money as possible' first-year student Zhang Yan noticed. Huining students usually stated that they did not care very much that they could not buy fancy items, like special brands of clothes or cosmetics, but that they found their colleagues' consumption behaviour all too wasteful.

Yet Huining students did find it difficult to cope with their own tight financial situation when they witnessed how generously the others invited their friends out for food. Without the financial capability to reciprocate such invitations, which they felt was an unquestionable duty, they saw no way to participate in such events. Huining students thus often tried to evade invitations by not showing up or by pretending to be otherwise busy. In this respect, the scarcity of their economic means excluded them from the social activities of their better-off fellow students. While some admitted that such exclusion hurt, others accused the others of immoral wastefulness.

The importance of economic means for enjoying sociality was especially prominent when it came to having love affairs. The irritation that new students from Huining County felt about couples hugging and kissing openly on campus usually faded within weeks after enrolment. It then became clear that starting a love affair was not necessarily a matter of morality but also of consumption power. It was generally accepted that the man would shoulder the costs of dating by paying for such things as drinks or food. Male students with a low monthly budget had strong reservations about starting a love affair. Second-year student Sun Baoquan was a case in point. He explained:

> Nowadays some couples practise the AA-system. This means that when you go out together you split the bill. Still, as soon as there is some kind of celebration, like a birthday or Valentine's Day, you

> have to give presents to your beloved. That adds up to quite a lot of money. Poor students just do not have the financial means for that. Moreover, the girls fall for the urban and rich students, because that brings many advantages. To date a poor student does not bring any benefit. I thus gave up on the idea of having a girlfriend. I just do not think about it anymore.

With some student couples renting rooms outside the university for privacy, costs involved in dating could increase monthly spending considerably. Recent graduate Cao Jingzhu reported that when dating his girlfriend during university, his monthly spending increased from 400 yuan to about 1,000 yuan. No wonder poor students were reluctant to court someone. Moreover, they often felt they lacked attraction anyway. Sun Baoquan explained further: 'Most girls look for those guys with money and power, because they will gain status from being together with them, it fulfils their vanity. Of course there are also exceptions. Some girls like those who are brave and determined, who can stand hardships and work hard. These are usually rural girls. They speak the same language as we do. It is easier to communicate with them'.

Fourth-year student Wang Yongqiang, however, blamed the difficulties that male rural students experienced in finding a partner on their own psychological conditions. 'I think it is not true that girls disrespect rural men. The problem is that rural men do not show their abilities, they are too shy. Urban students have no problem in showing their best sides. And girls usually fall for those who perform well'.

In their turn, rural female students with strained monthly budgets felt they had few chances to attract a boyfriend. They often claimed they were not pretty enough because they lacked the means to dress fashionably. Like their male county fellows, they also often blamed themselves for being too introverted.

There were several ways in which rural Huining students coped with experiences of disadvantage in the many respects described above. On the one hand, they interpreted the situation as a challenge. Taking pride in the 'Huining spirit of hardship' they aimed to catch up and even overtake the others, according to the motto 'If I am inferior to you today that does not mean that I will be inferior to you tomorrow as well'. They thus convinced themselves that determination and diligence would make their fate change. Just like recent graduate Hu Shijun summarised: 'If the others can afford to take the airplane today, I do not care. Because it does not mean that I will not be able to do the same in the future'.

On the other hand, rural Huining students often tried to maintain pride in their frugal lifestyle. Several arguments were put forward to support the

moral superiority of frugality. It was either claimed that the kind of amusement their richer fellow students engaged in was not interesting, or that it was of questionable moral value. The latter was relevant for example when the others were said to go out for dancing at disorderly, chaotic places; the term used to describe their disorder (*luan* 乱) also implies immorality. Dating was discounted with the argument that only a very small percentage of student couples stayed together after graduation. Huining students claimed that they were not interested in 'playing around with feelings' (*wan ganqing youxi* 玩感情游戏), and that one could not enjoy a love relationship that was sustained by one's parents' money. Indeed, the most common moral argument against others' consumption habits was that they selfishly exploited their parents. First-year student Dong Tianlong commented: 'My urban roommate spends a lot of money. His telephone bill alone amounts to a couple of hundred yuan each month. When he runs out of money he thinks about his family. But as soon as he has got some money, he only thinks about his girlfriend! We [students from Huining] are responsible, they are just careless'.

The central moral argument against their economically potent fellow students thus was the question of whose money was being spent. Huining students constantly reminded themselves that their fellow students were privileged because of their parents' efforts. 'If you are rich being a student, you are rich just because of your parents, right?' concluded first-year student Xu Xiu. Questioning the moral basis of rich students' resourceful position helped to belittle their power. Accordingly, being aware of how difficult it was to earn money was a source of moral pride. Huining students argued in turn that, 'At least I earned the money I spend myself'.

Indeed, a number of students did work. Those who lived in Lanzhou took odd jobs or worked as private teachers. These jobs were seen as an opportunity to gain experience 'in society' and to develop one's *suzhi*, in addition to earning money. Those living on campus, however, were cut off from such opportunities because the university's shuttle to town was too expensive to make taking a job there worthwhile. The university administration supported poor students by offering students' jobs (*qingong jianxue* 勤工俭学) on campus. However, taking such jobs also bore the risk of losing face should fellow students see one cleaning the lecture buildings or the toilets. Nevertheless, a number of rural Huining students still made use of this opportunity to earn their daily living. When also taking a student

loan they thus could live almost independently from their family's financial support.[76]

Independence was a source of pride to rural students, especially in comparison with their urban fellow students. The latter's dependence on their parents, not only in financial terms but also for advice on numerous and minor daily matters, was often mocked by rural students. After all, they usually had been self-reliantly resolving daily problems since high school, and considered themselves to have matured, become understanding (*dongshi* 董事) and self-controlled (*kongzhi ziji* 控制自己). At the latest, their parents had given up direct interference with their lives when they enrolled in university, claiming that it now was the children who 'knew better'. Indeed, rural students were increasingly empowered in their relation to other family members because they lived outside the village and their level of education was increasing continuously. A number of male students even had already taken over the position of family manager. This entitled them to have a word also in their parents' affairs, such as farming decisions.[77]

Strikingly, in spite of rural students' manifold experiences of self-reliance (*zili* 自立), self-determination, and problem solving (*dongshou nengli* 动手能力), only a few interlocutors interpreted these competencies as proving rural students' 'comprehensive quality'. In the end, the notion of *suzhi* seemed to be less related to general mental or social capabilities, but rather to a certain level of purchasing power in the modern urban context. As such, the notion implied not only the ability to buy certain consumer goods and engage in particular hobbies, but also familiarity with cultural traditions, such as the tea ceremony or calligraphy. Moreover, 'comprehensive quality' evidently included a certain way of communication and handling social relationships that was unfamiliar to rural students.

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[76] At Lanzhou University cleaning was paid 5 yuan per hour. Taking up a study loan was explained by the students as a way to disburden the family since it shifted the responsibility for paying back the debt away from their parents to themselves. In some cases parents did not want their children to take up a study credit but rather preferred to scrape together the money themselves. It was presented as a matter of pride to be able to finance the child's education, but it also entailed an aspect of keeping the child financially dependent, thus maintaining intergenerational obligation.

[77] Educational achievement thus could also be a means of emancipation from parental, particularly paternal authority. Yet, Masters student He Tao gave a different interpretation when claiming that 'as long as a son has no education, his father will have power over him for all his life. But of course it does not always work like that in practice. Actually, educated children are better behaved and show more filial obedience than uneducated ones'.

Communication

Concerning the issue of social capabilities, rural students were torn. On the one hand, they took pride in being more 'social' than their urban classmates in terms of polite manners and considerateness for others. On the other hand, they were convinced that since 'society' was ruled by ways of social communication unfamiliar to them, there was something to be learned from their urban fellows. In this respect, university was a 'small society' that taught them their lesson.

Structurally, one important difference between students from urban and rural family backgrounds was the number of siblings they had. Almost all urban students born in the early and mid-1980s were only children. Rural students of the same generation usually had at least one – if not several – siblings. Moreover, in the villages they had grown up in close contact with a number of paternal cousins and other village children. Rural students were usually convinced that socialisation as a single child did make a difference. 'Their parents' whole investment is concentrated solely on them. That is different for those who have siblings, they always have to consider their environment', summarised student Wang Yongiang. Despite such a general understanding that patterns of socialisation had differed, different habits still caused everyday conflicts in the dormitories. Rural students often felt neglected by their urban fellow students in daily contact. Such neglect was not only a matter of the latter showing disinterest or even disrespect in verbal communication. It was also very much a matter of certain manners, like showing respect by getting up when someone entered the room, inviting the person to take a seat, and offering to share food and drink. Such polite behaviour was habitually enacted by most rural Huining students, but not reciprocated in the same fashion by their urban roommates. In the eyes the Huining students, their fellow students were less skilled in etiquette and more egotistical. Sun Baoquan explained the Huining perspective. 'They always see themselves as being the centre of everything. We are used to adjusting to the others. But they always want the others to adjust to them. For example: when they want to sleep and the others are still awake, they want everybody to turn off the light. If we want to sleep, we just turn our head around so that we are less blinded by the light'.

At the same time, rural Huining students were convinced that they also lacked certain capabilities of social communication which they had to learn. Student Wu Jiang explained:

> Wu Jiang: University is a transitional period (*guoduqi* 过渡期). It gives you the opportunity to adapt slowly. We should make good use of this transition phase, and learn the things it has to offer. At university we are only half students, for the other half we are already

> ‘people in society’ (*shehuiren* 社会人). During senior secondary school everything was just about studying. But university is not only for study, it is also about how to become a person in society. It is a phase of transition into society. Entering society too abruptly may cause strong feelings of alienation and insecurity. It may be a very frightening experience. But since university has already taught us how to behave in society, the whole process will be smoother; it will be easier to adapt. Life in society will feel less strange if one is prepared.
>
> HO: Did you learn something during your time at university that prepared you for society?
>
> Wu Jiang: Yes, a little. For example, one should first reflect when communicating with others and not just talk from the bottom of one’s heart. At university you learn how to cover up. If you dislike someone you should not show it, but keep it hidden inside. Once a teacher told us that the worst enemies are not those who scold and criticise you, but those who are nice to you from the outside but actually despise you. At university we all become these kinds of persons. In senior secondary school relationships were different; we were honest because we were young. Now we feel that we have grown up (*chengren* 成人, lit. to become a person) and reflect more. We keep out of other people’s business as much as possible, but just care about ourselves.

Wu Jiang experienced the challenge of adjusting to society as a moral contest between honesty and ‘covering up’ in social relationships, with her preferences clearly still being with the former. After all, she felt quite isolated at university:

> Among students we talk little, nobody likes to listen to other people’s problems. The others [urban students] do not like to talk to us; that is obvious. They only think about their own business, they are just not interested in other people. They are very selfish. They do not want others to know about their business, but rather keep things to themselves. Nowadays urban students often talk about that they should mutually substitute for the siblings they do not have, so that in the future their children will have uncles and aunts. I do not believe that this is realistic, because their contact amongst each other is very superficial. They keep many things to themselves. They just remain too distant to each other to really have such kinds of relationship in the future.

