

Tel Aviv University
The Gershon H. Gordon Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Sociology and Anthropology

**BORDER CROSSING AND CHANGING MOBILITY OPPORTUNITIES:
MARRIAGES BETWEEN MAINLAND WOMEN AND HONG KONG MEN**

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by

Avital Binah-Pollak

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This work was carried out under the supervision of

Supervisor: Prof. Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni

Committee members:

Prof. Nicole Constable (University of Pittsburgh)

Dr. Orna Naftali (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

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ABSTRACT

More than one third of all marriages registered in Hong Kong in recent years were between local men and mainland Chinese women. Studies conducted on the topic center primarily on the social, economic and political context in Hong Kong and the way it shapes and influences the migrant experience after permanent immigration. The focus is on the difficulties mainland marriage immigrants experience in Hong Kong and their integration into Hong Kong society. Since these studies center on “the Hong Kong side of the border,” they also have a tendency to take for granted the women’s motivations and the circumstances that encouraged them to migrate across the border.

The marriage migrants I came to know in Sheung Shui had met their husbands while working (*dagong*) in Guangdong Province. As part of China’s vast rural-to-urban migration, they left China’s inland provinces in their late teens, travelling thousands of miles to one of China’s coastal cities in search of employment and better opportunities. The women’s experiences as labor migrants as well as the social connections they made during the time they spent working in mainland China, have a major influence on their everyday lives even after they legally immigrated to Hong Kong. These reasons are also crucial in their determination to continue to reside in Hong Kong despite the difficulties they experience. More specifically, I argue that in order to understand the phenomenon of cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men it is essential to consider the women’s inner migration process in mainland China as it constitutes a major and significant part of their marriage-migration narrative.

Cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men are part of unique social, political and economic circumstances which enabled the women to choose labor migration as well as marriage migration as a strategy to achieve upward social mobility. Situated in the heart of this context is China's *hukou* system, the economic reforms, the campaign of "the improvement of the quality of the entire population" and the common perception in contemporary China that human life has become "a new frontier for capital accumulation."

I explored the importance of the Hong-Kong China border in the lives of the marriage migrants and gave attention both to the "physical" as much as to the "social" and "cultural" meanings and implications of the border. In addition to focusing on the border as a major component in my informants' lives, I examined gender as an important construct in the women's migration narrative and explored the way it intersects with dominant discourses about rurality and urbanity and periphery and center. Focusing on these aspects enabled me to explore two major questions: 1) How are the different individual strategies to achieve 'mobility' intertwined in the mainland women's migration narrative? 2) How do the women negotiate the Hong-Kong-China border in their everyday lives?

The cross-border marriages, as well as the other cross-border interactions such as maternity tourism, cross-border consumption and cross-border schooling influence the expanding and blurring of the Hong Kong-China border, so that there is a much wider strip of border where the dichotomies of rural/urban, periphery/center, and hybrid identities/nationalism get new and more complex meanings. The cross-border interactions also contribute to the questioning of the idea of where Hong Kong begins and where China ends.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Between 2010 and 2011 I lived with my family in Sheung Shui, a town in the New Territories, Hong Kong, which is approximately a ten minute train ride from Shenzhen, China. A short while after my five-year-old daughter began to attend a local kindergarten I discovered that most of the children's mothers were rural mainland Chinese women who migrated to Hong Kong after marrying local men. Almost every day, after bringing their children to kindergarten or school, Sheung Shui marriage migrants met for a Cantonese breakfast. Following breakfast, they usually spent their mornings together until it was time to pick up the children from the kindergarten. After getting to know some of the women, I was invited to join them for their daily breakfast. Usually our meetings continued in the afternoons and nearly three times each week we had dinner together at one of the women's homes. The husbands were usually absent from our gatherings. Most of them worked long hours and came home late, others worked night shifts or far from Sheung Shui, and did not return home every day.

More than one third of all marriages registered in Hong Kong in recent years were between local men and mainland Chinese women (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2014). The influx of mainland Chinese women to Hong Kong is a well-known phenomenon in the public discourse in Hong Kong as well as in mainland China, and in recent years it has been drawing a significant amount of attention. On February 1 2012, an advertisement comparing mainland women who cross the border to give birth to locusts was published on the first page of the *Apple Daily*, a popular local newspaper in Hong Kong. The same week, a video of a loud argument between a local passenger and a mainland mother who was giving a snack to her child on the Hong Kong subway train, was uploaded to YouTube, heating more than one million views

in only few days. The video received hundreds of offensive comments, among them: “Mainlanders have no manners”, “they are all farmers”, and “[they] are not welcome in Hong Kong.” The negative views of the mainland immigrants by Hongkongers have a significant influence on the everyday lives of the Sheung Shui marriage migrants who in many cases experience social isolation. For the women, Hong Kong is considered to be a desirable destination, signifying the “quality” (*suzhi*) which the Chinese state has encouraged its population to achieve over the past three decades.

1.1 RESEARCH GOAL AND CONTRIBUTION

Previous studies about cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men center primarily on the social, economic and political context in Hong Kong and the way it shapes and influences the migrant experience after permanent immigration (Newendorp 2008, 2010; Ma 2012; Chan 2014). The focus is on the difficulties mainland marriage immigrants experience in Hong Kong and their integration into Hong Kong society (Lau 2008; Newendorp 2008, 2010). Ornella’s (2014) study diverges from this perspective as it aims to understand the complexities that arise in the interim period when mainland wives still hold visitor immigration status. Since these studies center on “the Hong Kong side of the border,” they also have a tendency to take for granted the women’s motivations and the circumstances that encouraged them to migrate across the border.

The marriage migrants I came to know in Sheung Shui had met their husbands while working (*dagong*) in Guangdong Province. As part of China’s vast rural-to-urban migration, they left China’s inland provinces in their late teens, travelling thousands of miles to one of China’s

coastal cities in search of employment and better opportunities. Shenzhen's proximity to the Hong Kong border makes it an ideal place for female rural migrants to meet Hong Kong men who often travel to Shenzhen as part of the close economic ties between Hong Kong and southern China.

All marriage migrants must wait for a period of five to seven years after their marriage before they receive a permit to live in Hong Kong permanently. Nicole Constable (2014: 10) claims that because Hong Kong is not a nation-state, “citizenship may be a strange word to use in relation to Hong Kong.” Yet, based on Hong Kong’s Basic Law,¹ people with the right to abode in Hong Kong hold the status “Hong Kong permanent residents.” As a legal category, permanent residency basically bears the status of local citizenship, which safeguards one’s right to unconditional stay in the territory and freedom from deportation (Ku 2001: 260).

According to Article 24 of Hong Kong’s Basic Law: “Chinese citizens born in Hong Kong before or after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region hold Hong Kong Permanent Resident Status, and hence the right of abode in Hong Kong.”² This law means that a child who is born in Hong Kong to parents who are both mainland Chinese, will automatically receive Hong Kong Permanent Residents Status. Legal citizenship entitles access to highly subsidized medical care and education.

Arrangements for family reunification between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese residents have been governed by the Chinese authorities since 1980 through the One Way Permit (OWP) scheme. Each application for family reunification is assigned a certain number of points based on the family’s situation. The system enables mainland China authorities to control the flow of immigrants from mainland China, with quotas of about 55,000 people per year. The

¹ The Basic Law came into effect upon Hong Kong’s return to China in 1 July, 1997

² URL: http://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/chapter_3.html.

OWP scheme is justified in the context of the Chinese government's agreed human rights obligations of "facilitating family reunification at a rate that Hong Kong's economic and social infrastructure can absorb without excessive strain" (Bacon-Shone, Lam and Yip 2008).

Newendorp (2008: 14) argues that after the women legally immigrated to Hong Kong, their migration experiences became substantially different from the migration experiences of the female labor migrants in Shenzhen. As I will demonstrate throughout my dissertation, the legal status that the Sheung Shui marriage migrants gained in Hong Kong is extremely important in understanding their migration experience. Nevertheless, I also argue that the women's experiences as labor migrants as well as the social connections they made during the time they spent working in mainland China, have a major influence on their everyday lives even after they legally immigrated to Hong Kong. Furthermore, the reasons which encouraged them to leave their home provinces have a significant impact on their perception of Hong Kong. These reasons are also crucial in their determination to continue to reside in Hong Kong despite their difficulties. More specifically, I argue that in order to understand the phenomenon of cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men it is essential to consider the women's inner migration process in mainland China as it constitutes a major and significant part of their marriage-migration narrative.

I focus on mainland China's social, economic, and political conditions that encouraged the women to migrate to one of China's coastal cities and as a result meet their future husband, and immigrate to Hong Kong. Following Freeman (2001), instead of demonstrating that the women's actions are a result of structural conditions, I aim to expose the crossing points between their local practices and the structural conditions, and to discuss the constraints, the opportunities, as well as the women's actions as agents. I will focus on the physical as well as on the symbolic

journey mainland women who married Hong Kong men experience, and will highlight the different meanings “mobility” and “immobility” have in contemporary China and Hong Kong. The purpose of this study is to explore two major questions: 1) How are the different individual strategies to achieve upward social mobility intertwined in the mainland women’s migration narrative?; 2) How do the women negotiate the Hong-Kong- China border in their everyday lives?

Exploring these research questions will contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between migration, gender, and im/mobility in mainland China, Hong Kong and beyond. Focusing on the physical and the symbolic border as an important component in the marriage migrants’ lives will hopefully extend the growing discussion about Hong Kong - China relations and in particular the understanding of the changing “nature” of the political, social and cultural boundary between Hong Kong and mainland China. The literature review will focus on three major themes: 1) the understanding of border as a theoretical construct; 2) the relationship between gender, migration and im/mobility; and 3) the state of research on cross-border marriages. Combining these topics will create a theoretical as well as historical ground for presenting my ethnographic data and discussing the phenomenon of cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

1.2.1 The Border as a Theoretical Construct

In his article “Borders,” Ulf Hannerz (1997) raised the question: “Has this now become a borderless world?” (537). Hannerz argued that not only that it is not a borderless world; people have become “more preoccupied with borders than ever.” According to Hannerz, borders are

“something to take into account, to maneuver with actively as people go about their lives; often undoubtedly constraining, but occasionally perhaps even a resource” (327).

Borders have a fundamental impact on the way millions of people live, work and travel throughout the world. The increase in the number of borders and in the different forces that created and nurtured their growth, led scholars from different disciplines to study phenomena which take place at the border, and to explore the various ways in which borders help us understand global change (Wilson and Donnan 2012: 1). Scholarly work about borders is mostly divided into two major categories: studies about physical borders and studies about the border as an image. Studies about physical and international borders are usually situated in the field of Geography and Political Science. The study of the border as an image began only during the late 1960s when anthropologists started their occupation with the identity of ethnic groups.

Borders were not always an integral part of anthropological studies. Anthropologists' first and main concern was the functioning of defined whole groups. The way that groups of people were presented in early anthropological studies such as the “Nuer” (Evans-Pritchard 1940) or the “Tikopia (Firth 1957),” made it seem as if these were isolated groups which existed in separate worlds (Hannerz 1997; Donnan and Wilson 1999). In most cases, the borders themselves were not the main topic of research; instead the border was used as a way to define or encompass the cultures and groups which were the main focus of the study.³ Moreover, the border was usually not a variable in the analysis, and was not compared to borders elsewhere (Wilson and Donnan 1999; 2012: 7-8). The main reason was that these studies emphasized the local conditions, and cultural context in keeping with the anthropological tradition of focusing primary on local cultures while treating the state only as a setting (Wilson and Donnan 2012).

³ The Diffusionists were an exception since they were interested in understanding the similarity of certain traits among different cultural groups (Hannerz 1997; Donnan and Wilson 1999).

Fredrick Barth's edited volume *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth 1969) marked a significant shift from the focus on societies in which borders encompass, to a focus on the meaning of the borders themselves. Barth acknowledged that although members of specific ethnic groups cross borders and interact with members of other groups, they still manage to maintain their identity. Barth understood that the physical border itself was not the sole reason for keeping an ethnic group's identity, and his main concern was the “ethnic boundary that defines a group and not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (Barth 1969:15).

The endeavor to understand ethnic groups' identities lead to the conception that besides being physical, borders are symbolic (Wallman 1978: 205). Based on a study about ethnic groups in Britain, Wallman (1978) argued that since borders are symbolic, they also respond to changes between internal and external systems, and that its size, quality and significance will change according to the situation and through time. Wallman maintained that the social border also has two kinds of meanings: The first is structural, what she named an “interface” between two social systems. The second is the identity line between “us” and “them.” The boundary marking the ending edge of one social system and the beginning edge of another can mark members off from non-members, or non-members from members. It is the point at which, or the means by which, members can be identified. While the interface element marks the change, the identity element marks the significance given to that change, and expresses the participants' relation to it (Wallman 1978: 206-207). Zygmunt Bauman (1990) argued that among all distinctions of people's relations with others, the distinction between “us” and “them” stands out the most. According to Bauman, these two categories signify totally different attitudes between: “emotional attachment and antipathy, trust and suspicion, security and fear, cooperativeness and pugnacity” (40).

The preoccupation with social and cultural borders became more apparent since the end of the 20th century when studies have increasingly reduced the importance of state borders, suggesting that their status is in decline (ODowd 2010). This approach rested on post-modernist conceptions that the world has become “smaller;” that time and space are narrowing, that there has been an increase in the number of immigrants around the world, and that social institutions which were previously perceived as superior, lost their power. This idea is also based on the analysis of historical events and processes such as post-colonialism, the fall of the Iron Curtain, the expansion of the European Union, the rise of ethno-national groups, the rise of neo-liberal economy, new political orders, new relationships between developing and developed countries and others. In other words, the “nation-states era” gave way to “post-nationalism” or a “world beyond the nation-state” (ODowd 2010; Wilson and Donnan 2012: 2-4).

As a result, scholars began dealing with the various meanings of social and cultural boundaries. Many studies recruited the border as an image in order to understand what happens when two or more cultures meet (Hannerz 1997: 35). For example, Renato Rosaldo (1989) reported that his everyday experiences as a migrant did not easily fit the conventional anthropological concept of culture. Rosaldo argued that borders “should be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that requires investigation” (Rosaldo 1989: 207-208). The endeavor to understand the influence of borders on the creation of culture led scholars to also explore borderlands. Kearney (1991) suggested that borderlands are more than a state/state zone where some seek to exercise control, and others to evade it. Based on an anthropological study in the US-Mexico border, Kearney demonstrated that borders have two meanings and since the configuration of borders vary; it challenges the ability of nation states to define the legal and cultural identities of the borderland populations

(Kearney 1991: 70). Alvarez (1995: 448) pointed out that the term borderland refers not just to the region adjacent to a state border, but also to the “multiple conceptual boundaries involved - the borderlands of social practices and cultural beliefs in a contemporary global context.”

Hannerz (1997: 538) argued that instead of treating the border as a boundary between “something” and “nothing,” people and culture should be recognized to exist on both sides. Following Victor Turner, Hannerz suggested that the border area should be viewed as a liminal zone: “A place where cultures may become conspicuously unpacked: culture+culture rather than culture/culture” (541). The ethnography of state borders should not be limited to the border area itself since the border is linked to all individuals, groups, and organizations in which work or want to work in a transnational manner: refugees, immigrants, tourists, international businesses and families (Hannerz 1997: 546).

The preoccupation with symbolic borders was criticized by scholars who claimed that although state borders have changed, they have not disappeared (Paasi 1996). Michael Mann (2007) argued that in recent years the state form of polity is powerful and intrusive in the lives of citizens than ever before in history and therefore its influence should not be overlooked. In keeping with the idea that studies about borders should be less constrained by disciplinary boundaries, and that the state should be regarded as one of the major players since it has a significant role in culture and identity formation, this dissertation focuses on the importance of the physical border as well as the social and cultural boundaries between Hong-Kong and mainland China.

Anthropology's main contribution to border studies is its sensitivity to the role of borders in daily life, to people's narratives, and the ways in which borders are marked in and through their everyday practices (Wilson and Donnan 2012: 8). In addition to highlighting the meaning

of the border in the Sheung Shui marriage migrants' everyday lives, this dissertation also aims to explore the different strategies Sheung Shui marriage migrants use in order to negotiate the boundaries they encounter. Gendered studies about migration also view the geographical border as socially constructed, and as defined by gender differences. The borders themselves are the main focus of the study, and are the address to gender-specific and political processes which are tied to the making and remaking of them (Nagar 2002).

1.2.2 Gender and Im/mobility

Variables such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality and class influence people's ability to migrate. Although gender is significant in understanding different processes related to globalization and migration, until the 1970s studies about migration focused primarily on men, while women were presumed to play a passive role as companions (DeLaet 1999: 13; Mahler and Pessar 2003). The ignoring of women from the study of migration did not correspond with the reality of international migration, because "women migrate across borders at approximately the same rate as man" (Mahler and Pessar 2003: 814). Since the 1980s it is possible to observe a rise in the number of studies which focused on the predominance of women in migration trends. However, most of these studies focused on the household and workplace, neglecting the role of the state in the gendered lives of immigrants (Mahler and Pessar 2003: 819).

The attempt to "compensate" for the absence of women from the study of migration in most cases amounted in studies "about migrant women" and did not lead to a significant change which is characterized by a gendered analysis of migration (Freeman 2001; Mahler and Pessar 2003). Hondagneu-Sotelo argued that gender is not simply a variable in the analysis of global phenomena but a set of social relations that organizes migration patterns. Her main argument is

that beyond documenting or emphasizing the presence of women migrants, there should be “an examination of how gender relations [which are exercised in relational and dynamic ways] facilitate or constrain both women's and men's immigration and settlement” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994: 3).

In most cases, studies that focused on macro theories of globalization ignored gender as a construct. The deletion of gender from the social and economic dimensions of globalization processes created a dichotomy in which the gender analysis of globalization was mapped in such a way that global equaled masculine and local, feminine (Freeman 2001: 1008). With the agreement that a macro-structural analysis is not sufficient for understanding every day experiences, since the 1990s ethnographic studies began to focus on the local context in order to highlight the way in which broad processes influence the lives of women. Studies about women's migration focused on labor migration, especially from poor and/or rural areas to large cities (Ong 1991; Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Parrenas 2006; Jacka 2012), women's trafficking (Siddharth 2009); marriage-migration (Newendorp 2008), and the commercialization of intimate relations (Constable 2009). These studies mostly emphasized the local practices of migrants and contributed to the understanding that gender and class have a crucial impact on motivations for migration as well as on the everyday experiences of women migrants.

A local analysis of global processes only partially contributed to a gendered understanding of migration processes because it continued to portray the local as feminine and as contained within, and thus defined fundamentally by, the global which is considered masculine. Instead, Freeman called for a different kind of analysis:

What is called for as well, then, is a feminist reconceptualization of globalization whereby local forms of globalization are understood not merely as effects but also as constitutive ingredients in the changing shape of these movements. A feminist reconceptualization of this sort requires a stance toward globalization in which the arrows of change are imagined in more than one direction, and where gender is interrogated not only in the practices of men and women in local sites but also in the ways in which both abstract as well as tangible global movements and processes are ascribed masculine or feminine value (Freeman 2001: 1013).

Freeman argued that in order to understand migration processes, the interface between global forces and process which take place at the local level should be exposed. In other words, studies should aim at creating a dialectical relationship between concepts that are perceived as dichotomous, for example: global/local; masculine/feminine; production/consumption; and formal/informal sectors of the economy (Freeman 2001: 1009). One example is Nicole Constable's (2009) research on commercialized intimate relationships and mail-order brides which refers to changes in patterns of both local and global processes. Her study challenges the dichotomous model of private/public; intimate/impersonal; material/emotional; money/love; global/local and culture/nature. Constable argues that the commercialization of sexuality, intimacy and marriage is not simply one of the consequences of globalization. She demonstrates that globalization offers opportunities to define new relationships and to redefine spaces, and manifests of intimacy that can change and go beyond norms and gender-conventional spaces (Constable 2009: 58). This kind of analysis, which views processes that take place at the local

level as part of global phenomena and not as a result of them, contributes to a more flexible analysis of the relationship between gender and migration (Freeman 2001: 1012)

Since the 1980s women from developing countries (with a large percentage from Asia) have increasingly migrated to developed countries and regions, usually to work in the export processing regions or as domestic workers. This growing pattern of migration was framed under the “international division of reproductive labor (Parrenas 2006).” This division of labor enables global production by providing cheap and disposable labor force, thus creating “a gendered and radicalized world order” (Yang and Lu 2010: 16). The first major theme which arises from studies about female labor migration is women's agency and their ability to influence their own fate. For example, in her study about Philippine domestic workers in Hong Kong, Constable (2007) showed that although many of the women experience great difficulties living away from their families, and in many cases suffer from bad employment conditions, they are not docile or passive. The women are conscious of their actions, and they strive to resist in their own ways, and for their own benefits. Aiwah Ong (1991) demonstrated that although Chinese female migrants are regularly exploited by the contracting services and by the factories, they still experience feelings of personal freedom since they were living as single women in dormitories, have more consuming power, and are able to delay marriage. The female migrants' feelings of personal freedom described by Constable and Ong, are reinforced in two other studies which were conducted on rural-to-urban female migrants in mainland China (Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Jacka 2006). According to Gaetano and Jacka (2004: 4), the migrants' experiences lead them to a feeling of independence and empowerment, especially since they left behind the authority of their parents or in-laws.

The second issue which comes up in studies about female labor migration is the politics of labor identity. In her study about women factory workers in Shenzhen, Pun Ngai (1999) argued that inside the work-place three major factors influence the women's new social identity: the urban-rural dichotomy, regional disparities, and gender inequalities. Based on a study about rural domestic workers in Beijing, Sun shows that although most rural migrants leave their home to escape their rural identity, as it turns out, their geographical mobility usually does not help them shed rurality. Instead, in the new urban surroundings they become more “rural,” and less “civilized.” The images of the poor rural areas are part of a hegemonic discourse based on a structural dichotomy between “centers and peripheries, knower and known, and the independent and the dependent.” This structurally unequal relationship means that those who migrate to the “center” from the “periphery” (for example less developed provinces), become subalterns in the city, and almost always gain the status of having low *suzhi* (quality) (Sun 2009: 618).⁴

Sun argues that class difference and rural-urban dichotomy are not sufficient for understanding labor migrants’ low social position, and she highlights the migrants’ body as a major site for subordination: “The subordination, peripheralization, and exploitation of the rural migrant by her urban employer is a result of the numerous ways in which the migrant body is made to take on a subaltern and outsider status” (Sun 2009: 638). This analysis leads to the inevitable question of whether the social and cultural boundaries “move” with the migrants; is physically crossing the border necessarily means that it has been actually crossed?

⁴ The term *suzhi* will be further discussed throughout the dissertation.

1.2.3 Marriage Migration

As part of deepening globalization processes there has been a rise in marriages involving migration. In the early 1990s this phenomenon practically did not exist, however the percentage of foreign brides has risen dramatically in the second decade of the 21st century (Kawaguchi and Lee 2012). Earlier studies about migration mostly focused on the economic aspects of migration and neglected marriage for, or as a result of international labor migration (Kofman 1999). Piper and Roces (2003) argue that studies should not regard marriage migration and labor migration as two distinct categories. For example, in many cases women can become wives as a result of labor migration. Recent studies also highlighted migrant women in the simultaneous roles of main income earners and transnational mothers (Parranas 2001; Constable 1999; 2014). My dissertation, which focuses on the women's labor migration as a significant part of the marriage migration experience will contribute to this analysis.

“Marriage-related migration” is regarded as an umbrella term referring to migration in order to marry, to be reunited with a spouse (family/spousal reunification), or other situations in which marriage is a significant factor in migration (Charsley 2012). Since the field of marriage migration is relatively new, no conclusive conceptual system has been developed (Charsley 2012; Kofman 2004). Migration-related marriages are often described as: transnational marriages, cross-border marriages, marriage migration or migration-related marriages. In the recent volume *Transnationalism Marriage: New Perspectives from Europe and Beyond*, Charsley (2012) emphasizes the importance of establishing a decisive conceptual system. For example, Charsley makes a clear distinction between transnational and cross-border marriages. She argues that transnational marriage can relate to any type of marriages which cross national boundaries, while

cross-border marriages are specifically related to ethnic diversity. In other words, the important distinction is related to the difference between inter and intra-ethnic marriages (Charsley 2012: 14-15).

Williams agrees that transnational marriages involve a transnational activity. Yet, she situates cross-border marriages “on a continuum between those that are firmly transnational and those that are clearly not” (Williams 2012: 23). As opposed to ethnicity, Williams chooses to highlight the lacking of formal status or citizenship of one or both partners as an important factor, as well as the difference in class, interests or status (24). Yang and Lu (2010) observe that the phrase “cross-border marriage” emphasizes geographical, national, racial, class, gender and cultural borders. Following Yang and Lu (2010) and Williams (2012), in this dissertation I chose the term “cross-border marriages” when referring to marriages between mainland Chinese women and Hong Kong men. The term highlights the idea that although both partners share similar ethnic background, the mainland wives cross political, social and cultural boundaries.

A significant contribution to the study of cross-border marriages is the volume *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia* (Constable 2005). The studies in the book explore the individual “perspectives, motivations, and experiences” (Constable 2005: 2) of the men and women involved in cross-border marriages, and it views the marriage as a result of both local and global processes that make these marriages possible. Another significant contribution of the book is its focus on the depiction of women as having an active role, without neglecting the recognition of the limitations and the “different degree of agency” they exhibit (ibid: 3). Constable suggests that while we are used to thinking about these marriages as upwardly mobile for women, they should actually be viewed as “paradoxical hypergamy.”

Although in most cases the women's economic status improves dramatically after marriage, their social position in the receiving society and their husband's family is relatively low (ibid: 10).

Long-distance marriage migration is considered a relatively new phenomenon in China (Fan and Huang 1998: 231). Even though statistically marriages with non-mainland Chinese account for no more than one percent of all annual registered marriages (National Bureau of Statistics China 2012; Friedman 2010: 11), they are important for understanding social processes in contemporary China. These types of marriages include marriage across vast geographical distances within mainland China, for example with a spouse from a distant province (Fan and Huang 1998); marriages between different ethnic groups (Freeman 2005; Schein 2005); marriages between mainland wives and western expatriates (Farrer 2008; 2013) and marriages across the Taiwan strait (Freidman 2010; 2014).

Until the late 1970s most mainland immigrants to Hong Kong were single young men who entered Hong Kong illegally after escaping political and social turbulence in China. By contrast, since the 1980s, most mainland immigrants to Hong Kong have been women who entered legally through the OWP scheme (Ornellas 2014: 49). Table 1 shows that since the mid-1980s most one-way permit holders from mainland China were women who moved to Hong Kong to join their husbands.

	1986	1996	2006	2014
males	673	493	579	491
females	1000	1000	1000	1000

Table 1: One-way permit holders entering Hong Kong by sex
(Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2015: 26)

Table 2 illustrates the number of marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men since 1986. The data shows that the number of marriages increased from 15,776 in 1986 to 28,145 in 2006 and then decreased to 18,645 in 2014. The rise of these cross-border marriages in the late 1980's could be attributed to the signing of the Sino-British declaration in 1984 and then Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2015: 45).

The decline in the number of marriages since 2006 is related to the changing in immigration policies and could also be a result of two other factors: the improvement of China's economy and the increase in resentment towards mainland Chinese immigration in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, although the total number of cross-border marriages decreased in recent years, in the past five years, its percentage among the total number of marriages registered in Hong Kong remained steady – around one third (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2015: 45).

	1986	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2012	2013	2014
Number of marriages with mainland wives and HK husbands	15776	21220	24564	18380	28145	20312	20621	19166	18645
Total marriages registered in HK	43280	42568	37045	32825	50328	58369	60459	55274	56454
Percentage of cross-border marriages	36%	49%	66%	55%	55%	34%	34%	34%	33%

Table 2: Number of marriages with brides from the mainland and grooms from Hong Kong
(Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2015: 45)

Because these marriages comprise about one third of all marriages registered in Hong Kong each year, this phenomenon has a tremendous influence on Hong Kong society. Studies

about cross-border marriages between mainland China and Hong Kong focus primary on the integration of the women in Hong Kong (Lau 2008; Newendorp 2008, 2010), and the difficulties the migrant wives experience during the period they still hold a visitor immigration status (Ornellas 2014). Ornellas' study (2014) focuses on the migrants' as well as the migrants' families' engagement in political organizing to claim citizenship rights. Newendorp's study (2008) is based on ethnographic work conducted between 2001 and 2002 at a social welfare center in Kowloon. The main focus of her study is the difficulties mainland female immigrants in Hong Kong experience while trying to adapt to their new lives. In an article published in 2010 that was based on interviews that the author conducted a few years later than with some of the same women, Newendorp demonstrated that as opposed to her previous study (2008) which depicted the migrant women as somewhat passive, her new findings demonstrate that some of the women have gained positions of responsibility, took pleasure in their jobs, and focused on their new employment as a positive way to characterize their life experiences in Hong Kong. Newendorp concluded that the women's workplace provided a "way" into Hong Kong society (Newendorp 2008: 93). Lau (2008) argued that after migrating to Hong Kong, the women go through a process of losing their "mainland identity" in order to gain a local one. Lau's study focused on the everyday experiences of the women in Hong Kong and on the different themes and practices in which they need to learn in order to "acquire" their new identity.

So (2010) looked at the phenomenon of cross border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men from a different perspective. His main effort was to understand the motivations of Hong Kong men to marry women from across the border. The first reason is related to Hong Kong's demographics: Statistical data shows that in the past few decades there has been an imbalance in the sex composition of the population of marriageable age in Hong

Kong. So argued that as a result of the massive flow of mainland immigrants during the 1970s the sex ratio increased from 109.2 males per 100 females to 115.8 males to 100 females. He goes on to argue that not only that men outnumbered women, the mainland migrants were in a disadvantage position and it was easier for them to find a mainland wife than a Hong Kong woman (525).

