

Internal migrations and family structure changes in rural China. An exploratory field research in Danian Township, Guangxi province.

The twelfth five-year plan (2011-2015) is testimony to central government's wish to narrow the city-countryside gap. This political choice is in line with my analysis and the field research I carried out in the rural township of Danian (Guangxi province) in 2010. This article intends to analyze the link between migration and socio-economic changes in rural China. I first discuss my theoretical framework. Second, focusing my analysis on individual action and on my exploratory field research, I highlight the fact that rural migration to the cities has a real impact on rural socio-economic living conditions. Third, moving from micro to macro I show that, since 2000, the Chinese government has changed the direction of its national development policy by multiplying measures to improve rural life and to narrow the gap between living conditions in cities and rural areas. I conclude that the inhabitants of Danian have been able and continue to make the most of government measures, recently to their advantage, to implement migratory strategies that allow them to achieve their goals and contribute to the development of rural China.

Introduction

Even if in Asia in general and in China in particular, structuralism used to be a predominant theoretical approach in sociology, a tendency to emphasize more and more on the adaptive strategies developed by individuals is developing among Chinese scholars' analysis¹. Following this direction and Sen's capability approach, I will intend to demonstrate, in this communication, that migration and development in rural China are part of the same process and constantly interact.² Scholars have largely overlooked this approach. They have rather focused their analysis on destination areas; it is to say on the impact of migration on urban centers³.

In China, despite the acceleration of the urbanization process in the last thirty years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to be an essentially rural country with just over half the population registered as rural, according to the 2010 population census⁴. However, officially more than 220 million citizens holding a rural residence permit live intermittently between city and countryside (nearly 32% of the rural population and 17% of the total population)⁵ and have jobs that do not correspond to their original agricultural status. In this article the urban and rural populations are defined according to where their residence permit (*hukou*) is registered ("*de jure hukou* population") and by extension the urban centers and rural areas are geographical areas that are mainly inhabited, on a permanent basis, by a population holding an urban or rural *hukou* respectively⁶. In order to focus on what people are able to do and be in a specific context determined by social, political and economic structures, I adopt Sen's capability approach as theoretical framework⁷. Sen argues that one should focus

¹ Li, Lulu, *zhidu zhuanxing yu jiecenhua jizhi de bianqian (Institutional transition and the evolution of stratification mechanisms)*, in *Zhongguo shehuixue (Chinese sociology)*, n°4, 2005; Li, Peilin, Ma, Rong and Li Qiang, *Shehuixue yu zhong guo shehui (Sociology and Chinese society)*, Beijing, Shehui kexue wenxian chabanshe.

² Castles, Stephen, *Development and migration – Migration and development : What comes first ?*, in *SSRC Migration and development conference papers*, 28 February – 1 March 2008, New York, p.10.

³ Some outstanding researches make exception, see for instance Unger, Jonathan, *The transformation of rural China*, New York, M.E Sharp, 2002; Murphy, Rachel, *How migrant labor is changing rural China*, Cambridge University Press, 2002 and Davin, Dalia, *Internal migration in contemporary China*, London, Macmillan press, 1999.

⁴ 50,32%: http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/newsandcomingevents/t20110428_402722244.htm. Accessed on 23 April 2012 and http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-04/28/content_12415449.htm. Consulted on 24 August 2011.

⁵ <http://www.newgeography.com/content/002218-china-urbanizing-and-moving-east-2010-census>. Consulted on 22 August 2011. *Guowuyuan yanjiushi ketizu*, Council of State Affairs Research Group, *Zhongguo nongmingong diaoyan baogao, Report on studies of Chinese migrant workers*, Beijing, Zhongguo yanshi chubanshe, 2006, p.70. The exact number is: 221'426'652 persons: http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/newsandcomingevents/t20110428_402722244.htm. Accessed on 13 April 2012.

or natural disasters. Cf. <http://www.un.org/fr/events/migrantsday/> and <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=19729&Cr=CNUCED&Cr1=migrants>. Consulted on 31 March 2011.

⁶ For a discussion of the definition of "urban population" see Chan, Kam Wing, *Measuring the urban millions*, in *China Economic Quarterly*, 21–26 March 2009, *Misconceptions and Complexities in the Study of China's Cities: Definitions, Statistics, and Implications*, in *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 48(4), p. 303-412, and *Dangqian zhongguo de chengzhen renkou tongji wenti ji zhen dui jingji fexi de yingxiang*, *Current statistics of urban population and its impacts on economic analysis*, in *op.cit. Renkou yu laodong li pi shu (2010)*, *Green book of population and labor (2010)*, p. 236-246.