Distance was one recurrent issue when talking with rural Huining students about relationships with their fellow students. With a certain nostalgia, they

would recall senior secondary school as a time when relationships had been closer and less complicated and when communication had been honest and direct. Back then, it was claimed, one had just spoken one's mind, simply and naively. Contrary to that, relationships at university were experienced as more distant, complicated, and controlled. People seemed not to be honest with each other, but rather covered up their inner lives. Not least, relationships at university were also believed to entail more calculation and instrumentality. On the one hand, such development was seen to be an inevitable consequence of growing up. On the other hand, it was attributed to the fact that university already was a small-scale society. This implied that social relationships were already becoming more complicated, and more calculation (*xiangfa* 想法, lit. thinking) was needed for handling them. As 26-year-old Duan Wenlan, a recent graduate, maintained, 'At university, relationships already get more complicated, they develop in the direction of utilising each other for one's own aims (*huxiang liyong* 互相利用). People start to have intentions (*xinyan* 心眼) within their relationships'.

'Society' was considered to be composed of relationships based on calculation in ways that village life was not. Society's complicated environment and complex social relationships were said to be alien to rural students, who had experienced little contact with strangers. Strikingly, the fact that rural Huining students had already arranged the pragmatics of daily life in the county seat during senior secondary school did not count as an experience of 'steeling oneself through [experience in] society' (*shehui de molian* 社会的磨练). Most people would agree with 46-year-old graduate Zhang Guo who claimed that rural Huining students lacked 'basic social education' (*shehui de jiben jiaoyu* 社会的基本教育). They had no experience with the way human relationships 'in society' functioned in communicative terms; that they should be controlled, diplomatic, and reflected. Moreover, they were innocent about the instrumental character these relations entailed.

Accordingly, fourth-year student Wu Jiang maintained that she had to learn how to be flexible in communication, how to talk diplomatically, and how to pay lip service when necessary. She saw her lack of such communication skills as a deficiency that she had to overcome as she faced graduation and was about to enter society. Zhou Xilong, a 44-year-old teacher who originated from rural Huining but had been working at a school in Lanzhou for eight years, still professed to difficulties in adapting urban ways of communication and building social relationships. Zhou Xilong was caught in a dichotomist way of thinking about rural-urban differences, and when talking about the issue he became quite upset:

> If urban people accuse me of 'petty famers' thinking' (*xiaonongmin yishi* 小农民意识), I will answer, yes, you are right, I am a peasant! There is nothing wrong with being a peasant! Urban people talk about 'peasant consciousness' (*nongmin yishi* 农民意识), they look down on peasants. But I am a peasant [!]. And as such I look down on 'urban consciousness' (*chengli de yishi* 城里的意识). There is a clear cultural difference. What they praise as a virtue, we think is vulgar. Just look at how they handle human relationships. Compared to rural people, urban people have three deficiencies in this context. First, they are selfish. To be selfish means to only think of oneself, to think that everybody around has to be at one's service; parents, siblings, and even the leaders in the work unit, everybody should just serve them. Rural people think of contribution instead. They are happy to help others or do something for them. That is the difference; urban people are selfish and rural people are simple, sincere, and honest (*pushi* 朴实). Second, urban people are very calculative. They make a clear difference between one yuan and two yuan. We do not make such a difference. They think that if you have to give someone two yuan you really have to give two yuan and not one and one half. They are very nitpicking. Third, urban people are hypocrites. For example, if someone did a bad job and I still tell him that he did a good job, he is happy to hear that praise, even though he knows that it is not the truth. That is different among rural people. If you did a bad job and I still praised you, you clearly understand that as ironic. Rural people do not hesitate to say directly that someone has done a bad job. If they still praised the other, it is meant to tease or hurt. But in the urban context, the other person would still like to hear it.

A considerable part of Zhou Xilong's disappointment with his urban environment can be related to the lack of social acknowledgement he received from urban students and their parents due to his rural background. Nevertheless, he was extreme among the graduates with whom I talked in his determination to uphold and praise rural virtues against urban degeneration.

Yet Zhou Xilong's conviction that he was still a peasant despite his education, profession, and urban dwelling was shared by others. Younger graduates, like Duan Wenlan, who was 26 and had worked in a bank in Lanzhou for almost a year, also felt they might never adapt to urban communication styles. As he explained, 'Urban people have definite advantages in terms of their communication skills and in terms of how to do *guanxi*. We rural people generally adjust quickly, but we are too honest, we

do not know how to talk diplomatically (*yuanhua* 圆滑). Some things are really difficult to learn, and some things we maybe will never learn'.

Conclusion

This chapter described how rural Huining students experienced the transitional phase of university life. While campus living conditions generally were valued as luxurious, rural Huining students discovered – in the classroom and in university social life – that they occupied the lowest end of the wide spectrum of socio-economic inequality in contemporary Chinese society. In study related matters, rural Huining students resorted to their 'reserves' of diligence and determination. The ethics of striving for advancement had been inculcated in their earlier highly competitive schooling environments. There they had been taught the old Chinese idea that poverty engenders morality, an idea that also resonated in the local government's slogan of the 'Huining spirit' that did not shun any hardships in striving for advancement.

Yet their willingness to bear hardships, as a sole 'weapon of the weak', was of little help when rural Huining students faced the challenge of acquiring 'comprehensive quality', usually understood as organisational, cultural, and communication skills. Their willingness to take hardships was also of little help in addressing their exclusion from consumption-oriented social interaction among fellow students, including daily conversations about latest trends, eating out, or dating. Rural Huining students were aware that in the society they were about to enter, it was the urban students' ways of communication and social interaction, their consumption power, and their alleged 'comprehensive quality' that would set social standards. In this respect, university life was a 'small-scale society' that gave rural students a feel for the future challenges that awaited them.

In view of their disadvantaged position, rural Huining students tried to maintain their pride in the morality of a frugal lifestyle, the determination to not squander other people's money, diligence, self-reliance, and social considerateness. Moreover, they coped by temporalising their present problems, professing hope that their experience of hardship equipped them with abilities that would pay off over time. In the end, they hoped, they would even surpass their urban compatriots. After all, so they argued, an urban family background was an ascribed privilege that bore the risk of moral degeneration. In the end, their own attitude of constant striving might turn out to be a more solid base for success than initial privileges.

Rural Huining students thus negotiated and in some respects challenged the common holistic hierarchy in which the economically more potent citizens from better-off regions of China are considered to be morally

superior (Kipnis 2011). On the contrary, rural Huining students claimed moral superiority for themselves, particularly making reference to classical Chinese values, such as bearing hardship, showing diligence, and exhibiting considerateness for the needs of others.

On the other hand, students did not challenge all aspects of the hierarchy. For example, they accepted the officially endorsed notion of *zonghe suzhi*. The university considered this an important qualification necessary for advancement and success, and linked student success with a variety of cultural abilities that rural Huining students rarely manifest and felt themselves to lack. Such cultural abilities were unambiguously admired, and the lack of opportunity to learn them prior to university enrolment was much regretted. Students also accepted the importance of urban communication styles as dominant at university. Their attitudes towards these styles were, however, ambiguous because they often were interpreted as entailing a certain moral degeneration.

How graduates dealt with the challenge of their most important step in 'changing fate' – their entry into the labour market – will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 7
Entering Society

In China, the critical phase of finding employment is understood as the point at which students finally grow up and 'enter society' (*jinru shehui* 进入社会). Decisive policy changes concerning this passage from university into society took place in the late 1990s. At that time, the state retreated from its responsibility to allocate a job for every graduate. With the state's retreat, one of the central pillars of socialist planning fell. Planning for the educational sector was no longer made to correspond closely with the need for personnel to build socialism. Instead, job creation and placement were to be accomplished through market mechanisms, as expressed by the slogan 'both sides choose' (*shuangfang xuanze* 双方选择). Qualified labour was to be recruited according to the needs of the rapidly growing economy. Such choice was a new phenomenon, for graduates as well as for employers.

The newly emerging employment practices hardly worked in accordance with pure market principles of economic efficiency or choice of candidates according to qualification. Instead, nepotism and personal relations (*guanxi*) often paved the way to qualified positions.[78] At the same time, as graduates rushed towards the labour markets in the burgeoning coastal cities and inland growth zones, the state retained several programs that offered job allocation in government bodies to graduates who volunteered to go – or return – to less-developed economic areas, most of them in the western part of the country.

In view of such basic changes in the academic employment sector, the experience of 'entering society' varied for different cohorts of rural Huining graduates. Early graduates who attended tertiary or vocational secondary educational institutions in the 1980s or early 1990s profited from the state job allocation policy. Such allocation usually gave them no choice in the

[78] I refer to common discourse here. To my knowledge there are no systematic data available to quantify the impact of 'going through the backdoor' for permanent employment. The relevance of 'personal relations' for job allocation has been reported also for the period before labour market reform (e.g. Bian 1994a).

location of their assignment, but it provided a steady position. Those who graduated after the late 1990s, however, faced the challenge of entering society on their own. Unlike their predecessors, recent graduates faced both new risks and new opportunities, and they could – in principle – exercise 'free choice' when entering the labour market.

In local discourse people described their experience of the employment sector above all through a distinction between formal/permanent and temporary employment. The term for formal and permanent employment, *gongzuo* (工作), is a legacy from the Maoist period, when it designated formal work in a unit for which urban household registration was required. After the dismantling of state and collectively owned industries, blue-collar employment became insecure, and *gongzuo* came to be equated with white collar employment alone. 'Hiring out your labour' (*dagong* 打工) was generally used to signify unqualified temporary jobs (*kuli huo* 苦力活, lit. hard physical labour) that neither entail welfare benefits nor protection against dismissal. When interlocutors emphasised the insecure and underprivileged nature of contract work (*hetong gongzuo* 合同工作) as compared to *gongzuo*, they would also use the term *dagong* for white-collar temporary work.

The new mechanisms of labour distribution have been interpreted by a number of authors as signalling a shift from socialist governing through structured dependency to neoliberal governing through self-responsibility according to the motto 'create your own rice bowl' (Bray 2005: 190). Accordingly, graduates' search for employment is viewed in terms of individual self-development, while the state is considered a neoliberal regime that governs its subjects through 'freedom' (Hanser 2002; Hoffman 2006; Liu 2008), or 'from afar' (Zhang and Ong 2008). Some authors, such as Hoffman (2006), note that China's neoliberal techniques of governance through employment are coupled with reform-era patriotism, so that self-development is linked to state strengthening, and graduates are called upon to develop 'patriotic professionalism'.

For most graduates from rural Huining family backgrounds, neither individual self-development nor patriotism seemed central in determining their pathways into the labour market. These students' social reality was rather shaped by concrete economic restrictions, like the need to pay back their study loan or the social obligation of supporting their siblings. Moreover, these obligations, as well as the structural lack of viable *guanxi* with people in powerful positions in the urban sector, severely curtailed their exercise of 'free choice' in respect to labour market entry. While few of them considered 'self-development' an important aspect of their future professional life, for those who ended up selling their qualified labour on a

temporal basis, the marketability of their qualification was an important aspect.

This chapter highlights how recent changes in the academic employment sector affected the life of graduates from rural Huining. What options did students and recent graduates from the region feel they had when entering the new labour markets? How did they reason about these options and the choices they made? What resources could they employ and which conditions finally made them succeed in 'changing fate'?

Pathways into the Labour Market

I first describe a number of pathways into society. The four cases I present include graduates who hired out their labour on the market (case 1 and case 3), took advantage of state job allocation for returnees to the county (case 2), or used *guanxi* to get access to steady employment (case 4). The cases highlight the options perceived by contemporary students and recent graduates and their reasoning about the choices they made. In the end of the chapter, I describe a special kind of *guanxi* that turned out to be an important resource: county fellowship (*laoxiang*).