A second explanation for Hong Kong men's motivations to marry women from across the border is related to the men's social position (So 2003). Hong Kong men who marry mainland women are usually working-class men who in many cases are unable to find a suitable wife in Hong Kong. According to So, Hong Kong working-class men find it easier to marry a mainland wife since "they have much more to offer to rural mainland Chinese women than they can offer to Hong Kong women of similar age and education" (ibid: 524). In addition, Hong Kong men believe that mainland women are "more stable, less sophisticated, and less picky than Hong Kong women, and thus would give them a greater sense of control and security" (ibid: 525).

While the dramatic sex ratio might explain marriages which took place during the 1970s and the early 1980s, they fail to explain the large number of cross-border marriages which intensified during the late 1990s, after Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty. Based on the Hong Kong National Statistics Bureau (2012a), while an imbalance in the sex composition continued to exist in the end of the 20th century, it was certainly not as acute as it was during the 1970s and the 1980s.⁵ Moreover, similar to previous studies which focused mostly on the implications of the marriages on the women's everyday lives and on Hong Kong's society

⁵ In 2000, the sex ratio was 103.4 males to 100 females. In 2005 it rose to 108.69 males to 100 females (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2012a).

(Newendorp 2008, 2010; Yau 2010), So (2003) did not explore the conditions which enabled the marriages from the women's perspectives.⁶

The marriage migrants I came to know in Sheung Shui passed through at least three different living spaces: the village or small town they grew up in mainland China, the region they worked in as labor migrants, and Sheung Shui, Hong Kong. Each of these spaces is characterized by different legal, political and social systems and thereby consequences on the women's social status and mobility opportunities. Throughout this dissertation, these spaces are viewed and analyzed as points or locations along a symbolic axis which has many other, either symbolic or physical, points. This axis which does not have a concrete starting or ending point is viewed as a metaphor of the women's desire to gain upward social mobility.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

Similar to other anthropological studies, this study began when I realized that the phenomenon of cross-border marriages between Hong Kong men and mainland women was a manifestation of unique socio-political circumstances, and I was eager to learn more about it. As opposed to the typical "PhD training routine," I did not enter the "field" with a research proposal or with the intention of conducting fieldwork. In fact, when I first arrived in Sheung Shui in the fall of 2010, I was not even aware of the phenomenon of cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men. Sheung Shui's proximity to the mainland Chinese border made it a relatively low-cost destination and that was the primary reason for choosing to reside there. After my daughter began to attend a local kindergarten, I was invited to have breakfast

⁶ So mentions briefly that the main reason mainland women find it attractive to marry a Hong Kong men is related to the economic gap between Hong Kong and mainland China (So 2010: 525-526).

with several mainland marriage migrants whose children attended the same kindergarten. It was very soon then that I realized that Sheung Shui was in fact a fascinating site for an anthropological enquiry.

The changing “nature” of Sheung Shui, from a residential space to a research site, brought up an ethical dilemma: How will my decision to explore the phenomenon of cross-border marriages influence my relationships with the mainland marriage migrants I came to know? How can I become an ethnographer? I was looking for the opportunity to tell the mainland mothers that our joined gatherings became sites for an anthropological research, and that our long personal conversations are now documented. While numerous studies were written on meaningful friendships that often emerge during the ethnographic process, and on the complexities that such relationships often bring with them (e.g Coffey 2002; Rabinow 2007[1977]), few studies explore what happens when friends become informants. As opposed to being an outsider researcher who enters the field, Taylor (2011) writes about being an “intimate insider:” The situation which “reshapes the researcher’s role in and experiences of her own culture and those within it” (Taylor 2011: 3). Although I did not know the marriage migrants for a long time before I began my “official fieldwork,” our personal circumstances as migrants, women and mothers brought us closer, and similar to Taylor (2011), I often felt as an “intimate insider.” As an ethnographer, it was not an easy task to balance between my personal commitment to the women, and my professional interest in their everyday lives as a scholar. Yet, after discussing my planned research with some of them, I was surprised to discover that they were actually quite enthusiastic about the research, and were seeking to contribute. Coffey (1999) pointed out that friendships should be regarded as a positive contribution to ethnographic studies:

Relationships we create in the field raise our awareness of the ethnographic dichotomies of, for example, involvement versus detachment, stranger versus friend, distance versus intimacy... Friendships can help to clarify the inherent tensions of the fieldwork experience and sharpen our abilities for critical reflection... They do affect the ethnographer's gaze and it is important that that should be so (Coffey 1999: 47, cited in Taylor 2011: 4).

My attempts to balance between my personal relationships with the marriage migrants and the endeavor to learn as much as possible about their everyday lives is in many ways similar to dilemma of balancing between the personal and the professional circumstances mentioned in Goldstein-Gidoni's (2012) study about Japanese housewives:

Only in retrospect, and only after allowing myself the removal of what I have come to see as the artificial border between the personal and the professional, could I realize the relevance of my own personal experience as a young mother to my "professional" interest (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012: 21).

My changing role also highlighted the fact that my preliminary position in the field actually enabled the birth of this study. Similar to what Connie Sutton (1998) wrote about never choosing motherhood as a topic of research, I often felt that the field "chose me." My personal circumstances, mainly the presence of my daughter was most probably the main reason I was invited to breakfast for the first time. Yet, my daughter not only enabled me to enter the field, she also played a key role in the study. In retrospect, the marriage migrants' children were a key

element in their everyday lives, and very important for understanding their motivations for migrating across the border.

Poveda (2009) discusses the idea of offspring as research collaborators. Scheper-Hughes (1993) who conducted her fieldwork in extreme conditions of poverty and infant mortality in Brazil, did not exclude her daughter from her fieldwork even at times it became emotionally difficult for her daughter. During my fieldwork I often felt situated between these two descriptions. On the one hand, the presence of my daughter made it much easier to attend the afternoon gatherings, to learn about the local kindergarten, and to discuss with the marriage migrants their everyday dilemmas as mothers. On the other hand, it was difficult for my daughter to learn Cantonese, to make friends and to adjust to Hong Kong's strict education system. Overall she experienced great hardships in Hong Kong and I realized that each day that passes, carries with it a heavy burden. While an ethnographer's personal circumstances are often relevant to the professional endeavor, conducting participant observation with children also carries with it certain problems not present in other research settings (Poveda 2009).

This study is based on 13 months of fieldwork conducted in Hong Kong and Shenzhen in the years 2011-2013 and 2015. My ethnographic work included participant observations and interviews of families that included a mainland wife, a Hong Kong husband and one or more children. All the families lived in Sheung Shui, a town in the New Territories, Hong Kong. Studies about cross-border marriages between mainland China and Hong Kong often describe the women as "mainlanders." For example Newedorp (2008) refers to the women in her study as "mainland immigrant wives." As opposed to many of the mainland immigrants who reside in Hong Kong's relatively poor districts, the women I came to know in Sheung Shui did not experience concrete financial difficulties. In this sense they were not a "representative group" of

“mainland marriage migrants” in Hong Kong. However, the term “Sheung Shui marriage migrants,” which I use throughout my dissertation challenges “mainland marriage migrants” as a fixed term, and it situates class as an important factor which influences the women’s experiences as wives and as migrants. Similar to the journey of the women, my ethnographic inquiry did not have a specific starting point. The term “Sheung Shui marriage migrants” reflects the importance of legal citizenship; it also underlines their migration experience as a journey.

My ethnographic work included participant observations and interviews. I also conducted dozens of conversations and structured interviews with mainland Chinese labor migrants as well as Hong Kong local activists. After leaving the field I continued to maintain “thick communication” with key informants through email, Facebook and We Chat online chats. This continued communication with the field gave me the opportunity to witness changes in the women’s migration narrative, which proved to be very significant to my understanding of their experiences as migrants and as mothers in Hong Kong. The conversations and interviews with the women were conducted in Mandarin, and the conversations with local social workers and activists were conducted in English. Unless mentioned otherwise, the names used throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THESIS

This dissertation is structured so as to enable an understanding of the phenomenon of cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men mainly from the wives’ perspectives. It is also aimed at highlighting the marriage as a journey for achieving upward social mobility. The women’s journey is situated in a unique social and political context, which

is influenced by both sides of the border. The border between mainland China and Hong Kong is treated not merely as a physical border but rather as a social and cultural boundary which recognizes that people and cultures exist on both sides. The boundary is constantly negotiated by both structural conditions and the people and commodities that cross it.

In the first chapter I examine the relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong from a historical perspective. I show how the return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, and the intensification of the cross-border interactions have influenced the way in which mainland China and mainland Chinese are viewed and treated in Hong Kong. These views have a significant influence on the marriage migrants' everyday lives and on their experiences in Hong Kong. The second chapter explores the social, political and economic constraints and opportunities Sheung Shui marriage migrants experienced in mainland China before meeting their Hong Kong husband. These circumstances supported the women's decision to embark on a journey to obtain upward geographical and social mobility. Furthermore, through the emphasis on the structural conditions in China's rural areas, the chapter examines the question of when does a migrants' journey begins.

Chapter three introduces the group of marriage migrants I came to know in the border town of Sheung Shui. In this chapter I discuss the everyday experiences of the marriage migrants, and focus on their social gatherings with other mainland marriage migrants such as joined breakfasts, afternoon gatherings with the children, and playing the Chinese tile game of Mahjong. The chapter reveals that as opposed to their previous experience as labor migrants in Shenzhen, most of the Sheung Shui marriage migrants do not work outside their homes, and their children's schedule is the major anchor in their everyday activities. The social structure as well as the

“gender contract” which characterizes their marriages left them in the home sphere, at the margins of Hong Kong’s society.

Chapter four emphasizes the meaning of becoming a Hong Kong permanent resident. As I show, the importance of obtaining the HKID is related to the way in which Hong Kong is envisioned by the women before and after crossing the border, as well as to the way in which “the other side of the border” is mediated by Chinese state and other social agents. Through the concept of *suzhi* (quality) I highlight the idea that although the economic gap between mainland China and Hong Kong has decreased dramatically over the past two decades, the cultural and social gaps continue to exist and they are manifested in the mainland marriage migrants’ everyday lives.

Chapter five focuses on the importance Sheung Shui marriage migrants place on their children’s education. The mothers regard the Hong Kong’s education system as a desired destination and as a site which has a significant impact on their children’s future. As part of the pursuit after “higher *suzhi* (quality),” the mothers dedicate a significant amount of time to their child/ren school work and to other learning activities. These activities play an important role in their everyday lives.

2.0 CROSS-BORDER INTERACTIONS AND LOCAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN HONG-KONG

When I first entered the apartment I would reside in during one of my field trips in Hong Kong, I was surprised to discover that a poster of an image from the Tiananmen 1989 demonstrations covered the entire wall of the main room. The poster was very large; about two meters long and three meters wide, and it depicted the square after the tanks entered Beijing and the massacre took place. This was the image of the terrible outcomes of the demonstrations; the death and wounding of hundreds of young people who believed that they are fighting for a democratic China.

Due to my close contacts with several Hong Kong young artists and social activists, I was given the opportunity to spend the summer of 2013 in an apartment which was intended to host visiting artists in Hong Kong. The apartment was owned by the Hong Kong government and was “given” to the group of artists who established a unique art-space called “Woofer Ten.” The art-space and the apartment which was one floor above were located on Shanghai Street in the bustling Kowloon district. After long conversations with the artists who also saw themselves as social activists, I realized that the events which took place in Beijing in June 1989 signified to them one of the darkest moments of China’s Communist regime. More importantly, however, the image was placed on the wall as a constant reminder to everything they rejected in mainland China. The hanging of the poster from the Tiananmen demonstrations was an example to the boundary many Hong Kong people drew in their efforts to distinguish themselves from mainland China.



Figure 1: The poster of the Tiananmen demonstration's outcomes in the artists' apartment (photograph taken by the author, July 2013).

In his book about border crossing and exchange in South China Ma writes: “This book begins in the 1970s when the mainland-Hong Kong boundary was most conspicuous and ends when this boundary gradually fades away after the handover in 1997” (Ma 2012: 1). Ma’s main argument is that the growing cross-border interactions have resulted in the blurring of the social and cultural border between mainland China and Hong Kong and turned the border into an administrative one rather than political (Ma 2012). Considering the recent Umbrella Revolution⁷ and based on my ethnographic data, I argue that while mainland consumers and commuters view

⁷ The Umbrella Revolution was the name given to the large demonstrations which took place in Hong Kong in the fall of 2014. The significance of the events will be further discussed throughout this chapter.

the border as a resource, many Hong Kong people, especially young social activists view the growing cross-border interactions as a threat.

During an interview I conducted with Ben, a young activist few months after the Umbrella Revolution he told me: “It might sound bad, and I might be wrong saying it... but... I treat the mainland tourists and the mainland marriage migrants the same way – I hate them both.” Ben did not distinguish between the marriage migrants who hold a HKID and the mainland consumers who are temporary visitors in the city. He labeled all mainlanders as “the other,” and made an effort to draw a line between “us” and “them.”

In this chapter I focus on “the Hong Kong side of the border” and on the struggle, disappearance and reappearance (Abbas 1997; Fung 2001) of Hong Kong local identity vis à vis the growing number of cross-border activities. While Chinese authorities are constantly emphasizing the idea that Hong Kong is an inseparable part of China, young Hongkongers strive to keep the border as a rigid divide. Hong Kong people’s negative views of mainland China and mainlanders had a significant influence on the marriage migrants I came to know in Sheung Shui who were perceived as outsiders, and were placed at the margins of society.

2.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Until 1842, Hong Kong was an integral part of South China. The First Opium War broke out as a result of China’s efforts to suppress the British opium trade. However, the war resulted in China’s quick defeat and on August 29, 1842 the Treaty of Nanjing was signed, and China ceded the Island of Hong Kong to Britain. Two years after the Treaty of Tianjin was signed in 1860, China ceded Kowloon to Britain and it became a part of Hong Kong. The terms of both

treaties were harsh and they received the name the “unequal treaties.” Besides the cession of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, the New Territories were leased to Britain as well. The treaties demanded compensation of substantial amount of money from the Chinese government, the right of extraterritoriality, the opening of designated ports for trade and the right of foreigners to live in. The era which followed the Opium Wars and the unequal treaties is considered in China as the “Century of Humiliation;” One hundred years which marked the defeat of China by Japanese and Western Imperialism. After 150 years of British colonial rule, on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong was returned to Chinese sovereignty as Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Hong Kong has continually enjoyed a unique political and geographical relationship with mainland China and with Guangdong province in particular, and there have been a significant movement of people from mainland China into Hong Kong and vice versa. Until the Communist Party came to power in 1949, border-crossing between mainland china and Hong was relatively unrestricted (Law and Lee 2006: 21). During that period, free migration took place especially when there was political or social unrest in mainland China (Law and Lee 2006: 2019).⁸ After WWII, Hong Kong’s population was around 500,000 to 600,000. Around the period during which the Communist party came to power, big waves of refugees fled China, and in 1953 Hong Kong’s population reached 2 million (Szczepanik, 1958: 153, cited in Law and Lee 2006: 2019). As a result, the colonial government enforced the Immigration Control Ordinance which required the possession of entry permits (Law and Lee 2006:219). The

⁸ The first wave of refugees took place at the middle of the 19th century as a result of the Taiping uprising. The second wave occurred as a result of the 1911 Revolution. The third wave happened in 1938 during the Japanese occupation (Law and Lee 2006: 2019).

outcomes of the Great Leap Forward led to massive waves of illegal immigration in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Another big wave of illegal immigration occurred between 1967 and 1973, as a result of the Cultural Revolution (Ku 2004: 334-335).

The migrants who escaped the outcomes of the Communist governments' political campaigns during the 1950s and early 1960's (mainly the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution) were welcomed in Hong Kong, and were treated as fellow Chinese and not as "aliens competing for scarce social resources as they would later" (Mathews, Ma and Lui 2008: 30). During the 1970s there was a change in popular mood, moving towards the perception of Hong Kong as a "land of opportunity" (Lui and Wong 1995: 111-127). This perception became stronger as Hong Kong's economy improved in contrast to the economic situation in mainland China. The economic gap together with the political turmoil in mainland China helped construct China as "an alien, backward, and chaotic 'other'" (Chan 2014: 26). These views changed Hong Kong people's attitude towards mainland immigrants who arrived in the following years. The massive flow of migrants from mainland China during the late 1970s was seen as a threat in the eyes of the colonial government and by the local population. Although the local population was comprised mainly of migrants, they were relatively hostile towards the new immigrants and the mainland Chinese were no longer considered Chinese relatives but "strangers to be scorned" (Mathews, Ma and Lui 2008: 37).

As a result, a more distinctive sense of local identity and distinction had emerged in Hong Kong (Ku 2004). As opposed to the negative image of mainland China, Hong Kong was perceived as a modern and international city (Ma and Fung 1999; Fung 2001; Ku 2004; Ma and Fung 2006; Cha 2014). Many "locals" considered themselves as those who worked hard to achieve what Hong Kong now has to offer. Since the late 1970s Hong Kong people have become

very protective of their land and what it is able to offer, and they were not willing to share it with the new mainland Chinese immigrants. Hong Kong people began demanding social benefits from the colonial government and their sense of who should enjoy the benefits and who should not began to arise (Ma 1997; Siu 1997; Fung 2001; Mathews, Ma and Lui 2008). For the first time, Hongkongers made a distinction between “we” (*Heunggong yahn*) and “them” (mainland Chinese).

In the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, China and Britain signed the “One Country, Two Systems” principle. In the agreement which was signed by Zhao Ziyang and Margaret Thatcher on 19 December 1984 in Beijing, the PRC Government stated that it had decided to resume the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong (including Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories), and the UK Government declared that it would hand over Hong Kong to the PRC with effect from 1 July 1997. The socialist system would not be practiced in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and Hong Kong's previous capitalist system and its way of life would remain unchanged for a period of 50 years, until 2047. The Joint Declaration provides that these basic policies should be stipulated in the Hong Kong Basic Law.⁹

Even before the handover, many Hongkongers people believed that a change is inevitable and is only a matter of time. Figure 2 presents one of the propaganda posters published by the Chinese government a short while before 1997. Even though the captions read “Hong Kong’s return, one country-two systems” (*Xianggang huigui, yi guo liang zhi*), most of the images are associated with mainland China. The traditional Chinese cultural symbols like China’s Great Wall and The Forbidden City are situated at the back of the frame and the largest part of the

⁹http://www.legislation.gov.hk/blis_ind.nsf/CurEngOrd/034B10AF5D3058DB482575EE000EDB9F?OpenDocument.

composition is of Deng Xiaoping- China's paramount leader and the president of the Chinese Communist Party. Hong Kong Island is also present but it is covered with what is considered to be China's national flower – the peony. In other words, Hong Kong is not given a significant part and is “swallowed” in the great Chinese nation. The poster does not leave any doubts; Hong Kong is presented as an imminent part of China. This propaganda poster serves as an example to the nationalistic discourse seen in the local media during the period of the handover which worked to incorporate Hong Kong's local identity under the national identity (Fung 2010: 595).



Figure 2: Hong Kong returns to Chinese sovereignty propaganda poster (Chinese posters.net).

In accordance with the "One Country, Two Systems" Hong Kong's system was meant to remain unchanged for a period of 50 years until 2047. However, since Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty, the city has been experiencing concrete political and social changes. These changes are a result of two main processes: the increase in cross-border interactions, and the

implementation of new instructions by the Chinese central government. Changes in the central government's rhetoric and attitudes towards Hong Kong enhanced Hong Kong people's concern with their city's future. In a conversation I conducted with Ben, the young social activist I mentioned above he explained:

The Chinese are not waiting until 2047; things are already starting to change. We can't go to the streets as before... My friends are being arrested in protests. When we protest against the appointing of Chinese representatives in the Hong Kong government, they are warned and if they resist they get arrested; *before* [my emphasis] we didn't even need a permit to protest.

In the fall of 2014, Hong Kong's people's concerns reached a critical point. Large demonstrations which were later named "The Umbrella Revolution" were organized mainly by The Hong Kong Federation of Students and the Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement. The protests were officially initiated because of Hong Kong locals' discontent over China's refusal to allow the open selection of candidates for Hong Kong's leader (chief executive), in the city's first democratic election scheduled for 2017. Instead, The Chinese government decided that a panel will select two or three candidates to run. The main reason for the demonstrations was the discontent with the 2017 elections. Yet, the motivations for the massive protest cannot be separated from the growing amount of cross-border interaction, and as a result the distress many Hong Kong people I talked with and interviewed feel regarding their city's future.

2.2 HONG KONG PEOPLE'S SENSE OF BELONGING

“Do you travel to China (*Zhongguo*) on regular basis?” was one of the questions I often asked Sheung Shui marriage migrants during our interviews. A common reply I received was: “We are in China right now; you must mean mainland China (*dalu*).” When I asked a mainland Chinese student I came to know in Israel about his experience studying in Hong Kong he replied in a similar manner: “It was wonderful; Hong Kong is China’s best city!” These responses echo the Chinese authorities’ recognition of Hong Kong only in terms of a geographical containment of the local population, and not as a distinct identity.

On June 2014 China’s central government issued “an unprecedented” White Paper which stated that the central government holds “comprehensive jurisdiction” over Hong Kong and is the source of its autonomy. The statement claimed that “many wrong views are currently rife in Hong Kong” and that: “Some people are confused or lopsided in their understanding of the policy [one country, two systems] and the Basic Law” (South China Morning Post 2014). Yet, the term Hong Kong people or Hongkongers (*Heunggongyan* in Cantonese and *Xianggangren* in Mandarin) signifies a separate identity of which many Hongkongers are proud. To many of the local population, the conception of a Hong Kong identity is historically and culturally real, and this classification affirms their distinctive and compelling set of shared values, norms, and ideologies (Fung 2010: 595).

Most colonized societies that have gained independence in the course of the 20th century rejected the colonizer and celebrated one’s own independent. This has not been the case in Hong Kong. Although there has been some resistance to the British rule, it was greatly accepted by many of the local population. At the same time, China which is considered to be Hong Kong’s homeland became noticeably foreign (Mathews, Ma and Lui 2008: 149). Before 1997 many

Hongkongers perceived themselves as the opposite of mainland Chinese, yet their identity was not contrasted to being “Chinese” (*Zhongguo ren*). The return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty and the influx of mainland tourists and immigrants complicated the social and cultural distance between Hong Kong and mainland China. Instead of embracing the nationalistic discourse, many Hongkongers became stricter in their differentiation from mainland China (Fung 2010: 595).

A survey conducted in June 2014 (While the Umbrella revolution was taking place) revealed that the importance of the term “Hongkonger” (*Xianggangren*) has increased as opposed to the terms “Chinese” and “citizen of the PRC” who have considerably dropped since 1997 and 2007. In the same survey, when “identity indices” were used, Hongkongers’ feelings were strongest as “Hongkongers”, followed by “Asians”, then “members of the Chinese race,” “global citizens,” “Chinese,” and finally “citizens of the PRC” (Public opinion polls 2014). The survey shows that the embracing of the term “Hong Kong people” or “Hongkongers” as a mark of a local identity has become a useful way for the local population to resist national assimilation.

Since 1997 each year on July 1 mainland China celebrates Hong Kong’s return to the motherland. On that day a festive parade takes place in Hong Kong with the presence of high government representatives, from mainland China and Hong Kong. At the same day, hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong demonstrators rally against the occasion. In 2014 estimations were that close to 500,000 people took part in the demonstrations. Cheng, a Hong Kong man who is married to a mainland woman told me about his experience in one of those occasions. On July 1, 2013 to celebrate the 15th anniversary of Hong Kong’s handover to mainland China, China’s president Hu Jintao arrived in Hong Kong to take part in the official celebrations. Cheng told me that when Hu lifted his hand in the air during the parade, thousands of Hongkongers who were in

the crowd scolded him. It was very clear from Cheng's facial expression while narrating that he could not identify with Hu Jintao as "his" president. Cheng's expression demonstrated the distance or even aversion, he felt toward the Chinese "leader."

Hongkongers from different social backgrounds I interviewed expressed their longing to how things were before 1997. Lo, a Hong Kong man who is married to a mainland woman told me that "life in Hong Kong was much better before 1997." He explained that before Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty, there were not so many regulations which influenced everyday life. During our conversation, Lo went to another room and returned with a one hundred Hong Kong dollar bill. He showed me the bill and explained that he keeps this bill as a reminder to life before 1997: "you see this bill; there are not any Chinese characters on it." Lo concluded: "in a few years the Chinese will not need Hong Kong. It will not be anything special to them; it will be just like Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen." Lam, an established local artist told me that the local currency is very important to Hong Kong's identity: "after we won't have our own bill, there won't be any Hong Kong left." These excerpts from interviews I conducted with Cheng, Lo and Lam represent a relatively common opinion in contemporary Hong Kong. Hongkongers from different social backgrounds I interviewed expressed their views with regard to the return to Chinese sovereignty as having a major influence on Hong Kong's society and as a major threat to the city's future. As a result, they strived to distance themselves from mainland China and what it represented.

2.3 WHAT CAN “WE” DO?

In a visit to Hong Kong few weeks before the Chinese New Year on February 2015, Sheung Shui's streets were crowded with mainland tourists who crossed the border to purchase their New Year's gifts in Hong Kong. On a stroll in Sheung Shui city center I noticed that many of the stores changed their supplies and became shops which mainly sell baby milk powder, diapers, and other food products intended especially for the mainland Chinese visitors and traders. This change was also confirmed to me by Cheng who told me that “Hong Kong shops and restaurants are changing for the worse.” He explained that the “old shops” are disappearing and that all one can purchase now in Hong Kong is milk powder and diapers. Social activists I interviewed explained that the towns which are closer to the border like Sheung Shui and Yuen Long are becoming places intended for mainland tourists and shoppers. The idea that Hong Kong has significantly changed since 1997 was very common among the group of young social activists and artists I came to know in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong media as a whole have in recent years become more favorable to China. According to K.C. Chan, the chief editor of The Hong Kong Economic Journal, the main reason for this new tendency is not the growing favorability to China; but rather a consideration of the mainland market force (Mathews, Ma and Lui 2008: 58-60). Nevertheless, Hong Kong's mass media remains comparatively free (ibid: 61), and in popular newspapers and other forms of media, in many cases, China is still portrayed in a negative way. According to an article which was published in the *South China Morning Post* in November 19, 2004, there is a somewhat positive side to the influx of mainland tourists, because they are spending large amounts of money in the shops, hotels and restaurants and are helping the city's economy. At the same time, the author claims that the mainland women who cross the border to give birth in Hong Kong

have a very negative impact on Hong Kong's health system: "not all of the consequences of this boom in mainland visitors can be viewed in such a positive light... concerns are being raised about some of the less favorable repercussion." The article continues:

Our maternity wards, we are told, are being swamped by pregnant women from the mainland, putting a strain on resources. Increasing numbers of mainland tourists are committing crimes and filling our jails. The flood of visitors from the north is even crowding local residents out of their favorite restaurants and entertainment venues. Pregnant women from the mainland have long sought to have their children born in Hong Kong. They view the medical treatment they receive as superior - and there is the added bonus that their children are entitled to the right of abode. In the past they often came here as illegal immigrants - now they are coming as tourists. As for crime, there have always been understandable concerns that the visitor scheme will be exploited. So far, the official figures suggest that the impact has been slight, although it is increasing. But this is also an inevitable result of opening up the floodgates. It would be naive to think that the only tourists applying for visas will be those motivated entirely by a desire to spend their hard-earned cash in our shopping malls (*South China Morning Post*, November 19 2004).

It is clear that the author does not view the influx of mainland tourists as a positive contribution to Hong Kong's society and future. The mainland mothers are described as exploiters and as a burden on Hong Kong society. Conversations I conducted with Hongkongers from different backgrounds revealed similar views regarding the phenomenon of maternity tourism. A Hong

Kong University professor (who is a physician) mentioned with anger that all the taxes he pays go straight to the mainland women. Several Hong Kong women I spoke with told me that “mainland women occupy all of the beds in the hospitals.”

Hong Kong husbands who are married to mainland wives revealed negative views about mainland China as well. Lo explained that although his family did not object when he married a mainland wife, he personally believed that all mainland people want is to take advantage of Hong Kong’s resources. He recalled a recent story about a mainland woman who tried to cross the border to give birth in Hong Kong but was caught by the authorities. After being caught, she did not give up and did not agree to return to China. Eventually the police took her to a Hong Kong hospital and she gave birth to her son. As a result, the woman received a three month permit to remain in Hong Kong and she could extend it. In addition, Lo said that the child was entitled to receive a monthly stipend of 2000 HKD (approx. 260 USD). “This is why so many Hong Kongers don’t like mainland people” he concluded.

A video which was uploaded to YouTube in 2011 represents an escalation in the discontent Hong Kong people feel towards the phenomenon of maternity tourism of mainland women in Hong Kong, and in general to the changes Hong Kong is going through since its return to Chinese sovereignty. The images in the videos are of mainland people in different locations and in different situations in Hong Kong. For example, in one of the scenes a mainland child is seen defecating on the side of the road. A different scene shows mainlanders taking their shoes off on the train. The dominant colors which were added to the video are bright red and black.