⁷ For further reading on the "capability approach", see Sen. Amartya, "Poor, relatively speaking", in *Oxford Economic Papers*, 35 (1983), p. 164.

his analysis on “the actual opportunities a person has”⁸, “namely their functionings and capabilities. Functionings refer to the various things a person succeeds in “doing or being”[...], while “capabilities” refer to a person’s real or substantive freedom to achieve such “functionings””⁹. Based on my fieldwork carried out in the township of Danian, in the Rongshui region, in the north of the Guangxi province, I show how rural households use individual (although sometimes strongly conditioned by family) strategies and state policies in favor of the countryside, to maximize their gains regardless of existing social political and economic structures. By taking the perspective of the migrant rural worker (*nongmingong*), my aim is to study the phenomenon of internal migration that affects, either directly or indirectly, one in two individuals across the social spectrum¹⁰, and its socio-economic impact on village life.

I carried out an exploratory field research in two villages of the Danian Township: Guihe and Gaoliao. Guihe groups together six hamlets (Guimu, Goukou, Xinlong, Xinlong Shangzhai, Guihe and Guihe Shangzhai) which are mainly inhabited by the Dong ethnic minority. Gaoliao is made up of three hamlets (Xiangtang, Yala and Gaoliao) which are mainly inhabited by the Miao ethnic group. These two villages had 3’392 inhabitants in 2009, according to the municipal statistics of Danian. Between January and March 2010, when migrants return to their villages to celebrate Chinese New Year, I interviewed 34 individuals from these two ethnic groups, of both sexes and in different age groups (20-29, 30-39, 40-55 and 55 and over) using the semi-directive interview method. I supplemented these interviews with “participant” observation of, and informal discussions with, the population. In some cases, this enabled me to obtain more unguarded or spontaneous replies than I received during the recorded interviews. I analyzed and supplemented the contents of these exchanges using statistical data provided by the Danian municipality on the economic situation of the commune and the structure of its population, and by reading the national press and carrying out an extensive consultation of secondary literature.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: first I will discuss more my theoretical framework. Second, I will consider how internal migration, which has increased since the admission of China to the WTO ten years ago and which highlights the existing socio-economic inequalities¹¹ inherent in the Chinese development “model”, relatively contributes in a developing context to close the gap between city and countryside¹². I will show that the impact of internal migration on rural change goes far beyond the role played by remittances; it allows investments, transmission of new skills and development of social networks. Third, I will look at how, since 2000, the year in which President Jiang Zemin launched the first program to develop the center of the country, the Chinese government has broken with the policies in force since 1949 to finally give priority to the rural areas and efforts to bridge the growing social gap. Hu Jintao, riding on an overall yearly economic growth rate of more than 10%, pledged to “build a harmonious society”¹³. The political guidelines given by the government at the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which were held from 5 to 13 March 2010 in Beijing

⁸ Sen, Amartya, *The idea of justice*, London, Allen Lane, 2009, p.253.

⁹ Sen, Amartya, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford, Oxford University press, 1999, p. 75 and Hick, Rod, « The capability approach : Insights for a new poverty focus », in *Journal of social policy*, N°41, 2012, p.292.

¹⁰ Rural population represents more than half the national population. See *China Statistical Yearbook 2009*, , *China Statistics Press*, 2009.9 (National Bureau of Statistics of China), p.89.

¹¹ The Gini coefficient, which measures social inequality, rose from 16.2 at the beginning of the 1980s to 20.6 at the beginning of the 1990s (<http://www.worldbank.org/html/prddr/trans/j&a96/art2.htm>, consulted on 13 May 2010), and to 41.5 at the beginning of the 2000s (Chesnais, Jean-Claude, “Les revenus, une pauvreté persistant et des inégalités croissantes”, in Isabelle Attané, *La Chine au seuil du xxi e siècle*, Les cahiers de l’INED, no°148, 2002, p.472).

¹² Average annual revenue for city residents is more than three times the average annual revenue of someone living in the countryside; the first group earns an average of 1315 renminbi a month, while the second group earns an average of 397 renminbi a month to live on (see op. cit., *China Statistical Yearbook 2009*, p.317). Even if we have chosen a Manichean position in this article by opposing city and countryside in order to set off the contrast in development between these two geographical categories, we are entirely aware that there are differences in development within cities and rural areas. As a reference: 1 euro= 8.27 renminbi (exchange rate of April 17th, 2012).

¹³ Hu Jintao launched a new slogan calling for the construction of a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*) as soon as he came into office in 2002.

confirmed and strengthened the central authorities' wish to narrow the city-countryside gap.¹⁴ Therefore in this last section we will discuss changes in the countryside, coming from the state, in term of a march toward more equality rather than in term of inequality.