'You Have to Be Willing to Take Hardships'

Li Wenzhong and Zhang Shuhua were classmates during senior secondary school in Huining in the mid-1990s. Since Li Wenzhong had been a lazy student, so it was said, Zhang Shuhua had not taken much notice of him. After the national college entrance exam, both ended up studying mechanical engineering at junior colleges, albeit in different regions of China. Li Wenzhong went to Liaoning Province in the far north-east because, as he said, 'I wanted to go as far away from Huining County as possible'. Zhang Shuhua attended a junior college in Hunan Province in southern China. Only after they had met in the Huining county seat shortly before their college graduations, had they come together as a couple. Graduating from a junior college in the year 2000 meant having missed the chance of being allocated employment by just one year. However, in retrospect, that did not matter much for them since neither had been willing to go back to Huining County. Without any personal relations that might have helped them to find steady employment elsewhere, they realised hiring themselves out for temporary employment was their only option. 'Job allocation had been abolished. All we could do was to rely on ourselves (*kao ziji* 靠自己) and look for temporary work (*dagong*) everywhere', Li Wenzhong recalled. He decided to try looking in Beijing, where he could stay in a room with a former

classmate, who also helped him to find his way around. A public job fair helped him to hire out as a temporary worker in the IT sector.

Computer application had been only a minor subject for Li Wenzhong as well as for his future wife. Yet both had gained some working experience in this field through odd jobs they had done alongside their studies. Already before graduation Zhang Shuhua thus had been able to sign a short-term contract with a company affiliated to her college. But then she decided to join Li Wenzhong in Beijing. When I met both in Beijing, they took turns explaining their situation:

> Li Wenzhong*:* We did not have clear career plans (*mei you shenme dingwei* 没有什么定位), we just wanted to follow our interests. It was not difficult for me to find a job. If I was a graduate from southern China I probably would have higher demands. But I was prepared to hire out my labour and do temporary jobs. So I could go anywhere. I was never interested in southern China, so we went to Beijing. Everything worked out quite smoothly. Huining people are used to taking hardships.
>
> Competition in Beijing certainly is tough; many graduates with credentials from high level universities look for jobs here. But we people from Huining County benefit from the fact that we are very much to the ground and dependable (*tashi* 踏实). If you do a good job, you will not be dismissed. And you learn and mature in the job. We have already done this for quite some years now. We have not faced many difficulties so far. Of course it was important that we never tried to change the branch. It is still possible to find work in IT also in Beijing. We usually stay for about two years in one job. We have yearly contracts and so far it has never been a problem to get them prolonged. We Huining people are used to hardship. When we feel that a certain job does not benefit to our general development any longer, we change jobs. That's normal. If you are tired of your situation you try to change it. People from Huining can deal with it. We can adjust to any circumstances in the working environment. Our degree is considered low, so we have to do comparatively tiring jobs. Although we do the same work as the others do, we have to work harder.
>
> Zhang Shuhua: We find new jobs via the internet. That is quite easy nowadays. Just after graduation we did not have much experience and we only had a low academic degree. Of course we could not find an ideal job. That is normal. There is much competition in Beijing, and every year there is a huge bunch of new graduates looking for jobs here. Nowadays even graduates with a Bachelor or a Masters

degree have difficulties in finding a job. Actually, sometimes the problem is their attitude (*geren de dingwei* 个人的定位). Some people are just not willing to take hardships, especially those from well-off family backgrounds. They have a certain idea about what kind of positions they should get, but, to say it frankly, they are just not willing to take any hardship.

HO: What kind of hardships do you mean?

Zhang Shuhua: To work a lot under high pressure. I met some graduates with a Bachelor degree in business administration who thought that just because they graduated from university they should get a position as a manager. But if you have no working experience whatsoever, why should anybody employ you as a manager? I think these graduates have a problem in defining their position properly. They look down on certain positions, but for the others they are not qualified (*gaobucheng dibujiu* 高不成抵不就). That is why they do not find a job. Just after graduation you have to start from the bottom and then work your way up gradually.

Li Wenzhong: They do not want to do hard and tiresome work. But in fact by doing this kind of work you also gain experience. We people from Huining do not mind hard work. When we learned everything that there was to learn in a certain job we look for another one. In fact, the jobs we do usually do not have much prospect (*kanhao* 看好) or status. We hope to gain more and more experience and then strive for advancement. That is how we do it, we start from the ground.

Zhang Shuhua: You do various kinds of work, and learn how to assist others in their jobs; you advance your knowledge and your individual overall working quality step-by-step. You learn to value your abilities and you get to understand how the branch works. All that helps you to gradually advance in the job, you just cannot reach heaven with a single step.

Of course, both were lucky to have qualified in the booming branch of information technology, which had been absorbing much temporary labour since the time of their entry in 2000. In their positions, they had earned enough money to pay back their study loans within two years. Other than the exhaustion of long commutes, their main problem was settling in Beijing for the long-term. As for everybody else I met during fieldwork, settling down in the city meant buying an apartment. In Beijing's real estate market, such a goal was extremely difficult for them to realise. They did not regret their decision to come to the capital, but they admitted that they advised their siblings to make other choices.

The only 'reserve' these two graduates felt they had in Beijing's highly competitive labour market for graduates was their diligence and determination to take hardships. In their constant striving to increase their qualifications and advance they displayed an 'entrepreneurial self'. The 'Huining spirit' in fact perfectly fit flexible labour market conditions. Such a spirit maintained low demands in the present but high hopes for the future when all hardships and long-term working experience would be rewarded. In respect to flexible working conditions, graduates from rural Huining seemed better adjusted to meet the demands of China's new labour market than their compatriots from better-off families who were less driven by an ethic of hard work.

'I Don't Have the Option to Ramble'

Gao Xinyu had returned to Huining County after graduating from a university in Qinghai Province two years before our interview. With the help of some personal relations his family had arranged for him to become a teacher at one of the senior secondary schools in the Huining county seat. I contacted Gao Xinyu through his former classmate Chang Binyan. When I visited Gao Xinyu in the teachers' dormitory room at his school, he started the conversation with reference to our common friend:

> Chang Binyan attended university in Lanzhou and has been influenced by the atmosphere there. He did not return to Huining County. Actually, of those students who attended university in the south, none has come back. They prefer to hire out for temporary employment. Since I was only in Qinghai Province, I was less influenced by this trend. I would have liked to attend a Masters studies program, but my English was not good enough to be admitted. I also would have liked to have rambled and to have tried my luck finding employment on my own, but for poor students like me that is not so easy. I did not have money, and I did not have any *guanxi*. My family supported me all those years. They just could not do so any longer. It was now my turn to earn some money. I had to pay for my brother's education. He also needs expensive medicine. Since my parents could not finance that, I had to get a job to earn a living for both my brother and me. We [graduates from poor family backgrounds] have to earn money immediately after graduation. That is why I went back to Huining. My parents think that to have steady employment (*gongzuo*) here is not bad at all. But we, having been to the big cities, do not think so. Our views have changed. For us working in the county seat is nothing to be proud of. …

> I recently got married, and life became very pragmatic thereafter. I have my own family now to care for. I would have loved to go somewhere else, continue education, and become a university professor. But this opportunity has passed. Now I will stay here. My wife works in the township government. She wants to be promoted to come up here (*shanglai* 上来) to the county seat. I have already cleared my study debts because I worked as a private teacher during university and earned quite some money with that. Now I only have the debts from the marriage. We kept the marriage rather simple and did not spend much more than 10,000 yuan. The next thing I have to finance is buying an apartment. And I have to find a way to get my wife transferred here (*xiang banfa ba ta tiaoguolai* 想办法把她调过来). For that you need money, and you need *guanxi*.…
>
> My parents arranged the job for me. They wanted me to have steady employment. For them it is important that I have a retirement pension; that I enjoy an 'iron rice bowl' and do not have to worry about the future. It gives parents mental peace when their children's situation is settled… Being a teacher puts me under high pressure. We teachers have to fulfil certain quotas in terms of our students' scores in the exams. For teachers who fail the quota, life becomes difficult. Society will not respect them any longer. Therefore I am under high pressure. The job as a teacher is tiresome and has low status. That is unfair, just compare [our work] with what these people in the government offices do.

For some of the graduates who were willing to return to Huining County, the state still provided steady employment as a teacher or government official. Due to increasing competition between returnees, preconditions for being allocated such a position have, however, been on the rise during the 2000s. Having *guanxi* with someone in the local government thus has become increasingly important. As of 2007, even Bachelor degree holders faced difficulties in being allocated a state job in the county seat. Junior college graduates would be sent to the townships. For them monthly earnings would be as low as 260 or 360 yuan per month (e.g. as elementary or junior secondary school teachers) for the first two or three years. Thereafter salaries would rise and they would achieve regular cadre positions. By offering divergent conditions for employment on township as compared to county seat level, administrative regulation sustained a definite spatial hierarchy. By coupling both, spatial hierarchy and hierarchy of educational degrees, job allocation practices thus fostered their mutual reinforcement. Though job allocation is part of the socialist legacy, taking advantage of it has become

perceived as a matter of 'free choice' that incorporates a consideration of one's available resources and *guanxi*.

Gao Xinyu maintained that due to his poor family background he lacked the 'freedom' of taking advantage of other options offered by the labour markets. Other graduates originating from rural Huining interpreted the situation the other way around. For them, the low remuneration in positions at the township level made the option of returning to Huining County problematic. After all, they had to clear their study debts and at the same time often also had to support the education of one or several siblings. Such considerations were relevant to Yan Tianlong, whose situation I describe next.

'The System Is Unfair'

I visited Yan Tianlong and his girlfriend Duan Yunhe several times in their dormitory room in Lanzhou. The room had been allocated to Yan Tianlong by the junior secondary high school that had hired him as a temporary teacher. He had graduated from a short course at the Lanzhou Teachers' Training University the year before. His girlfriend had been his classmate at senior secondary school and they had been a couple ever since. When filling out the university application form after the national college entrance examination, Yan Tianlong had made the choice for both of them. Duan Yunhe thus had ended up at a short course at the Lanzhou Institute of Commerce. Only when she received the letter of enrolment did they realise that the tuition was exceptionally high (8,000 yuan per annum as compared to 5,600 yuan for Lanzhou University). Her three years of tertiary education thus had been a considerable financial burden. Since graduation, she had worked for 400-500 yuan per month as a shop assistant in a grocery store around the corner from their dormitory. In a long interview during one of my visits, Yan Tianlong explained the options that had been open to him after graduation and his continuous doubts about the choice he had made, not least since his current situation bore reason for quite strong frustrations:

> Both the pupils at this school and their parents look down on me [because of his rural family background]. That makes me angry. I do the same job as the other teachers. Maybe I even do it better. But my work is not valued. There is nothing I can do about it. Most of those teachers hired on contract have rural family backgrounds. Graduates from the cities usually are offered steady employment. If you are from the countryside, you have to start your life in the city from zero. You have nothing. You do not even have a place to stay. That puts you under high pressure. If all teachers were hired on contract, I would feel better. But right now some teachers work on contract

while others have steady employment. That's a big problem. Formally employed teachers earn 3,000 yuan, and they also get paid during holidays. I only earn money when I work. I am paid per hour. But I can do nothing about it. If I do not give my best today, I may be dismissed tomorrow.