The colors which represent blood and dirt provide the viewers with a general feeling of discomfort. Throughout the video, the mainlanders are compared to locusts:¹⁰

Locusts come out of nowhere overwhelm everywhere
Shouting, screaming, yelling like no one could hear
Ever feel shame to yourself?
Invading across the Hong Kong border and taking over our land
That's your specialty
Parasitic until your citizenship is recognized
Big-belly locust like aliens, pregnant and not stopped by immigration
No one can stop them from scamming HKIDs
Locust eggs hatch in hospitals
Taking over beds and not paying bills...
What's really invaded is the future of the next two generations
Setting up this trap, brainwashing us with "China is great" every day

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueNr7mfFZu8>



Figure 8: An add published in a newspaper in Hong Kong comparing mainlanders to locusts (Apple Daily 2012).

Before the 1970s, Hong Kong was largely a refugee society. There was relatively little conventional political participation by common people, and there were very few civil society organizations (Lam 2004).¹¹ This changed during the 1970s due to several factors: First, the

¹¹ Lam points out that as opposed to studies which focused mostly on social and political stability, before the 1970s there was in fact some social participation. For example: movements seeking change in government policies, industrial action, campaigns against private corporations (Lam 2004).

colonial government enabled more tolerance of social protest and petition which created a political opportunity structure. Second, as the economic situation began to improve, more people demanded social reforms and livelihood improvement. Last, a new class of educated youth, born or brought up in Hong Kong began to show a better sense of belonging to Hong Kong, and as a result there was a rise in social and pressure group movements. During that time, the young activists were mostly focused on correcting the problems of the colonial regime and improving the quality of life in Hong Kong (Lau 1984; Liu and Kung 1985; Lui and Chiu 2000; Ma 1997: 200-201).

The social movements of the 1970s, in this sense, marked an important period of community- and identity-building and joint engagement between state and society (Ma 1997: 201; 2009; Lui 2002). Mobilization of grassroots movements and participation through collective action gave rise to a new form of state-society relations (Ma 1997: 202). The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on December 19, 1984, and the subsequent debate on the future political formula had turned the attention of Hongkongers, and in particular the mass media, towards constitutional rather than livelihood issues (Lai 2000; Lui and Chiu 2000: 13).

The group of artists and social activists I came to know during my fieldwork in Hong Kong invested a significant amount of its time in advocating social consciousness and creating social activities. Hong Kong young activists' high awareness of civil society is also evident in the following excerpt from an interview I conducted with Julia, a young Hong Kong artist who dedicated most of her time to voluntary social activities. In an interview which took place in Woofer Ten (the art-space I described above) she told me about her family's roots and its relation to her political and social awareness. Julia's parents migrated to Hong Kong after they ran away from the Chinese Communist Party. She remembered that while she was growing up

her parents used to tell her “very bad things about mainland China”. Yet she also told me that even though her mother ran away from the Communist Party and had been living in Hong Kong for many years, her mother still believed that “authority [the communist regime] is the biggest power.”

During our interview it was clear that Julia criticized her mother's admiration of authority. Julia argued that mainland Chinese people “choose to obey the government” and that “the concept [obeying authority] is very strong inside them.” Julia added that Hong Kong people are different: “Hong Kong people have their own power... so I think that working for the community is very important to me... and also to the development of Hong Kong.” Julia concluded our conversation by stating the importance of “power which comes from the people.”

Julia’s views about the importance of Hong Kong people’s own actions came into terms in numerous social and political activities she and her friends initiated and participated in during the past few years. Moreover, it was important for her to emphasize that Hong Kong people’s ability to freely choose and act is in complete contrast to the situation in mainland China. In other words, the constant engagement in social activities and the building of the community, as suggest by Julia and other activists I interviewed, was an alternative way for them to distinguish themselves from mainland China.

In the summer of 2013, Woofer Ten, the art space Julia and her friends run in Kowloon, hosted a group of comic artists named: “Comic Daemons.” The name of the exhibition was “Universal Suffrage Now” and its main objective was to display the cartoon artists’ feelings and concerns about Hong Kong’s future. Figure 3 below is an example to the main message brought up in the participants’ works. The painting contains a fat well-fed cat which occupies most of the composition. The cat’s red ribbon symbolizes China or even The Chinese Communist Party.

The crown on its head means that it is the ruler. There are doves around the cat, holding signs and protesting “no cats allowed.” Although the cat seems satisfied and tired, it still managed to catch one dove. The cat obviously does not need the dove but it wants to grab it anyway; perhaps because it is able to do so. The message delivered is quite clear: The doves which symbolize peace are in great danger.



Figure 4: "Fighting for freedom," 2013, painting by the artist Xiao Hua.

In recent years, more and more Hong Kong young activists form new small groups all intended to either resist mainland China or fight to maintain what they perceive as Hong Kong's unique identity. One of the projects which has been drawing a great deal of resistance from local active groups is the "North-East New Territories Project." The main objective of the project is to build thousands of housing and commercial buildings in Hong Kong's New Territories which are situated near the Hong Kong – China border, and to enable mainland Chinese to enter the area without a special permit. Several young activists groups have been protesting against this project claiming that: "The North East New Territories Development Project means dissolution of Hong Kong-China Border."

One of the projects which is currently resisting the urban development in the New Territories is Mapopo community farm. The farm was established in 2011 by two young social activists: Becky Au and Cho Kai-kai who "felt that the time for more action had come" (Tsoi 2012). The farm is located in Mo Shi Po village in Fanling. On a visit to the farm in the summer of 2013 I was quite surprised to discover that it was located in a residential area, mostly surrounded with high-rise buildings. The farm seemed as if it was one of the last pieces of rural land left in the area. The farm consist a small rickety house in which the groups of activists reside in, and fields in which organic vegetables are grown. Although on the farm's web page the main objective is to practice sustainable agriculture, when I interviewed one of the activists, the first thing she mentioned was their resistance to the "North-East New Territories Project." She took out a map of the planned project and explained that they set up the farm in order to delay the urban development as well as to resist China's interference with Hong Kong. Ben, one of the leaders of the protests against the project explained:

Ben: It seems that the economic status has been swapped. Capital from the mainland has changed the structure of Hong Kong's economy. Underlying policies have also been adjusted gradually. An obvious feeling comes from Hong Kong people is that they feel Hong Kong is being changed to serve the economy of China not Hong Kong itself.

Hong Kong people...easily read the project as an action of erasing borders, merging Hong Kong into the planning of the Greater Pearl Delta Region.

Avital: Why do you think the Hong Kong government supports the project?

Ben: It is obvious... The Chief Executive and his team are not elected by Hong Kong people, and half of our legislative council members are not elected by Hong Kong people too. Projects like "the north-east" do not need to concern the benefit of Hong Kong people and the future of this city indeed. You may say that Hong Kong is part of China, and why I said that the development or policy making do not concern Hong Kong people. The truth is that even in Mainland China, the benefit does not go to the people but only to the rich. Hong Kong in the eyes of Chinese government is a useful place to trade, to develop real estate property for the rich. What is the benefit and future of Hong Kong, who cares?

Although in recent years it becomes harder to maintain the social and cultural border between the two entities, Hong Kong young activists strive to at least preserve their ability to influence their unique identity in Hong Kong. In a conversation I conducted with Ben in the winter of 2015, few

months after the Umbrella Revolution ended, he told me that most Hong Kong people blame China for Hong Kong's social and economic problems:

Regarding to the “One country, two systems,” you may see how Hong Kong people react to the constitutional reform of 2017... The political and cultural difference between the two places still cannot be broken easily. While facing the north-east project, or similar issues, Hong Kong people will act in a protective way against them. You could say it is about fear, and Chinese government is using such strategy to make Hong Kong people scared. We feel insecure about our city's future.

Since the late 1970s social, political and economic changes began to take place on the other side of the border as well. Millions of rural migrants began to leave their homes in China's inner provinces and to settle in the new Special Economic Zones which were built in the coastal Province of Guangdong close the Hong Kong border. The search after “a better life” and the quest after geographical and social mobility on the Chinese side of the border, have resulted in the intensification of cross border activities, among them cross-border marriages between mainland wives and Hong Kong men. The Chinese government has not been taking any significant measures to stop the cross-border traffic. As a result, marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men and, the increasing numbers of children born in Hong Kong to mainland mothers have led in recent years to an increasing resentment towards mainlanders in Hong Kong. Recent studies about Hongkongers' feelings towards mainland China and mainland Chinese commuters and immigrants demonstrate that in contemporary Hong Kong there is a significant amount of discrimination against mainlanders, and that Hongkongers consider

mainlanders as “outsiders” and “intruders” (Yau 2010). These views have been widely manifested in different media devices which have been emphasizing a range of negative aspects related to mainland China, mainland Chinese immigrants and tourists. As I discussed throughout this chapter, it lead to the rise of organized social movements who believe that Hong Kong should strive to save its unique identity. The following chapter explores the social, political and economic constraints and opportunities Sheung Shui marriage migrants experienced *before* meeting their Hong Kong husband. These factors enabled the women to choose labor migration as well as marriage migration as a strategy to achieve upward social mobility.

3.0 THE “FIRST STEP” IN A LONG JOURNEY

It is a relatively common notion that journeys have a clear starting and ending point. But when exactly does a journey begin? Let us think about a German woman traveling in Thailand. At which point did her journey start? Was it when she bought her plane ticket online? Was it at the airport? Was it when the airplane took off, or only when she landed in Bangkok? Perhaps her journey started when she first decided she wanted to travel to Thailand. It is not an easy task to put one's finger on an exact “starting point” of any journey; whether it is for the purpose of tourism, let alone migration. Where are the marriage migrants I came to know in Sheung Shui *from*? When did they become migrants? Their journey's starting point is difficult to determine since their decision (any decision) is not only “personal,” and it is always part of a specific and complex context. I do not intend to imply that the women did not have an active role in their migration process, and that they were simply “shaped” by structural conditions. Yet, from an anthropological perspective, a “personal decision” is never an individual matter. It is a constant negotiation which is bound to structural constraints and opportunities.¹²

In order to understand the women's motivations for becoming migrants, in this chapter I will focus on the social, economic and political changes that China has undergone in the past three decades as these circumstances consist as a major and significant part of their migration narrative. Situated in the heart of this context are China's *hukou* system, the gap between the rural and the urban sector, the economic reforms, and the campaign of “the improvement of the

¹² This idea echoes Eva Illouz's argument that even emotions which are often considered a personal matter, are shaped in the sphere of economic production. For example, in her books *Cold Intimacies* and *Saving the Modern Soul* Illouz describes the ways in which 20th century culture became “preoccupied with emotional life – its etiology and morphology – and devised specific techniques – linguistic, scientific, and interactional – to apprehend and manage these emotions” (Illouz 2007: 6).

quality of the entire population.” Young rural females’ motivations to pursue geographical and social mobility are also closely related to the way in which gender intersects with dominant discourses about rurality and urbanity and periphery and centers in contemporary China. These constructions are apparent in the way in which they are represented by others as well as by the women themselves (Jacka 2006: 32).

3.1 CHINA’S HUKOU SYSTEM

“Those who used their minds (*laoxin*) ruled, and those who used their muscles (*laoli*) were ruled” (Mencius in the fourth century B.C., cited in Feuerwerker, 1998: 11).

Before the Communists came to power in 1949, more than 80 percent of China's population lived in rural areas. Over the years there were few legal or institutional restrictions which limited the peasants' ability to physically migrate, and poor peasants could and did leave their villages in search for better opportunities either in one of China's cities, frontier areas, or overseas (Whyte 2010: 7). By the turn of the eighteenth century internal migration became a familiar part of Chinese society. Millions of Chinese were on the move; searching for new employment, profitable opportunities, or to make up for shortage in land (Kuhn 2008: 26-27).¹³ The relative freedom to move resulted in high rates of upward and downward mobility and as a result the status barrier between rural and urban residents was not large (Whyte 2010: 7).¹⁴

¹³ For example, between 1722 and 1776, the population of Sichuan rose from 2.3 to 6.6 million (Kuhn 2008: 27).

¹⁴ While there were no legal restrictions, imperial edicts from the 18th century show that the emperor Yongzhen thought that migration, although could not be stopped, should be regulated. For more information about migration restrictions during the imperial era see Kuhn 2008: 18.

In traditional Chinese political and cultural discourses, the urban/rural divide was much less significant than the distinction between the scholar-gentry class (*shi*) and the ordinary people (*min*). However, the meanings of this distinction changed over the years, and the term *min* was reconstructed into “peasants” (*nongmin*). According to Feuerwerker (1998: 9-10), this change was created as a result of the intellectuals’ struggle for a new self-formation as they made the transition from the traditional scholar-officials (*shi*) into the intellectuals of the modern era (*zhishifenzi*). During the late nineteenth century a differentiation between the rural and the urban society began to grow. The treaty ports¹⁵ that were established after the first Opium War, and especially Shanghai, served as an example to a high quality of life and culture, and were juxtaposed to the living conditions in rural areas (Stockman 2000, cited in Jacka 2006: 35).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as part of the growing discourses about the nation’s future, China’s intellectuals were eager to change the image of the “old” society. The main objective was to transform the “old” ideas and customs which were considered the main obstacle standing in China’s way to become modern (Spence 1991). For the elites, the rural population was now a major barrier to China’s development. Cohen (1993: 153-4) argues that through the transformations of “farmers” into “peasants;” “tradition” into “feudalism” and “customs” or “religion” into “superstition,” not only that the “old society” was invented, but also the basic negative criteria designating a new status group; one which is not part of the reconstruction of the new society.

Although the Communist party owes its coming to power to the peasants, it was during the Mao era (1949-1976) that the gap between the rural and the urban sector in China has in fact deepened dramatically (Whyte 2010). In 1951 China's Ministry of Public Security set up China's

¹⁵ “The treaty ports” was the name given to cities that were opened to foreign trade after the first Opium War (1842) and the signing of the unequal treaties.

household registration system (*hukou*).¹⁶ According to this system, any Chinese citizen has a residential status which is classified by two related sections: the first is the geographical location in which a person is supposedly residing (*hukou suozaidi*). The second refers to the type of *hukou* (*hukou leibie*); whether it is “agricultural” or “non-agricultural.” Until 1998, a child's *hukou* was inherited from the mother (Chan and Zhang 1999). The main reason was that the Chinese government wanted to limit the number of non-agricultural *hukou* holders, and even children who were born in the cities could only inherit their mother's residential status. Since surviving in the city without access to the local benefits such as health care and education is considered extremely difficult, over the years, this regulation discouraged urban men from marrying rural women (Fan 2003). After 1998, the Chinese government eased its regulations and allowed the inheritance of either the father or the mother's *hukou*. Yet the effect of the policy change on marriages between rural women and urban men is still unclear.

During the 1950s, as a result of the Communist government's investment in industrialism, many peasants began to migrate to urban industrial sectors in search for employment. However, it was not until the late 1950s that the State had begun to see this large migration as a serious problem. The Communist Party believed that China's industrialization required the separation between rural and urban residents. This way the peasants could continue to produce food for those working in industry (Zhang 2001: 25). The *hukou* system's original aim was to monitor the country's mechanism of population movements; however after the end of the Great Leap Forward (1961), the system was used by the government to limit and control migration, especially from the rural to the urban sector.

¹⁶ The system was first set in the cities and in 1955 was extended to rural areas. In 1958 it was formally implemented (Chan and Zhang 1999: 819).

The reinforcement of the *hukou* system in 1958 eventually turned the Chinese peasants into “birth-ascribed” rural *hukou* holders, and as a result, peasants were “anchored” in the countryside for decades with virtually no ability to move. Studies compare the *hukou* system during the Mao era to a “domestic passport system” which divided the population into two “castes”: The urban or non-agricultural population which was economically and socially superior, and the agricultural population which was not entitled to the benefits urban *hukou* holders were allowed to (Potter 1983; Zhang 2001: 25-26).

Urban residents were entitled to different employment, housing and social benefits while the agricultural population were left to produce and supply the food. Although the Communist government fostered techniques and institutions in order to advance agricultural production and to improve the rural residents’ income, the most fundamental campaign – The Great Leap Forward created the worst damage. The Great Leap Forward was an economic and social plan which aimed to transform the country into a modern state through the process of agriculturalization, industrialization, and collectivization. The plan ended in a catastrophe of widespread hunger, which resulted in more than 30 million deaths, mostly from the rural sector. The result was a widening of the gap in incomes and standards of living between rural and urban areas over the course of the Mao era. Most importantly, because of the *hukou* system, poor local communities were not able to leave their villages, and had to “remain locked in poverty” (Whyte 2010: 10).

Since the early 1960s, the *hukou* system has created: “social segregation and social disparity.” The social dualism created a “chasm in [the] Chinese society” which came into terms in different social and personal levels (Chan and Zhang 1999: 830). Since the 1960s only urban *hukou* holders were able to be assigned to a job in the urban sector. City jobs were reserved only

to those holding a local urban registration status, and those holding a rural *hukou* could not compete for a job in the urban sector (Whyte 2010: 12). Besides employment, housing in urban areas was also bureaucratically controlled and allocated. Up until the late 1980s, most urban residents received their housing through their working units (*danwei*). There was no housing market and a person holding a rural *hukou* was not entitled or able to rent or purchase a house in one of China's cities. Basic food necessities and medical care was also provided to urban residents through their working units, and except for the emergency rooms, clinics were off-limits to non-local residents as well. In addition, city schools were closed to non-local residents, and only those holding an urban *hukou* could enroll their children into city schools which were considered significantly better (Whyte 2010: 12).¹⁷

After Mao Zedong's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution (1976), China has undergone significant economic and social reforms which had a dramatic influence on both the rural and the urban sectors. Since 1978, China's economic growth has been extremely rapid, reaching close to ten percent a year for three decades and generating dramatic improvements in the average living standards of the Chinese citizens (Beaver, Hou and Wang 1995; Whyte 2010: 4).¹⁸ In recent years there have been initiations to conduct major reforms in China's inland rural areas. In an effort to advance China's economic and social development, government leaders announced an urbanization target of 70% by 2025. Instead of expanding China's megacities, this future urbanization would be characterized by the growth of rural towns and small cities. There

¹⁷ Up until today, in most large cities, it is still extremely difficult for migrants' children to enter the local education system. This is still considered a significant barrier which has tremendous social implications.

¹⁸ For example, by 1984, peasant family per capita income in China had risen 62% over that of 1980 (Fu 1984, cited in Beaver, Hou and Wang 1995).

are rural villages that have done quite well in terms of prosperity and in some areas the urban/rural divide is not so sharp anymore (Hillman and Ungar 2013: 3).

As part of China's "Open Door" policy and after the third Plenary Session of the eleventh Congress in 1978, Deng Xiaoping declared on four special economic zones in southern China: Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen. In 1984, the Chinese government further declared on fourteen coastal cities as special areas for overseas investment. Deng Xiaoping's main objective was to open China to the outside world and to attract foreign investments.

Although China has undergone massive economic reforms, statistics on urban and rural household's average income show that the gap between the urban and the rural sector has further deepened since the end of the 1970s (see figure 4). In 1978, when the reforms were only initiated, the income ratio between urban and rural residents was 2.56: 1, i.e. urban residents' average income was 2.56 times of that of rural people. In 1983, after the villages returned to the "Family Responsibility System (*Jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi*)," the farmers' incomes grew and the income ratio was reduced to 1.82: 1. The gap between the annual income of the urban and the rural households began to grow again after 1985, reaching a ratio of 3.31:1 in 2011 (Xinhua net 2010; China Statistical Yearbook 2012).

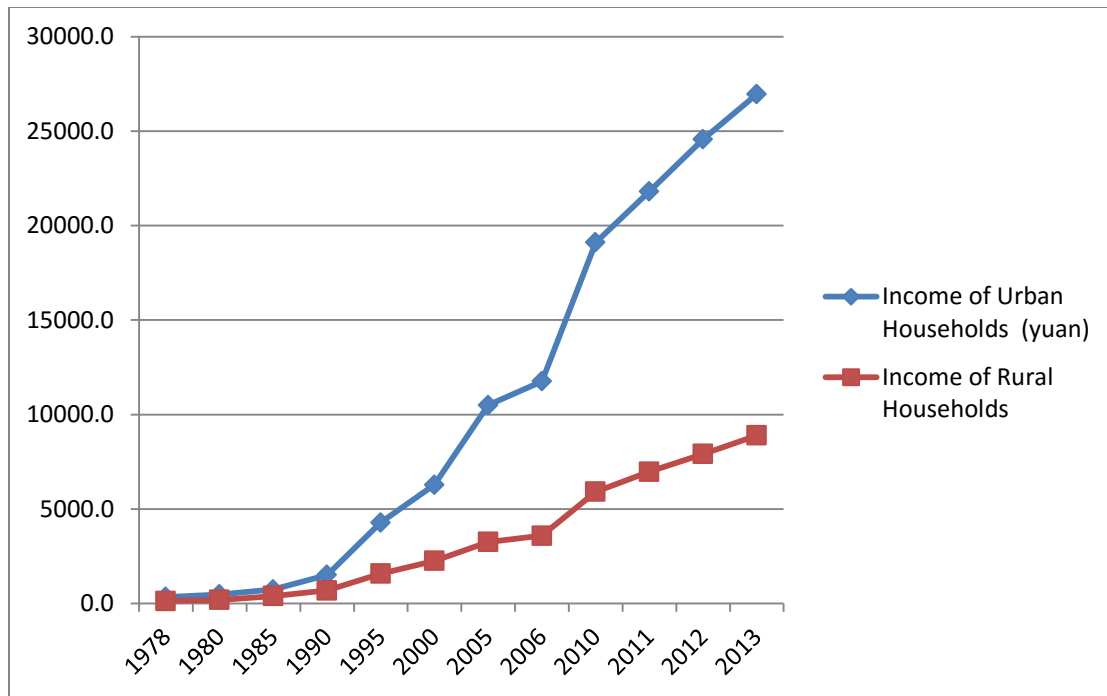


Figure 5: Increasing gap of income between rural and urban households
(China Statistical Yearbook 2014)

In addition to the income disparity, the gap between the urban and the rural sector comes into terms in other aspects as well. Reports show that the living conditions in many villages are still very low in comparison to the infrastructure in the cities. A report published by China's Academy of Social Sciences in 2005 found that in the early 2000s about half of all the villages in China did not have access to running water, and that 300 million people in rural China still did not have permanent access to safe drinking water. 40,000 administrative villages were still inaccessible by public road; and roads to 70% of China's villages were not paved. In more than 50% of the villages 20 million people were still not connected to electricity; 7% of the villages did not have access to telephones, and 50 million villagers were not connected to television or radio (Rosenberg 2013). Households' consumption patterns as well as households' access to

basic consumer needs also reflect the disparities between rural and urban households.¹⁹ One of the main reasons for the growing gap between the rural and the urban sectors is that the State has been prioritizing the development of cities and the urban economy. Moreover, most of the investments were made in coastal areas, what resulted in an apparent inequality between the coastal and inland provinces (Park 2008: 41-42; Rosenberg 2013: 64).

Following the launch of the economic reforms, even though peasants were able to leave their hometowns and migrate to one of China's cities, the social boundary between the rural and the urban sector which deepened during the Mao era continued to exist. Inequalities caused by the *hukou* system have systematically prevented labor migrants from enjoying equal access to social services in large cities. Estimations are that more than 260 million migrants, who live in one of China's metropolis areas, are not entitled to the same benefits as those who hold a local urban *hukou* (An 2013). Moreover, the *hukou* system and its implications have created social and cultural boundaries which turned the labor migrants into "marginal citizens" (Fong and Murphy 2006).

The gap between the rural and the urban sector as well as labor migrants' marginal positions in the cities is one of the central issues which occupy contemporary social and political discussions in mainland China. In an article published by *Xinhua Net*, China's official news agency after the Third Plenary Session of the Seventeenth CPC which took place in 2008, the pressing need for a reform is highly stated. According to the article, the Chinese central government will conduct major efforts to end the urban-rural dual structure, and will work towards a reform in the household registration system (Xinhua Wang 2008). By introducing a

¹⁹ For example, in 2009 among 100 households: there were 135.6 computers in urban areas and 108.9 in rural areas; 96 washing machines in urban areas and 53.1 in rural areas; 106.8 air conditionings in urban areas and 12.1 in the villages (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2010).

possibility for major reform in the *hukou* system, the central government is also lowering the flames of potential social unrest. In 2014, a plan issued by the state council is planned to remove the distinction between urban and rural residents for 100 million rural labor migrants. The plan is meant to help migrant workers to access local services and social welfare. Yet, Chinese experts argue that these changes will have limited impact. For example, since the document does not refer to the crucial question of land rights, it is argued that in many cases labor migrants are reluctant to adopt an urban *hukou* because that will mean losing their land rights (Branigan 2014).

Scholars argue that the *hukou* system remains largely potent and intact. According to Chan and Buckingham (2008: 582) “the cumulative effect of these reforms is not the abolition of the *hukou*, but devolution of responsibility for *hukou* policies to local governments, which in many cases actually makes permanent migration of peasants to cities harder than before.” Feiling Wang, a professor at Georgia Tech and author of *Organisation Through Division and Exclusion: China's Hukou System*, said: “The system is simply too important to get rid of: it helps the government to rule” (Branigan 2014).

The caricature below depicts one of the major and common criticisms of the *hukou* system. On the upper part of the composition the sign says “get ready.” Two people are preparing for the race at the starting line while a third person is a few steps back. Attached to his ankle are cuffs which have a piece of paper saying: *waidi hukou* (an outsider *hukou* holder). In other words, the meaning of this caricature is that a person not holding a local *hukou* who in most cases is a labor migrant, is considered to have fewer opportunities and begins his “life journey” far behind a person holding a local *hukou*. Moreover, it also demonstrates that the migrant’s journey does not begin when she leaves her home province.

During the past three decades labor migration became one of the central ways people in rural China provide for their families (Murphy, Zhou and Tao 2015). Although in most cases labor migration doesn't allow institutional mobility, the lack in economic opportunities in the countryside, and the *suzhi* discourse resulted in the perception of migration as one of the only means to obtain geographical, social, and economic mobility. Millions of children in China's rural areas grow up knowing that migration is an inseparable part of their lives. In recent years, as more and more parents leave their homes in search for employment, the number of children whose parents migrated without them increased as well. Studies show that left-behind children²⁰ account for 37.7% of all rural children and 21.88% of all children in China (ACWF Research Group 2013, cited in Murphy, Zhou and Tao 2015). As a result, migration is perceived as a fundamental part of rural people's lives, even before they begin considering it as an actual possibility.

²⁰ The marginal position of rural parents in the cities, and their lack of access to local social benefits such as health care and education, makes it extremely difficult for them to bring their children with them to the cities (Fan 2003).

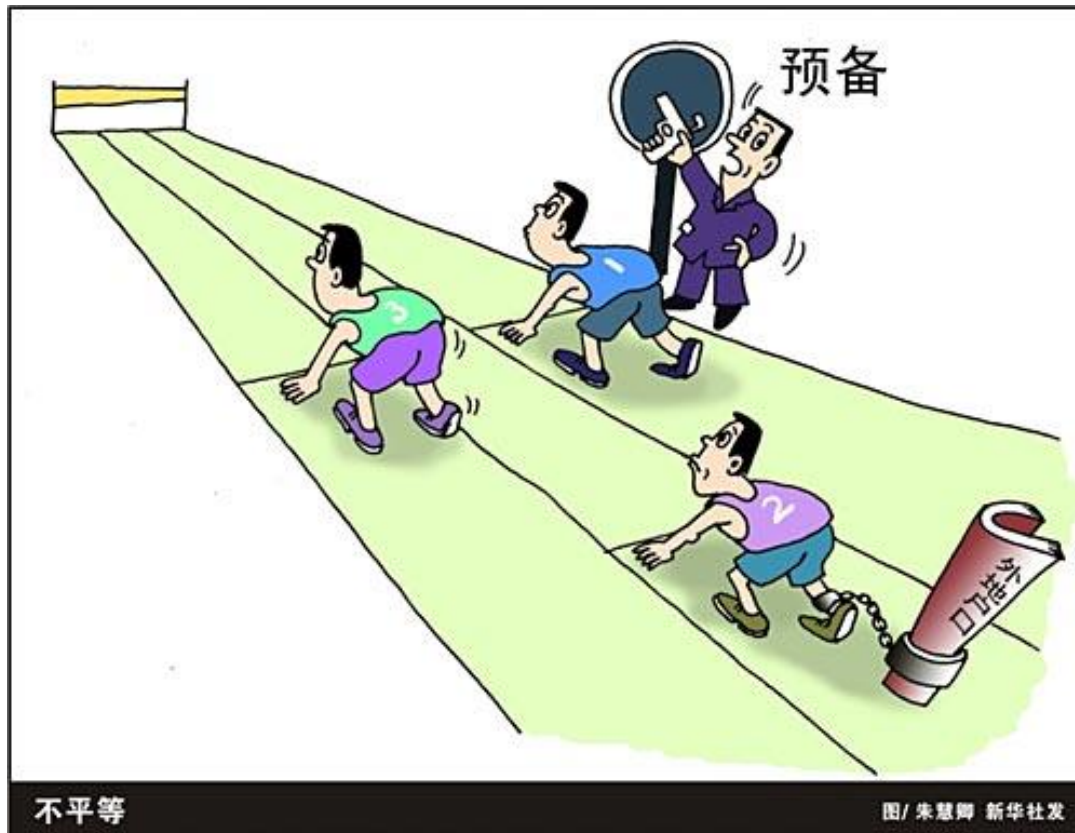


Figure 6 “Not equal” (*bu pingdeng*) (Xinhua Wang 2008)

3.2 A GENDERED IMPACT ON THE GAP BETWEEN THE RURAL AND THE URBAN SECTOR

The *hukou* system and gap between the rural and the urban sector do not influence young men and women in the same way. Rural female migrants’ motivations for out-migration are also related to the structural factors which determine women’s low social position (Fan and Huang 2001: 231). For centuries, although there were significant regional, ethnic, and class differences, girls and women’s family and social position was considered inferior. The positions of boys and girls were mainly reflected in common sayings such as: “a son keeps incense at the ancestral

alter burning” and “investing in a daughter is like pouring water onto another's field” (Attané and Guilmoto 2007; Shi 2009, cited in Murphy, Ran and Xi 2011).