1. Development theories, internal migration and change in rural China

Despite the greater flexibility that exists since the end of the 1980s and the introduction of an identification card, rural-to-urban migration continues to be strictly controlled by the system of residential registration (*hujū zhīdù*), more commonly referred to as the *hukou* system¹⁵. This residence permit system, established in 1955, separates the population into two categories: the population born in the city holds an urban "citizen" status and the population born in the countryside holds a rural "citizen" status¹⁶. This institutional division between urban and rural populations, assigning them different place to live as well as distinctive social, political and economic rights, to the disadvantage of rural population, is "integral to China's socio-economic structure and development strategy"¹⁷ and has created a dual society. In the 1950s the leaders decided to follow a soviet economic growth strategy, i.e. "a rapid industrialization centered on heavy industry in cities and extraction of agricultural surplus from the peasantry"¹⁸ and the *hukou* system was the mechanism chosen to prevent rural-to-urban migration and to exclude the rural population from state provided goods and welfare policies¹⁹. I will not argue that the central government under the Maoist period had already planned the positive role that the rural population would play in his new "model" of development (*zhongguo moshi*)²⁰. However since the reforms of 1978 and the relative economic liberalization, the country's economic growth is essentially driven by labor-intensive production and the exportation of goods. The country has a comparative advantage in the production of such goods owing to population growth brought on by the "baby boom" in the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, the use of fertilizers, hybrid seeds and new technology have increased agricultural production and productivity, and since the quantity of land available in the countryside is continually decreasing (due to the urbanization process and the construction of infrastructures such as roads) part of the available agricultural work force has been underemployed since the 1980s²¹. Furthermore, because of the increased pressure on the land, in some areas the land held by households is barely sufficient to feed family members. In this context and to satisfy labor needs, the central government started to allow, under strict regulations, rural-to-urban migration. Nevertheless, even if in cities migrants are not eligible for social benefits as they are linked with the place where the *hukou* is registered, internal migration has been the main way for rural families to increase their revenues and reduce pressure on the land.

In the 1950s and 1960s development theories perceived migration as a mean for modernization. They mainly applied neo-classical and rational choice theory. To that perspective, development induces migration from countryside to city, which decision is overwhelmingly based on the assumption that individuals have an exact knowledge of

¹⁴ *Renmin ribao*, from 5 March 2010.

¹⁵ On the *hukou* system see: Wang, Fei-Ling, *Organizing through division and exclusion. China's Hukou system*, Stanford University Press, 2005; Chan, Kam Wing and Zhang, Li, *The Hukou system and rural-urban migration in China: Processes and Changes*, in *The China Quarterly*, N° 160, December 1999, p.818-855.

¹⁶ For further reading on this notion please see Kam Wing Chan, Bingqin Lin and Dorothy Solinger.

¹⁷ Chan, Kam Wing, « The household registration system and migrant labor in China : Notes on a debate », in *Population and development review*, V.36, N°2, 2010, p.362.

¹⁸ Op. cit., Chan, Kam Wing, p.357.

¹⁹ See Wang, Fei-Ling; Chan, Kam Wing ; Solinger, Dorothy J.

²⁰ For example, Qi, Shize, *Lun zhongguo moshi, Discussing the Chinese model*, Shen Yunsuo, *Zongguo moshi lun, The chinese model discussed* ou Zhang, Yu, *Zhongguo moshi. Gaige kaifang sanshi nian de zhongguo jingji, The Chinese model over 30 years of reforms and liberalization* consider that the Chinese development model only exists since the implementation of the liberalization policy and the reforms. However researchers Pan Wei, *Zhongguo moshi : jiedu renmin gongheguo de 60 nian, The Chinese Model: a reading of 60 years of the Popular Republic*, Gan Yang, He Xuefeng, and Zhang Baijia believe that the reforms implemented by Mao established the ideological principles that would enable the success of the post-Maoist reforms.

²¹ Using the data provided by the municipality of Danian, a rural commune in the Guangxi province, we have calculated that the area of farm land available has gone from 786.43 m² in 2000 to 598m² in 2009: *nongcun shehui jingji tongji nian baobiao*, Archives for 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2009 of the Municipality of Danian on the economic situation of the commune.

employment opportunities and wage levels in cities. To the tenants of this theory, the wage disparity between rural areas and cities is a sufficient factor to explain migration, the spatial redistribution of labor from low-wage sectors to high-wage sectors. In the long run, in accordance with the supply and demand rule, migration flow will reduce as incomes in the countryside (rise) and in cities (fall) will adjust and tend to the equilibrium point.²² Then in the 1970s and 1980s structuralist theories emphasized the role of migration in undermining “the prospects for local economic development and yields a state of stagnation and dependency”²³. They argue that remittances rather than being invested in productive goods are spent in non-productive goods such as housing or consumption products.²⁴ As, according to them, only unsuccessful migrants have the project to return to the village, the socio-economic impact cannot be positive. This argument does not hold in the Chinese case because with the *hukou* system migrants *enter the city without truly leaving the village*. They circulate between cities and their hometowns, going back to their villages about once a year. Rural migrant workers are *de jure* treated as part of the rural population. Since the 1990s and especially since a decade, number of academics has argued that migration can induce positive socio-economic changes on the area of origin.²⁵ They emphasize the role of the individual, the family and the community in migrations decisions. To them the impact on the sending area is positive because migrants will use human capital gains to promote modernization and socio-economic development in their village of origin.