In the current system, those [who are] formally employed (*zheng shi gongzuo* 正式工作) enjoy everything. They get an apartment. At least they get a credit for buying one and receive housing subsidies. But we get nothing of that kind. We do not even get a credit from the bank. At least my school pays my salary more or less on time. That is not the case everywhere.… Some of my classmates went back to Huining County to become village teachers there. They even had to pass a pro-forma exam before they were allocated a position. Now they earn 260 yuan. I get paid per hour and I work a lot. And I get 400 yuan as a welfare subsidy, even though that is only half of what those who are formally employed here receive. But the fact that my job is not steady gives me much pressure. I earn more money [than those who returned to Huining County]. I earn about 2,000 yuan per month. But the job is not secure. That makes me worry. …

I did not go back to Huining because I have to finance my younger brother's education [he is attending a tertiary vocational program at a junior college in Hunan Province]. So the main reason why I am here is to ease the family's financial burden. Those who went back think in long-term perspective. After three years their salary will rise to more than 1,000 yuan, and they will get all the social welfare benefits of a formal teacher. The job I do here looks good from the outside, but I work hard and I have a lot of pressure. What happens if they dismiss me? It is very difficult to find any employment if you do not have *guanxi*. In my family everybody is a peasant; nobody holds a powerful position. But in contemporary China finding steady employment is not a matter of qualification or competence. If the headmaster were my maternal uncle, I would for sure get formally employed and enjoy all the privileges. As it is now, just hiring out my labour and living under great pressure, I feel treated like a second class person. That is a big problem. The work is the same but the payment is not. …

Maybe I am just too conservative and in the future everybody will work on a contract basis only. But the point is that when I want to go back to Huining later, I will have lost the right for being assigned a job there. I have no choice any longer but to get along here. Right now everything depends on how my pupils perform on

> the exams. That is the basis on which they judge a teacher's abilities. Seen from the long-term perspective it would probably have been better if I had returned to Huining County. On the other hand, staying in the city offers better development perspectives. When you return to the county, you are stuck there for the rest of your life. So I do not regret that I did not go back. My situation will not necessarily continue like it is now. It may also improve. The best for me would be if they introduced the contract system everywhere. With my abilities and experience I then would have the chance to find something else if they do not want me here anymore. Compared to many of my classmates I still am comparatively well-off. They do odd jobs, like selling clothes or the like. They lie to their parents, because they do not want them to worry. They tell them that they found good work. …
>
> When I decided what to do in the future I was also influenced by someone from my village whom I call 'little uncle' (*xiaoba* 小爸). He was the first Bachelor graduate in our village. Although he was already promised a position as an English teacher at Huining Senior Secondary School No. 1, he decided not to take it. He went to Africa as an interpreter instead. He advised me not to go back to Huining, life there would be just too boring. And I would earn only very little money. The money he earns now he saves for attending Masters studies later. He does not want to go back to our backward region. Actually nobody wants to go back. Only those who see no chance elsewhere go back.
>
> My parents want me to come back; they think differently, all that counts for them is security. As it is right now I have no peace in my heart, and my parents have no peace in their hearts as well.

Another aspect of frustration and worry for Yan Tianlong was the situation of his girlfriend.

> To get married and set up a family is an actual (*xianshi* 现实) problem. My girlfriend graduated from Lanzhou Institute of Commerce. But now she only earns about 400-500 yuan by doing some odd job. If we had known that before, she just would not have had to attend university at all. For the kind of job she does now she does not need that high an education.
>
> Although the unemployment rate is high, they still extend university enrolment, just because the universities want to earn people's money. Many disagree with such methods. We are all Chinese, but the inequality between us is too big.

However, Yan Tianlong's girlfriend, Duan Yunhe, evaluated her experience differently:

> People who have not attended university themselves mock me by asking what use it is to go to university if you do not earn more money afterwards. Of course going to university was expensive. I spent more than 30,000 yuan. But I do not regret it. It has been a very special experience. Although the college I attended was very average and we did not learn much, I still enjoyed college life. I am happy I had the chance to experience what it means to be a student. It was interesting. I met a lot of people I would not have met otherwise. Still, I spent most of my time with students from Gansu Province because the other students looked down on us. Especially in retrospect, college life was very romantic; we had much more freedom than we had at senior secondary school and the campus environment was much nicer. Of course I also felt under pressure because the others were much more outstanding (*youxiu* 优秀) and talented (*duocai* 多才) than me. They knew how to do all these things like dancing and singing and organising events. I admired them for that.

By the time I met her, Duan Yunhe planned to go back to Huining. She hoped to be allocated a job in the township government, which required her to pass an examination for which she was busy preparing. We talked at length about her future prospects.

> Duan Yunhe: Life is better here in Lanzhou; of course I would like to stay here. I got used to being here. My parents also think it is better not to live in Huining County. We [she and her boyfriend] advised my younger brother to attend university outside Gansu Province, but my father wanted him to apply for Lanzhou University so that he stays closer to home. They [the parents] do not understand much about the world outside, they think that Lanzhou is already very good [laughs]. Everybody who has been to the south says that it is much better there. I have never been anywhere else; we both do not dare to aspire to that much…. Nowadays I think that people from the countryside stink, because they sleep on the *kang*. I did not notice that before. If I pass the exam and get allocated a position in the township government, I will at least sleep in a bed and not on a *kang*. But still there will be no heating in winter. To stay here in Lanzhou without a job is no option. I would like to be able to stay here, but one needs money for doing that. Since I have not managed [to get a decent job], the only thing I can do is to go back. In the

> beginning I will not earn much, but later the salary will increase. Here in Lanzhou, the pressure is too high, I do not fit here.
> HO: Have you applied for jobs here?
> Duan Yunhe: People in the countryside believe that if you managed to leave the rural areas you proved to be more capable than the others. Lanzhou is a big place and I do not have capabilities enough [for this place]. That is why I did not apply for any jobs here. Nowadays for getting a job you do not only need to be a good student, but also have experience. At university only those active in the Student Committee gained such experience.… In the case that I pass the exam for a position in the local government position, I will go down there (*xiaqu* 下去). He [her boyfriend] will stay here. His situation depends on how well his pupils perform in the exam. 'We see while we progress' (*yi bian zou yibian kan* 一边走一边看), we do not plan very far into the future.

For her boyfriend, Yan Tianlong, the difficulties of 'entering society' were about the choice between two systems. On the one hand there was the old system of state job allocation that promised the long-term benefit of secure employment and eligibility to social welfare schemes. On the other hand there was the option of earning more money immediately. This, however, meant to bear job insecurity in a market-oriented system of hire and fire. The two options were, moreover, related to an administrative, and thus also a socio-economic, dimension between the economically less developed environment of township or county seat and the economically more developed provincial capital or other places outside the province.

In Yan Tianlong's case, social support obligations towards his younger brother had influenced his decision in favour of the latter option, but they had not been the only aspect. The wish to retain the possibility to 'develop', to keep the future open, to not give up on the wish to succeed in setting up a life in the provincial capital and, not least, to maintain hope for advancement also had played a role. At the same time, Yan Tianlong also longed for security, fostered by his parents' laments as well as his own anxieties. Given the current mixed system, he constantly worried that the risk he was taking by rejecting steady employment might be too big, since there would be few alternatives available in case he was fired from his present job.

For his girlfriend Duan Yunhe, the socio-economic and spatial hierarchy between rural Huining County ('small place', 'down there') and urban Lanzhou ('big place', 'up here') corresponded with the capabilities necessary to succeed on each level. Even though she had graduated from junior college, she was convinced that her capabilities were insufficient for

succeeding in Lanzhou. Her wish to return to Huining County might have aggravated Yan Tianlong's doubts about his own decision. The secure and carefree situation of his colleagues in steady employment aroused strong feelings of anger about the unfairness inherent in the coexistence of two employment systems. After all, it was still those with urban registration who were likely to enjoy the best of both systems. They enjoyed the benefit of secure employment and earned a high salary. Due to their household registration, it was much easier for them to achieve both in the provincial capital. They, moreover, were more respected by the pupils' parents. It thus seemed to Yan Tianlong that the others had it all; while he, as a graduate from a rural family background, had to make a tough choice. Nevertheless, life in Lanzhou still seemed more attractive than being allocated a job in Huining County. Not least, income was about ten times as high as that in Huining County. Although not the only aspect, being able to support his younger brother still had been an important factor in his decision. It contributed to his self-esteem as someone who fulfilled his role as the elder brother and helped to secure the advancement of the family.

'The Only Way to Get a Steady Job Is through Guanxi (关系)*'*

Duan Wenlan and Zhang Jun, classmates during senior secondary school in Huining and close friends since then, introduced themselves to me proudly as being not at all the typical kind of Huining students. They took pride in having been not very ambitious nor well behaved in school, and reported having little respected their teachers. With just as much diligence as necessary during certain critical phases during schooling, they had both managed to get enrolled in and graduate from the Lanzhou Institute of Commerce. Both had been lucky to find a job that after a probationary period of one year turned into steady employment. Even though I talked to them individually, they had quite a similar outlook on life.

Duan Wenlan was very open about the fact that one of his maternal cousins had pulled strings to get him the job. He admitted, 'I am lucky (*yunqi hao* 运气好) that my cousin holds a powerful position as a department head at a bank in Lanzhou. Otherwise I would never have achieved the steady position I have now'. His friend Zhang Jun confirmed finding a job without *guanxi* was impossible:

> Most graduates do not find employment by themselves; their parents find it for them. In this respect we graduates from rural family backgrounds are really disadvantaged. We have the same level of qualification as our urban fellow students. We might even be more capable in some respects. At least we are not less qualified than they

> are. But as long as our parents do not have *guanxi*, it is impossible to find steady employment.

Both Duan Wenlan and Zhang Jun estimated that of their 60 classmates during senior secondary school, more than two-thirds had used *guanxi* to find a job. Some had returned to Huining County to get allocated a job by the government. They claimed that less than a handful had found a decent job on their own.

In fact, many of the recent graduates from rural Huining family backgrounds I met had made use of the help of a relative in a powerful position to get a job. These cases testified that the 'rise of families' in China really was a matter of generations, as it was often claimed in popular discourse. In the end, the availability of *guanxi* in the urban context was the all-decisive difference in the family background of these graduates. Similarly, rural families which had benefited from job allocation during the first phase of the reform policy continued to profit substantially in the 2000s as the next generation entered society. Early graduates were the most important resource to new graduates, because they could open doors that otherwise remained closed to first-generation students.

Taking his own situation as an example, Duan Wenlan again explained how the 'rise of the family' worked:

> My cousin [the one who helped to get him the job] financed my studies. That money I do not have to repay. But I will help him whenever he is in need of help. That is how Chinese families rise. One person helps the other to move upwards. We have this saying that 'on your way to enlightenment, all your chickens and dogs will accompany you into heaven'. Such a phenomenon might not be entirely good, but it is our custom, and it cannot be changed that easily. In general, you have to rely on yourself (*kaoziji* 靠自己). You think that is a contradiction? It is not. You should ask for others' help only in particular instances, when you are really in need of help. But you should by no means depend on others for a whole lifetime.

While an influential relative was crucial for getting employment, setting up a life in the city still entailed a number of other pressures. When I congratulated Duan Wenlan and Zhang Jun for having solved all their problems by finding secure employment, they were reluctant to agree. Zhang Jun liked his job in sales, because it meant a lot of travelling. He claimed to possess the right social capabilities for the job, since already during university he had spent much time drinking, smoking, and going out for leisure – habits that now turned out to be important assets when dealing with business partners. Duan Wenlan stated that he did not to care at all whether his job at the bank was interesting or not. He cared only that it was steady.