In the beginning of the 20th century with the ending of the Confucian bureaucratic system, intellectuals began to develop a strong sense of mission to shape the new modes of thought and behavior. Instead of seeking solutions in traditional thought, early modern writers turned towards the future, reaching beyond China's borders and embracing the new in an attempt to assert China's place and ensure its survival in the modernizing world (Pease 1995: 279-280). As I have described above, the search for China's modernity was closely related to class differences and to the urban/rural divide. However, in addition to these aspects, the critique of the family system and the issue of women's liberation provided one of the most significant terrains on which China endeavored to construct its modernity, and the public discourse on women in China underwent significant changes (Johnson 1993: 28; Rofel 1999: 44).

Most studies about the changes in women's social position during the first half of the twentieth century focused on the May Fourth movement's criticism of the Confucian values regarding family traditional norms and women's inferior position. These studies also reported on the changes which began to take place in women's everyday lives (e.g. Johnson, 1983; Gilmartin 1995; Rofel, 1999; Leutner and Spakowski, 2005; Brownell and Wasserstorm 2002; Bailey 2006, 2012). Although in rural areas some of the mechanism that tied women to traditional roles was weakening, the new cultural currents of the May Fourth movement generally failed to reach the villages. Most of these changes took place in urban areas where the exposure to western culture was stronger (Johnson 1993: 33-34).

The political and social changes that took place after the rise to power of the Communists in 1949 had a tremendous impact on women's position in society. The early 1950s is considered

a period, by which women's rights were dealt with more actively than at any time before or since. The "Marriage Law" published by the Communist Party on May 1, 1950 stated the minimum age for marriages, prohibited arranged marriages, stated that a man and a woman are allowed to choose their spouse freely, and that widows are permitted to remarry (Davis and Harrell 1993).

The law had a profound influence on the structure of the family and on women's position in the Chinese society. However, since the early 1950s, the reform of women's social and family position was left to occur as a result from other social, economic and political changes that China has undergone in the pursuit of economic development and building socialism (Johnson 1993). The liberation of Chinese women has been continuously set aside as "secondary" in importance to "more pressing needs" of land reform, of production, and of economic reform. While the Communist government embraced gender equality as a principle, it still saw revolution through the "cultural lens of patriarchy" (Wolf 1985: 261). The CCP's emphasis on class as the primary cause for inequality resulted in the viewing of gender as peripheral to the proletarian struggle, and the women remained second class citizens within a patriarchal society (Wolf 1985; Park 1992; Gilmartin et al. 1994).

The launching of The Family Planning Policy (*Jihua shengyu zhengce*) in 1978 had a major impact on the lives of China's girls and boys. When the policy was implemented, each couple was allowed to have only one child. However, any couple facing financial difficulties, mainly those in rural areas whose first child is a girl, could apply for the birth of a second child by going through the necessary formalities. In addition, in ethnic minority areas, the policies were also more flexible. In recent years, the rapid decrease in the birth rate, combined with stable or improving life expectancy, has led to an increasing proportion of elderly people and an increase in the ratio between elderly parents and adult children. As a result, urban families whose

one of the parents is an only child were entitled to have a second child (Hu 2002). On October 29, 2015 the Communist Party ended the “One-Child Policy,” and all couples are now allowed to have two children. It is still unclear that the change will have a significant impact on the birth rate. Moreover, scholars argue that although the party has relaxed the policy to a certain degree, it still controls women’s fertility (The Economist 2015).

Since the introducing of the policy in 1978 there has been a steady increase in the sex ratio, especially in China’s rural and poor provinces. In 1979 the sex ratio was in the biologically normal range of around 106 males per 100 females. However, the gap has deepened since the mid-1980s, from 108 males per 100 females born between 1985 and 1989, to 124 boys for every 100 girls born between 2000 and 2004 (The Economist 2010). In urban areas there are signs that girls’ position in their families has improved dramatically. However, there are verified local differences, with ratios equal to 1.3 in China’s poorer provinces (Hesketh, Li and Zhu 2005).

There are strong indications that both urban and rural families choose to have sex selective abortions, but the gap in the sex ratio is much more acute in rural areas, especially in second births. Since most rural couples are permitted to have two children, the sex ratio for the first birth is within the normal limits but it rises sharply with birth order. If the second child is female, it is not uncommon that parents decide to terminate the pregnancy, allowing them to have another child in an attempt to have a son. Murphy, Tao, and Lu (2011) conclude that even though they witnessed variations in intensity of son preference within China's patriarchal rural society, China's patrilineal system clearly maintains the “social, cultural, and economic need for at least one son” (683).

The imbalance in the sex ratio was also apparent in the kindergarten my daughter attended in Hong Kong where close to two thirds of the children were boys. Wang Jian, a

mainland marriage migrant whose daughter attended the same kindergarten, did not seem surprised when I mentioned to her that there are very few girls in the class. Without needing to think about the reason she immediately explained: “Most of the mothers in the kindergarten are immigrants from mainland China and in mainland China people still prefer boys. Everybody knows that women in mainland China have abortions when they find out that their fetus is a female.”

China bans such tests for fear it will lead parents to selectively abort their unborn child in favor of having a boy, however, demographic patterns indicate that this practice is not rare and also that parents have found a variety of ways to reveal their fetus’s sex. In 2014, a mainland man was arrested for being suspected of arranging sex tests in Hong Kong for pregnant mainland women. According to the report, the women sent their blood tests to Hong Kong and received a result in just a few days. After finding out that they were carrying girls, some of the women had abortions and others arranged adoptions (Zhuang 2014).

In addition to the acute sex ratio, studies about rural families’ conceptions regarding their children’s education demonstrate that rural parents believe that pursuing education is more significant for boys than for girls. For example, one study documented a rural mother stating that while girls should study well and perhaps “learn a skill later,” boys should study as hard as they can otherwise they “have no chance” (Jin Chi, and Nirmala Rao 2003: 344).²¹ Further discussions I had with mainland women from different social backgrounds revealed similar views. Li Xian, an educated urban mainland woman explained that because it was still common that after marriage girls would move out of the house to live with the husband’s family, the

²¹ A survey conducted in 1995 shows that 23.2% of girls ages six or older have never attended school, compared with 8.5% of boys (Fan 2003: 28).

majority of rural families still believed that it is not “worth” investing in the daughter’s education. She added that if a family has to choose between investing in their son or their daughter’s education, they will definitely choose to invest in their son, and that as a result, most rural women have very few opportunities to improve their living conditions.²²

Although women’s position in society and in their families changed significantly over the years, gender inequality in contemporary China has not declined dramatically (Fan et al. 1998: 230). While there are indications that women’s labor opportunities in rural areas have improved as a result of China’s economic reforms and the growth of the industrial sector (Beaver, Hou, and Wan 1995; Murphy, Tao, and Lu 2011: 667),²³ during the 1980s and 1990s young women were still very often considered marginal to the rural economy and men were those who usually had a better chance of obtaining non-agricultural work (Bauer et al. 1992; Fu 1984; Honig and Hershatter 1988). Socio-cultural traditions, which are rooted in Confucianism, reinforced a division of labor, and both men and women labor migrants were channeled into “gender-segregated jobs” (Fan 2003: 24). This division became a dominant mode of household production in China’s rural area. In some cases, with the economic growth, women workers were gradually eased out of the labor force to take primary responsibility for their homes and their

²² In recent years, gender disparities in basic education in China have decreased dramatically. However in China’s poorer rural areas it remains a valid concern (Hannum et al. 2009: 5). As a result of son preference, in China’s rural areas, in many cases, young girls, more than boys, are under pressure to leave school early to help with farming (Wolf 1985: 126-133). In the film *Up the Yangzi* (Chang 2007) a rural family is forced to leave their home as a result of the construction of a dam. When the family’s conditions turn for the worst, they urge the oldest daughter to leave school and go work on a tourists’ boat. Although the girl wishes to continue studying, dreaming of becoming a scientist, she is still forced by her parents to abandon her goal.

²³ In a 1986 report of 323 counties in 14 provinces, women accounted for 35%-45% of the total number of workers in specialized trades (Xiao 1986, cited in Beaver, Hou and Wang 1995: 206). In a study about the implications of the economic reforms on rural women’s lives in two different townships in northern China, it is demonstrated that in the township of Taoxianxiang, women’s positions in their families have improved dramatically. According to Taoxianxiang’s party secretary, women’s earnings have also increased: “from this labor, women’s earnings are comparable to, or greater than, those of laborers in factories, the preferred occupation for Taoxianxiang men” (Beaver, Hou and Wang 1995: 222).

families' welfare (Beaver, Hou and Wang 1995: 208; Fan 2003). As a result of rapid industrial development, the traditional notion that "men are in charge of the outside things, and women are in charge of the inside things" (*nan zhu wai; nu zhu nei*) has reemerged, and with it a new social status of the housewife (*jiating funu*) (Zhang and Ma 1988, cited in Beaver, Hou and Wang 1995: 212).

3.3 THE SUZHI DISCOURSE AND IM/MOBILITY

The development of a market-oriented economy resulted in major changes in the rural sector. In the early 1980s the Communist government decided that as opposed to the collective system which placed the responsibility on communal decision making and rewards, the agricultural sector will return to using the "Family Responsibility System," which meant that the family returned to be the basic unit for decision making (McMillan, John Whalley and Lijing Zhu 1989). The system began to be implemented in 1979, and by the end of 1984, 97 percent of farm families operated under this system (McMillan, John Whalley and Lijing Zhu 1989).

The villages' return to the "Family-Responsibility System" created a surplus of young workers who were looking for employment opportunities. Until the mid-1980s, there were still strict controls on rural-to-urban migration; for example, people were only able to purchase food or housing in the place where they were registered. This limitation resulted in people's lack of ability to leave their hometowns in search for better opportunities. Yet, in the mid-1980s; as part of China's movement towards a market-oriented economy, the government eased its regulations, and people searching for employment opportunities were able to move into the cities (Luo 2006). The government allowed peasants to obtain permanent residents permits which enabled them to migrate outside their hometowns (Fan and Huang 1998). The opening of factories in China's

coastal cities together with the changes in the economic and agricultural system in the rural areas led to the movement of millions of young villagers from the rural areas and into the cities. The rapid development of the urban labor market has at the same time increased the demand for cheap labor in industrial and service sector jobs (Fan and Li 2002).

Since the early 1980s, the number of rural-to-urban labor migrants has been growing rapidly. In the early 1990s the estimations were that about 50-60 million people were migrant workers. This number has risen to about 100 million in the early 2000s, and in 2009 it rose to 150 million. Based on China's latest population census, in 2010 about 261.4 million workers have been living and working outside their registered area (Chan 2013). As part of China's vast inner migration process rural females began to migrate to China's urban areas as well. Surveys on female rural-to-urban labor migration estimate that during the 1990s, around 35 percent of all labor migrants were female. This number has increased and in the beginning of the 21st century, female migrants constituted about half of all labor migrants (Luo 2006: 69).

Since the end of the 20th century, in addition to being a source of livelihood, the motivations for rural-to-urban migration were closely related to the launching of the campaign of "Raising the Quality of the Population" (*Tigao renkou suzhi*). In the past three decades, the term *suzhi* has become a major component in contemporary China's governance and society, and it has had a significant influence on rural migrants' motivations for becoming labor migrants and on rural migrants' experiences in the cities. Although *suzhi* is usually translated into "quality," the use of the term and the different meanings it has been carrying are much more complex. Since the late 1970s, as part of China's transition from a planned to a market economy, the meanings and usage of the term have undergone significant variations. During the 1980s Chinese intellectuals were concerned with what was holding China from modernizing and it became a

highly challengeable topic in Chinese society. The Chinese government was attributing China's failure to modernize to the "low quality" (*suzhi di*) of its population, especially in rural areas (Anagnost 2004: 190).

Since the 1980s, the policy's main aim has been to improve professional skills and academic and educational achievements in order to advance China's position as an economic power in the global arena and to create a strong China in relation to the Western countries. The idea has been the creation of a new socialist being through the improvement and development of each person's ideals, morals, education, and discipline (Judd 2000: 22). The changes in the meanings and usage of the term *suzhi* are related to another common idea in contemporary China that human life has become "a new frontier for capital accumulation" (Anagnost 2004: 189). While earlier usage of the term implied that the *suzhi* of a person is related to deeply internalized qualities, in contemporary China it is quite obvious that a person's (usually referring to a child) qualities are greatly influenced by each person's family, social, political, cultural, and economic capital (Woronov 2003: 35-36; Kipnis 2006: 297).

In contemporary Chinese society, the concept *suzhi* has become "highly mobile and seems capable of being deployed in almost any context in which comparisons between individuals, communities, and populations are being made regardless of gender, location, class, or ethnicity (or indeed because of them)" (Sun 2009: 618). Studies began to show how the term *suzhi* has entered discourses regarding the rural/urban division. Sun (2009) argues that a common perception among urbanites is that *suzhi* is usually found lacking in rural labor migrants who have moved to one of China's wealthier metropolises and industrial centers. The term has been widely used to criticize the various scarcities of rural migrants from "lack of formal schooling and low literacy to poor personal hygiene and table manners" (618). Anagnost (2004) argues that

the *suzhi* discourse can be found most elaborated in relation to the body of the rural migrant and the middle-class only child, which are thought to be placed at two opposite endings. While the middle-class urban family strives hard to build “quality” into their child in order to become a neoliberal subject, rural migrants struggle to reach the city in order to escape rurality (Anagnost 2004: 192).

The marriage migrants I came to know in Sheung Shui had left their hometowns and migrated to Shenzhen during the 1990s, when the economic reforms already had a significant influence on the rural sector. However, China’s coastal cities developed at a dramatic rate towards the end of the 1990s, and the economic gap between the rural and urban sectors widened rapidly. Even though *hukou* is a formidable barrier to institutional mobility, in comparison with the economic opportunities of the village, the city is viewed as a desirable destination. As a result, in order to escape their rural destiny, millions of young single rural women chose labor migration as a means of achieving social and economic mobility.

3.4 “IN ORDER TO MOVE UP, YOU NEED TO MOVE ELSEWHERE”²⁴

After Shenzhen was declared as a special economic zone (SEZ) in 1979, it became one of the cities which attracted large amounts of labor migrants. Shenzhen's exceptional economic development is manifested in the growth of its population. In 1980, before millions of migrants flooded the area, Shenzhen was a small city with 310,000 residents and less than 30,000 workers. At the end of 2000, the population increased to 4.33 million (Ngai 2004), and in 2010, the city's population has reached eleven million (China's National Census 2010). Most importantly,

²⁴ Vertovec 2009: 1.

however, is that close to seventy percent of Shenzhen's population is not considered permanent residents, which means that they do not hold a local residential status (*hukou*) (Ngai 2004). Not only that the number of labor migrants rose from less than 1% in 1979 to 72% in 1994 (Kuhn 2010: 9), Shenzhen has the largest concentration of female migrants between the ages of 15 and 29 (Andors 1988; Liang and Chen 2004).

As I discussed above, in contemporary China rural women continue to be subject to various constraints which limit their social, economic, and physical mobility. At the same time, the economic reforms have created new opportunities for young rural women to become labor migrants in search for better opportunities. In Pun Ngai's study in garment and electronics factories in Shenzhen she found that 90 percent of the total labor force in the light manufacturing industries was “young, female, and under 25 years of age” (Ngai 2004: 30). In other words, Shenzhen's growth has depended to a large extent on rural female labor migrants. In this gender-segregated labor market men are usually channeled to work in heavy manufacturing industries while women are often directed to textile and manufacturing industries and the service sector. . Moreover, the female labor force is extremely homogenous, comprising mostly young and single peasant women (Fan 2003: 27-28; Zhang 2014: 17).

Even after the women permanently immigrated to Hong Kong, Shenzhen continued to be a significant part of their journey. Most of the women spent many years living and working in Shenzhen before meeting their husband, and they considered it a familiar place which they often missed. The close distance between Sheung Shui and Shenzhen enabled them to travel to Shenzhen on regular basis, for shopping, getting a haircut, visiting a favorite restaurant or meeting friends and relatives. When Sheung Shui marriage migrants discussed their experience as labor migrants in Shenzhen, they made a clear distinction between the poverty that had

characterized their past in the countryside and their life in Shenzhen, which they considered to be a place that could fulfill their dreams.²⁵ A-xian, who became a labor migrant at the age of sixteen explained:

I was born in a village in Guangxi Proving and came to Shenzhen when I was sixteen years old. My home was very poor... it is a rural area and I couldn't continue my studies. So I followed my classmates and my friends to Shenzhen. I was very young back then, and did not understand anything. If someone told me to do something I did it. I worked in many places, and I even went to work in a factory. Afterwards my brother arrived and he opened a small business so we worked together, and it was better.

The *suzhi* discourse did not only highlight the gap between the rural and urban sectors, it underscored the perception of the limiting constraints imposed by the poor conditions in China's villages. Yang Chen's narrative below illustrates the commonly held perception that the village did not offer any hope for young women:

I was born in Henan Province and left home when I was fifteen years old. My father gave me 100 Yuan and told me that this was all he could give me. I came to Shenzhen in 1994, and it was very difficult back then. My purpose for coming to Shenzhen was to work hard

²⁵ In a study conducted by Tamara Jacka (2006) among members of the Migrant Women's Club in Beijing in the early 2000's, 23.9 percent of the respondents cited the backwardness of their hometown or the poverty of their family as a significant reason for out-migration. Yet, some of the migrants also had nostalgic feelings towards their childhood in the villages. Jacka argues that the hardships and alienation they experienced in the city caused them to paint a rosier picture of life in the countryside (130).

and to change my life on my own (*wo yao kao ziji de nuli jiu gaibian wo de shenghuo*). In Shenzhen I became a nanny. I took care of two children and you know how much I earned? One hundred Yuan per month, but I said, never mind, I can do it! They gave me a place to stay, provided me with food, and I really thank them nowadays. They taught me everything I know!

Yang Chen not only emphasized her desire to build a “new life” in Shenzhen, she also highlighted the significant change that had taken place in her life since she first left her hometown. Moreover, she attributed this change to the urban family she had worked for and the urban environment in which she lived. Her assertion that this family had “taught her everything she knows” echoes discourses about the social position of rural migrants, and the common conception that city dwellers have higher *suzhi* than rural people

We were sitting in her cozy living room in Hong Kong, when Wang Jian, who has been living in Hong Kong for eight years, told me about life in the village she grew up in. She was born in a small village in Hunan Province, and grew up with nine sisters and a brother. As a child they had very little to eat, and she described their lives as extremely difficult. She told me that because her family was very poor her mother became sick, her teeth turned black and fell one after the other. Wang Jian’s mother died at a very young age and her older sisters had to take care of the whole family. At the age of 22 Wang Jian left Hunan Province and migrated to Shenzhen. After meeting her husband in Shenzhen she had to wait seven years until she received the permit to immigrate to Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong Wang Jian lived with her husband and daughter on the sixth floor of a high-rise building close to the Sheung Shui’s railway station. The apartment used to belong to

her parents-in-law who passed away few years back. Wang Jian often complained that the apartments in Hong Kong were very small and she was not pleased with the size of their own apartment; it was about 30 square meters, and had enough space to barely fit the necessary furniture. Nevertheless, she thought that Hong Kong was a good place to live in, especially for her only daughter: “I think that living in Hong Kong is much better for my daughter, mainly because of the difference in the education system.” Almost each time that Sheung Shui marriage migrants discussed the living conditions in the villages they grew up in, it was followed by a comparison to their living conditions in Hong Kong, and the opportunities Hong Kong holds for their children.

The poor living conditions in the villages and the lack of economic opportunities were closely related to the desires of young village women to experience new things and develop themselves. A-lin, who I mentioned above, explained: “I wanted to look at the outside world, to grow up and experience (*chuxi*); I wanted to find employment, to earn money and to change my living conditions (*gaibian jiating de shenghuo*).” I heard similar explanations from other Sheung Shui marriage migrants, including: “to make a better life” (*weile rang shenghuo sheng de geng hao*), “because my home environment was not good and I wanted to go out and find work” (*jiali huanjing buhao, xiang chuqu dagong*), “I wanted to see what is outside” (*xiang qu wai kankan*), and “to change my life” (*gaibian ziji de shenghuo*).

These explanations of Sheung Shui marriage migrants show that rural-to-urban labor migration was considered a means of “moving up” and fulfilling one’s dreams. Most of the internal migrants were young single rural males and females who left China’s inland provinces in search of better opportunities in one of China’s metropolitan areas. Despite the hard work, the difficult living conditions and the low salaries which the city usually offered them, many

migrants shared the belief that the city provides many possibilities and that only in the city would they be able to earn more, develop and gain experiences.

Migration from the village to an urban area not only offers myriad opportunities, it also contributes to geographic and occupational mobility. In the city peasants work in new industries and earn higher incomes. However, after the initial upward move from the rural to the urban labor force, most migrant workers are unable to progress to higher positions in urban industries, even when they move between jobs (Li 2004). Many migrants experience exclusion and social disadvantage and remain a marginalized group (Fong and Murphy 2006; Chang 2008; Han, Huang and Han 2011). This social segregation is one of the consequences of the *hukou* system, and of hegemonic discourses which created social dualism and a split in Chinese society (Chan and Zhang 1999: 830). The perceptions about the relatively low status of the rural sector and especially the less developed provinces are based on a structural dichotomy between “centers and peripheries, knower and known, and the independent and the dependent” (Sun 2009: 618). As a result of this structural dichotomy, although the labor migrants’ main goal is to increase their employment opportunities and improve their living conditions, the migrants who move from the “periphery” to the “center” become subalterns in the city and usually also acquire the status of having low *suzhi* (Anagnost 2004: 192; Sun 2009: 618).

China has undergone great changes in social structure and class hierarchy since the economic reforms of 1978. The economic reforms contributed to the dismantling of many social classifications and divisions such as urban and rural areas, work-unit boundaries, the dichotomous categorization of party leaders and worker, and others (Bian 2002). Nevertheless, in spite of substantial changes in China’s social structure, China’s household registration system continues to have impact on the division between the urban and the rural population (Han, Huang

and Han 2011), and still serves as an important mechanism in distributing resources and determining life opportunities (Chan and Zhang 1999; Wu and Treiman 2004). This social exclusion has effectively prevented rural migrants from attaining urban status, which is still considered higher than rural status in China's household-registration system (Han, Huang and Han 2011: 206-7).

As a result of peasants' difficulties to improve their social status in the city as labor migrants, after a few years of working, many choose to return to their villages (Han, Huang and Han 2011: 209). For most labor migrants social, economic and political constraints continue to influence their everyday experiences, and the journey from the village to the city does not end in acquiring a local *hukou* which enables institutional upward mobility. For many migrant women, the pressure to get married escalates once they reach their early 20s. Even if they manage to find urban work, in most cases marriage means giving up their job and returning to the village. In many cases the household division binds the women to their village and limits their mobility opportunities (Fan 2003).

Yang Chen, a 36-year-old labor migrant who has been living in Shenzhen for more than 20 years told me that most rural Chinese women at her age, including her sisters, are already married, taking care of children and the rural household. She explained that she decided to become a labor migrant because she was unsatisfied with the life that she believed was expecting her as a rural woman:

When I was two years old my mother died, and I grew up with my father and my two older sisters. Our family was very poor, and I was considered very naughty (*tiaopi*)... I left home when I was fifteen years old. If I would not have left, I was probably married

when I was eighteen and I didn't want that. By now I was probably at home with my children. I managed to change my life!

Yang Chen's narrative was quite exceptional. Even though many of the female migrants who left the villages and become labor migrants have expressed their will to postpone marriage, after a few years of working as labor migrants, they usually returned to the village to get marry and start a family (Jacka 2006). Yang Chen decided to remain in Shenzhen, yet even after 20 years she still held a rural *hukou*.

The marriage migrants I came to know in Sheung Shui did not manage to change their *hukou* even after working in Shenzhen for several years. From the marriage migrants' perspective, marrying across the border and obtaining a HKID was another step in their journey towards achieving upward social mobility. *Suzhi* also determined the strategies employed by Sheung Shui marriage migrants in their pursuit of upward geographic and social mobility. To escape their rural destiny they left home in their early teens and migrated to one of China's cities. Many of the women believed that life in the village was constraining, and explained that they had migrated to the city in order to "change their life." Yet, as labor migrants they were situated at the margins of society, and their *suzhi* remained low in the eyes of the local population.

Studies show that the exposure of female rural migrants to urban life also influenced their marital habits. Thus, among the new opportunities the city had to offer, many rural women reported that they viewed the city as an opportunity to marry an urban husband (Murphy 2002). A-lin told me that, like most of her friends, she had arrived in Shenzhen in the hope of marrying a man of a higher social position. While marriage to an urban man is considered desirable, it is quite rare for a rural migrant woman to marry such a man. Most urban men are reluctant to marry

migrant women because of their perceived lower social status, as well as the added difficulty if the wife and future mother does not hold a local, urban *hukou* (Jacka 2006: 1313). From the women's perspective, cross-border marriage enables them to gain legal status, to achieve upward social mobility and to "build quality" into their children.

4.0 SHEUNG SHUI MARRIAGE MIGRANTS

Wang Jian was the first mainland marriage migrant I came to know in Sheung Shui. When we met she was 39 years old, married to a Hong Kong man for 13 years and had a daughter who was four years old. Our daughters were at the same age and it was after the girls became friends that we came to know each other as well. Sheung Shui is Hong Kong's closest town to mainland China's border, and it has a relatively large percentage of mainland marriage migrants. Wang Jian had been living in Sheung Shui for a relatively long time and had many mainland marriage migrant friends. She was considered by her friends as someone who had a lot of knowledge about the local living situation and when they needed any kind of assistance, they often consulted her. A very short while after Wang Jian and I first met we became close friends and later on she turned out to be one of my key informants.

When I met Wang Jian in 2011 she was a housewife. Similar to all of the families that I came to know in Sheung Shui, the traditional phrase "men are in charge of the outside things, and women are in charge of the inside things" characterized her marriage as well. She did not have a paying job and her husband Lam who worked as a luggage carrier in a five-star hotel in Kowloon spent many hours at work. He often left the house very early, returned home late, worked night shifts and also during the weekends. Wang Jian was the main caretaker and she rarely received any assistance from other family members.

In her book about Japanese housewives, Goldstein-Gidoni (2012: 97-98) mentions that the question of the division of labor at the home sphere is normally discussed in relation to working mothers, who are pressured between their employment outside the home and the burden

carried out as a result of the “second shift” (Hochschild and Machung 1989) which includes different house chores and child rearing. Goldstein-Gidoni argues that it is also important to consider the division of labor at the home sphere with regard to women who do not hold paying jobs, as it can contribute to our understanding of women and their perspectives on self and social role. In this chapter I discuss the everyday experiences of the Sheung Shui marriage migrants. As I will demonstrate, the longitudinal nature of my study enabled me to witness changes in the women’s everyday practices in Hong Kong, which proved to be very meaningful to my understanding of their experiences as wives, mothers and migrants.

4.1 SOCIAL GATHERINGS AND SOCIAL RELATIONS AS EMPOWERING STRATEGIES

A short while after I met Wang Jian, she invited me to have breakfast with a group of her friends. The group I spent most of my mornings with from that first time on included six women but often other marriage migrants who lived nearby joined our morning gatherings as well. All women were originally from mainland China; they were between the ages of 33-40, completed nine years of education, married to a Hong Kong man and had one or two children. During the period I conducted my first fieldwork between 2010 and 2011 most of the children were at kindergarten age. In many of the public and private kindergartens in Sheung Shui, half a day of kindergarten lasted between 9 AM to 12 PM and a full day ended at 5 PM. Mainly due to financial reasons, except for two families, all of the Sheung Shui marriage migrants’ children attended half day of kindergarten. Most of the mothers’ day was dedicated to taking care of their

children and they only had few hours during the mornings in which they did not spend time with them.

Almost every morning after they brought their child/ren to the kindergarten, the women went to have breakfast together, and it soon became my everyday habit as well. We often went to a traditional Cantonese tea house and spent between one to three hours eating, drinking and chatting. The breakfasts were an important part of the Sheung Shui marriage migrants' schedule and at the restaurant we usually encountered other groups of mainland marriage migrants who met there for breakfasts as well.

The Cantonese restaurant we regularly visited was located inside a shopping mall in Sheung Shui center, close to the kindergarten our children attended and it was considered one of the most popular restaurants in town. It was very large, round tables suited to fit more than ten people were scattered around the room, and each table was covered with a light colored table cloth. The floors were covered with a wall-to-wall carpet, and there were no windows, which contributed to a feeling of isolation from the world outside. Large chandeliers were hanging from the ceiling and the florescent lights were very bright. The tables were crowded with families or friends, and all through the day it was very difficult to find an empty table. In most cases, on the way to the kindergarten one of us registered for a table and on our way back our table was ready for us. The restaurant was so popular that in some cases we had to wait more than an hour until our table was ready.

Next to each seat there was a plate, a small bowl, a spoon, a cup for tea and a pair of chop sticks. After everyone sat down, one of the women usually took charge of the order. The menu was made from paper and the guests were supposed to mark their order right on the menu. Then they would call for the waitress out loud and she would come and take the order. Many of the

waitresses or the cleaning workers were mainland marriage migrants and the group of women I came with often knew them and spoke with them for a few minutes. On some occasions the workers were from the same hometown as the guests and then they would exchange few sentences in their mother tongue.