In their analysis of migration and rural development, Chinese scholars incorporate arguments from both perspectives. On the one hand, they favor a state intervention to impulse positive stimuli for the development of rural areas (investment in infrastructures, welfare policies, etc.)²⁶. However, some scholars also stigmatize the role played by the *hukou* system, which has delayed the moment when the Lewis turning point/transition²⁷ should have taken place and has subsequently postponed the increase in the rural migrant workers real wage.²⁸ On the other hand, they recognize the positive impact internal migrations have on the countryside.

The above-mentioned theoretical perspectives introduce a dichotomy between urban and rural areas, as well as macro and micro levels of analysis. While neo-classical and modernization theories tend to underestimate the role of the structures, structuralists tend to overestimate the importance of structural constraints.²⁹ They also do not take into account the capability of an individual to act under specific structures, and they minimize the role played by non-economic dimensions. In this article, in order to make agency and capability of social actors central to explain how internal migration is changing rural society and economy in China, and more especially Danian Township, I adopt a pluralistic approach which is able « to account for the role of structure - the constraining or enabling general political, institutional, economic social, and cultural context in which migration takes place - as well as agency - the limited but real capacity of individuals to overcome constraints and potentially reshape the structural context »³⁰. Development will be here understood in his broader meaning: encompassing economic, political, social and cultural changes coming from the state and from the individuals; with changes such as income growth, progress in education, welfare, infrastructures, etc. and improvement in human capabilities, interacting in an ecological

²² See Lewis, Arthur ; Fei and Ranis ; Todaro, Michael ; Harris and Todaro (he introduces a nuance stating that individuals base their decisions to migrant on incomplete information and may find themselves at destination on a situation of underemployment).

²³ Massey, Douglas and al., *Worlds in motion. Understanding international migration at the end of the millenium*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.220-275.

²⁴ Gunder Frank, André; Standing, Guy; Lipton, Michael; Connell, John.

²⁵ Op. cit., Castle, Stephen ; Newland, Kathleen, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=580> (accessed April 17th, 2012) and De Haas, Hein, <http://www.imi.ox.ac.uk/pdfs/imi-working-papers/WP9%20Migration%20and%20development%20theory%20HdH.pdf> (accessed April 17th, 2012).

²⁶ Zhou, Pei.

²⁷ The point at which the excess labor in the subsistence sector is fully absorbed into the modern sector, and where further capital accumulation begins to increase wages.

²⁸ Cai, Fang ; Wang, Meiyun ; Du Yang ; Zang Zhanxin ; Hou Huili.

²⁹ Op. cit. De Haas, Hein, p. 33-34.

³⁰ Op.cit, De Haas, Hein, p. 34.

system.

2. The effect of internal migration on rural society and economy: the micro study of Danian Township

Internal migration, means used by households or family groups to achieve their objectives through the opportunities available to them, has a deep impact on the economic and social organization of the Chinese countryside. In China, this phenomenon has reached unprecedented levels and it concerns the entire rural environment: more than 220 million peasants have non-agricultural jobs, half of which are carried out in urban areas³¹. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, 84% of migrant workers are aged between 16 and 40³². This trend is confirmed by our observations in the township of Danian; according to the villagers, people born in the 1980s and 90s migrate (save for some exceptions) while migrants over 40, in general, return to the countryside³³. In 2006 in Danian, about 43% of the population in age to work migrated; this figure declined a little in 2009 (35%), probably because of the financial crisis and the relative slowdown of the economy.³⁴ The majority of them are illegal, working without a work contract or they are “self-employed” (*zimou zhiye*), and therefore have no social security³⁵. Migrant workers are generally vulnerable in the cities and often do not qualify for complete social security (unemployment benefits, pension, health, accident and maternity insurance) in the city or in the countryside. Migration is nevertheless the best way for rural families to increase their income through the optimal use of the available work force. In Guangxi province on average an urban citizen earns 1'178 yuans a month, whereas a rural citizen earns 307 yuans.³⁶ National trends show that Eastern China and the coastal areas attract 71% of migrant workers³⁷. Due to the proximity of Guangxi province to Shenzhen and Guangzhou - two special economic zones in the province of Guangdong - Danian migrant workers tend to migrate to this province. Our interviews show that men over 40 tend to stay in the province and work felling trees or collecting rubber. Younger men go to work in the city in the construction sector, in car factories, plastic factories, steel factories, etc. Women also migrate but they go to work for urban companies, manufacturing toys, clothes, and the youngest work assembling electric components. Contrary to the national trend, none of the women in the villages in question carried out social work (in other words, none of them worked as cleaning ladies)³⁸. I observed that migrants tend to find work in the city through their networks before leaving their village³⁹.