Yet both stated that even though they had found employment the real problems had just begun. Duan Wenlan explained:

> I do not like to be in Lanzhou. The pressure is too high. After the probationary period I will earn about 2,000 yuan. It means that I have to struggle for my whole life just to be able to buy an apartment.
>
> To set up a life in Lanzhou means finding a wife. For that I need to buy an apartment. In a way I do not feel old enough for all that. Life is already too difficult for me alone, how should I be able to care for a family?
>
> It is important to have your own home (*jia* 家); that is our conviction (*guannian* 观念). If you live in a rented place, you always feel that your life is not secure. You feel like you are without roots (*piaobo* 漂泊, lit. to drift aimlessly). It is important to feel secure. Also those who disregard stability and rather like to challenge themselves (*tiaozhan ziji* 挑战自己) will realise the importance of settling down sooner or later. Life is just like that (*renshi changing* 人世常情).

Zhang Jun explained why he felt he had no option but to face all the problems involved in setting up a life in Lanzhou:

> We are under higher pressure now than we used to be as students. We have to get married and buy an apartment. In Lanzhou I belong to the poor strata of society, but in Huining I would be one of the rich. We stay here just because of the next generation. Only if we stay, the next generation will grow up under better conditions. Our children will receive better education and do not have to go through the low quality schooling in Huining County. We bear all these difficulties for the sake of the next generation. When I stay in Lanzhou, my child will grow up as an urban child. If I lived in Huining County, my child would be a child from Huining. What a difference that makes!

Even with steady employment, life in the city was not easy for graduates originating from rural Huining. Although neither Duan Wenlan nor Zhang Jun had a girlfriend, they still felt the pressure to marry. As a precondition for marriage, the groom needed to buy an apartment in the city. In view of the enormous financial burden this entailed, they obviously had pondered the merits of staying in Lanzhou. Strikingly, one of the main arguments in favour of not returning to Huining, where life seemed so much easier, was based on a long-term family-oriented perspective. Even though setting up a life in the provincial capital meant a lot of struggle for them, they accepted the burden (also) for the sake of their children.

County Fellows as a Resource

In the course of my research I learned about an important source of support I had not reckoned with before: county fellowship (*laoxiang*). Particularly when facing the problem of getting into contact with graduates from different age cohorts who lived in Beijing, county fellowship turned out to be very helpful. In Beijing there circulated a list of *Huining laoxiang* that listed more than 300 persons. Moreover, when contacting people from the list, they usually were very supportive once they heard that my project dealt with their home county.

Even during university, county fellows sometimes turned into an important source of support. Although officially prohibited by university regulations, networking among *laoxiang* was usually tolerated. At Lanzhou University each year some Huining students would take the initiative and scan the name list of newcomers for county fellows. They would then organise an unofficial meeting among county fellows of the various grades. After this initial *laoxiang* networking, usually no further activities were organised. Individual *laoxiang* would, however, keep in touch. 'If your acquaintances and friends are not willing to help you out with some matter, you can always ask a *laoxiang*', maintained Masters student He Tao. Also when it came to dealing with the university administration, it might be helpful to look for a *laoxiang*. 'If you contact a *laoxiang* it gives you a small advantage, because *laoxiang* feel more obliged to help', He Tao stated. Everybody agreed that being able to refer to a common regional background made it easier to establish contact with a stranger. Reference to common origin, people maintained, provided a basis for a certain feeling of closeness that made it easier to ask that person for a favour.

A list of more than 50 Huining *laoxiang* also existed among Lanzhou University staff, but it was not actively circulated among the students. To know who among university staff was a *laoxiang* was thus a matter of gossip and shared knowledge. Until the mid-1990s, 52-year-old Tong Weibin had been quite well known as a Huining *laoxiang* in the university's job allocation office. When I talked to him about those times, he stated:

> I treated students from Huining County well, because I knew they had grown up under difficult conditions. When they heard that I was head of the student office they would come to me and ask for help.… It was clear that those from the countryside hardly had any *guanxi*, such as a high official or something similar, among their family members. Therefore I was willing to help. They turned to me because they had no other option, and I tried to make up for that. If one of their family members had steady employment, like being a cadre, I would send the student to ask this person for help. But if

> their family since generations had been only peasants, to whom could they turn? Asking me for help meant that they put trust in me. Moreover, these students usually were very capable, they often were high achievers and their human quality also was good. Such students I liked to help to get into the jobs they wanted. When they heard that I was a helpful person they came to me and referred to the fact that they were *laoxiang*. Even though we had no kin relations or did not know each other personally, they just came to my office and told me from which village they originated and I would agree to help them.

Such a statement puts an interesting light on the job allocation policy, which obviously did not render *guanxi* superfluous (cf. Bian 1994a and Walder 1986). Tong Weibin remained in close contact with Huining County and often returned there. His many contacts with Lanzhou University graduates he had helped find positions in local government certainly made him a much welcomed guest on such visits. The advantages of *laoxiang* relationships Tong Weibin explained to me:

> *Laoxiang* relationships are probably a matter of Chinese tradition as much as of the contemporary system. *Laoxiang* help each other, they share their resources with each other (*xianghu zhijian de ziyuan gongxiang* 相互之间的资源共享). For example, one *laoxiang* may work in the personnel department, the other in the police office…. The person in the personnel department has his resources there; he may help with some issues in the field of personnel. And the one in the police department may help with matters related to his work, such as issuing a passport for going abroad. That is his resource. In case the first person needs a passport he can ask the second person for help. For the latter it might be very easy to arrange such a matter. If the latter, in turn, has a problem, he may come to the former because it might be convenient for that person to solve the issue in the realm of his scope of business.

Laoxiang is thus a form of *guanxi* based on common origin.[79] The notion of *laoxiang* could relate to the village, the township, the county, but also to the province level, depending on the kind of foreign environment in which people meet.

In practice, *laoxiang* of the elder generation seldom were a source of active support for current university students. They were, however, an important source of hope. They had been so already since the student's early childhood. Stories about successful *laoxiang* circled widely in the villages in

[79] Yang (1994: 115) quotes the saying '*gongzhang buru laoxiang* 公章不如老乡' meaning 'an official seal is not as good as a fellow from the same hometown'.

Huining and local teachers often used these stories to motivate their pupils to study hard. The county government supported recurrent reference to *laoxiang* by keeping track of successful *laoxiang* and portraying their life stories in a number of books and a locally well-known film about the region (e.g. Sun 2003; Huiningxian 2007). None of the official speeches I attended at local schools and meetings with the county government, and only a very few of the interviews with students and graduates from rural Huining, passed without praise for the high number of Huining *laoxiang* who had made a career in Beijing. The most famous among them was said to be the secretary of Prime Minister Wen Jiabao during his time in office from 2002–12.

Rural Huining students took these examples of successful *laoxiang* as a reason to hope that they might also reach the highest realms of society. Their *laoxiang* seemed to have succeeded solely on the basis of determination and diligence. Of course, the students were well aware that the employment system had changed. Still, without any other option available, they clung to the hope that fate lay in their own hands and that as long as they remained determined, everything was possible in principle. Such an attitude was summarised in the often cited saying that 'where there is a will, there is a way' (*youzhizhe shijincheng* 有志者，事竟成). Students and recent graduates repeatedly claimed that lamenting social inequalities and one's own disadvantages would only corrupt the willpower necessary to change one's fate. 'Chances', they reminded themselves, 'are only given to those who are well-prepared' (*jihui zongshi liugei you zhunbei de ren* 机会总是留给有准备的人).

Retelling stories of *laoxiang* idealised them as models to be emulated and helped stir others' aspirations to reach for high goals. In addition, knowledge about particular *laoxiang* in influential positions engendered hope that these people might at some point offer support; and that it might be possible to turn to them for help if relying on oneself to enter society failed. Several Lanzhou University students did in fact plan their careers according to information about which positions were occupied by *laoxiang*. Such students hoped for preferential treatment from these *laoxiang*.

Student Yao Zhiqiang was a case in point. When he took the exam for Masters studies in 2007, he had fixed his mind on enrolling in a certain department at Tsinghua University. No alternative seemed acceptable to him. He had a firm belief that his determination and diligence were the main criteria for winning such a highly desired place at China's top university. But he also counted on the fact that an important professor in the department was a *laoxiang*. He had contacted this person and received some general information about the entry exam. Such information had not helped enough to succeed on his first attempt. However, Yao Zhiqiang would not

compromise on his goal, even though the risk of failing again a year later would make him lose even more face. He already did not dare to return home because, as he explained, 'The villagers already start to have opinions about me, since I am still a student and do not earn any money'.

The influence this particular *laoxiang* exerted on Yao Zhiqiang's life planning was twofold. On the one hand, hope for some preferential treatment had not faded, even though such support had remained only minimal so far. On the other hand, the fact that a person from Huining County could reach such a position made his own aspirations seem more realistic; it fostered hope that his goal was no pure phantasm.

The strength of *laoxiang* relationships was a matter of spatial distance. *Laoxiang* feeling was generally said to be not very strong among people in the provincial capital of Lanzhou 'because Huining County is too close and there are too many Huining people around in Lanzhou'. With growing spatial distance to the home county, common origin was likely to become an increasingly strong source of support. In otherwise anonymous Beijing, for example, networking among Huining *laoxiang* was sometimes used to help arrange even daily matters.

Wu Zhang, a successful software entrepreneur in Beijing, confirmed that *laoxiang* was an important source of *guanxi*. 'If you want to get things done here in Beijing, it is very helpful if you can turn to a *laoxiang*. Without any *guanxi*, people just ignore (*buli* 不理) you'. Cai Fujun, a high level employee at a government department, explained that while he made use of *laoxiang*, it also meant that he was approached for help on the same basis:

> Cai Fujun: If you face a particular problem, like you need to see a special doctor, you may turn to a *laoxiang* for help. In Beijing it is very difficult to get an appointment with a specialist, it costs several hundred yuan. If a *laoxiang* can help initiate the contact, even the most prominent specialist may accept you. Things like that count as minor mutual support between *laoxiang*. If young graduates from Huining County look for a job, I may recommend them to somebody or just give them general advice about their career planning. Also for a business matter I may call a *laoxiang.* If the *laoxiang* cannot help me, then he or she would look for someone else who can.
>
> HO: Could you directly contact someone whom you do not know personally, just by referring to common Huining County origin?
>
> Cai Fujun: Yes. Like Professor Yu Zhenyan, who called me yesterday evening on your behalf. I only met her once and can hardly remember that. But I was of course willing to help….
>
> Huining County government started to organise county fellow meetings (*laoxianghui* 老乡会) in about 2004. On such occasions

> *laoxiang* meet and discuss the situation in Huining County, how to support the county's development, and how everybody can contribute. Such official meetings take place only once in a while. There are also smaller and more informal meetings among *laoxiang,* where we just meet and go out together.…
>
> People from the county government sometimes contact us and ask for our help in finding a job for some Huining students who study here in Beijing. In these cases I usually look at their CV and give information about vacant positions for which they could apply. I may also invite them for a job interview. But that does not mean that I necessarily give them the job. The county government contacts me because I am quite successful. They look for those who did not make Huining County lose face [i.e. those who give face] and hope that we will contribute to solving the county's problems. We care quite a lot about 'face'. That means that those who do not have a good job and have only a low salary, would rather hide from the others because they are afraid of being asked for help they are not able to provide. Some of those in really influential positions have *rexin* (热心, lit. hot heart) and help others, some do not have *rexin* and do not provide any support.

Not all Huining people in Beijing were active in *laoxiang* activities. As Cai Fujun had mentioned, a certain level of success seemed to be the precondition to participate in the network. Moreover, as Cai Fujun stated: 'There are also some Huining people here in Beijing who do not want the others to know about their place of origin. They hide the fact that they originate Huining County, or even from Gansu Province, and that they are from the countryside. They are afraid to be looked down upon because of that'.