After the order was placed, one of the women, usually the one who was in charge of the order in that particular meal began to clean the dishes which were on the table. She would pick up all of the spoons, cups and chopsticks and place them in a large bowl that was brought to the table. Then when all of the dishes were inside the bowl, she poured hot tea from the pot onto the bowl on the dishes. Then she would shake the dishes around so every side received the hot liquid. After few seconds the woman who “washed” the dishes gave them back to the other women. In most cases Wang Jian was in charge of ordering the food and cleaning the dishes. When I asked her what was the reason for “washing the dishes,” which actually seemed very clean she replied that it is a “local custom” and that it is something they only do in Hong Kong.

The women were familiar with the exact gestures they should make during breakfast. For example, when the tea pot was empty they knew that the lid should be lifted. This was a sign which meant that the waitress should fill up the pot. When one of the women poured more tea to her cup, the others tapped on the table so that she would know that she should fill their cups as well. Although most Sheung Shui marriage migrants were not originally from Guangdong Province and were not used to the local food, after a few years of living in Hong Kong they were already familiar with most of the Cantonese dishes. Moreover, their encounter with Hong Kong culture did not occur after immigrating to Hong Kong. Since all of the marriage migrants were labor migrants in Shenzhen before meeting their husbands, many of them visited Hong Kong style restaurants in Shenzhen and were familiar with some of the Cantonese dishes. Although in

contemporary Hong Kong friends often split their bill in joined gatherings, we never split our bill and instead paid in rotation. In keeping with the mainland custom, each of the guests would insist on paying until the rest of us gave up.²⁶

Breakfast usually ended around 11 AM and because the children's school day ended a short while after that, following breakfast we did not return home. Together, we strolled the streets, hanged out in Sheung Shui shopping malls, or bought groceries in the local market. At noon we went to pick up our children together. We usually made our arrangements for the rest of the day as a group. In many cases on our way back home from the kindergarten we made plans for the rest of the afternoon and dinner.

When the weather allowed we spent our afternoons in the square and playgrounds outside the buildings we lived in. The building my family and I resided in was part of a compound which included four buildings. Each building had 33 floors and contained close to 200 families. The compound was very conveniently located close to the train station and stores. The apartments were small (approx. 30 square meters), and as a result the mothers and the children preferred to spend their afternoons outside. Many of the young families who lived in the compound were comprised of a mainland Chinese mother and a Hong Kong father. After the children completed their kindergarten or school tasks the mothers went down to the square and all of the children played together. It was a time for the mothers to meet new mainland neighbors and to chat with women they have not seen for a while. Often at dinner time, we did not return home individually; and usually went up to one of the apartments to have dinner together.

In addition to our everyday gatherings, during the holidays or on special occasions, we met for a meal which included a larger number of marriage migrants. During these gatherings the

²⁶ Although this used to be the custom in Hong Kong as well, in contemporary Hong Kong, especially the young people often split their bills.

host prepared different kinds of dishes, in most cases associated with her hometown. In a special lunch Wang Jian hosted in her apartment to celebrate the Chinese New Year of 2015, attended more than fifteen marriage migrants. Many of them were friends who did not see each other for a relatively long time since they moved to different parts of Hong Kong. The table included more than ten different special Hunan dishes and in addition some of the guests brought their own specialties. Others brought wine or desert. The women took pride in their home dishes and they took photos, uploaded to Facebook, We Chat and sent to their family and friends back home.

The event Wang Jian hosted lasted several hours; the women drank red wine and the atmosphere was very vibrant. At 3:30 PM when it was time to pick up the children from school, most of the guests remained at Wang Jian's apartment and I went with her to school to pick up the children. Wang Jian told me that when she immigrated to Hong Kong there were only few mainland women in Sheung Shui, but that recently more and more mainland women reside in Sheung Shui. Wang Jian explained that as a result it is a "problem" (*wenti*) for her because her apartment is too small to fit all of her new mainland friends. Wang Jian told me that although she has been living in Hong Kong for more than eight years, all of her friends in Hong Kong are originally from mainland China, and that "Hong Kong women look down at us" (the mainland immigrants) (*kan bu qi women*).

As discussed in the introduction, Hongkongers often expressed negative feelings towards the mainland immigrants and tourists. Even Hong Kong men who had a mainland wife revealed negative views about the mainland immigrants. Wang Jian's husband Lam explained that he personally believed that all mainland people want is to take advantage of Hong Kong's resources. Sheung Shui marriage migrants seemed to accept this structural condition and were quite empathetic to the negative views. A-lin and Wang Jian explained that many of the cross-border

marriages are indeed “fake” (*jia*), and that Hong Kong authorities do not have any other choice but to limit the entrance of the mainland women who try to enter Hong Kong and use the city’s welfare system.

As a result of their feelings of exclusion, Sheung Shui marriage migrants maintained very close contacts with each other. They were involved in their friends’ lives, very often counted on each other’s support, and their social networks were a strategy to deal with the isolation they experienced. The women’s mutual assistance and cooperation was especially evident during our joined gatherings. On weekdays when we met for dinner, although the host was in charge of preparing most of the dishes, the other women took a very active part in the preparations and the cleaning afterwards. The meal was a communal activity which was regarded by the women as a joined responsibility. In many cases even choosing the dishes and purchasing the ingredients at the local market was conducted together, and if one of the women went to buy the groceries on her own, her child/ren were taken care of by the other mothers.

When the host was preparing the food in the kitchen, the other women set the table; they did not need to ask her where the utensils were, they were familiar with their friend’s kitchen and felt free opening the refrigerator and the cupboards. When dinner ended, the women acted as if it was their own home; they would wash the bowls, clean the table and contemplate together how to save and pack the leftover food. In some cases the leftovers were packed in boxes and given to the guests to take home for their husbands. Even though in some cases the mainland marriage migrants who participated in the gathering were not close friends or knew each other only for a relatively short while, their husbands’ absence and the isolation from Hong Kong society resulted in a feeling of a shared destiny.

On many different occasions Sheung Shui marriage migrants also felt a certain degree of obligation towards their mainland friends' children. This was very prominent during our social gatherings when the mothers often commented on their friends' children's behavior or addressed the children's requests or problems. For example, when the children were called to stop playing and join the table, one of the mother usually encouraged all of the children (and not only her own) to wash their hands and go sit next to the table. She then went to the washroom and made sure that the children are doing as she asked. The children did not necessarily sit next to their own mother and during the meal the mothers helped each other's children to fill their bowl and even persuaded them to eat.

On a Sunday morning during the summer of 2013 we had a large breakfast with ten mainland marriage migrants. Because it was the summer holiday four children joined our breakfast as well. Chun was a 39 years old mainland marriage migrant from Sichuan, and she was Wang Jian's closest friend. During the period I conducted my fieldwork, Chun discovered that her husband had a mainland girlfriend and that whenever he traveled to Shenzhen for business, he spent time with her.²⁷ The couple got divorced; her husband moved to Shenzhen to live with his girlfriend and almost lost contacts with his children. As a result, Chun went through an extremely difficult period, during which she attempted to take her own life. Chun's mainland friends supported her in any way they could.

²⁷ A mainland "second wife" was a relatively common phenomenon in Hong Kong and mainland women often had a negative image due to the growing number of Hong Kong men who had a young mainland girlfriend during their business travels (Tam 2005). A-lin told me that when her mother-in-law discovered that her son has a mainland girlfriend from Hunan, she disapproved. The reason was that her own husband had a "second wife" from Hunan Province.

During that particular breakfast, Chun's daughter Lily asked her mother for a glass of Coke, but Chun did not agree and continued chatting with her friends. Lily did not give up and asked a few more times. After a short while, Chun lost her patience and began yelling at Lily. Lily started crying and when she did not stop, her mother began hitting her. Wang Jian who was sitting next to Lily hugged her and comforted her. Lily continued crying but only after a few moments Chun calmed down and stopped hitting her daughter. During the whole episode, all of the women sitting at the table did not say a word to Chun but embraced Lily until she stopped crying. The same afternoon, A-lin told me that even if she did not agree with Chun's behavior, she did not want to judge her because everyone has their own way of educating their children. The support Sheung Shui marriage migrants received from their mainland friends was a strategy to deal with and negotiate the structural conditions in their everyday lives.

In addition to the joint meals, playing the Chinese tile game of Mahjong (*da majiang*) was a major component of the Sheung Shui marriage migrants' everyday lives. The game usually took place in one of the women's homes, and in addition to the four players, in many cases, other women arrived with snacks and drinks and the game became a social gathering. Usually, the games lasted between two to ten hours. In some cases, although the women began to play when the children were still at school, the game lasted for a long time and one of the guests was sent to pick up the children and bring them home. Even after the children returned, the game did not end and the children completed their homework assignments or played together while the mothers continued their game. Sometimes, on weekdays the game lasted until nine or ten PM and the children would fall asleep on the sofa. During the weekends if the fathers were home, the game could last even until two and three in the morning.

The Mahjong game was not only a social gathering and a desired way to spend the day; it was also an empowering activity. During the game the women often bet on small amounts of money which contributed to the excitement. Occasionally they also lost or earned relatively large amounts. Whenever one of the women won few hundred Hong Kong Dollars she felt pride. Since most of the migrants did not have a permanent paying job, it was a non-conventional opportunity to earn their own living in Hong Kong. One evening, in a Facebook chat I had with A-lin's husband Cheng he told me that although it is already very late, he is not asleep because he is waiting to his wife to return from a Mahjong game. Cheng said that his wife told him that she will be home until 3:30 AM. After a few minutes he wrote: "Haha! She is back on time! She won 200 HKD tonight and 800 HKD last night." On rare occasions one of the husbands joined the game as well. However, most of them did not know how to play and in general it was considered the marriage migrants' sphere.

Mahjong is considered in mainland China and Hong Kong as a complicated game which is not an easy task to learn. However, in Hong Kong it was regarded as an activity which is conducted mainly by retired people or men and women who were unemployed and had enough spare time to invest in the game. All of the mainland marriage migrants I met in Sheung Shui spent a significant amount of time playing the game. Yet, because it was time consuming and in many cases the marriage migrants lost large amounts of money during the game, they often announced that "from now and on I will not play anymore." Since the game was an eminent part of many of the marriage migrants' everyday lives, quit playing also meant missing social events and the women usually returned to be active players after a short while.

When I returned to Hong Kong in the winter of 2015 A-lin told me that she rarely played Mahjong anymore. She explained that she is too busy with her son's school work and that the

game demanded too much time. However, instead of being a player, A-lin became a game organizer and a host. She bought a Mahjong electronic table for the price of 4000 HKD (approx. 500 USD) and placed it in the middle of her living room. The table was unique and had different functions which automatically dealt and arranged the tiles. A-lin told me that she bought the table “to make money.” She explained that usually twice a week four women (all mainland marriage migrants, and usually not close friends) rented the table and played at her apartment from around 10 AM to 6 PM. The amount paid for a whole day’s game was 160 HKD for the four players (approx. 20 USD) and in cases A-lin provided them meals throughout the day, the price was 240 HKD (approx. 30 USD). Being the game “host” enabled A-lin to earn money and at the same time, not to be part of an activity which is associated with unemployment. It was an empowering strategy she used to differentiate herself from the image of the “bored” marriage migrants.

The women spent most of their time with other marriage migrants who shared similar schedules as well as similar livelihood problems and concerns. Even after living in Hong Kong for long periods, most of the women did not have close Hong Kong friends, and they experienced feelings of exclusion from the local society. Yet, during the joined gatherings, the women were stripped from their “otherness.” While “outside” they were bound to the local norms, during the joined gatherings, they made their own rules and behaved according to them. Therefore, I suggest that these gatherings could be best understood as an “experimental regions of culture” (Turner 1982: 28); Even if the children or the husbands did take part in the activities, they were relatively marginal to the social activity. At the same time, the form of freedom the women experienced, existed within the context of limited social mobility and was usually practiced in the confined and crowded spaces of their private homes.

4.2 “SAME AS BEFORE, LIVING AS A HOUSEWIFE”

As opposed to their previous experiences as labor migrants, and although many of the families could have used the extra income, most of the marriage migrants I knew in Sheung Shui did not work outside their homes until their children began to attend primary school. The fact that many of the migrants did not work was not exceptional for married women in Hong Kong. The labor force participation rate for all married women in Hong Kong is relatively low in comparison to single women. In 2011, the labor force participation rate for Hong Kong women who have never been married was 67.2%, compared to 46.8% for women who have been married (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2012). Moreover, the women's low education, relatively low Cantonese proficiency, the presence of kindergarten and school-aged children in the family and the inability to hire outside help, have all been determined as negative correlates in married women's continued participation in the Hong Kong workforce (Lau et al. 2006). Furthermore, as immigrants, their few social contacts in Hong Kong further influenced their employment opportunities.

One reason for feeling insecure searching for employment was the migrants' Cantonese level. Mainland marriage migrants often told me that their Cantonese level was “not good enough.” Even after living in Hong Kong for more than eight years, and although she spoke fluent Cantonese, Wang Jian thought that her Cantonese level is “very bad” (*hen cha*). Similar remarks which expressed their disappointment from their Cantonese proficiency level were frequently made by mainland marriage migrants in Hong Kong regardless of the time they had been living in Hong Kong. Cantonese is the local dialect in Guangdong Province, and most

Sheung Shui marriage migrants began learning Cantonese as labor migrants in Shenzhen.²⁸ The necessity and superiority of Cantonese over Mandarin was widespread not only in Hong Kong but also in Guangdong Province and it influenced labor migrants' working and living experiences. In a study about a factory in Shenzhen Pun Ngai demonstrates that Cantonese is a major component in shaping work-place hierarchy. The power of Cantonese was explicitly demonstrated, and subordinates who were not native speakers but learned to speak Cantonese fluently were appreciated and had a better chance of promotion. Those who could not speak Cantonese often dealt with misunderstandings with their superiors. According to Ngai, if a worker did not want to remain at the bottom of the work hierarchy, they had to learn Cantonese, or at least to understand enough to survive in the work-place (Ngai 1999: 9).

Cantonese was not only considered superior than Mandarin it was also regarded as “a way” into Hong Kong society. The migrants' spouses considered Cantonese to be an important element in their wives' integration and most of them did not make the effort to learn Mandarin. As a result, all of the couples that I met in Sheung Shui spoke Cantonese with each other, and in most cases the mother spoke Cantonese with her children. A-lin's husband proudly told me that his wife “speaks Cantonese better than any mainlander he knows.” He then added that “if Hong Kong people do not look at his wife but only listen to her speak, they will have a hard time knowing she is an immigrant from mainland China.”

While their Cantonese proficiency level had a significant impact on their employment opportunities, the prominent reason most Sheung Shui marriage migrants did not work outside the home sphere was related to their position in the marriage. In all of the families I knew in

²⁸ Some of the popular mainland Chinese television programs are aired in Hong Kong with Cantonese subtitles. Since the marriage migrants are familiar with most of the characters, many learned the language while watching television.

Sheung Shui, the husbands were the breadwinners; their jobs often demanded them to return home late; some worked night shifts and slept throughout the day; others worked relatively far from Sheung Shui and returned home only during the weekends. The women's natal families were in mainland China and in most cases the husband's family did not take an active part in taking care of the children. As a result, Sheung Shui marriage migrants were the main caretakers which meant that they had to be available when their children return from kindergarten or school. Wang Jian explained that working outside the home "is not an option":

We [the mainland marriage migrants] can't work because there is no one to look after our children. Hong Kong grandparents don't want to take care of a baby whose mother is from China. Hong Kong women earn 20,000 HKD (2580 USD) a month so they can afford a nanny, but if we work we would earn around 8000 HKD (1032 USD). 5000 (640 USD) HKD will go to the nanny so it is not worth going to work.

Hiring a nanny in Hong Kong is a very common phenomenon and many families, including average waged families usually hire nannies who reside with the family and take care of the household and the children. For a short while A-lin was also thinking of hiring a nanny and finding a job but eventually decided that she will be her son's best caretaker, and that her son "needed her" to help him prepare for first grade. The marriage migrants' role as the main caretakers was an unsigned contract between the wife and the husband, and it characterized the hierarchy of most of the cross-border marriages. Many of the marriage migrants told me that the main reason they did not look for a job was in fact that their husbands preferred that they did not work. Wang Jian explained that her husband was working hard enough and that he preferred that

she stayed home and take care of their house, their daughter and him. The division of labor between Sheung Shui marriage migrants and their spouses highlight the term “gender contract” (Hiderman 1991) between them. While the term is often used to identify and better understand the complexities between women and men’s abstract relationships, it also contributes to a better understanding of the social, economic, and cultural relations among the state, the labor market, and the home (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012).

Although Sheung Shui marriage migrants were aware that their employment opportunities were relatively limited and accepted the idea that it would be difficult for them to find a caretaker for their children, they told me that if they were in a position to make their own choice, they would choose to leave the home sphere and find employment. Although A-lin’s Cantonese level was very high and although her son’s day in kindergarten ended at five PM, when I first met her she did not have a paying job and spent most of her days with her mainland friends. I asked A-lin about her views with regard to how she spends her mornings and she told me that she was very bored at home and that she would love to learn English and then find a job. After A-lin’s son’s turned five years old, she decided, together with her neighbor Yang Yan another mainland Chinese woman married to a Hong Kong man to sign up for a local course intended to train women to become beauty consultants. A-lin had done this kind of work in Shenzhen, and although she was not sure how she will handle the situation with her son, she was eager to leave the home sphere for a few hours a day.

The Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education offers vocational education intended to post-secondary students in Hong Kong. The course A-lin and Yang Yan took covered different fields and in order to graduate the students needed to pass an exam. In addition to the exam, at the end of the course, representatives from different beauty parlors in Hong Kong visited the

school and interviewed the women. The participants also had to show their ability to speak a few simple sentences in English.

It was quite difficult for A-lin and Yang Yan to attend the classes. The class was about thirty-minute train ride from Sheung Shui and ended in the afternoon after the children returned home from kindergarten. Because A-lin's husband returned home only during the weekends, and Yang Yan's husband returned home quite late on weekdays, they asked Wang Jian and me to pick up the children from kindergarten and take care of them until they return home. It was very important for A-lin to do well in the course and she took it very seriously; she even asked me to help her prepare for the English interview. After Yang Yan and A-lin successfully graduated from the course, they both received job offers at beauty parlors they considered "very good." However, although they were both very excited to finally work outside the home, they eventually declined the offers. A-lin told me that because the work-hours will not allow her to pick up her son from kindergarten "there is nothing she can do." She explained that in Yang Yan's case, even if she finds a caretaker for her son, her husband preferred that she did not work. In other words, not only that the mother was responsible for taking care of the child, even in cases where she was able to hire a nanny or to work in accordance with her child's school schedule, some of the husbands' intervention was very prominent and the "contract" was not negotiable.

The marriage migrants' employment opportunities changed when their children began to attend primary school. Unlike kindergarten, primary school lasted every weekday from 8 AM to 4 PM, and it left the women with more free time. At school the mothers made new social contacts which created new opportunities. In addition, as the children grew up and the women felt more confident in the marriage, the husbands intervened less in the wife's schedule. After their child began to attend first grade, some of the marriage migrants searched for activities

outside the home sphere. A-lin started volunteering at her son's school few hours each day, three days a week. As opposed to A-lin who volunteered, Wang Jian and Yang Yan had found employment. They worked at a local primary school, three days a week, three hours a day, and their main task was to prepare lunch boxes for school children. Their salary was 100 HKD per day (approx. 17 USD). When I asked I-lin about her views with regard to this change in her life she said that although she does not earn any money "she is very happy to do it."

Although working outside the home sphere was a relatively fresh change, many of the Sheung Shui marriage migrants did not regard it as a key change which had a major influence on their social role or sense of belonging to Hong Kong society. As Sheung Shui marriage migrants' journey continued, their Cantonese level improved but most of them did not pursue after higher or vocational education. They were still bound to their child/ren's school schedule, and their employment opportunities remained quite limited even after their children began to attend first grade. During our gatherings, the women usually asked one another whether she is "currently working." In other words, the "employment discourse" was usually around the current employment situation as opposed to thinking of their employment as permanent. Similar to rural labor migrants in China's cities whose labor is devalued as having "low quality" (Anagnost 2004), and regarded as can be purchased at a low price (Zhang 2014: 18); Sheung Shui marriage migrants took part-time jobs which were considered marginal to Hong Kong's economy.

A few months after A-lin began to volunteer at her son's school I asked her once again in a Facebook chat how she spends her days:

I spend my time pretty much as before, like a housewife (*shinai shenghuo*). From Monday to Friday I am busy making breakfast and pack lunch for my son's school.

During the mornings I also do some volunteer work at the school. If I don't go to the school I meet with friends and have breakfast, play cards, but recently I don't play as much as before. At the evenings I prepare dinner for my son and then we do the homework together. On the weekends my husband returns and we go to eat outside, drink coffee.

The excerpt above demonstrates that although A-lin began to volunteer at a school three days a week she still felt that she is a "housewife." The phrase A-lin used to describe her social role was in Cantonese rather than Mandarin meaning she evaluated herself according to Hong Kong society. Although she managed to find volunteer work outside the home sphere, she felt it did not actually change her social position.

In the winter of 2015, about two years after we conducted the above conversation, A-lin was no longer volunteering. She explained that now that her child is at school he is very busy and has many tasks to complete every day. As a result, she did not have time to work. A-lin further explained that because she had to help her son with all of his tasks, she does not get to meet her friends as frequently as before. Each day when her son Yueyue returns home they do his homework together. She sits next to him and closely watches that he completes all of his assignments in the best possible manner. It usually takes them more than three hours and then it is already time to eat dinner, take a shower and go to bed. A-lin prepares a hot meal every day and they sit to eat together. After her son falls asleep, A-lin prepares his breakfast for the next day and puts the school uniform on the sofa. In the morning, she wakes up early and walks her son to school. A-lin's everyday practices demonstrate that in some cases after the child began to attend first grade, instead of having more free time to search for employment or to spend time

with friends, the mothers found themselves under additional pressure and they even experienced isolation since their time to meet their friends for breakfast or to have joined dinners became limited. The children's schedule was still the major anchor in the marriage migrants' everyday lives and since they rarely received help from family members; their employment opportunities remained limited and marginal in their lives. While Sheung Shui marriage migrants viewed their child as a means of obtaining social mobility, the child also anchored them to the home sphere.

4.3 FAMILY TIES

In pre-Liberation China (before 1949), daughters were usually regarded as having no economic value to their birth parents. Marriage was considered an opportunity for the natal family to be compensated for raising a daughter, and the common compensation was in the form of a bride's price (Fan and Huang 1998: 230). After marriage, women usually left to live with their husbands' families and as a result their ties to their village and their natal families weakened (Andors 1983: 56; Honig and Hershatter 1988: 166; Johnson 1983: 8–9; Zhang 2009: 256-7).

The market reforms have had a significant influence on the relations between married daughters and their natal families (Zhang 2009). As a result of economic and social changes which took place mainly from the late 1970s, most married women have increasing contacts with their natal families. Consequently, in contemporary China, women are no longer considered “spilt water,” as was the case in traditional Chinese patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal society.

In order to gain social support, daughters maintain closer ties with their natal families and at the same time natal parents gain social and economic support from their daughters (Zhang 2009).²⁹

Upon discussing with Sheung Shui marriage migrants the reasons for leaving their homes at a relatively young age and becoming labor migrants, most of them expressed the will to “change their lives” (*gaibian ziji de shenghuo*) but also to feel “free” (*ziyou*). Freedom was also related to their ability to earn their own living. As labor migrants, before permanently immigrating to Hong Kong, most women spent between 10-12 hours outside the home sphere, working and earning their own money. They became economically independent and it enabled them to send money to their natal families on regular basis. However, their marriage to a Hong Kong man signified a major change. After marriage or during their pregnancy, most women quit their jobs. As marriage migrants, they spent most of their time in the home sphere and became economically dependent on their spouses.

Sheung Shui marriage migrants continued to send money to their natal families in mainland China on regular basis even after migrating to Hong Kong. Marriage migration was viewed by the women as well as by their natal families as having an impact not only on the women and their children’s to be, but on the future of the whole family as well. For example, A-lin told me that her parents viewed her marriage to a Hong Kong man as “a very good thing which could improve the family’s economic conditions, and contribute to a happy living” (*keyi gaishan jiali jingji tiaojian, guo shang xingfu shenghuo*). Although all of the replies I received from Sheung Shui marriage migrants indicate that their families were very pleased with their marriage to a Hong Kong man, few also mentioned that because Hong Kong is far from their home Province, they met only once a year and that it was relatively difficult.

²⁹ For a detailed discussion on the reasons for these changes see Zhang 2009.

Even though in most families the wives did not control the house budget, they had access to the family's bank account and sending money to their families was their decision. In fact, in many cases, the spouses, even if they knew that it was taking place, were not involved in the process and often did not know the exact amount which was sent. For example, before A-lin and her son traveled to Hunan Province for a family visit, few days before the Chinese New Year in 2015, Cheng told me that he knows that each time his wife travels to mainland China she takes "a lot of money with her." When Cheng discussed his wife's visit, he also mentioned that while in traditional China children often received paper money as a gift for the New Year, in contemporary China a child will not accept less than a one hundred bill. When I asked him how much Hong Kong children receive, he replied "no more than twenty." In other words, Cheng viewed his wife's habit of sending money to her family not as a traditional custom but as an act of greed; as something which is disconnected from the Chinese tradition. Cheng's opinion about this issue was in accordance with the negative views he often expressed towards mainland China.

When I asked the women what their spouses thought about them sending money to their natal families, they usually replied that they "do not mind" (*meiyou yijian*). What "Do not mind" or "does not have an opinion" in a more literal translation means, is that the husbands did not stop their wives from sending their parents money on regular basis. The husbands believed that this relationship is inevitable and must take place. In fact, the wives' contacts with their natal families, was seen as an integral part of the gender contract.

The women told me that their economic support did not influence their relationship with their parents. However, most of the women also indicated that their relationship with their natal family actually improved after marriage. Sheung Shui marriage migrants traveled to visit their natal families at least once a year, usually during the summer holiday. Since the children's

vacation lasted almost two months, their visits were quite long and lasted about three to four weeks. Some of the women also went back for shorter visits during the Chinese New Year. When traveling for a family visit, Sheung Shui marriage migrants always took their children with them and in most cases their Hong Kong husband remained in Hong Kong.

The main reason given for the fact that the husbands rarely accompanied their wives was that they could not get time off from work. However, in some cases, the husbands preferred to remain in Hong Kong even during the Chinese New Year when they were on holiday. Cheng, A-lin's husband told me that he did not like to travel with his wife to Hunan Province and that the last time he visited her family was about four years ago. Cheng emphasized that he just did not like spending time in mainland China, and described his previous visit to his wife's home as a negative experience.

Even when Cheng talked about his wife's family, he often drew a line between his lifestyle in Hong Kong and her family's. Cheng explained that a few years back he joined his wife and son to visit his wife's family in Hunan Province. He described his visit in a very negative way and said that he just could not understand "how people could live this way." He described how his wife's father and other family members spit on the floor of their living room. He said: "can you imagine, sitting in your own living room and spitting right on the floor, it is so disgusting." Although his wife and son travel to Hunan Province for a family visit twice a year, Cheng rarely travels with them, He preferred to remain in Hong Kong, even if it means spending the Chinese New Year in Hong Kong without his wife and son.

Visiting the family and old friends in mainland China was the marriage migrants' sphere. They usually decided if and when to travel and they made the traveling arrangements by themselves. Although there are indications that in contemporary rural China more men

accompany their wives to visit their natal families (Zhang 2009: 265), this change did not characterize cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong. This arrangement signified the social and cultural relations between the husbands' feelings of local identity and the home. The men saw themselves as Hongkongers, and in most cases did not feel obligation towards their wives' natal families and as a result remained on the Hong Kong side of the border.

When we got together to celebrate the approaching Spring Festival of 2015, the women discussed their upcoming plans for the holiday. When Wang Jian discovered that most of her mainland friends were planning to travel to their home provinces in just a few days, she mentioned that this year she decided not to travel back. She explained that visiting her home village means that she would need to spend a large amount of money on presents for her classmates and red envelopes for her sisters' children and that she considered it a heavy financial burden.³⁰ Nevertheless, after many of her mainland friends left Hong Kong for their New Year family visit, Wang Jian eventually decided to return to Hunan Province to visit her family. Although Wang Jian's parents both passed away and even though she had been living in Hong Kong close to nine years, she still felt she wanted to spend the New Year with her sisters and old classmates in her home village. In one of our conversations few days before the Chinese New Year she told me that she has very good friends in Hong Kong but that her family is in Hunan Province. During her visit, Wang Jian uploaded to We Chat (a popular chat application) many photos of herself in Hunan with old classmates and family members. In her description of the photos Wang Jian stated: "I just could not be away from my dear ones." In a conversation I had with A-xian, a mainland marriage migrant who has been living in Hong Kong for eight years,

³⁰ "Red envelopes" refer to small envelopes which are filled with a certain amount of money and traditionally given to small children during the Chinese New Year.

two weeks before the Chinese New Year of 2015, she told me that she misses her family in Guangxi Province especially during this time of year but that she could not return home because of her work. The women's alienation in Hong Kong became especially prominent during that time of year. Yang Yan also told me that she does not like to remain in Hong Kong during the Chinese New Year because the atmosphere is not "warm" and "exciting" (*renao*) as in mainland China.