2.1. Economic impacts

³¹ Op.cit., <http://www.newgeography.com/content/002218-china-urbanizing-and-moving-east-2010-census>. Consulted on 22 August 2010 et op.cit., Guowuyuan, p.70.

³² *Guojia tongjiju nongcun si*, Department of rural surveys, National bureau of statistics, *Waichu nongmingong jiben tezhen*, The basic characteristics of migrant workers, in op.cit. (2010) *Renkou yu laodong li pi shu* (2010), Green book of population and labor (2010), p. 5.

³³ In particular, see interview with teacher in the village of Gaoliao : 10_080210. The proportion of migrants over 40 only represents 11.9 % of total migrants, op. cit., *Guojia tongjiju nongcun si*, Department of rural surveys, National bureau of statistics, p.5.

³⁴ Op.cit., *Nongcun shehui jingji tongji nian baobiao*, archives 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2009 of the commune of Danian. The documents do not mention the repartition of these figures by sex.

³⁵ *Shehui lan pi shu*. *Zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce*, Blue book of China's society. Society of China analysis and forecast 2011, shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, Social sciences academic press, p.28-38 and Peng Xizhe, 2009 *Zhongguo feizhenggui jiyue fazhan baogao : laodongli shichang de zai guan*, Report on China's informal employment development : Survey on the labor force market, Chongqing chubanshe, Chongqing press. And, according to a survey carried out by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of 68,000 rural households in 31 provinces, 857 regions and 7100 villages when the migrants returned to their village for the 2008 Chinese New Year, some 80 to 120 million migrants were working in the informal sector (without work contract): http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/t20090325_402547406.htm, consulted on 22 August 2011. These references supplemented our interviews with the population in Danian.

³⁶ 1'178 yuans are worth about 143 euros and 307,5 are worth about 37 euros. Figures are quite similar if we consider them at national level: 1'315 yuans and 397 yuans in urban and rural areas respectively. Op.cit. *China Statistical Yearbook 2009*, p.317 and *Guangxi Statistical yearbook 2009*, p.192.

³⁷ Op.cit., http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/t20090325_402547406.htm.

³⁸ According to the 2006 statistics, migrants work in the following sectors (in order of importance): manufacture, construction, social services, hotels and restaurants, shops and other. *China Statistical Yearbook 2006*, China Statistics Press, National Bureau of Statistics of China. For further reading on migratory sectors see Rouleau-Berger, Laurence and Lu Shi, *Les travailleurs migrants à Shanghai*, in *Perspectives chinoises*, n° 87, January-February 2005.

³⁹ “The data shows that 26 per cent of migrant workers found work via the assistance of family members, 10 per cent through the assistance of friends, 43 per cent with the help of relatives, and 8 per cent via help from fellow villagers”, in Li, Shi, *Rural migrant workers in China: Scenario, Challenges and Public Policy*, Working paper n°89, International Labour Office, Policy Integration and Statistics Department, Geneva, 2008, p.12. This data was confirmed by the interviews that we carried out with the population in Danian.

In Danian, peasants primarily migrate for economic reasons. The decision appeared to be rather a family decision to maximize income and to minimize income risks through a diversification of revenue.

The significant wage difference between the place of origin and destination⁴⁰, makes migration a way for families to increase their revenues. For the province of Guangxi as a whole, the contribution from migration is an essential component in the structure of the revenues of rural households; according to official figures, in 2009 it represented 34.8% of the total income of a rural household⁴¹. It is however highly likely that this figure has been largely under-estimated and that the economic impact of migration in the countryside is much greater, as numbers of migrant workers are in situation of informality. It is also difficult to estimate rural households revenues, as incomes from migration are hardly regular. In certain cases both parents migrate, while in others only one of the two goes, or sometime neither of them migrate over a certain period. In addition migrants do not always send money back to their families in the countryside on a regular basis. The interviews I carried out in Danian showed that the more integrated young migrants were in the city, the less likely they were to send money back to their families in the village. Families where the migrants were over 40 and where one of the couple members stayed on in the countryside, as a strategy to diversify their resources, would all receive money regularly. In such a case, migration remittances provide an income insurance for households. However, in the case of the younger generations, not yet married or without children, households of origin would receive remittances on a much more irregular basis. Migration is therefore, for households with offspring and elderly, a strategy to diversify the source of income and to overcome rural structural constraints. It allows rural citizens to increase their purchasing power in general, and to invest in their village of origin. Migration can also be the way in which peasants acquire social status in the countryside. On returning to the Danian Township, it appeared to me that migrants that have succeeded in increasing their financial resources, gained social prestige, and are perceived by their relative and the village community as “having succeeded”. Migration expands their capabilities and gives them a social status that they are denied in city where they are considered as a “second-class citizens”.