Yang Jiantuan, a 24-year-old graduate employed by a Beijing bank, was not such a case. He energetically promoted his rural Huining background with great nostalgia:

> During my childhood people in the countryside were very simple, they did not think much (*mei you hen duo xiangfa* 没有很多想法). We did not care that much about money and these things. As long as there was enough food, we were happy. We did not think about striving forward (*shangjin* 上进) and competition. Those were happy times. We all 'ate from one pot' (*daguofan* 大锅饭). When we discuss these things among *laoxiang* on the internet everybody agrees. Only after we left Huining County, when we changed environment, life became full of hardships. Back in Huining County life was not hard at all. To attend senior secondary school was of

course tough, but not in spiritual terms. We just did not feel that our life was hard. That came only after we left the region and saw how colourful [i.e. well-off] other places were.

I wanted to leave because I felt I was outstanding (*youxiu* 优秀), I wanted to do something with my life; I wanted to challenge myself. My father [who had been to Beijing] always told me about Beijing, so I wanted to go there as well. As a pupil I was rather naughty, but I wanted to be a hero and accomplish something big. I liked competition; it gave me self-confidence and acknowledgement by the others. Only after I left the region did I realise that in fact my starting position was very low. …

I like the countryside, I cannot get used to things in Beijing, like the food here. Cities are bad. But those who want to get something done (*zuo shi* 做事) have no option but to come here. I would prefer to live in the countryside. There is more space, and there are animals and fruits. Life is full of pleasure and there is no mental pressure.

To buy an apartment in Beijing is really tough. And then you also have to buy a car. Personal relationships are very tense (*jinzhang* 紧张) here, you cannot just hang out with your neighbours. The quality of the air and the environment is bad. I do not like all of that. At home people sit under the trees in the court yard and they eat fresh food. Human relationships are smooth and close there; and life is free. You do not have to care whether your clothes are dirty. In the city you always have to dress up. I always look at pictures from Huining County on the internet, I miss that life.

I never liked Beijing. Beijing people discriminate against those who come from other places (*paiwai* 排外). Life here is chaotic and immoral (*luan* 乱); and it is noisy. It is not at all as cultivated as presented in the media. People just care for themselves. Beijing gives me the feeling of rootlessness (*piaoguo* 飘过).

My family does not want me to come back to Huining County. They say that since I already invested so much in my education, I should stay here, because life anywhere outside Huining County for sure is better and because I can develop better here. They expect me to reciprocate back home. Quite a few *laoxiang* have donated things to Huining County, like school buildings. To reciprocate is a Confucian principle; it is part of Chinese morality. You should reciprocate the kindness (*en* 恩) of those who have raised and educated you (*yangyu* 养育). Although the region did not give us much materially, it still cultivated our mentality and for that we

> should be grateful. The region taught us to be striving, simple, good, and thankful. It taught us to use our own strength for progressing upwards (*kao ziji de nuli xiangshang zou* 靠自己的努力向上走). That is what we learned from growing up in that region; to strive forward.
>
> Huining people are good and simple, people from Beijing are not. They discriminate against others. The degree of discrimination depends on which region you come from; people from Gansu Province are treated the worst because the region is very poor. Some feel ashamed about being from the countryside, but I am proud about it.

About the help he had received from *laoxiang*, Yang Jiantuan reported:

> I got the job via a *laoxiang*. *Laoxiang* are very united (*baotuan* 抱团). Those in powerful positions help those without influence because they see it as a way to reciprocate to the region. I reciprocate the help I received from that *laoxiang* [in getting the job] by visiting his family and paying my respect there each time I return to Huining County. And I will always help him when he is in need of help.

With the backing of a *laoxiang* in the higher management of the bank he worked at, Yang Jiantuan actively promoted *laoxiang* networking by taking care of the *laoxiang* website during office hours. He also used *laoxiang* connections for business matters, such as attracting people from Huining as new customers, because 'they all need credit'. Like all the other recent graduates he worried most about buying an apartment, getting married, and settling down. But, he concluded, 'if you rely on yourself and on *laoxiang*, that helps a lot'.

Not everyone from the region could turn to the Beijing *laoxiang* network for support. On the one hand, spatial distance made it quite easy for those in Beijing to turn down requests from the home county. As Cai Fujun explained, 'If you are in Lanzhou, you have to care much more about requests from *laoxiang* because [if you do not help] there will be a lot of bad gossip about you in the village'. One's reputation in the village, however, was not of much concern to him or other influential *laoxiang* in Beijing. In order to ask for help from the *laoxiang* network, Yang Jiantuan explained, 'you have to have proven to be capable'. Or one needed connections with an influential person within the network. Since both his father and grandfather had held influential positions in the Huining County government, the support Yang Jiantuan had enjoyed from influential *laoxiang* in obtaining his own position in Beijing might well have been based on other kinds of closeness and mutual obligation, and not 'just' on shared regional belonging.

Conclusion

This chapter described several cases of recent graduates from rural Huining family backgrounds and portrayed their choices for how to enter society. It became clear that the employment sector the graduates faced was segregated spatially as well as in terms of different employment systems.[80]

Those willing to return to the county could still benefit from the remnants of the old state job allocation system and ask the local government for a position in the local administration. Competition for this option had increased, but due to the notion of spatial hierarchy and the conviction that conditions surely improved with increasing distance from the countryside, such a return was considered the least prestigious option for university graduates. Such a return meant a loss of face, because it proved that one's ability had not been sufficient to manage elsewhere. Some parents, however, preferred to have their offspring in secure and steady state positions close to home. Some graduates shared such a preference, but others rejected the predetermined life of a government employee in one's home county, and believed that places of 'higher order' entailed more prestige as well as the option for further 'development'.

A second option for university graduates was to sell one's labour on the urban market for temporary labour. Such an option meant living with the insecurities of a hire and fire system, but it also offered the vague possibility of 'self-development'. The conditions under which graduates could sell their labour depended very much on the marketability of their qualifications. Computer knowledge and teaching were reasonably marketable, but university education in some fields was of almost no benefit, and these graduates had little advantage over unqualified labourers. Whether or not the qualifications that a graduate achieved at university were marketable was rarely a matter of conscious choice. Before and during university studies, students rarely made choices in terms of 'self-improvement' or the development of a 'professional self' in the neoliberal sense. Rather, their choices were shaped by privileged access to corresponding expert knowledge or more simply luck, both good and poor, in pursuing a subject of study.

The conditions of 'entering society' changed radically if graduates could make use of *guanxi* with someone who could arrange steady employment. It was in this respect that urban graduates were at a clear

[80] The employment sector was certainly also segregated in terms of gender. This became particularly obvious at job fairs on the university campus or in public buildings in town, where positions frequently were advertised as suitable for male candidates only. Positions for women often were advertised with explicit preconditions in terms of appearance and body size.

advantage. With a number of relatives working in the urban sector, the probability of finding helpful *guanxi* was incomparably higher for urban graduates than it was for rural graduates. If rural graduates did have an influential relative, he or she usually was an early graduate who had benefited from the state-guaranteed career paths of the planned economy. These early graduates thus lived up to what had been expected from them from the beginning. They used their position to help change the situation of the whole family.

In addition to family relations, *laoxiang*, or county fellowship, served as an important resource. The utility of such relationships based on a common origin increases with distance from the home county. For some years the county government has promoted networking among successful county fellows, *laoxiang*. County fellows were seen to be an important development resource for the region. They can provide donations and counselling and can channel beneficial projects to the region. As in a family, the county's 'children' who had left to try their luck elsewhere, should reciprocate to the region that had nourished and educated them; they should help to pull the region out of poverty. One important contribution *laoxiang* made to the region was to support Huining graduates as they entered society without other forms of help and connection. Not least, *laoxiang* contributed to the region's development simply by having made careers elsewhere. They were promoted as models to be emulated. In view of educational mobility having turned into an expensive endeavour with insecure outcome, continuous reference to successful *laoxiang* of the former generation in local discourse helped to engender and maintain educational aspirations among local pupils and students, fostering the hope that also their fate was changeable.

Chapter 8
Conclusion

This book set out to understand the astounding educational aspirations among rural dwellers in one of the poorest regions of China. I explored what people from Huining County meant when they claimed that educational achievement brings about a 'change of fate'. I approached the phenomenon through a close-up study of the different steps of education-based social mobility in and away from rural north-west China. This allowed me to highlight the perspective of various actors involved in the complex process of educational mobility. It became obvious that high educational aspirations in the region were rooted in a mix of various traditions and developments, some of which reinforced each other. Furthermore, the motivations for educational investments could not be reduced to a rational calculation of the material benefits to be expected from them.

Local notions about the merit of education reflected both Confucian ideals and the historical experience of educational success being coupled with upward mobility. Yet, these were not the only aspects motivating contemporary educational aspirations. The ambitions of rural families in the 2000s were also shaped by China's more recent socialist history. By overturning China's social structure, Maoism demonstrated that social stratification was alterable and that 'fate' was changeable. In rural regions, the communist government promoted schooling during high socialism, and thus even in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, education became an important form of capital among the masses that opened pathways away from purely manual work and into administrative positions in the local brigade or commune. This was so even though political capital remained indispensable for mobility into higher levels of the state bureaucracy.

In the reform-socialist era, political capital lost some of its importance and the expansion of a pool of qualified labour became crucial in China's drive to catch up with the industrialised capitalist world. In the early reform period, the government fully funded education and guaranteed graduates of tertiary institutions with a permanent state position. For the rural population,

educational achievement thus offered upward mobility, steady employment, and urban welfare privileges.

Since the late 1990s, this pathway into secure urban working positions has become very narrow. The state has gradually retreated from job allocation, and rapidly expanded enrolment in tertiary education so that the market for qualified labour has become saturated. Yet because Chinese society remains firmly and administratively divided into rural and urban populations, with state support and welfare benefits disproportionately directed to urban dwellers, the economic boom has worsened the relative socio-economic conditions in the countryside. Education remains the best path to stable urban jobs, marriages, and opportunities to legally change one's residential status. Even if living conditions in many parts of the countryside were to stabilise or even advanced considerably, the 'peasant' existence is increasingly shunned as 'backward' in view of the country's rush for development. Thus mobility away from rural regions has become ever more desired.

In practical and financial terms, educational mobility could well turn into a losing deal for China's poor rural dwellers. Widening socio-economic disparities between rural and urban areas have translated into increasingly disadvantaged conditions at local educational institutions. To even reach tertiary institutions, pupils from poor rural family backgrounds must compete with others from better-off regions on an ever more unequal basis. Even if they afford the high tuition fees of higher education, students of rural backgrounds have difficulties obtaining urban jobs. Personal relationships play an important role in urban recruitment practices, and graduates with rural backgrounds often lack these essential relations. And beyond the job, there still remains the problem of affording urban housing, especially if one is obligated to repay or support others in an extended rural family.

Yet in Huining County such difficulties had not slowed educational striving in the early 2000s. On the contrary, educational aspirations seemed to have increased. The continuous rise in educational preconditions for employment in the township or county administration had contributed to people's conviction that the overall demand for education surely was increasing. Moreover, the locality offered no alternative pathways to improved living conditions and most labour migrants could be expected to return home sooner or later. Thus, educational achievement was considered the only way to 'change fate' even if it was an expensive and risky proposition.

Without the possibility to change fate, life would feel simply hopeless. It was precisely the hope for upward mobility that rendered all burdens connected to educational endeavours bearable and worthwhile. As long as

educational achievement allowed at least the hope for a different future, all efforts to obtain it seemed justified.