Although Sheung Shui marriage migrants traveled to mainland China only once or twice a year, many of them communicated with their natal families on regular basis. One of the main reasons it was quite easy for the marriage migrants to keep in touch with their families and old friends was the constant use of smartphones. Through Online Chat applications they could easily speak or send messages in a relatively low cost. Living in Hong Kong did not disconnect them from their families, and it seemed as if they were very involved not only in their mainland friends' lives in Hong Kong, but in their mainland families' lives as well. During our meals they often took photos of the dishes and uploaded to their group chats. It took only a few seconds until they received responses from family member or friends who immediately texted back. In addition to sharing posts and pictures, Skype was also a common way of communication. A-lin spoke with her father on Skype every day, and in fact she told me that their relationship became even closer after she got married and moved to Hong Kong. One evening, A-lin mentioned that she just realized that her father did not call her today but then added that he probably knew she was busy and that is why he did not call. She thought of calling him but said that he is either asleep or watches television. In other words, even though they were few thousands kilometers apart, she was involved in her father's life and felt close to him. A-lin's close relationship with her natal family is further described in the following example.

Few weeks after A-lin graduated from the beauty consultants' course, she decided to find a solution so she could finally have an opportunity to spend time outside her home. Because A-lin did not feel close to her mother-in-law and occasionally even mentioned that she never helps her take care of Yeuyue, she turned to her parents. A-lin asked her parents who live in Hunan Province (approx. ten hours travel by train) to travel to Hong Kong and help her take care of her child so she could work for a short while. A-lin's parents received a three months permit and came to live with A-lin and her family. Although their apartment was quite small, her parents slept in her son's room and her son slept in his parents' bed like he does almost every night. Because A-lin's husband Cheng spends the week outside Hong Kong due to his work, Yueyue sleeps with his mother almost every day. During those three months, A-lin worked at a beauty parlor and according to what she said, was very satisfied. Yet, after three months when the permit ended, her parents returned to Hunan and A-lin quit her job to make herself available for her son again.

In this period of continuing economic change in mainland China, and as a result of increasing out-migration, married rural women are often "left-behind" after their husbands migrated away in search for employment. At the same time, the husbands' absence also leaves more space and autonomy to those women. They can plan their daily activities to suit themselves, including enhance their contacts with their natal families (Zhang 2009: 276). The social position of the marriage migrants I came to know in Sheung Shui is in many ways similar to the position of rural China's "left-behind women" described in recent studies (e.g. Zhang 2009). As I discussed throughout this chapter, the social structure and the consequent "gender contract" which characterizes the marriages, leaves the women "behind" – in the home sphere. However, they are in a "home sphere" which is located thousands of miles away from their villages. They

live in Hong Kong; not as labor migrants, but as legal citizens. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the importance of legal citizenship is closely related to a collective imagination of the city and of an imagination and actual life in Hong Kong. The meaning of becoming a Hong Kong permanent resident is linked to the way in which Hong Kong is envisioned and experienced by the women as well as to the way in which "the other side of the border" is mediated by Chinese state and other social agents. These powerful imaginations have influenced the way in which the women collectively envision the world they live in and their own "positionalities and mobilities within it" (Salazar 2011: 577; see also Morley 2000).

5.0 HONG KONG AS AN IMAGINED CENTER

“Historically laden imaginaries—socially shared and transmitted (both within and between cultures) representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices—are at the roots of many travels, whether in the context of tourism or migration” (Salazar 2011: 576-577).

One morning, after having breakfast with several mainland marriage migrants, I joined them for a stroll in one of Sheung Shui’s shopping centers. Although Sheung Shui is a relatively small town, it has several shopping centers which are quite new and include very expensive and brand name shops. As we strolled the stores, tried on clothes and learned about new makeup and cosmetic products, we entered one of the stores which specializes in imported cosmetics. As A-lin, A-xia and Chun began to contemplate which products they would like to purchase; I noticed that they were staring at three women who just entered the store. The women, who were speaking Cantonese, examined the products but did not purchase anything and left the store after a few moments. I thought that the mainland migrants knew the women who just entered the store but when I asked them they immediately replied they did not know them and that they were looking at them because “they are tourists from Guangzhou (mainland China).” It was quite obvious that the marriage migrants looked down at the mainland tourists who they viewed as “outsiders.”

I wondered if they were able to guess that the women were from mainland China by listening to their accent but A-xia explained: “it is easy to tell they are from the mainland because of their clothes and the way they walk.” During a mutual visit to a shopping center in Shatin several weeks before the Chinese New Year in February 2015, A-lin told me that it was

very easy to distinguish between local residents and those from mainland China. She pointed at a group of people getting off the train and said: “Look at them...you see how they push their way through the crowd, you immediately know they are mainlanders (*dalu ren*).” On our way back to Sheung Shui, with the train crowded with mainlanders carrying many shopping bags, A-lin explained that if she had to make the decision once again, she would still choose to live in Hong Kong despite the difficulties she experienced, because “Hong Kong people’s culture (*wenhua*) is higher.”³¹

The two episodes I described above are manifestations of the common views Sheung Shui marriage migrants shared about mainland China, mainland Chinese people, and Hong Kong. The mainland marriage migrants seemed to have a certain image of *how* mainland tourists in Hong Kong “look like,” and “act like,” and in their everyday day lives they made a clear distinction between the mainland tourists who were temporary guests and themselves who were Hong Kong permanent residents. The boundary they drew is similar to the distinction urban *hukou* holders make when referring to the rural labor migrants (*waidai ren*) who they perceive as temporary guests in their cities. The emphasis on Hong Kong’s superiority is closely related to the discussion about the different meanings and usage of the term *suzhi* (quality). As opposed to rural migrants who are considered “outsiders” (*waidi*) with “low *suzi*” (*di suzhi*), being a Hong Kong permanent resident enabled the Sheung Shui marriage migrants to institutionally situate themselves as “locals” (*bendi*).

Studies about the Hong Kong-China border focus primarily on the views Hongkongers share about mainland China and mainlanders, and their attitudes towards mainland immigrants in Hong Kong. These studies also emphasize changes in Hongkongers’ perceptions of their own

³¹ The term *wenhua* although translates as “culture,” is commonly used to situate the urban population as “better” and “more educated” than the rural population.

identity (Lau 2008; Mathews and Ma 2008; Newendorp 2008, 2010; Ma 2012; Chan 2014). Few scholars have studied the way Chinese mainlanders think of and consume Hong Kong (Ma 2012). In this chapter I will concentrate on the views mainland marriage migrants in Hong Kong hold about Hong Kong and Hong Kong people. As I will show, mainland marriage migrants' desire to permanently immigrate to Hong Kong and their views and perceptions about Hong Kong's superiority are influenced by broader hegemonic discourses in mainland China which are based on the structural dichotomy between rural and urban, center and peripheries, and modernity and tradition.

Ma argues that the imagining and consumption of Hong Kong by mainlanders is related to the notion of modernity, and can be understood through the concept "satellite modernities" which refers to cities that mediate between developed centers and developing cities. As a "satellite site," Hong Kong draws migrants from across Asia who immigrate there in order to experience the "global west" in an environment which they consider relatively secure and comfortable. Hong Kong, among other satellite sites and developed centers across Asia, has "highly functional nodes that facilitate exchange and motivate modern imaginations" (Ma 2012: 12).

In the late 1970s, after Mao Zedong's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, China's economic reforms were at their embryonic stage and the economic gap between mainland China and Hong Kong was pronounced. The significant gaps in material wealth and standard of living, together with differences characterizing Communist Party rule compared to British colonial rule, created an apparent social and cultural boundary between the two places (Ma 2012: 22). According to Ma, as time passed and China opened up to the world the vision held by mainland migrants about Hong Kong changed accordingly, no longer envisioned as the desired destination

it had been before. Ma concludes that the modern/tradition distinction is the motivating force behind mainlanders' migration to Hong Kong, and that the superiority of modernity is displayed in materiality (2012: 16-17).

While the concept of modernity helps explain mainlanders' imagining and consuming of Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s, my ethnographic data reveals that the construct of modernity is not sufficient for understanding contemporary cross-border relations between mainland China and Hong Kong, particularly the large number of marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men. Instead, I suggest the concept *suzhi* in order to explain these marriages. Using *suzhi* as a construct highlights the notion that while the economic gap between mainland China and Hong Kong narrowed dramatically over the past two decades, the cultural and social gaps remain. In addition, issues which are not directly related to the idea of modernity, like education, law and order, are viewed by the migrants as extremely important factors which contribute to their image of Hong Kong as a desired destination. This idea is manifested in the everyday lives of mainland marriage migrants and the growing number of cross-border interactions.

5.1 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL MOBILITY

A-lin was born in a small town in Hunan province in 1979 where she grew up with her parents and younger brother. She attended school until ninth grade, and at the age of sixteen left the village on her own and migrated to Beijing in search of employment. She recalls how in Beijing she felt quite lonely and often missed her family. What's more, the money she earned was not sufficient and she decided to leave Beijing and try her luck in Shenzhen. In the mid-1990s Shenzhen was a growing city offering young migrants many opportunities. In Shenzhen A-lin worked in a beauty parlor, six days a week, between ten to twelve hours a day, seven days

a week, for a monthly salary of 600 RMB. She quit her job after a few years to work as a receptionist at a local company. At the time her salary was considered relatively high, and although it took her some time to adjust, she remembers that she was quite pleased with her new life in the city.

Three years after A-lin left her home and migrated to Shenzhen at the age of 19, she met Cheng, a man from Hong Kong who is eight years older than her. Unlike most Hong Kong men who are married to a mainland woman, Cheng is educated; he has a Master's degree and works as an engineer. A-lin and Cheng met when A-lin worked as a receptionist. During that time, Cheng's work demanded frequent trips to Shenzhen and on one of his company visits they began talking. A-lin told me that when they first met she thought that he was not good looking at all. But, they started going out and she discovered that they enjoyed each other's company. Moreover, she explained that he has relatively large eyes and she thought that it must mean that he studies hard and that he is very smart.

They married in Hong Kong four years after they met. After their marriage, A-lin was not entitled to immigrate to Hong Kong and had to wait in mainland China for her immigration approval. During her wait she and Cheng rented an apartment in Shenzhen where they lived together. Their son was born in Hong Kong three years after they were married. Nonetheless, A-lin was not entitled to permanently immigrate to Hong Kong after the birth of her son. When I asked Cheng about the time they lived together in Shenzhen, he drew me a map, and showed me that each area marks the economic level of the people living there. Cheng explained that at the beginning they lived in the mid-range area, but that he "could not stand it." He said that it was too dirty and noisy so he decided to rent an apartment in an area which was considered much better. Cheng further explained: "I could not stand living in China and although it was much

cheaper than renting an apartment in Hong Kong, I could not wait to move back to living in Hong Kong.”

Continuing to live in Shenzhen was not an option for her or her husband. When their son turned three, and it was time for him to start kindergarten, they rented an apartment in Sheung Shui, Hong Kong. A-lin was entitled to live in Hong Kong for a period of three months each time she visited. During this period they continued to rent an apartment in Shenzhen where she lived when she was not in Hong Kong. It was only after seven years of marriage that A-lin finally received her Hong Kong Identification Card (HKID) and permanently immigrated to Sheung Shui. On the day that A-lin’s HKID was approved, her husband took a day off from work, they went together to pick up the card and celebrated at a shopping center in Shatin, a town which located about 30 minutes from Sheung Shui. A-lin was very excited and seemed to be immensely relieved. Receiving the HKID has significance for mainland immigrants in Hong Kong, granting them legal rights and social benefits; the following episode from my field notes gives another illustration for this point.

During one of our joined Cantonese breakfasts, I mentioned that I just returned from a doctor’s appointment. The women seated around the table asked me about my appointment and were interested to know which clinic I visited, and I explained that it was a local public clinic. They next inquired whether it was expensive for foreigners to use Hong Kong’s health services. I replied that because I was a Doctorate student in a Hong Kong university³² I was entitled to receive a HKID which enabled my family and me highly subsidized access to Hong Kong’s public clinics. The women seemed so surprised that I received the HKID only a few weeks upon arriving in Hong Kong and asked me if I can show them the card. After taking out my Identity

³² In 2010 I began my Doctoral studies at the department of anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In 2011, due to personal reasons I returned to Israel and applied to a Doctoral program at Tel Aviv University.

Card, the women passed it around the table and examined it. Yang Yan took out her own card, compared it to mine and explained that as opposed to them, although I held a HKID and was entitled to subsidized health care, I was not considered a Hong Kong permanent resident, and that that might be the reason I received my Identity Card so quickly. In other words, the HKID signified an institutional belonging to Hong Kong and not did not only present a vague idea about a desired life. It was clear that this card had a significant meaning to the marriage migrants.

Social benefits offered in Hong Kong (*Xianggang fuli*) cover a wide range of vital services, including highly subsidized education for children,³³ health care and public housing for eligible citizens.³⁴ These are considered superb services by many mainland people I spoke with, and one of the most important advantages Hong Kong has to offer its citizens. Nevertheless, while Hong Kong's government provides a variety of social services, about 1.3 million Hongkongers, or nearly 20% of the population, live below the poverty line (Ngo 2013). Furthermore, a survey conducted by a local Hong Kong think tank, named "Hong Kong Ideas Centre" reveals that almost one third of the young adults in Hong Kong are dissatisfied with society. Although many of the respondents argued that they will be willing to take an active part in political demonstrations, most of them cited housing, not politics, as their main area of complaint (Lau 2015).

³³ Public education in Hong Kong requires payment for books, uniforms, and extra curriculum activities.

³⁴ The Hong Kong Housing Authority offers affordable housing for lower-income residents. There are different criteria, and the system is based on a lottery and is highly competitive.

In conversations I conducted with Hong Kong young social activists they often mentioned that the cost of living in Hong Kong is unbearable, and it seemed as if it was one of their major concerns. Ben, a young social activist told me in the winter of 2015 that most Hongkongers are very upset about the housing prices. He explained that he is very worried about his own security since his landlord can decide to increase the rent at any given time. Ben also argued that mainland China's interference with Hong Kong's economy is the main reason for the extremely high prices.

Sheung Shui marriage migrants often discussed the housing situation as well. Most of them lived in rented apartment and they often complained that the apartments were extremely small and too expensive. Nevertheless, on many different occasions the women stressed the advantages of Hong Kong's social services, and they often compared them to the way things were conducted in mainland China. For example, one of the benefits routinely mentioned in our conversations was Hong Kong's highly subsidized medical care. The contrast between the access mainland Chinese citizens have to medical care and the health benefits Hong Kong offers its citizens is evident in the following example.

One day A-lin received a telephone call from her brother in Hunan Province. He explained that his wife, who was eight months pregnant with their first child, had gone into early labor, apparently as a result of food poisoning. At the hospital, due to the wife's serious condition, the couple lost their baby. The wife remained in critical condition and hospitalized for further treatment. A-lin's brother and his wife both hold a rural *hukou* and, as A-lin explained; because it is too expensive they do not have health insurance and will not receive the health care they need. She added that the doctors in mainland China "only care about the money they will receive from patients and that the health care a patient receives is related to the amount of money

a person is able to pay.” A-lin decided to help her brother and to send him 20,000 RMB. When A-lin and Wang Jian discussed the situation, they criticized mainland China’s hospitals, the Chinese doctors who lack a sense of morality and the low quality of street food. A-lin said: “no wonder his wife got food poisoning, she should not have bought street food.” During her sister-in-law’s hospitalization A-lin was very worried about her brother and his wife, but, as I noticed, she felt very secure about her own social position and legal status.

China's tremendous economic growth has been accompanied by dramatically increasing inequality. While most urban residents who hold permanent jobs receive benefits such as free or subsidized education and healthcare, the situation in rural areas is quite different (Zhang and Kanbur 2005: 189-190).³⁵ During the Mao era (1949-1976) although rural areas received far less social expenditure than the cities, the government adopted an alternative strategy to promote basic healthcare. The focus was on preventive rather than curative healthcare measures. The large manpower and the fact that the masses were organized in communes, production brigades, and production teams enabled the mobilization of the masses to engage in public health (Zhang and Kanbur 2005: 189-190). Before the 1978 economic reforms, insurance in rural areas was provided by the Cooperative Medical System (CMS). This system organized health stations, paid village doctors to deliver primary care and provided prescription drugs. At its peak in 1978, the CMS served 90 percent of China’s rural population (Yip and Hsiao 2008).

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³⁵ For a review about the changes in China’s medical policy see for example Yip and Hsiao 2008; Zhang and Kanbur 2005, Mou et al. 2009).

Cooperative Medical System (CMS). This system organized health stations, paid village doctors to deliver primary care and provided prescription drugs. At its peak in 1978, the CMS served 90 percent of China's rural population. After the communes were dissolved and the villages returned to the Family Responsibility System, the CMS collapsed, leaving close to 90 percent of all peasants uninsured (Yip and Hsiao, 2008). To fill the gap, the government authorized the establishment of private medical practices in rural areas, forcing most rural residents to rely on themselves to pay for healthcare (Zhang and Kanbur, 2005). Studies show that this resulted in many rural people in China who cannot afford basic health care, driving many families to poverty due to large medical expenses (Yip and Hsiao, 2008).

Major health disparities can also be found between migrant workers and the local urban population (Mou et al. 2009). Due to institutional barriers still in place, rural migrants who do not hold a local *hukou* usually have limited access to health care when they migrate to the city (Mou et al. 2009; Chen 2011). Furthermore, labor migrants are not entitled to Government Employee Insurance and to Labour Insurance, the main types of health insurance for employees holding local *hukou*, while at the same time they do they have access to the New Rural Cooperative Medical Insurance since they live and work in the city (Mou et al. 2009). Migrants who become seriously ill will usually return to the countryside to receive treatment (Hu et al. 2008; Xiang 2007, cited in Chen 2011: 1298).

The high number of pharmacies in Shenzhen is also a sign for rural labor migrants' lack of access to medical care. During my fieldwork in Shenzhen I noticed that in neighborhoods where there is a large concentration of poor labor migrants, there were numerous pharmacies and small clinics. When I asked labor migrants in Shenzhen for the reason, they indicated that

because they do not have the financial ability to go to the hospital when they get sick, they help themselves by purchasing inexpensive medicine at local stores.

Mainlanders from different social backgrounds whom I interviewed in Shenzhen often highlighted the sharp contrast between Hong Kong's welfare system and its absence in mainland China, especially for rural *hukou* holders. For example, in a conversation I conducted with a mainland couple who lives and works in Guangzhou, they praised Hong Kong's excellent social services. The wife argued that, although mainland Chinese people who hold an urban *hukou* and work in one of China's cities are entitled to some kind of medical care, it usually does not cover basic expenses when visiting a physician. She went on to explain that her medical insurance covered only a small portion of the expenses she had incurred when she went to see a doctor a week earlier, and that as a result she had to pay for the medical care and the medicine from her own pocket. She concluded that many mainlanders, herself included, do not feel safe living in mainland China.

Sheung Shui marriage migrants recounted that, like other labor migrants in Shenzhen, they were considered a "floating population" (*liudong renkou*) by the Chinese government, and "outsiders" (*waidi ren*) by the local population. As *waidi ren*, they were entitled to very few of the social benefits the government provided to residents born in urban areas, including medical insurance, housing subsidies, pensions and educational opportunities for children (Han, Huang and Han 2011). By marrying Hong Kong men these women were able to change their legal status. Obtaining a HKID meant they received the One Way Permit, that they were legally part of Hong Kong society and were entitled to many of the social benefits they lacked when living in the village or as labor migrants in the city. The HKID marked not only the significant change in their

legal status, but also their higher *suzhi* compared to mainland tourists, particularly labor migrants who in mainland China are perceived as marginal citizens and as having low *suzhi*.

5.2 THE CONSUMPTION OF HONG KONG'S HIGH "QUALITY" COMMODITIES

Even before their immigration to Hong Kong, many of the marriage migrants already had an idea of what life would be like in Hong Kong. For example, A-xia, who is married to a Hong Kong man and has lived in Hong Kong for four years recalled:

Before I arrived in Hong Kong I thought that Hong Kong was a place to yearn for (*yige hen xiangwang de defang*), I thought that every aspect of life in Hong Kong was excellent: commodities (*wuzhi*), everyday survival (*shengcun*), and the culture (*wenhua*). I also thought that it was good that there is democracy (*minzhu*). I did not think there was anything bad in Hong Kong (*meiyou bu haode*). I believed Hong Kong was all of these things because I used to watch television and the news, or sometimes my friends or relatives came back to China from Hong Kong and that is what they used to say about Hong Kong.

While the positive image of Hong Kong may have changed slightly after their permanent immigration, in most cases Hong Kong continued to be a desired place to live and consume.³⁶

³⁶ In recent years, in reaction to Hong Kong's local population's protest against mainland China, there has also been protest against Hongkongers by mainlanders. For example, in 2013 after Hong Kong locals named mainlanders "locusts," a Beijing University professor called Hongkongers "dogs" on prime time television. In conversations I had with educated urban mainland Chinese people they also used to express negativity about Hong

One element which came up in many of our conversations was that of Hong Kong as a very orderly place. Sheung Shui marriage migrants praised the order in Hong Kong and often expressed the view that the “law is strict and impartial” (*fazhi yanming* 法制严明). Similar to the comparison between Hong Kong’s social benefits and the lack of benefits in mainland China, emphasis on Hong Kong’s order was usually contrasted with the negative image of mainland China. Hong Kong was also perceived as very “clean” (*ganjing* 干净) and “safe” (*anquan* 安全). The women often stressed the tidiness of the streets, the trains and the bus stations. On one occasion, A-jun, a mainland marriage migrant who had lived in Hong Kong for the past two years, expressed her satisfaction with life in Hong Kong. As she explained, Hong Kong is a wonderful place to live because it is “very clean.” She pointed to the bus station floor to demonstrate just how “clean” Hong Kong was, and told me that it was very important for her that Hong Kong was orderly and tidy. She assured me that when I go to Shenzhen “I will see for myself how big the difference is.”

Marriage migrants usually praised Hong Kong food product safety that was contrasted to “fake” (*jiade* 假的) products often found in mainland China. Whenever we visited a new restaurant I was told that I should not worry because “in Hong Kong the food undergoes regular inspections by the health department.” On one occasion, A-lin invited my family to eat at a food court located on the top floor of the fish and vegetable market in Sheung Shui. When we reached the court I noticed the extremely dirty floors, the overflowing garbage cans, and in general what looked like a very unsuitable place to eat. I was in the early stages of pregnancy and worried about the sanitation level at this food court. However, A-lin explained: “you have nothing to

Kong. For example claiming that Hong Kong people: “only care about money and that they don’t have any culture (*wenhua*).”

worry about; it is clean and safe because we are in Hong Kong.” In other words, A-lin did not judge the cleanliness of the restaurant by its actual condition, believing that because we were in Hong Kong, this meant that the food was completely safe. These thoughts echoed her reaction to the food poisoning her brother’s wife had suffered during her pregnancy. When A-lin described what her brother and his wife had eaten the night before they lost their baby she told me that “it was street food” and that the food “there (in mainland China) cannot be trusted.” A-lin was not surprised to learn that purchasing food in mainland China could be dangerous, while she believed that in Hong Kong this was not possible.

Although Sheung Shui is situated very close to the mainland China border, Sheung Shui marriage migrants often told me that they felt secure living in Hong Kong compared to life in mainland China. One of my neighbors, Ding, a mainland marriage migrant who had lived in Hong Kong for four years, told me that she was afraid to take her children with her whenever she traveled to Shenzhen. She said that many children are kidnapped in Southern China and that “it is very dangerous there.” Trafficking in children had become a national concern in mainland China and stories involving trafficking in babies in southern China occasionally appeared in Hong Kong media. These stories further contributed to the image of a lawless China that is dangerous for children (Bosco 2013, 142; Tam 2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

The notion of Hong Kong as a trustable place is not only held by mainland immigrants living in Hong Kong, and can also be found among mainland Chinese living in China. Mainland Chinese from different social backgrounds whom I have talked to and interviewed also believed that Hong Kong products were safer and of higher quality than those sold in mainland China. Consequently, since Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty there has been mass consumption of Hong Kong products by mainlanders, especially from Guangdong Province. This

is particularly conspicuous since similar products are widely available across mainland China. The following ethnographic excerpt illustrates this point.

Every morning, on the way to my daughter's kindergarten, I passed a line of used plastic bags placed on the ground in front of a pharmacy door. It was usually several minutes before the pharmacy opened at 9:00 AM. I wondered about this line of plastic bags and asked A-lin about it. She told me that they belonged to mainland people who crossed the border early in the morning in order to purchase baby milk powder at the pharmacy. They placed their plastic bags to save a place so they would be the first ones in line to purchase milk formula. A-lin explained that they tried to arrive as early as possible because by 11:00 AM Hong Kong stores would be out of milk powder.

Baby milk powder has become one of the most popular products carried across the border from Hong Kong to mainland China in recent years. In 2008, Chinese authorities reported that 296,000 of mainland Chinese babies became sick from contaminated Chinese-made baby formula and related products that, as it turned out, contained melamine (BBC 2008; 2010). Since then, many mainland parents prefer to use foreign milk-powder brands such as those sold in Hong Kong. Despite the fact that more than seven years have passed since the melamine was discovered, most mainland Chinese parents believe that foreign milk products are safer and better, and prefer to give their baby products that were not made in China. The mainland parents I interviewed, who lived and worked in Shenzhen, told me that they crossed the border on a regular basis to purchase milk powder for their baby. They emphasized that although imported milk powder is sold in pharmacies and supermarkets in Shenzhen, they still do not trust its authenticity. They explained that even if the box itself indicated that the contents were not manufactured in China, the contents could still be locally-made.

It was a common belief both in Shenzhen and Hong Kong that Chinese food products could not be trusted. I occasionally heard “horror” stories about what went on “on the other side of the border.” For example, one of my key Hong Kong informants, a forty year old woman who volunteered at different community centers across Hong Kong, told me that the children of a friend who had bought some fruit in mainland China had discovered that the contents were purple, and that the fruit was not real. She also added that many of the eggs sold in mainland China are not genuine but manufactured eggs.

A post titled “Why do ‘I’ purchase products in Hong Kong” (*‘Wo’ weishenme qu Xianggang gouwu* 我为什么去香港购物) was published in one of the most famous forums that provide information about life in Hong Kong. The writer listed the reasons mainland people should consume Hong Kong products:

Why should mainlanders purchase Hong Kong commodities? First, the quality (*zhiliang* 质量) of Hong Kong products is guaranteed (*baozheng* 保证). Unlike mainland China’s standards (*fuhe Zhongguo biao zhun* 符合中国标准), Hong Kong has one of the world’s top quality inspection systems. When comparing mainland China’s fake products and bad quality to Hong Kong’s good quality and cheap prices, who wouldn’t choose to go to Hong Kong? Second, the shopping environment, the openness, the transparency, the service and other aspects are all better than those in mainland China. (Tianya 2014).

This post drew many comments confirming the writer’s experiences. One of the commenters gave the following example:

A while ago I watched the news in Guangzhou about a man who had bought some kind of Chinese medicine. After he discovered that the product he had bought was fake (*jia huo* 假货), he returned to the store and confronted the clerk. However, the clerk refused to admit that the product was not real. The buyer told his story to the local media and when the reporter called the store, the owner still did not concede; they argued and it was not solved. No one knows what happened in the end. Based on mainland Chinese norms (*guanli* 管理), the guess is that nothing happened to the store or its owner. If something like this would have happened in Hong Kong, after the evidence was collected, the shop would definitely have been closed down. I myself have seen with my own eyes many cases in which pharmacies in Hong Kong were forced to close for this same reason. This is the high degree of law enforcement in Hong Kong. As a buyer, who wouldn't want to purchase without worries. (TianYa 2014).

Sheung Shui is the closest Hong Kong town to the mainland Chinese border. When mainland Chinese cross the border to purchase Hong Kong products, they usually do so at one of Sheung Shui's shopping centers. I witnessed hundreds of people at the Sheung Shui train station and at the immigration check points in Luo Wu and Shenzhen, carrying large boxes of baby milk powder and other commodities on their way back to mainland China. In addition to people crossing over to Hong Kong to purchase Hong Kong products, many traders could be seen daily in train stations selling products bought in Hong Kong. These products include baby milk powder, diapers, cookies, yoghurt drinks and electronic devices. When the Sheung Shui marriage migrants traveled back to mainland China to visit their families, usually on the Chinese New Year or during the summer holiday, most would bring baby milk powder for the family baby as

part of the gifts they brought their family. Other gifts included clothes and electronic devices such as a new type of mobile phone.

In 2011, the children of the women I came to know in Sheung Shui were between the ages of four and five, and were still drinking milk formulas on regular basis. In addition to their regular meals, the children drank a bottle of milk formula every night before going to bed. When I asked A-lin why she gave her four and a half year old-son milk formula she replied that it was very important for the development of his brain. Most of the women told me that they breast fed for a relatively short time, and preferred to use milk powder because it will contribute to their child's development.

While the World Health Organization recommends feeding children exclusively on breast milk up to the age of six months, only 15 per cent of babies aged four to six months in Hong Kong are breast fed. One of the main reasons is that in spite of health professionals' recommendations, Hong Kong's baby milk industry is constantly promoting its products as scientifically proven better for the baby than breastfeeding (Tsang 2013). For example, large advertisements hang on the Hong Kong's MTR stations' walls promising parents smarter children who will do better in school and succeed better in life. The use of milk powder by the marriage migrants is another illustration of *suzhi* in terms of "improving" the quality of the child through Hong Kong-made milk formula.