According to Engel’s law, if the income of a household increases, the proportion of this income allocated to the purchase of food decreases, the proportion allocated to clothing and accommodation remains constant and the proportion allocated to education, leisure and saving increases. These kinds of expenditures enhance villagers’ capabilities and wellbeing⁴². If we consider the structure of income and expenditure of rural households in the province of Guangxi, we can see that incomes increased between 1995 and 2000 and that, in accordance to Engel’s law, spending on food decreased, falling from 61% to 53% of income⁴³. But, contrary to Engel’s law, spending on accommodation increased by nearly five points⁴⁴. This data shows that in this part of the countryside, the population’s intermediary needs have not yet been met⁴⁵. In my interviews, many people said that they migrated to be able to build “better houses”. I noticed that the inhabitants of Danian that had worked in the construction sector in the city, tended to apply the skills that they had acquired on returning to the countryside. While the houses in the commune are traditionally built without concrete foundations, we saw certain migrants, who told us that they had worked in construction, use

⁴⁰ On average, 1315 renminbi per month in the city, compared to 397 renminbi in the countryside (see op. cit., *China Statistical Yearbook 2009*, p.317).

⁴¹ Op.cit. *Guangxi Statistical yearbook 2009*, p.192 et op.cit., *Nongcun shehui jingji tongji nian baobiao, archives 2006 of the commune of Danian*.

⁴² Structuralists argue that they are « non-developmental ».

⁴³ Op.cit. *Guangxi Statistical yearbook 2009*, p.194.

⁴⁴ They went from 12.2 to 17.94% of household income. See ibid.

⁴⁵ The Engel coefficient was 53.4% in 2008 for rural households of the province of Guangxi. See Op. Cit. *Guangxi Statistical yearbook 2009*, p.167. It should be noted that some Chinese specialists argue that the coefficient overestimates the situation in the countryside. They consider that it is better to use the income per inhabitant and spending per inhabitant to analyze the situation in the countryside in China. (Discussion with professors at the University of Beijing specializing in rural sociology).

these methods and even use steel beams. Although this type of construction, with a first floor made out of concrete or bricks, a chimney to evacuate smoke, and even a bathroom and a few household appliances (which is still a luxury in the countryside), is financially encouraged by the government, most of the houses in the commune are still built entirely out of wood, with animals occupying the first floor, a living area (a room with a hearth in the center and two or three rooms) on the second floor and a top floor used as a loft to store rice. Apart from offering families greater comfort and more hygienic living conditions, new constructions are also a way for the owners to show their economic success to the other villagers and earn prestige in the village. In the case of young men, this makes it easier for them to find a wife, since in the countryside, and in particular among the Miao and Dong ethnic groups, wives go to live in the house of the oldest son or of the youngest son's parents. In Danian, five times more houses were built between 2004 and 2009⁴⁶, which coincided with a period when the rate of migration within the township increased considerably. Moreover, the surface of the new houses built in villages is increasing. For the township as a whole, it went from an average of 58.2m² in 2004 to 84.05 m² in 2009⁴⁷. Without migration, most peasants would not have been able to build such houses.

Migration and the income it generates is a way of redistributing wealth in rural areas and to balance the social relations between villagers. Various recent studies pointed out that pioneer migrants tend to be from the wealthiest rural households. My fieldwork in Danian confirmed this finding. Interviews revealed also that migrants from these households tend to earn more than the most deprived because they have a better *guanxi* (network) to get a relatively well paid-job. Discussions with the population revealed that migrants tend also to mobilize this social network in the village to capture the subsidies allocated by the local State. Likewise this captation of resources was observed for officials. In the long run this disparity is likely to disappear or at least to decrease. As the number of migrants from Danian is expanding over years: from 1'704 in 2000 to 3'550 in 2009 (with a stable natural growth rate)⁴⁸, the network of the villagers is outspreading and therefore the cost, the income differential and risks are tending to decrease. In Danian, remittances are generally spent on non-productive assets such as building a house, which marks the point of crystallization of the process of balancing social relationships within the village community. This income is also spent on marriages, consumer goods and education. With the spread of migration, one may assume that income inequality will tend to reduce in the village.

Villagers from Guihe and Gaoliao also look for work in the city in order to be able to purchase consumer goods. For instance, in the region I studied, all families now have a television and a motorcycle, whereas in 2007, when I first went there, only a few households were beginning to buy these goods. Now, nearly every adult member of the family has a mobile phone. We found that migrants that returned home for the 2010 Chinese New Year tended to give children bicycles as presents, whereas, until then, there were no bicycles in the township. Households are also beginning to invest in appliances such as washing machines, fridges and they use more electricity on a daily basis⁴⁹. The migratory strategies of rural populations give them access to consumer society and they are progressively acquiring a higher degree of comfort.