Moreover, people were ready to invest in education because there was an immediate return in terms of improved social status for educational achievers, their families, and their wider social networks. This immediate rise in status was based on elements of Chinese tradition, precedents of educational achievement facilitating mobility into urban society, and the prospect that a 'change of fate' would benefit everyone in the social networks of successful graduates.

Educational striving thus was far from an individual matter. Pupils and students were called on to study hard in order to change their own fate and that of their family. Their efforts were supported by the extended family which provided some exemption from contributing to the household economy, provision of tuition and living expenses, and moral encouragement. Support, however, was accompanied by recurrent and explicit references to the reciprocal obligations it entailed. Students and recent graduates could expect numerous requests from their rural relatives for financial and social support in the future. Pupils, students, and recent graduates experienced high levels of mental pressure to become a backbone of family support. Yet the high expectations of others also gave educational achievers a sense of self-worth as capable and trustworthy persons in the years before they encountered the difficulties of the labour market. Such moral encouragement was conveyed to successful pupils and students through symbolic and practical rewards, recognition, status, and empowerment in their family, village, and school.

The social embeddedness of students from poor rural backgrounds certainly differed in degree from that of their better-off urban counterparts. Rural Huining students had to reckon with the obligation to support parents who had few resources for care in old age except those provided by their children. Given the lack of a state pension system in rural China, local parents' efforts to support their children's education thus were also connected to their wish to secure their offspring's help when they would become too frail to work in the fields or to migrate to the cities to sell their labor.

In view of economically deprived local conditions, a share in the family patrimony was hardly an attractive asset in the intergenerational contract. In contrast, parents' selfless sacrifice of working hard and skimping on their own daily expenses for the sake of paying for their children's education, spurred by recurrent references in local discourse in the families, in the villages, and at schools to the obligation of future reciprocity such parental sacrifice entailed, helped to reconstitute the intergenerational

contract by instilling and inculcating in local pupils and students feelings of gratitude and obligation towards their parents.

While the conventional notion of the sons' responsibility for taking care of the elderly parents was still prevalent locally, practice showed that this gendered intergenerational contract was at a particular risk. In view of a marriage market that was characterized by a surplus of men, a tendency towards hypergamy, and a hierarchical structure that not only reflected the level of socio-economic development of each partners' place of origin, but also their level of education, support for a son's education meant enhancing his chances to find a marriage partner. Yet, since it usually was the groom who was expected to provide housing for the newlyweds as a precondition for marriage, male graduates from impoverished rural family backgrounds had to cope with the skyrocketing prices in the urban real estate markets when planning to get married and settle in the cities. Adding future expenses for the education of their grandchild(ren), parents of male graduates could thus hardly expect many benefits to flow back to the village. Moreover, male graduates often got married to women of equivalent level of education who as daughters-in-law were seldom willing to submit without protest to their conventional role of being the care-taker of their husband's elderly parents.

By comparison, having a daughter attain higher education would rather enhance her capability to contribute to their natal parents' elderly care in the future. Moreover, the conventional notion that elderly care obligations rest on the sons' rather than on the daughters' shoulders made female graduates interpret their parents' educational support to be even less instrumentally motivated than had they been sons. This, in turn, often caused them to feel particularly grateful for their parents' support and induced a strong wish to reciprocate the help received with emotional, financial and practical support for the parents at a later point in life.

Graduates from rural areas usually had at least one – if not several – siblings with whom they would share the burden of elderly care for the parents. This means that when students had been financially supported by their siblings during their studies, the latter certainly expected the graduate to contribute substantially, at least in financial terms, to the care of elderly parents. Intragenerational educational support between siblings thus entailed an aspect of disburdenment of intergenerational obligations towards the parents.

In rural Huining, parents usually had a low level of education and only limited resources to finance their offspring's education. A local student's educational pathway thus often was facilitated by an uncle or an aunt who had benefited from the state system of allocation of job and urban residence rights to all graduates. These uncles and aunts interpreted the support of their

nieces and nephews partly as a contribution to improving the lives of their rural siblings, because the supported nieces and nephews would 'naturally' (and by law) take care of their parents during old age. Thus diagonal intergenerational educational support was expected to be reciprocated vertically, thus turning into intra-generational sibling support, mediated via the next generation. Moreover, the fact that graduates of the early reform socialist period passed the benefits they had achieved on the basis of their educational credentials down to the next generation helped to confirm conventional notions about the intergenerational transmission of 'cultural capital'.

In contrast to the earlier generation, more recent graduates from poor rural family backgrounds faced multiple difficulties of finding employment in the competitive labor markets and providing for continuously rising costs of living in the cities. Moreover, these graduates not only shouldered the future obligation to care for their elderly parents, but many already now felt the burden of helping to finance their parents' life in the villages or to contribute to their siblings' educational and other costs. If their labor migrant siblings had supported their education, such support would often not have been motivated by the shared (but gendered) intergenerational obligation of providing elderly care for the parents. Considered as a kind of 'gift' that entailed a definite obligation of future reciprocity, intra-generational educational support of labor migrant siblings also served the supporters' long term aim of insuring against their own future risks by 'investing' in the relationship with a potentially successful graduate.

The flow of support resources between and within the generations in local family networks testified that in this impoverished region family members tended to value each other as important reserves of support. Living at the bottom end of China's vast spectrum of socio-economic disparity, family support became decisive for individual as much as for familial advancement. However, mutual dependency did not inhibit family conflict and amplified the multiple pressures rural youth and their parents faced. Yet, in view of the insecurities and competitiveness of contemporary Chinese society, investment in family relatedness through the 'gift' of educational support just seemed to offer more in emotional and material terms than pure egotism.

Although students from rural Huining remained embedded in webs of social support and reciprocity, their educational mobility was a lonely endeavour that inevitably separated them from their family and place of origin. Not surprisingly, their pathway thus often was accompanied by certain nostalgia for the rural life they had left behind. Having enjoyed high esteem as the bearers of hope at home, students from poor rural family

backgrounds who reached tertiary institutions found it hard to cope with finding themselves at the lowest end of China's vast socio-economic discrepancies. They were then bound to realise that diligence alone might not be a sufficient precondition for success, and that they lacked a number of other important resources. In addition to economic capital and the cultural knowledge of how to participate in a booming consumer society, these students lacked capital in the forms of communication and organisational skills and knowledge of high culture. Few could play an instrument or had experience in making public speeches. Lack of these kinds of competencies, generally defined as 'comprehensive quality' (*zonghe suzhi* 综合素质), reflected the low status of their place of origin in the national socio-economic hierarchy. Moreover, lack of these comprehensive qualities made students from poor rural family backgrounds shun participation in the numerous extracurricular activities at university and induced feelings of inferiority. They tried to cope with such feelings by temporalising their present problems and usually also by restricting their social contacts to those of similar background. These strategies of avoidance, however, meant students missed the chance to earn credits for showing comprehensive quality, and ultimately disadvantaged them academically.

Notions of contemporary Chinese society as being characterised by an administrative hierarchy that paralleled socio-economic discrepancies directly translated into perceptions of a hierarchy of 'human quality' necessary to succeed at each level. Accordingly, the ways of life in the big and economically booming metropolis were believed to convey the highest human quality. When confronted with the manners of rich urban students, however, rural students contested such a one-dimensional definition of *suzhi*. They claimed that their own early emancipation from parental guidance due to their studies, as well as the social considerateness forced upon them by local circumstances (i.e. having siblings) and the responsibility they shouldered for changing their family's fate, were a kind of human quality that most urban students lacked. Yet the pride that poor rural students took in qualities rooted in poverty seemed to be also an expression of a defiant hope, which kept morale high in the daily confrontation with the others' advantages and dominance. In the end, rural students knew that success required them to adopt urban ways of social communication, even if they did not necessarily accept these as an expression of superior *suzhi*. They acknowledged the official endorsement of comprehensive quality when it came to describing the abilities of others, yet they hardly used the language of *suzhi* to describe their own efforts.

The conditions students faced on their pathway of educational mobility surely were not dominated unequivocally by the market. Nor were

students' and graduates' subjectivities fully market-oriented, or, for that matter, 'neoliberal'. Certainly, prospects of future 'development' did feature among the various aspects relevant to students and recent graduates when they pondered their professional future. The idea of 'development' related above all to the level of income, status, and living conditions potentially attainable in the urban centres, a level that certainly was out of reach if one returned to the home county and accepted a secure position in local government.

When considering how to 'enter society', graduates of rural family background often referred to their support obligations. The obligations could lead a student to favour either the option of returning to Huining County for the sake of job security, or the option of staying in the city and taking the chance to pursue 'development'. Steady local employment on a low administrative level at home was expected to produce 'returns' of continuously diminishing value. Opting for development, on the contrary, might bring a high monetary income, but entailed a high risk of failure in the competitive labour market if one lacked the crucial *guanxi*. Graduates who took this risk hoped that expanding conditions would render their on-the-job qualifications a sufficient resource to gain job security, even as they undertook the work of developing urban *guanxi*. For those with little self-confidence and an education that had equipped them with few marketable qualifications, jobs in lower levels of administration remained an option, but they had to grapple with the challenge of curbing their expectations for their own futures.

For students from rural family backgrounds, one of the main reserves they could revert to in their endeavour to change fate was their individual diligence and determination. Yet, in their efforts to compete with their peers from better-off regions they faced a number of structural disadvantages, exemplified in the continuous 'socialist' division of the population in two classes, the 'urban' and the 'rural', and the regional discrepancies in socio-economic development caused by the current policies. The challenges of discipline and diligence current students faced in the educational system were no new phenomenon brought about by increasingly market-oriented economy. Already in imperial times, when passing the civil service examination had been the main pathway of upward social mobility, educational achievement had required exertion of exceptional educational diligence and determination. Similarly, 'changing fate' by way of educational achievement always necessitated educational support, in imperial as much as in socialist and reform-socialist times. When the reform-socialist state retreated from some aspects of educational support of the socialist system by making people pay for their education and look for jobs themselves, the need for support by family networks certainly increased.

Educational aspirations thus closely intertwine with local social support arrangements. Students from the region continue to understand themselves as embedded in local support networks, even after they change status and become official urbanites. For them, educational mobility is not an individual matter only. They see no contradiction between individual ambition and social responsibility. On the contrary, ambition and responsibility are conflated and serve to reinforce each other.

Educational desire and fever are accompanied by severe worry in families and, increasingly, by strong social concern. In 2009, a survey was conducted by the China Women's Federation on the difficulties faced by Chinese families. The survey found the most severe cause of worry to be 'high educational costs'.[81] Late the same year, Chinese media reported the suicide of a Masters student, Yang Yuanyuan, on 26 November. The young woman's death sparked widespread public debate; the reason given for her desperate act was that she had lost hope that education would enable her to 'change fate' and to leave behind poverty.[82] In this book I have shown how the persistent hope for changing fate engenders enormous diligence and power. Pupils and students are motivated to study by this hope. Hope is a burden, but also as a source of strength. When hope is lost, all is lost.

It is likely that in the future, as China becomes an increasingly knowledge-based society, higher education will become even more important as a precondition for individual socio-economic advancement. While such a shift may seem meritocratic, other trends suggest that rural populations will be increasingly disadvantaged vis-à-vis their urban counterparts. In particular, the exam-oriented educational system with its emphasis on rote learning is likely to come under reform. Though the system has pedagogical weaknesses, it has long offered the promise – and many proofs – that the rural, poor, and other disadvantaged but capable individuals can rise through diligence and perseverance. If 'quality education' is introduced without substantial investment in rural educational resources, people in Huining County and other economically disadvantaged regions, stand no chance in the educational competition. Without the chance to pursue education, hope for economic security and for social and economic advancement – and thus all

[81] 新华时政 (*Current Policies of China*), Xinhua News website, http://www.yn.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2010-05/16/content_19797840.htm, 16.05.2010, last retrieved on 12 November 2010.