Several days before the Chinese New Year in February 2013, this state of affairs became a hot topic of debate in Hong Kong. Dozens of articles in Hong Kong media raised public awareness about cross-border shopping. According to these media reports, stocks of baby milk formula had become "alarmingly scarce" in Hong Kong as mainland traders and residents crossed the border to purchase milk powder (Ko 2013). During a visit to Hong Kong several

weeks before the Chinese New Year in February 2015, Sheung Shui's streets were crowded with mainland tourists who had crossed the border to purchase Hong Kong commodities. I noticed that many Sheung Shui stores had turned into shops catering to mainland Chinese visitors and traders. This was also confirmed by Hongkongers whom I spoke with and who claimed that "Hong Kong shops and restaurants are changing." Several young Hong Kong activists told me that the "old shops" were disappearing and that all one could purchase now in Hong Kong was milk powder and diapers. On one occasion a young Hong Kong artist told me that instead of going out for a meal, "we can go out to drink milk formula." Her remark signified the presence of the cross-border shoppers and its impact on everyday life of the local population.



Figure 7: Shops in Sheung shui and mainland shoppers
(Photograph taken by the author, February 2015).

As a result of public pressure, in 2013 the Hong Kong government decided to allow only two boxes of milk powder to be carried across the border from Hong Kong into mainland China. Thus, in the summer of 2013 large signs appeared around the immigration check point in Luo Wu on the way to the mainland Chinese border, indicating that people could not bring heavy luggage or more than two boxes of milk powder into China. In the winter of 2015, protests in Hong Kong against mainland visitors and traders intensified and demonstrations spread to

several Hong Kong cities. In response to requests by the Hong Kong government, the Shenzhen municipal government issued a decision restricting the number of visits Shenzhen permanent residents could make to Hong Kong (He and Tsang 2015).



Figure 8: Mainland traders at the Shenzhen station selling Hong Kong commodities.
(Photograph taken by the author, July 2013).

Sheung Shui marriage migrants and mainlanders living in Guangdong Province continue to “consume Hong Kong,” because its products are perceived as having higher quality (*zhiliang*), and its people as having higher *suzhi*. Although the economic divide between mainland China and Hong Kong has narrowed dramatically in the past few years, Hong Kong’s social benefits, its organization, law enforcement and high quality products, continue to be perceived as prominent and desirable characteristics. The search after *quality* is related to China’s goal of

“linking up with the rest of the world” (*yu shijie jiegui*). This popular slogan broadly captures China’s goal to achieve modernity (*xiandaihua*) (Zhen 2000: 93; Gaetano 2004: 41). This idea involves leaving the “periphery” and migrating to the “center” in order to cast off the “peasants’ mentality” and to be “baptized in civilization” (Meng 1995: 257, cited in Gaetano 2004: 41). At the same time, by “consuming Hong Kong,” the Sheung Shui marriage migrants not only act according to this dominant schema, they also manage to negotiate the boundaries between the rural and the urban sector and between the periphery and the center.

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, the idea of modernity alone does not sufficiently explain mainlanders’ consumption, imagination, and perception of Hong Kong. The search for higher “quality” (*suzhi/zhiliang*) goods and life is part of contemporary discourses about social mobility which highlight the idea that human life has become “a new frontier for capital accumulation Anagnost (2004: 189).” As I will discuss in the next chapter, similar to the Sheung Shui marriage migrants’ use of milk formula, the children’s education is perceived as a means of “improving” the *suzhi* of their child.

6.0 EDUCATION: A BRIDGE TO THE “FIRST WORLD”

After bringing our children to the kindergarten on one Friday morning, I went with A-lin to have breakfast in a Western-style cafe in Sheung Shui Center. A-lin's son's kindergarten ends at 5 PM every day and because her husband's workplace is situated outside of Hong Kong he returns home only on Friday nights. As a result A-lin felt quite bored at home. She said that before their son was born, they used to go to Starbucks, drink coffee and listen to music and she liked it very much. She told me that they have a wonderful relationship and that her husband is very good to her and to her family, but then she added: “I really don't know why he married me. He was born in a very good hospital, went to good kindergartens and schools, has two Masters Degrees and I didn't do anything with my life.”

The above excerpt demonstrates the importance A-lin places on education and the close connection she makes between education and socio-economic status. Linking between the hospital her husband was born at and his academic achievements stresses her perception that the journey to achieve upward social mobility begins at the very first stages of a person's life. Moreover, placing her husband's accomplishments in comparison to her lack of education signifies the hierarchy which characterizes their relationship. A-lin's views were common among Shueng Shui marriage migrants as well as mainland marriage migrants who lived in other areas of Hong Kong. They often expressed the importance of their children's education and the close relationship between studying in Hong Kong and their children's future. In this chapter I will focus on Sheung Shui marriage migrants' investment in their children and their children's education. The women did not only view Hong Kong as a symbol of “quality,” they perceived Hong Kong's education system as a desired destination which plays an important role in their

everyday lives and in their journey towards achieving upward social mobility. As I will show, they focused on their children as a symbol for “quality” and mobility.

6.1 QUALITY (AND) EDUCATION

The idea that children’s education is an important element in achieving upward social mobility and “succeeding in life” is situated in the heart of contemporary discourses in mainland China which promote the idea of “raising of the quality of the population” (*tigao renkou suzhi*) for the sake of the nation’s future. During the 1980s, the campaign had a significant influence on “The Family Planning Policy,” and as a result birth control propaganda began to use the term “human population quality” (*renkou suzhi*),³⁷ emphasizing the quality of the population over quantity (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006: 298). The campaign underlines the close connection between the “right” child-rearing practices and the “quality” of the child, and it has been widely transmitted to the public through different media devices.

For example, in a poster which was published in a magazine in 1986 (figure 7), the relationship between fewer births and the “quality” of the child is highlighted. This poster is exceptional because while during the Mao era propaganda posters usually placed Chairman Mao in the middle of the composition; in this poster the only child replaces the communist icon. In other words, having one child with “quality” traits became the main message. In figure 8 the child is smaller, does not occupy most of the composition as in the previous figure but is situated

³⁷ In the late 1970’s *suzhi* still referred to inborn qualities, and so the use of the term *zhiliang* was more widespread. In 1982 the People’s Daily began to use the two terms synonymously. Since the mid-1980’s the use of the term *suzhi* became more predominant. This meant that the usage of the term *suzhi* bridged the nature/nurture divide (Backken 2000; Kipnis 2006).

as part of China's economic development. The emphasis is on the close relationship between the Family Planning Policy and the development of China, and the child is represented as a contributor to the nation's future progress and growth.

The emphasis on the importance of the quality of the population over quantity was also evident in numerous interviews and conversations I conducted between the years 2006-2013 with Beijing urban parents about China's education system and their personal parental ambitions (Binah-Pollak 2010). During our conversations parents often expressed their personal hope to give birth to more than one child. However, whenever they conveyed this wish, their words were usually followed by the phrase "but there is nothing we can do, China has too many people" (*meiyou banfa, Zhongguo ren tai duo le*). In other words, young urban parents believed that having one child is not a personal choice which only affects the parents and the broader family; parents internalized the idea that having fewer children with higher *suzhi* is important for the nation's future.³⁸

³⁸ As I mentioned earlier, in 2015 the policy has been changed to two children.



Figure 9: "Clever and pretty, healthy and lovely" (China Posters 1986a).



Figure 10 “Do a Good Job in Family Planning to Promote Economic Development” (China Posters 1986b).

The specific term "Quality Education" (*suzhi jiaoyu*) originally appeared in educational journals in the late 1980s to describe the various kinds of educational interventions and practices intended to raise the quality of schoolchildren. By the early 1990s, use of the term was widespread among educators and had expanded beyond the confines of formal education to include family-based childrearing practices and the broader social climate (Woronov 2003: 34-36). In 1999, the Ministry of Education codified and standardized the disparate and often informal education reform policies throughout China and formulated the policy of “Quality Education” (Woronov 2006: 31-2). The following article which was published in *China*

Education Daily (Zhongguo jiaoyu bao) summarizes the main common characteristics and goals of “Quality Education.”

The new market economy places new demands on the quality of the personnel (*rencai*) of the future. The center of the market economy is competition. In order to prepare our youth for this, we have to get them used to the character of the new environment. First, survival of the fittest is a principle of nature in biology, the animal world, and in the changes in human society. Therefore, we have to inculcate in our young people, starting from a young age, the mentality of competition, mastering how to exist in the midst of competition, be good at developing amidst competition. Second, we have to raise their ability to generate new ideas. The central point of the new information age is constant actions; it can produce new ways of thinking, new ideas, and new behaviors. In the market economy, those who can grasp the ability to be creative, who understand new technology, who can see new products- those, are the ones who can succeed (China Education Daily 1995, 3 in Woronov 2003: 33).

The social pressure to ensure that children attain high socio-economic status through education has been recently described by some scholars as “education fever” (Kipnis 2011; Anderson and Kohler 2012). Kipnis (2011:1) argues that the “education desire” is a “total” social phenomenon which penetrated every aspect in everyday life. Especially in urban areas, the term *suzhi jiaoyu* was often used together with *yousheng youyu* (superior birth, superior education) (Kipnis 2006). Beginning in the early 1980s, the Chinese government launched an initiative to establish parent-training institutes (*jiazhang xuexiao*) across the country (Naftali 2007: 163).

According to government publications, the aim of these schools and other courses was to “raise the level of parents’ scientific education” and consequently “to improve the quality of childrearing” in China (All-China Women’s Federation and China’s Ministry of Education, 2002, cited in Naftali 2007: 163). There was an emphasis on the “scientific and modern knowledge” of the stages of pregnancy, childrearing and education in an effort to reach “excellence in child bearing, rearing, and education” (*yousheng youyu youjiao*) (Jing 2000).

Articles published in Hong Kong’s media occasionally blame mainland mothers for being “irresponsible,” “ignorant” and “immoral,” especially during the pregnancy stage. In an article published in the *South China Morning Post*, mainland mothers are blamed for the increase in the number of babies with abnormalities born in Hong Kong hospitals due to lack of prenatal care. The article quotes Cheung Kam-lau, consultant pediatrician at Prince of Wales Hospital’s neonatal care unit: “Having no prenatal care can put pregnancies in high risk. Most of these mothers expect healthy, chubby babies, but things just don’t always happen ideally” (Lee 2006).

The following story further illustrates the criticism aimed at mainland parents who as the article describe, desperately want to raise a “superior” child:

About three months ago, Dr Cheung’s (consultant pediatrician at Prince of Wales Hospital’s neonatal care unit) team took care of a boy whose ears and jaw were deformed. The parents already had two healthy girls and were shocked. Dr. Cheung said that with surgery the boy would be able to hear normally. “We counseled the parents, but they would not listen,” he said. “The child was too far from their expectations.” The neonatal team called in ear surgery experts to confirm their prognosis, but the couple, who desperately wanted a healthy boy, signed the child off after a few days. “We all feel very

sad about the baby's future. There is one more orphan in this world,” Dr Cheung said (Lee 2006).

The case presented in the article signifies one of the many costs that the campaign of raising a “high-quality” “superior” baby brings. As the article reports, it is not rare for mainland mothers to abandon a child born with abnormalities, and many of these babies end up in special homes in Hong Kong awaiting adoption (Constable 2014).

Previous research has indicated that parents’ academic guidance, preparation and planning for educational aspiration, activeness and intellectuality at home are related to children's educational attainment (Levine and Havighurst 1992). The gap between the rural and the urban sector has a great influence on the education opportunities and achievements of rural Chinese children. Even though primary and junior high school education has been free since 2007, the annual fees for a senior high school student can exceed the annual income of a rural person. In most cases, university fees would be even higher (Murphy 2014: 33). Given the educational background of rural parents, the absence of one or both parents due to labor migration, limited school-family communication, and lack of investments in rural areas, educational strategies are difficult to implement in the rural context. As a result, in contemporary China there is still a significant difference between rural and urban children’s education opportunities.

Parents’ descriptions of the differences between urban and rural environments and the implications of these differences, suggest that they are aware of the consequences of the lack of stimulation in the local environment on their children’s development. In a study about rural parents’ attitudes towards school learning, one of the fathers interviewed pointed at the yard of

the house and cited a local saying: “Here, you get up in the morning and see hills and pines, while in the city, you get up in the morning and see big buildings. There are only pines in the rural village. You see less, so the brain will be bad. In the city, there are lots of people. You see more and your brain works well... it is a big difference” (Chi and Rao 2008: 342). Because of their low status and everyday difficulties, rural parents view school education as a means to obtain a secure job, and to improve the family’s living conditions. The rural parents in Chi and Rao’s (2008) study emphasized that nothing could be worse for their children than to be compelled to do farm work throughout their entire lives. The most important thing for the parents was that their child will find a stable job *outside* the village, and they believed that education is the instrument in which their child should use to get the skill in order to do so (343).

The increasing importance rural parents place on education is manifested in a study conducted by the Chinese sociologist Gong Honglian (2005) in a township in Jiangxi province. Gong compares the educational approaches of “so-called” first generation migrants who went to work in Shenzhen during the late 1980s, with second generation migrants who had migrated during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Gong notes that the parents of the first generation migrants had little education and wanted their children to work and earn as much money as possible. The mainland women I came to know in Sheung Shui were part of this generation. They left their homes in search for employment and better opportunities, and did not consider education as a means to obtain upward social mobility. However, Gong further observes that the second generation had a few more years of education and that their own migration experience had taught them that even though uneducated people could earn money, those with more education could enjoy better quality lives and higher social status.

Although rural children's educational opportunities are limited in comparison to those of urban children, recent studies conducted in China's rural areas demonstrate that rural parents' views regarding education were just as enthusiastic as urban parents. In a national survey conducted in 1988, 90 percent of rural parents wanted their children to leave the countryside (Kipnis 2001: 17). In a study conducted almost a decade later in 2005-2006, 100 percent of the surveyed rural households answered affirmatively when asked whether they would like their children to pursue higher education (Kipnis 2001: 1).

The importance of education for the sake of the family as well as the parents' aspirations that their child will have the opportunity to leave the village is expressed in the recent documentary film *The Last Train Home (guitu lieche)* (2009). The film tells the story of a rural couple who leave their two children in the village with the care of their grandmother, and travel thousands of miles to work as labor migrants in a clothing factory in Guangdong province. The remoteness of the village is sharply contrasted with the possibilities the city has to offer. Throughout the film, the parents who work long hours in order to support their family, and the grandmother who takes care of the farm work and the children, express their deep concern that their children will continue their school work in order to leave the village. The importance of education for rural children is expressed by the grandmother: "Who doesn't want their children to have a good life? One can only leave the countryside if they study hard. Life was tough back then; we never had enough to eat. We had holes in our clothes. At that time, I wanted to leave the countryside. But the country needed farm labor. School children like me were asked to stay on the farm. We were called to support the agriculture. Otherwise, I would not have stayed here."

Although the parents worked hard to ensure their children's future, as an act of rebellion, their older daughter at the age of seventeen, decides to quit school and leave the village in order

to become a labor migrant just like her parents. When her father goes to visit her for the first time he tells her: “You shouldn’t be like us, first you quit school, and now you sew clothes...You should think things over.” When the parents go back to the village for a family visit during the Chinese new year, the first thing the mother asks her son after not seeing him for a year is how he is doing in school and how is his report card: “You are ranked fifth in your class? You should have done better.” When her son answers that he does not want to work too hard, she tells him: “Do well in school; it will benefit you when you grow up.” To her daughter who left school she says: “A peasants’ child must study hard. Otherwise you will end up like us.” One of the main themes of the film is that the villagers view their own home as a constraint place which does not hold any promises for the children’s future. Their only hope for their children is that they will leave the country side, and this goal could be obtained through education.

Kipnis (2001) argues that rural parents’ desire that their child will leave the village is closely connected to their will that their child will escape the stigma of being a “peasant” (2). Similar to the parents in the film *The Last Train Home*, the rural parents that Kipnis interviewed expressed the will that their children will work as hard and as much as they can so that they will have the same opportunities urban children have (15).³⁹ Gong’s (2005) conclusions regarding rural parents’ changing attitudes about the importance of education help understand mainland marriage migrants’ emphasis on their children’s education. Marrying a Hong Kong man and migrating to Hong Kong enabled mainland marriage migrants to expose their children to what is considered to be “first world education” (Fong 2011). Similar to the rural parents in the studies

³⁹ Rural parents’ perception that those who have more education enjoy more socio-economic mobility is supported by scholarly evidence (Murphy 2014). For instance, Hannum et al. state that by 2000, one additional year of education resulted in an average wage increase of 6.4 per cent (Hannum et al. 2010, cited in Hansen 2013).

and the film I described above, Sheung Shui marriage migrants believed that Hong Kong's educational system will be the instrument to achieve upward social mobility for their children.

6.2 HONG KONG'S QUALITY EDUCATION: A DESIRED DESTINATION

Recent studies on migration from developing to developed countries demonstrate that children's education is one of the primary motivations for migration (Murphy 2014). Many of these studies concentrate on the close connection between parents' investment in their children's education and their children's academic performances. Although in many cases children of migrants have better opportunities in their receiving country, studies present a more complex picture, showing that the academic achievement are influenced by the age and gender of the child, the gender and socio-economic status of the parents, and the school system (Kandal and Kao 2001; Asis 2006; Jampaklay 2006; Chen et al. 2009; Arguillas and Williams 2010).

After giving birth, Sheung Shui marriage migrants tend to live with their child in a rented apartment in Shenzhen until s/he turned three years old, and it is time to attend kindergarten. In many cases the child begins kindergarten in Hong Kong before the mother receives the One Way Permit, and she would go back and forth to Shenzhen until receiving the final approval to permanently live in Hong Kong. It appears that the child and his/her education was one of the main reasons the couples decided to live in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's education system is considered by the marriage migrants to be a migration strategy. According to Newendorp (2008) this was one of the main reasons mainland mothers endured the long wait for the Hong Kong Identity Card. Upon discussing with Sheung Shui marriage migrants the benefits of living in

Hong Kong, they always emphasized that living in Hong Kong is excellent for their child's future. When I asked them to state the main reason, common replies I received included: "Living in Hong Kong is good for my children because Hong Kong's education system is a lot better than in mainland China;" "I definitely think that living in Hong Kong is better, because the curriculum in Hong Kong is stronger than in mainland China... and there is an emphasis on learning English." Mainland marriage migrants who live in other parts of Hong Kong expressed similar views.

In Sham Shui Po, a poor district located in the northeastern part of Kowloon, there is a large percentage of mainland marriage migrants. The socio-economic level of many of the marriage migrants residing in Sham Shui is very low; many of the families live in public housing and receive government subsidies (Newendorp 2008). During my fieldwork I visited a welfare center intended to provide support and information about life in Hong Kong to mainland immigrants. During the weekends, the migrants' children also received assistance with their schoolwork. In interviews I conducted with Sham Shui Po marriage migrants they emphasized that they are willing to put up with the hardships for their children's future.

A-jun left her hometown in Guangxi province in 1995 and migrated to Shenzhen in search for employment. After working in Shenzhen for few years she met her Hong Kong husband through the introduction of mutual friends. They got married in 2006 in Hong Kong, and a year later, in 2007, she gave birth to her only daughter. After her daughter was born, A-jun continued living in Shenzhen. She was married for only one year and during that time still waited to receive her One-Way Permit, which she eventually received three years later. When their daughter turned three, A-jun and her husband decided that her daughter should attend kindergarten in Hong Kong and they permanently moved to the city.

The family rented a small apartment in Sham Shui Po, an area which she described as “a very bad environment.” A-jun told me that her husband’s job demanded traveling throughout Hong Kong and mainland China, so it is not convenient for him to return home every day. Because their daughter is young and she does not have any help from her parents in law, she cannot work outside the home. She said that as a result she feels very alone and lonely. A-jun conveyed that she does not like living in Hong Kong; that all of her friends are mainland immigrants, and that she is usually treated badly by Hongkongers. Although A-jun described her living experience in Hong Kong as extremely difficult, she also emphasized that she would never consider leaving Hong Kong and moving back to mainland China. She concluded that living in Hong Kong is good for her child's future because the Hong Kong education system is “superb” (*feichang hao*). At the end of our conversation, when I asked her if she thought Hong Kong's education system is better than in mainland China she replied: “It is not what I think; it is something that everyone knows!”

At the same welfare center, I interviewed Linxia who was from Zhuhai and had been living in Hong Kong for ten years. Linxia has three children who are twenty, sixteen and eight years old. She explained that she came to the center every weekend with her younger daughter because at the center there were teachers who could help her daughter improve her schoolwork. When Linxia told me about her life in Hong Kong she said that although she has been living in Hong Kong for more than ten years, she still could not get used to her “new” life and summarized: “life is just not good here... As opposed to mainland China, in Hong Kong everything is related to money, if you don’t have any money, you don’t have a life... Life here is just too hard.” Lin xia’s friend who was standing nearby overheard our conversation and told me

that she agreed but then added that although living in Hong Kong is “bad for the mother” it is “good for the children.”

Parents' desires concerning their children's education and academic future came up in many conversations I had with young mainland parents from different social backgrounds (urban and rural, richer and poorer) who expressed concerns for their only child's future. An urban middle-class mother I interviewed in a fieldwork which I conducted in Beijing in 2008 told me while holding her six-months-old baby girl in her arms that she was very worried that her daughter's life course has to be planned the minute she is born. As a result, young parents are driven to deal with dilemmas concerning their children's academic future as soon as their child is born, and in many cases the child's life course is planned even before.

Mainland marriage migrants in Hong Kong as well as mainland parents from different social backgrounds residing in Guangdong Province I have talked with described Hong Kong's education system as excellent in comparison to mainland China's. These parents also expressed their views that attending school in Hong Kong will increase their children's opportunities to succeed in life. Since Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty, a growing number of mainland families find different ways to cross the border and to ensure their child's future. The two phenomena I will describe below further demonstrate that Hong Kong continues to be viewed by mainlanders as a desired destination and its education a means to ensure the child's future.

Since 1997 there has been a constant flow of mainland Chinese women who cross the border to give birth in Hong Kong. In recent years about one third of all babies born in Hong Kong were born to mainland women (Hong Kong Census and Statistics department 2011). Slogans such as: "Provide your child with a bright future" and "let your child win at the starting

line..." are commonly found in websites which provide services for mainland Chinese women who plan to travel to Hong Kong to give birth. "Happy baby" (*baobao le*) is one of the companies which provides information, special services and maternity packages for mainland pregnant women who give birth in Hong Kong. According to their website, parents whose children are born in Hong Kong are: "people who wish that the next generation will have a better future" (*meihao qiancheng*). In other words, the messages these websites are advocating is if parents want to make it right from the start, and if parents want to ensure your child's future, they should give birth in Hong Kong. Moreover, these sites are also selling a dream of becoming an "excellent parent"; an idea that has been promoted by the Chinese government for the past three decades (Anagnost 1997; Naftali 2014).

When I met Li Xianchun she was a doctorate student in one of Hong Kong's universities. Li is a mainland woman, married to a mainland Chinese man. The couple owns an apartment in Shenzhen where the husband works. During her studies in Hong Kong, Li lived in the university's dormitories and commuted to Shenzhen during the weekends. When we met she was at an early stage of her pregnancy. We had long conversations about her child-to-be and especially about the place her child will be born at (Hong Kong or Shenzhen). Because she was a student in Hong Kong she received a HKID and was entitled to free health care and free prenatal examinations in Hong Kong. Yet, although Li went through her prenatal examinations in Hong Kong, when she was 24 weeks pregnant she still did not decide where to give birth. Li explained that the medical conditions in Hong Kong are much better than in mainland China. Moreover, she thought that being a Hong Kong permanent resident will be good for her child's future. She especially emphasized the importance of being entitled to receive the Hong Kong social benefits and the free education system. She also thought that Hong Kong's education is better than in

mainland China and explained that the classes are much smaller and that all schools have good teachers. It was a difficult decision for Li because although she believed Hong Kong has many benefits, she did not like living in Hong Kong because “Hong Kong people really don’t like mainlanders.” Li eventually decided to give birth in a public hospital in Hong Kong. Her son was born in the summer of 2011. He received the right of abode in Hong Kong and is entitled to all of the social benefits the city has to offer its residents.

In the summer of 2013 Li was very troubled regarding to where her son will attend kindergarten. Because they believed Hong Kong’s education system is very good in comparison to mainland China’s, Li and her husband both knew that their child will attend school in Hong Kong when he grows up. As a result, her husband thought that for their son's own benefit, he should attend kindergarten in Hong Kong as well. This way he would learn Cantonese and get used to Hong Kong's educational system. Li explained that getting into a good kindergarten in Hong Kong is not an easy task; especially for a child whose parents are both mainland Chinese. She applied for her son to be admitted into several kindergartens which are an hour drive away from the border and hoped for the best outcomes. After attending several interviews, her son was finally accepted to a kindergarten in Hong Kong. Every day his grandmother takes him to the border crossing area where a bus waits for all of the mainland children who study in Hong Kong. The journey from home to the kindergarten takes about an hour and a half.

The dramatic increase in cross-border pupils during the past few years attests to the importance that mainland parents place on education, as well as the way in which Hong Kong and its education system is perceived by mainland parents. The idea that education is a means to obtain upward social mobility is also reinforced in the survey “Babies Born in Hong Kong to Mainland Women” which was conducted by the Hong Kong Census and Statistic Department

and published in 2011. According to the survey, education is the primary reason mainland parents decide to give birth in Hong Kong. The survey's main conclusion is that 82% of mainland parents who gave birth in Hong Kong decided that their child will live in Hong Kong because of Hong Kong's educational system.⁴⁰

According to recent publications, since 2000, more than 200,000 children whose parents are both mainlanders have been born in Hong Kong. The number of cross-border children born in Hong Kong has increased from 600 in 2001 to 29,800 in 2013. In 2011, just before the Hong Kong government issued strict restrictions against pregnant mainland women entering Hong Kong, the numbers increased once again and nearly 35,000 children were born in Hong Kong to parents who are both mainlanders. According to information provided by schools in Hong Kong, the number of cross-border students, studying in kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools in the 2012/13 school year is about 7500, 7000 and 2000 respectively. In the 2013-2014 school-years around 20,000 pupils, a 21 percent increase from the previous year, crossed the border to attend public kindergartens and school in Hong Kong (Wang 2013).

On September 1, 2013, the first day of the school year, newspapers in Hong Kong were filled with articles about cross-border pupils. The articles described the difficult journey the children go through in order to reach their schools: young children needing to wake up at five in the morning and stand in the long lines at the immigration checkpoints. Because of the number of pupils, the media described the first day of the school year as “big chaos.” Although children woke up very early, many of them were still late for their schools and some went through a journey of more than four hours just to get to their kindergarten (Zhao 2013). Chen, a Hong Kong artist and social activist told me that he has great concerns regarding the phenomenon of

⁴⁰ Other reasons which parents considered important were Hong Kong's comprehensive legal system and the quality of living in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Census and Statistic Department).

cross-border children. He explained that in his opinion these children are born to broken families and when they grow up they will be very angry. He concluded by explaining that this phenomenon will have a negative influence on Hong Kong's identity.⁴¹

In conversations I conducted with mainland parents from both rural and urban households, I was usually told that the only way to increase a child's *suzhi* is through education. Since the common conception in mainland China is that a child's *suzhi* is greatly influenced by the family's social, political, cultural and economic position (Woronov 2003: 35-36; Kipnis 2006: 297), despite the difficulties, parents search for different ways to increase and expand their children's educational opportunities. Similar to the views held by mainland marriage migrants in Hong Kong, the phenomenon of maternity tourism and cross-border schoolings demonstrates that Hong Kong is viewed by mainland parents as a desired destination which has the ability to influence their children's future.

Shenzhen *hukou* holders, who cross the border to consume Hong Kong and then return to mainland China, can be considered as "flexible travelers." Mainland children, who cross the border every day to study in Hong Kong, are in fact "flexible citizens" (Ong 1999; Fong 2011). They hold an HKID, and are legally entitled to the social benefits Hong Kong offers its citizens. For these children, the border makes a distinction for their future, their perspectives, and their identity. These children's legal status is much more settled than that of children of rural migrants workers elsewhere in the mainland's big cities. Nevertheless, they continue to be viewed by many Hongkongers as "mainland children" and as "outsiders." From the family's point of view the child signifies a better future, a way to achieve upward social mobility, and to integrate in Hong Kong's society. For many Hongkongers, it is a struggle for Hong Kong's identity and future.

⁴¹ For a thorough discussion on the different meanings of the term "Hong Kong Identity" see Mathews, Ma and Lui 2008.

During the recent “Umbrella Revolution” there were concrete concerns that China will use actual force to conquer Hong Kong. Yet, my ethnographic data suggests that mainland immigration and tourism seems to pose even a higher threat than mainland China’s political intervention. Therefore, I argue that for both the marriage migrants and Hong Kong society “The birth is only the beginning.”

6.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION IN EVERYDAY LIVES

Blue Ocean (a fictive name) was the kindergarten my five-year-old daughter attended in Hong Kong. It was a local privately owned kindergarten, situated in a shopping mall in Sheung Shui. The children in the kindergarten were between the ages of one to six and they were divided into groups based on their age. Tuition for a half day was 2300 HKD per month (approx. 300 USD), which was not considered high compared to international schools in Hong Kong, but was higher than public kindergartens. A full day cost 4300 HKD (approx. 540 USD). In addition to the monthly tuition, extra fees were collected for books, fieldtrips, snacks, and winter and summer uniforms. Although Hong Kong’s public education is considered excellent in the eyes of many mainlanders, it is often criticized by local Hongkongers. Therefore, since the tuition was not considered high the families I came to know in Sheung Shui preferred that their children attend a private kindergarten. Furthermore, the mothers often told me that in this specific kindergarten there is an emphasis on English, which they considered extremely important. All of the families’ children attended public schools.