⁴⁶ Op.cit., *Nongcun shehui jingji tongji nian baobiao*, Archives 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2009 of the municipality of Danian on the economic situation of the commune. Owing to the distrust of the officials of the commune of Danian regarding our presence there, we were not able to obtain the statistic data for the years 2005, 2007 and 2008; moreover, we were only able to obtain part of the data for 2006. In Chinese rural areas, officials still regard foreign researchers with suspicion. We had to be very insistent and win their trust before being allowed access to the municipal archives; but after only a few hours we were asked to leave and give the authorities all our notes.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Our observations are confirmed by the upward trend in the consumption of electricity in the commune ; it more than tripled between 2004 and 2009 (see op. cit. *nongcun shehui jingji tongji nian baobiao*, Archives 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2009 of the municipality of Danian on the economic situation of the commune).

In terms of the consequences not strictly linked to the reasons for departure, the different stages in the migration process must be considered. The experience of migrants in the city sometimes makes them more ambitious. Some use their mobility to finance business projects or training, which are productive investments. Migration changes the opportunities available, first by showing rural citizens opportunities that they did not know existed, and then by allowing them to save up enough money to seize one of these new openings. However, my interviews indicated that migration is not always a source of innovation, although it systematically provides the means of achieving such innovation. Migration is therefore a form of “agency” (individual action and control over resources). The individual or the family group take the decision to migrate within existing social structures to reach and achieve their objectives, which can also develop and change over time⁵⁰. Besides migration enhances the capabilities of the villagers in Danian. For instance, in the hamlet of Yala, I met a father of 32 who had begun to migrate in 1998, after leaving high school. After ten years’ migration, he was able to pass his lorry-driving license and borrow the money from the bank to buy a lorry to start up a small transport business. Such cases still only concern a small group of migrants between the ages of 30 and 40 in Danian⁵¹. I did not meet any women with this type of project, probably due to the strength of tradition and the distribution of roles within households⁵². However, this example and our interviews illustrate that migrant workers do not lose their ties with their home villages. One reason could be drawn to the *hukou* system. If migrants leave their villages to work in cities for years, most of them remain *de jure* rural citizens in terms of rights and obligations. Trans-local theories on migration have also pointed out “many migrant groups maintain strong trans-local ties over sustained periods”⁵³. New technologies, such as mobile phones, Internet and Instant messenger, help them to keep ties with their hometowns. Internal migration in Danian in particular does not induce a brain drain because migrants have relatively low qualifications, consequently they can barely apply for an urban *hukou*. In general, empirical studies have demonstrated that migration can be perceived as “an expression of strong social bonds and of the wish to improve the lives of those left behind”⁵⁴; according to our empirical research this is especially relevant for the “first generation of migrants”⁵⁵. In Danian, internal migration transforms villages and the life of villagers by giving them the capability to invest in the construction of new houses, buy consumer goods, which, until then, had been the preserve of the urban population, or even to set up family businesses. Migration also has strong socio-demographic impacts on village society.

2.2. Impacts on health and fertility

Migration has a strong impact on the structure of the population in terms of age groups. Danian Township is being drained of its adolescents and young adults. Residents from 16 to 24 are almost entirely absent in the villages that we studied. There are hardly no men between 16 and 39 either. The groups left are the elderly (mainly women due to their longer life expectancy), people over 40 (with a slightly higher proportion of women), children between 1 or 3 and 15, and women who return temporarily to look after young children and/or elderly relatives.

⁵⁰ For further reading on the notion of agency see Oris, Michel, et al., *Linked lives and self-regulation: Lifespan – life course. Is it really the same?*, In *Advances in Life Course Research*, Volume 14, Issues 1-2, March-June 2009, p. 1–4 or Giele, Janet and Glen H. Elder, Jr., *Life Course Research: Development of a Field*, in J. Giele and G. H. Elder, Jr. (eds.), *Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 1998, p. 23.

⁵¹ According to the township archives, in 2009, 5% of the active population in Danian work in the secondary or tertiary sectors, op. cit. *Nongcun shehui jingji tongji nian baobiao*. In our sample 5 informants had the project to invest in a business in their hometown and 2 already did it.

⁵² For a sociological analysis of the traditional distribution of roles in rural households see Fei, Xiaotong, *From the soil: The foundations of Chinese society*, University of California Press, 1992.

⁵³ Op.cit, De Haas, Hein, p. 38.

⁵⁴ Op.cit, De Haas, Hein, p. 40.

⁵⁵ By « first generation of migrants », I mean the first birth cohort having migrated since the reforms, ie in the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite this contorted structure, the additional income generated by migration has increased the access to healthcare of rural populations. In addition to government reforms, this income enables families to cover their health costs as long as they do not become too expensive. These financial resources also enable them to benefit from better medical monitoring, which accordingly limits the risks of death due to illnesses that are not treated in time⁵⁶. Motorcycles bought with the income generated by migration enable the inhabitants of the villages in the Danian Township to go to hospital quickly in the event of an emergency. Until the arrival of this means of transport, they had to walk for an average of an hour and a half from the furthest villages. The government's construction of roads and the purchase of motorcycles by inhabitants has thus helped to decrease the mortality rate in the commune⁵⁷.