[82] The case gave rise to lively discussion on internet blogs that can be followed by searching for the key terms 'change fate' and 'Masters student suicide' (*shuoshisheng zisha* 硕士生自杀).

the power invested in ‘changing fate’ – would be lost across wide swathes of China.

Epilogue

Since I left Gansu Province after my year of field research in August 2007, I had the opportunity to return for very brief visits twice. Already during the first occasion in summer 2012, staying with my former host family in the Huining County village made me realise that, obviously, life had continued not only for me. When I arrived at the Lanzhou train station, where Zhao Mei, my former field assistant, was going to meet me, I did not recognise her. The slightly podgy university fresh(wo)man, who used to take pride in her simple rural ways as opposed to the 'girlish' consumption habits of her dormitory fellows, had turned into a stylish young woman. She had lost a considerable amount of weight, grown her hair long, and changed her simple trousers and sneakers for a short skirt decorated with sparkly strass and pumps. Throughout the years that had passed on her way to becoming a second-year Masters student, she apparently had adjusted much more to city habits than either she or I had expected. Six years before, when she had invited me to stay with her family during research, she had stated that she liked my way of not dressing in a feminine way with skirt, jewellery, and make-up, and that such appearance would not have been much welcomed in the village. Now she talked endlessly about her latest shopping triumphs, her weight, and the condition of her facial skin. The formerly rustic girl had turned into a young urbanite, eager to keep up with latest fashion.

On our way back to the village, the most striking impression was that the region appeared much greener than before. In 2006–07, everybody had been convinced that planting seedlings in the dry sloped fields under the anti-desertification policy of 'turning field into forest' was doomed to fail because of the arid climate. Now people reported that it had rained much more in the last years, so the policy had worked to change the region's appearance.

Life in the courtyard house of my host family also had changed. Zhao Mei's grandfather Mr. Zhao had died and Zhao Mei's third uncle, who used to live with the old man in the main room of the house, had gone to the

county seat where he worked as a watchman. Zhao Mei's younger brother had been much less successful in the college entrance exam than everyone had hoped and had enrolled at a teachers' college in neighbouring Qinghai Province. This left Zhao Mei's mother living alone in the courtyard, except for the days when her husband returned from his contract job in a nearby township.

At the time of my visit, Zhao Mei was in the middle of a conflict with her family that circled around her future plans, particularly in terms of her choice of a spouse. She had become engaged to Li Yongyuan, the elder brother of a classmate, who also was from Huining County. She had met Li Yongyuan for the first time during my field research five years previously when we visited his family. Thereafter Li Yongyuan had courted her for quite a long time before she had agreed to the relationship. This made her fourth uncle, the 'family manager' and the backbone of family support, very upset. If the relationship turned into marriage, it would run counter to all the future plans that he and the wider family had made for Zhao Mei. It was not only that Li Yongyuan held only a Bachelor degree from Lanzhou University, while Zhao Mei was studying for a Masters degree. His family was economically worse-off than hers, particularly since there was no well-connected early graduate among his wider family who might offer support in crucial matters, such as finding employment. Most importantly, after the frustration of having looked in vain for employment elsewhere, Li Yongyuan had returned to Huining County where he was assigned a position in a township government. Marriage to Li Yongyuan would mean that Zhao Mei's future prospects became severely limited.

Perhaps the situation would not be so dire, but Zhao Mei's fourth uncle also felt that Li Yongyuan lacked the stamina for a career outside Huining County. He thus refused to use his connections to help him find employment in Qinghai Province. Instead, he threatened Zhao Mei to withdraw his support for her, should she not change her mind and end the relationship. After all, when Zhao Mei had entered a key university she had chosen her subject in accordance to her fourth uncle's profession, so that she could benefit from his connections in building her own career. The family's plan was that with the help of the fourth uncle, both Zhao Mei and her brother would find employment in Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province where the uncle had made his home. This arrangement would also enable the two siblings to bring their parents to live with them in the city and share the caring work. Moreover, they would also take care of the fourth uncle and his third wife, whose marriage had remained childless. If Zhao Mei married Li Yongyuan, all the efforts and hopes put into Zhao Mei's educational

pathway would have been in vain. The protest of her family, in particular her fourth uncle, against the liaison made Zhao Mei doubt the relationship.

By the time of my visit, Zhao Mai had her mother's support. After an initial disaffirmation of the relationship, the mother had started to like Li Yongyuan. He had no reservations about life in the village, helped out in the fields and, most importantly, had already been introduced to the fellow villagers as her daughter's fiancé. Yet resistance against her boyfriend was still strong among the other family members.

Zhao Mei had tried several times to finish the relationship, but never stayed the course. She explained to me that she just could not bear his sadness, did not want to make her mother feel embarrassed in the village and, having lost her virginity to him, felt committed to the relationship. All this made her feel really trapped in a dilemma with no solution in sight.

During a stop-over in Lanzhou on the way back from the village in late August 2012, I also had the chance to meet again Lanzhou University graduate Fang Yubo, who was working in the same government department as five years previously. Fang was still facing quite severe financial problems. Although his younger sister, for whose education he had taken out high interest loans, had married into a small city near Lanzhou and he himself had repaid all his study loans, he still was troubled with financial burdens of family support. This time it was about rebuilding the parental house. After several years as a labour migrant, his elder brother had returned to the village to set up a small business. Together with his wife and two children he had moved into the parental courtyard. However, relationships between the generations were quite tense, so they had agreed to rebuild the house in order to have the conflicting parties live apart. As a graduate with steady urban employment, Fang was considered the backbone of family support and was expected to contribute substantially to the cost involved.

At the same time, Fang himself was struggling with the fact that his former girlfriend had decided against marrying him and had ended the relationship. 'That was because I cannot afford to buy an apartment in the city', he explained to me. At the age of 32 he worried whether he would ever reach the goal he was supposed to have realised many years previously: marrying and beginning a family. As a male rural graduate with no personal connections in the city, he faced the severe problem of purchasing urban housing as the central precondition for marriage. Since returning to Huining, where housing was much cheaper, was no option for him, he now hoped to find a marriage partner with fewer economic demands.

Two years later, in 2014, when I met Fang again when passing through Lanzhou on my way to Huining County, he brought a new girlfriend to the restaurant where we met. She also originated from Huining County,

but was not a university graduate. She had dropped out of secondary high school and gone to Lanzhou to work as a waitress. When we met, she had opened a small food stall in Lanzhou and was working hard day and night. Both Fang and she seemed to be quite infatuated with each other, and planned to marry soon. After all, Fang was now 34, an age considered much too high to still be a bachelor.

I went back to Huining County in 2014 because I had received notice that Zhao Mei had finally decided to marry Li Yongyuan. I always had promised her to participate in her wedding, so I took the opportunity to return to 'my second home' for that occasion. After all, I knew both families and in a way had been the unintentional matchmaker. Even though the wedding was a cheerful opportunity to meet everybody from both families again, circumstances also were mournful, because Zhao Mei's father had died in a work accident a year before. This incident, she claimed, had caused her to finally decide in favour of the marriage. After years of resistance, her family had given up trying to change her mind, and opposition towards her fiancé had softened. It seemed that everybody just had lost hope and interest in her. As she put it, she just was not in the limelight of the family's attention any more. Another crucial factor for her decision was that she had in the meantime finished her Master studies and had found employment on her own in the prefecture next to the county. She thus was no longer dependent on her fourth uncle's support.

As it turned out, the job that the fourth uncle would have offered Zhao Mei was a position in the local government of an upland Tibetan region of Qinghai Province. The position would have had a high compensation payment for the harsh living conditions. However, Zhao Mei was not really eager to take this kind of challenge. This was all the more so, since the fourth uncle had helped her brother into a much better position in Xining city.

During her first years at university, when she was still honoured as the first key university student in the family, Zhao Mei had been very enthusiastic about her educational success having won her participatory rights in family affairs despite her gender and young age. Now, however, it turned out that conventional gender roles still worked in favour of her brother. For example, when her brother introduced his fiancée to the family, nobody cared about her having a lower level of education and originating from an economically very difficult family background. This reaction was in clear contrast to the family's reaction to Zhao Mei's marriage plans. Continuous notions of gender discrimination became most obvious in the way the compensation payment that the family received after her father's work accident was distributed. Of the 690,000 yuan that the bereaved

received from the electricity company where the father had been working, the mother kept 200,000 yuan for her own living expenses. The remaining 490,000 yuan were allotted to Zhao Mei's brother to use for the purchase of an apartment in preparation for his marriage. Without any financial back-up by her family, Zhao Mei remained fully dependent on her fiancé for the provision of urban housing. In fact, without the knowledge of their families, the couple already had rented a common apartment in the prefecture where she was working and where he also had managed to get a temporary transfer. The goal of buying an apartment they postponed to a later date.

The two days of wedding ceremony were held mainly in a restaurant in the county seat. As usual, the wedding was a sad event for the bride's mother, who was being separated from her daughter. During the part of the ceremony that indicated the transition of the bride from her natal to her marital family, the fourth uncle finally gave his blessings to the marriage.

When the bride was taken to the house of her parents-in-law, where she was to stay for the first days after the marriage, some of Zhao Mei's uncles followed the convoy in order to inspect the circumstances of her new family. The conditions of Li Yongyuan's family were really poor. The house was located at the end of a very steep muddy pathway up a small hill. The whole courtyard gave an impression of being run-down: the floors were made of mud, the furniture and plates were shabby and tattered. There was no privy, so people used the fields instead. Strikingly, Li Yongyuan's parents had not only supported their eldest son's education, but also that of his two siblings, who also had attended tertiary schooling. Obviously, they had aimed to have all of their children 'change fate' and had skimmed each yuan they possessed for that goal.

For the occasion of the marriage, Li Yongjie, Zhao Mei's former classmate and Li Yongyuan's younger sister, had come all the way from Beijing to help her mother with preparations for the event. Since our last meeting seven years before, she had finished her studies at Lanzhou University, went for Masters studies at a key university in eastern China, and been employed in a research institute in the same city. Then, having become engaged to a colleague, she had moved with him to Beijing. Neither of the two liked living in the south, and Beijing was the man's native city. In Beijing, Li Yongjie worked as a scientist in weather forecasting. That she made it to the capital, and particularly the fact her fiancé was a holder of Beijing city residency, certainly caught the attention of Zhao Mei's uncles. Full of admiration for the young woman, the fourth uncle praised her, in the presence of his niece Zhao Mei, as having shown to be really talented. Obviously, it had been this kind of future that he and the rest of the family had hoped for Zhao Mei when she turned out to be an educational achiever.

Instead, Zhao Mei was now sitting in her beautiful wedding dress in one of the poorest households in Huining County, married to a local government cadre who had few prospects for promotion elsewhere. Even though the groom's family had collected quite some cultural capital with all three children having attended university, after years of high educational spending they still faced the financial burden of affording urban housing for two sons. When I left Zhao Mei, she whispered to me that she planned to have a child within the following year, and that she hoped that her child would be able to study in Germany one day in the future. She already had started to delegate her hopes to the next generation.

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Index

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1 Hann, Chris, and the "Property Relations" Group, 2003: *The Postsocialist Agrarian Question. Property Relations and the Rural Condition*.

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Helena Obendiek manages the Asia Programme at Konstanz University of Applied Sciences and is a research associate of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Germany.

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