My daughter’s group was comprised of twenty two children aged four to five. Even though it was a local kindergarten, and the main language of the kindergarten was Cantonese,

more than eighty percent of the mothers were mainland marriage migrants. Besides the children whose both parents were Hongkongers, there were also three children with foreign parents (including my daughter), and several “cross-border children.” The class had a Hong Kong professional kindergarten teacher, who could speak only Cantonese, and a Hong Kong young assistant, who spent a few years living in Canada and spoke English with the children.

Beginning at the age of three, the main aim of the kindergarten was to prepare the children for the examinations which will eventually determine the elementary school they will attend. Sheung Shui marriage migrants often discussed the different schools, and their goal that their child will be accepted to the best elementary school in the district. The room contained few toys, and it was designed as a classroom with small tables and chairs in front of a board intended for teaching. The kindergarten’s program was rather strict, and the curriculum included: Cantonese, Mandarin Chinese, English, and mathematics. Twice a week the children also had art and sports lessons. The kindergarten schedule was dedicated to studying the different subjects, and between classes they received a snack and a thirty minute brake for playing inside the classroom. The school-year was divided into two semesters and in the beginning of each semester the children received books and notebooks which accompanied their studies. Every day, the children were assigned homework which included writing numbers, practicing Chinese characters, and learning new words in English. The teacher graded the homework, and each child received one, two, or three stamps according to how well they did. Twice a week the children had dictations in English and Chinese, and they received number grades.

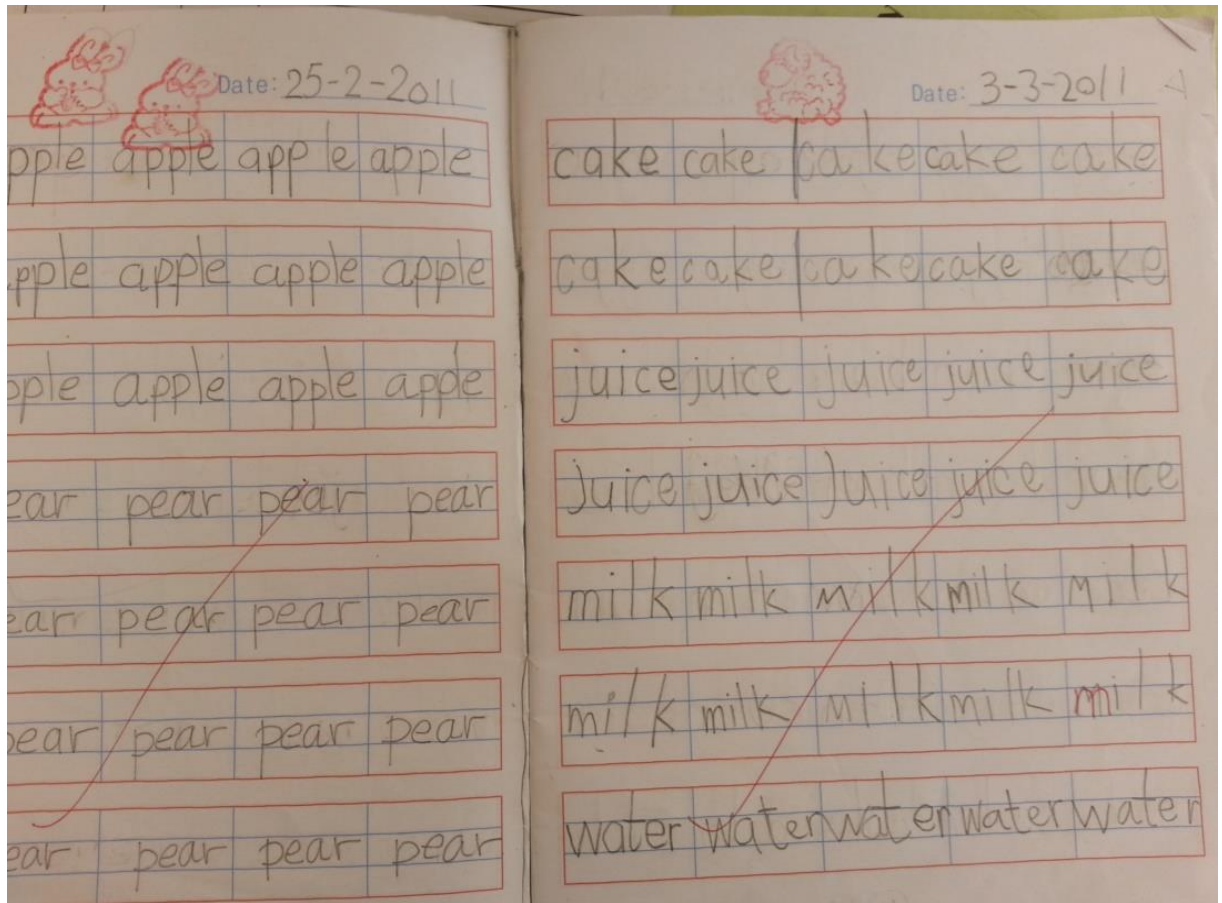


Figure 11: My daughter's English homework at the kindergarten.

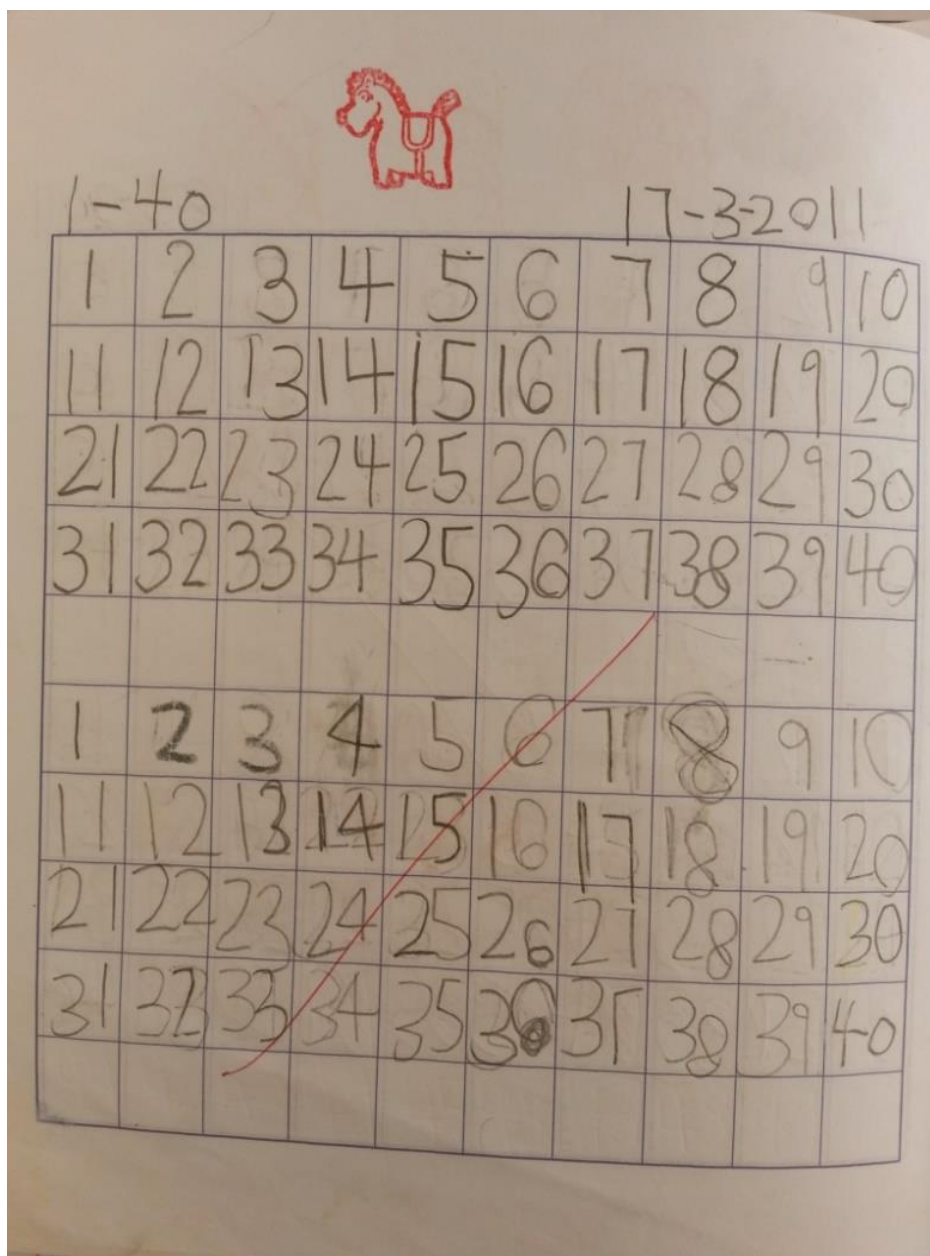


Figure12: My daughter's math homework at the kindergarten; She rarely received more than two stamps.

*Remarks: K2 & K3 2nd Term Final Assessment schedule:

4/7(Monday)	5/7(Tuesday)	6/7(Wednesday)	7/7(Thursday)
Study	English Dictation	Study	Chinese Dictation
Chinese Language	English	Mathematics	General Studies

Kindergarten
2011/6/24

Slip

I have read the above information.

Student's name: _____

Class: _____

Parents' Signature: _____

Figure 13: A spreadsheet provided by the kindergarten to the parents about the preparations for mid-term examinations in the kindergarten.

All of the children had to attend the kindergarten dressed in school uniform. The white color of the uniform could be seen as a sign that children were not expected to get dirty, paint, or play childish games. They spent most of their time sitting in the classroom listening to their teachers, and learning the materials. In addition to the weekly dictations, at the end of each term (twice a year) the children had thorough examinations in order to assess their learning abilities. Each exam was scheduled on a school day. During that week the children attended only the exams, and other kindergarten activities were canceled. The kindergarten also provided the option to register to extra-curriculum activities, which took place during the afternoons and the

weekends. These classes included: violin, art, dance, Kong Fu and others, and they demanded extra charge. Most of the Sheung Shui marriage migrants' children attended at least one extra curriculum course.

In all of the families I knew in Sheung Shui, the mother was responsible for bringing the child to the kindergarten in the morning, and picking up the child from kindergarten in the afternoon. Fathers joined the mothers only on rare occasions. After the children returned home, they usually ate lunch, and were immediately sent to do their homework and prepare for their weekly dictations. The mothers invested a great deal of time and energy to ensure that their children worked as hard as they can to complete their homework in the best possible way. Helping their children with their homework and preparing for the kindergarten's exams was a major part of the mother's afternoons, and it was considered a top priority. Only after they finished all of their assignments, the children were allowed to meet other children and play.

The parents received detailed information about the kindergarten's activities, but in fact there was little room for them to make any suggestions or to get involved. Each child had two assessment booklets, and every Friday the teacher would return the booklets to the parents with a new sheet which summarized the previous week's activities. One booklet was the class's weekly progress (*xuexi baogao*). In this booklet the parents were told about their child's learning progress, and they also received some information about the materials for next week's dictation. The second booklet was named "Student Handbook" (*xuesheng shouce*) and it was an attendance booklet. After reviewing the booklets during the weekend, the parents were supposed to sign their name and return the booklets to the kindergarten.

The child's learning achievements in the kindergarten were a major part of the Sheung Shui marriage migrants' conversations, and they took great pride whenever their child received a

high score in the quizzes and exams. After returning to Israel from my first fieldwork in 2012 Wang Jian often asked me how my daughter, who entered the first grade, was doing in school, and if she was “working hard” (*nuli*). Few days before the kindergarten’s mid-term exams, Wang jian wrote me a Facebook message, telling me that her daughter is very nervous and that she is investing all of her energy to prepare for the exams. She explained that the exams were very important because they will determine the kind of elementary school her daughter will attend the following year.

Although the fathers were absent during the weekdays, in the weekends they took the time to ensure that their children completed their homework, and that they were prepared for the upcoming dictations. Moreover, in most families, whenever the father was home, he took charge of the English homework, and on practicing short English conversations with the child. The mothers often told me that they felt they could help their child study mathematics and Chinese, but that they cannot speak “any English.” Sometimes they mentioned that their child’s English level is even better than theirs. This was another example to the hierarchy which characterized the couple’s relationship. The Hong Kong husbands were perceived as more “international,” and as such their English level was perceived better. The mainland marriage migrants often told me that as opposed to the relatively low English level which was taught in most schools in mainland China, Hong Kong schools focus on English, and that that will increase their children’s chances to succeed in life.

The home sphere was also dedicated to the child’s kindergarten work. In many of the houses, graded worksheets, English words, and math calculations were hanged on the living room walls and on the closets’ doors. In addition to fulfilling the kindergarten requirements, when I visited their homes, the mothers proudly showed me the extra work sheets they prepared

for their children. Wang Jian often prepared mathematics exercises for her daughter, and at the age of four and a half Linlin was already able to solve complicated multiplication problems. After her daughter received the kindergarten exams grades, Wang Jian changed the slogan of her QQ (a popular Chinese chat application): “My baby is the pride of mommy and daddy, this time she got the highest score in the entire class in the mid-term. All of her scores are 100. Good luck my baby!” (*Wode baobei shi bama de jiaobao, zhe ci qizhong kaoshi quan abn di yi, mei ke chengji dou yi bai fen. Baobei jia you! Jia you*).

Blue Ocean kindergarten’s education system was quite strict and demanded conformity from the children. In many conversations I conducted with local Hongkongers, I was told that this form of education was quite typical of Hong Kong pre-school education. My daughter was used to a significantly different education system and she experienced difficulties adjusting to the norms. Since I knew that our stay in Hong Kong was temporary, I encouraged her to try to absorb as much as she could but at the same time not to worry about homework or grades, which caused her high stress. Sheung Shui marriage migrants had a significantly different approach. During our joined gatherings we often discussed the kindergarten’s requirements and our views regarding the teachers’ attitudes. The mothers knew that I did not pressure my daughter to complete her homework assignments or to succeed in the examinations, and they often encouraged me to help her adjust to the kindergarten norms. In many occasions they found my daughter’s behavior too naughty (*tai tiaopi*), and as a result urged me to correct her behavior. In other cases, I was reminded that she should wear her uniform in the right manner. Occasionally they even made remarks about the color of her socks.

The emphasis Sheung Shui marriage migrants placed on education, and their admiration of Hong Kong’s educational system came into terms in the way in which they perceived the

kindergarten, the teachers, and the assignments given to their children. The kindergarten was considered top authority and they did whatever they could so that their child would fit in, follow the rules, and achieve the highest score in the assignments and examinations. Moreover, they rarely questioned the teachers' actions and decisions. On one occasion A-lin told me that the head teacher requested an appointment to discuss her son's learning achievements. The kindergarten teacher explained A-lin that her son does not work hard enough and that he only received ninety percent on his last quiz. When A-lin told me about their conversation she did not question the teacher's demands. She took the teacher's words very seriously, and acted exactly as the teacher suggested; she required her son to invest more time and study harder.

Mothers tended to explain that because they were immigrants from mainland China, they felt they had little to say to the local teachers about their own children's education. Wang Jian once said that when her daughter began to attend kindergarten, the head teacher used to treat her disrespectfully because her Cantonese was not very good and "because she is from mainland China." She then added that the teachers usually looked down at the mainland mothers and that only recently when the teacher learned that her daughter was the best student in the class, her attitude changed accordingly. The mothers rarely confronted the kindergarten teachers and as a result were treated by them in a condescending way. Nevertheless, they still strived hard so that their child will act according to the kindergarten's norms. The main reason was that they knew that their children's achievements will have a major influence on the elementary school they will attend. And they believed that the kindergarten's teachers and staff can provide them with the tools in order to achieve this goal. Moreover, the child's achievements also influenced the mothers' status in the eyes of the local teachers, and it contributed to the marriage migrants' feelings of belonging. The child as a means for mobility was also evident when Wang Jian told

me that only after her daughter was born and began attending kindergarten, she felt part of Hong Kong's society. This view conforms with long-standing Chinese notions of children as means to improve a family's status.

During my last fieldwork period in the winter of 2015, most of the Shuang Shui marriage migrants' children were already in primary school, continuing their journey towards becoming outstanding children. However, I choose to end the last chapter of my dissertation with an earlier episode from my field notes. In the summer of 2012 I was invited by the mothers of *Blue Ocean* kindergarten to join them for their children's kindergarten graduation ceremony. The ceremony was held at a large hall in a newly built science and technology park. At the day of the ceremony the mothers were very excited; they woke up early, dressed nicely and prepared for the big event. A post uploaded to Facebook by A-lin's husband stated that it is his son's "first important big day" (*di yige da rizi*). Wang Jian's husband Chang uploaded a photo of the small shield his daughter received for her superb achievements, and commented: "Thank you principal, head teacher and the teachers of the kindergarten for helping my daughter achieve such a big progress."

When we arrived, the children were dressed with white gowns, similar to college graduation gowns, and wore white socks and shoes. The ceremony's program included greetings from the kindergartens' principal, teachers and a supervisor from the educational bureau. It also contained songs and performances by the children which were conducted in Cantonese and Mandarin but mostly in English. At the end of the show, the principal asked the crowd to "give a big hand to the graduates," and the children received a graduation diploma which stated that the child: "has satisfactorily completed the required courses of work and play in the kindergarten." In many ways, the children's graduation ceremony was also a significant step for the mothers. Education being a fundamental part in acquiring higher *suzhi*, successfully completing the

kindergarten's examinations and entering primary school enabled the migrant marriage mothers to continue the journey.

7.0 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This dissertation focused on the phenomenon of cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men. I examined the women's motivations and everyday experiences in relation to the discursive, political, economic and social circumstances of mainland China and Hong Kong. In this concluding part, I will discuss three major issues: 1) The changing "nature" of the Hong Kong – China border; 2) Processes of belonging and exclusion; and 3) a new understanding of social mobility as an interpretive construct, and its implications for anthropological studies of migration.

7.1 THE CHANGING "NATURE" OF THE HONG-KONG CHINA BORDER(S)

In this dissertation I dealt with three types of "borders." The political border between mainland China and Hong Kong; the social and cultural boundary Hongkongers maintain between them and mainland China; and the boundaries that Sheung Shui marriage migrants constantly draw in their everyday life in Hong Kong. Both Barth (1969) and Wallman (1978) claim that something stronger than a physical border maintains an ethnic group's identity. Tilly (2004) defines social boundaries as different groups' intention to differentiate themselves from other groups. According to Tilly a social boundary is: "any contiguous zone of contrasting density, rapid transition, or separation between internally connected clusters of population and/or activity" (Tilly 2004). One of his main interests is to understand the reasons for the close connection between who "we" say we are, and which others we identify as "not us."

Every mainland immigrant arriving in Hong Kong receives a booklet entitled “A guidebook to the new permanent resident.” The photo which covers the booklet is of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon: Hong Kong's business and financial center. Although this is the place associated with the imagination of “Hong Kong,” it is in fact far from where the marriage migrants I came to know in Hong Kong reside. Crossing the political border between mainland China and Hong Kong, marriage migrants hoped to cross cultural and social boundaries as well. The women's motivations to cross the borders from the rural to the urban sector, and from the “periphery” to the “center,” were closely related to their ability to imagine their new destinations even before they reached them. Based on a study about tourism discourses and practices on the island of Java, Salazar (2011: 577) writes that “people hardly journey to *terrae incognitae* anymore these days but to destinations they already virtually ‘know’ through the widely circulating imaginaries about them.”

In her book about transnational Chinese students Fong describes how Chinese citizens imagine foreign countries as “paradise” (Fong 2011: 2). Fong chose the term “developed world” to describe popular Chinese ideas related to the kind of paradise Chinese citizens desire to be a part of. This classification depends more on the power, prestige, and geopolitical alliances of those countries and less on objective economic standards. The imagination of the *developed world* by Chinese students is not individual matter; rather, it is related to a collective imagination. Similar to rural Chinese imagining of the city, and transnational Chinese students' envisioning of the “developed world,” Hong Kong embodied the desired destination of the Sheung Shui marriage migrants. The emphasis on Hong Kong's superiority is closely related to the discussion about the different meanings and uses of *suzhi* as a social construct. In the process of crossing the border, the marriage migrants did not only gain legal status, mainland China became “the other.”

Hong Kong's "quality" highlighted mainland China's negative image, and the need to define it as "not us."

As I described throughout my dissertation, legal citizenship was in fact the tool that marriage migrants used in order to draw a boundary between "us" and "them." Yet, while "us" refers to being a mainland migrant wife, there are several "thems." The women sought to differentiate themselves, even in everyday life not only from mainland tourists and mainland Chinese citizens in general, but also from their previous social position as rural *hukou* holders and as labor migrants in particular. The fact that their families stayed "behind" on the mainland, made this "us/them" distinction more ambivalent and even painful. For the women, "them" also refers to Hong Kong people who did not view the marriage migrants as integral part of the Hong Kong society.

For the migrant women the border became a resource, and although in recent years it has also become a resource for Hong Kong entrepreneurs and others (Ma 2012), for many Hong Kong residents (especially the young generation), increased cross-border interactions became a source of instability and insecurity. As demonstrated by the recent Umbrella Revolution, the flow of tourists and immigrants, and the political intervention of mainland China, did not result in Hongkongers' embracing of the nationalistic discourse. To the contrary, many Hongkongers have sought more segregated, and their desire to differentiate themselves from mainland China has grown.

One of the implications of cross-border marriages as well as the rising numbers of children born in Hong Kong to mainland mothers is the changing nature of the border. Is Shenzhen "China" and is Sheung Shui "Hong Kong"? I argue that the cross-border marriages eventually cause the expanding and blurring of the Hong Kong-China border, so that there is a

much wider strip of border where the dichotomies of the rural/ urban, periphery/ center, and hybrid identities/ nationalism get new and more complex meanings.

7.2 PROCESSES OF BELONGING AND EXCLUSION

During one of the last lessons in a course I taught in Israel about migration in China, I asked my students if they think that “a migrant” can ever become a “non-migrant.” One of students raised her hand, and very passionately told the class that even though she immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union when she was only 10 months old, she still feels like a migrant. On a recent visit to my friends’ home in Israel; a family consisting an Israeli husband, a mainland Chinese wife and their three-year-old daughter, I noticed a box of Chinese instant noodles on the refrigerator. The family just returned from a one month visit to mainland China and brought the box of noodles back with them. I asked my children if they wanted to taste the noodles, but my friend told me: “your children cannot eat the noodles. I keep the noodles for desperate time, when I feel lonely and I miss my hometown... It is the only thing that brings me back.” These two examples, which raise issues of belonging and exclusion, exemplify one of the key questions this dissertation aimed to explore. Are the women I came to know in Sheung Shui still migrants? What are the different mechanisms that contribute to processes of exclusion and belonging in contemporary China and Hong Kong?

Migration is a socially embedded process that reflects and reinforces a specific legal and social structure. As such, migration is conceived as linked in its meaning and operation to changes in the economic, social and cultural landscapes in which it is a part of. “The social embeddedness of migration” means that feelings of inclusion and exclusion are not simply a

result of structural conditions. They are organized and ascribed with meanings in, and through the existing hierarchies of a specific context (Silvey 2005: 138). This analysis is highly relevant for understanding cross-border marriages. As my findings show, cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong Kong men reflect and reinforce the specific social organizations which exist on both sides of the border.

As discussed in Chapter Two, on the Chinese side of the border, migrant women's motivations to pursue mobility are closely related to the gap between the rural and the urban sector, the marginalization of women in their families and in society, and contemporary discourses related to the idea of the improvement of the "quality" of the population. My findings also reveal that crossing the border to Hong Kong did not "shed" many of the qualities that were the main reasons for out-migration. In fact, similar mechanisms, which contributed to the marginalization of the women in China's rural areas and in Shenzhen, persist in Hong Kong.

In her study about female migrant workers in a factory in Shenzhen, Pun Ngai shows that the rural women workers in Shenzhen continue to be viewed as peasants, especially by their employers. For example, during one of the inspections, after the manager found cartons that had been brought out by the workers to make benches in their rooms, he loudly told the workers: "Let me repeat, you are working now in the factory, and the bad habits you bring from the countryside should be given up. No spitting on the floor, and keep your bunk and room clean" (Ngai 1999: 5). Geographical mobility, in other words, from the point of view of the manager, did not help the migrants shed rurality and gain *suzhi*. The subordination, peripheralization, and exploitation of the rural migrant by her urban employer were not only related to class difference

or the rural/urban division, it was linked to the situating of the migrant as subaltern and as an outsider.

In recent years more and more studies highlight the importance of affects and emotions for understanding migration and transnational processes (Shaw and Charsley 2006, Skrbiš 2008). Geographers have argued that “place” plays an important role in the on-going constitution of identity (Cresswell, 2004). This idea derives from the understanding that “who we are” is closely related to multiple connections with people, events and places (Conradson and McKay 2007). Since a person’s home, usually, although not always, represents stability, geographical mobility significantly influences a person’s subjectivity. The networks lost through migration, the benefits of citizenship, and other local or global structures of power have a significant effect on gendered domestic relations of power (Charsley 2012). Migration thus inevitably results in new and complex forms of emotions (Sheller and Urry 2006).

My empirical data illustrate the centrality of emotional dynamics in the marriage migrants’ lives. Some of the “spaces of marginality” (Salazar 2010: 58) they wanted to escape from in mainland China reappeared in Hong Kong. For example, the marriage migrants’ feelings of exclusion were closely related to their relationship with their spouses. Most of the women were bound to an unsigned “gendered contract” which left them in the home sphere; the same social role they wanted to escape from upon leaving the village. The husbands’ absence, resulted in a feeling of a shared destiny, and often triggered emotional reactions. The women spend most of their time with other mainland migrants; they are considered “mainlanders,” and often experienced feelings of exclusion from the local society. In a study about marriage across the Taiwan Strait, Friedman argues that the Chinese marital immigrants in Taiwan are viewed as potential threats to the nation, and as a result are treated as “exceptional citizens” (Friedman

2010: 74). As I described throughout my dissertation, the social exclusion that Sheung Shui marriage migrants experience in their everyday life is closely related to Hong Kong people's fear of their city's future. At the same time, the legal citizenship granted the marriage migrants many of the social benefits they lacked as rural *hukou* holders, and as rural labor migrants. Hong Kong's social benefits and especially the education system which allowed them to build "quality" into their children contributed to their feelings of belonging. Despite the fact that they are confined within the social and cultural boundaries by which they are surrounded, they also manage to negotiate them in their everyday lives.

7.3 MOBILE IDENTITIES

When I began to write my dissertation I was eager to understand whether the women in my study managed to cross the border from the "periphery" to the "center" and from the "rural" to the "urban" sector. My fieldwork began towards the end of 2010 and my last visit to Hong Kong before completing my dissertation took place four years later in February 2015. During this period, I witnessed significant changes in the marriage migrants' lives, which proved to be extremely important to my understanding of their experiences as marriage migrants and as mainlanders in Hong Kong. For example, one of these changes was related to the way the women viewed Hong Kong. The image of a "flawless" Hong Kong has changed, and when I returned to Sheung Shui in the winter of 2015, I occasionally heard complaints about the housing situation and the high cost of living. In one of our conversations, Wang Jian even told me that she was not satisfied with her daughter's school teacher's behavior, a kind of complaint that was inconceivable before. Complaining about the Hong Kong system situated the migrants at least to

some extent as “locals,” who as I mentioned earlier, often criticized the social, economic and political situation in Hong Kong. As I have discussed in chapter six, another significant change is related to the growing up of their children, and its influence on the way the women spend their days, their employment opportunities and their social networks. These changes that I witnessed during my long-term study meant that there was no simple way to answer my intended research question.

Studies show that Chinese citizens view traveling abroad not only as a physical journey, but also as moving from one social position to another. The travelers do not desire the legal citizenship *per se*, but the prestige associated with the “developed world” (Ong 1996, 1999; Chu 2010; Fong 2011; Friedman 2010; 2015). Ong defines cultural citizenship as a process of: “self-making and being-made in relation to nation-states and transnational processes” (Ong 1996: 737). As such, it is not granted immediately upon receiving legal rights. One can be a legal citizen without enjoying the benefits and prestige of social and cultural citizenship (Fong 2011: 13). Friedman (2015: 4) argues that sovereignty and legal citizenship often even fail to produce meaningful experiences of inclusion and belonging.

Sedentarism often regards “stability, meaning, and place” as the typical or normal situation, while “distance, change, and placelessness” are treated as abnormal (Sheller and Urry 2006: 208). This definition means that a “physical place,” a “base line” or a “starting point” are seen as the norm or the fundamental basis for understanding people’s experiences and identity (Cresswell 2002). As opposed to “sedentary metaphysics,” cross-border marriages between mainland women and Hong men question the “taken for granted bond between people, place and culture” (Salazar 2010: 54; see also Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

The changes I witnessed meant that understanding the structural conditions which the marriage migrants encountered, as well as the way in which they negotiated these boundaries in a specific point in time, would not be sufficient for understanding the changes in which their geographical mobility generated. Instead of asking if the women managed to obtain upward social mobility, or whether their legal citizenship also granted them cultural citizenship, I argue that “social mobility” should be analyzed as a process. My findings highlight the idea that social mobility is an interpretive construct, which is formed in accordance with the specific social and cultural settings, and “time” must be a component in its analysis. I suggest that there is no point in time in which a migrant becomes a non-migrant; or a moment in which a new social identity is formed. The women’s social identity is constantly negotiated, contested and transforms. In this sense, the term “Sheung Shui marriage migrant” best describes their “current” social identity.

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