However, migration has also contributed to the increase in the number of rural citizens that contract sexually transmitted diseases⁵⁸. Family situations where couples do not migrate together for long periods of time are conducive to the development of extra-marital relationships. These relationships can, in the long run, bring about an increase in the rate of morbidity among migrants returning to the countryside, where they are likely to infect their partner, as China has not yet established a system to prevent the risk of the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases.

On the other hand, the migration of more than 20% of the population of Danian Township, of which more than 80% are between 16 and 39⁵⁹, also has an impact on the fertility rate in villages. Prolonged period of marital separation due to migration may depress fertility. In cities *nongmingong* are considered and treated, because of their *hukou*, as a second-class of citizens or noncitizens⁶⁰. Because of this institutional discrimination most of them have to live in exiguous housing inadequate for children, this may encourage migrant couples postponing childbearing⁶¹. Meanwhile this context can also discourage couples to have unplanned births⁶². In Danian, age of marriage for women has not increased, so postponing marriage cannot be an explaining factor of the decrease of the fertility rate in the Township. A better explanation could result in the exposure of young female migrant to the urban social norms and values, which favor nuclear households and the wellbeing of the children.

2.3. Impacts on the family structure

Peasant migration towards the cities has an effect on family structures and social dynamics in Danian Township. Migration changes the size and the distribution of roles within the family⁶³. In Danian the size of households has constantly decreased from 2000 to 2009, over the same period the migration rate increased by 52%⁶⁴. My interviews corroborate the township's archives. In 2000 a typical rural household in Danian encompassed five persons and in 2009 this figure dropped to four⁶⁵. We observed that for the generation born after 1980s, the traditional kinship pattern tends to change towards more conjugal independence and more individualization. As previously encountered by Yan Yunxiang during his field research in Xiajia village (Heilongjiang province), in Danian "the horizontal conjugal tie [tend to]

⁵⁶ Rural citizens recognize the positive effect of the establishment of a health insurance system in the countryside. In the event of illness, their first port of call is the village doctor or the hospital; they rarely call on the shamans any more. They would only go to them if the general medicine had not had any effect.

⁵⁷ Op.cit., *Nongcun shehui jingji tongji nian baobiao*, Archives 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2009 of the municipality of Danian on the economic situation of the commune.

⁵⁸ We did not ask questions regarding this issue. For more details see op.cit., Murphy, Rachel, p.209.

⁵⁹ Op.cit., *Nongcun shehui jingji tongji nian baobiao*, Archives 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2009 of the municipality of Danian on the economic situation of the commune.

⁶⁰ Op.cit., Solinger, Dorothy J., p.5.

⁶¹ Op.cit., Davin, Dalia, p.131.

⁶² Many want to have a boy to continue the practice of ancestral worship and the family line, and to prepare them for old age (yang er fang lao), since the Chinese countryside still does not have access to a retirement or pensions system. See our interviews and White, Tyrene, « Domination, resistance and accommodation in China's one-child campaign », in Perry, Elizabeth J. and Selden, Mark, *Chinese Society. Change, Conflict and Resistance*, Routledge, 2000, p.110.

⁶³ For an analysis of traditional family structures see the work of Granet, Marcel; Lauwaert, Françoise or Fei Xiaotong.

⁶⁴ From 1'704 migrants in 2000 to 3'550 in 2009. Op.cit. *Nongcun shehui jingji tongji nian baobiao* and our interviews with the peasants of the commune of Danian.

⁶⁵ Op.cit. *Nongcun shehui jingji tongji nian baobiao* and our interviews with the peasants of the commune of Danian.

replace[d] the vertical parent-son relationship as the central axis of family relations”⁶⁶. However this change came a decade later in Danian Township (2000s). It does not mean that stem households have disappeared yet but the trend is towards the “nuclearization” of the rural households and migration. Internal migration can here be perceived as an independent variable, explaining this transformation and the challenge experienced by the patriarchal family pattern. This gradual shift in the balance of power is the consequence of a long process and change in the structure of internal migrations.

The men were the first to leave during the first wave of migration (1980s-1990s). Their absence affected the lives of the left behind. Left alone, wives and elderly had to take up the agricultural work, previously carried out by the men. In general, they only saw their husband or son once a year. During the husband’s absence, wives took on roles as heads of the family, mothers and daughter-in-laws; they looked after the grandparents, the children and the farming. The grandparents also participated; for example, grandmothers helped with the cooking and watched over the ducks while the grandfathers guarded and herded the cattle in the fields; on their way back home they collected wood for the family hearth. In the husband’s absence, a new division of labor developed among rural families. In this new configuration, it is not strange to see more and more women taking charge of managing the finances of rural households⁶⁷. In some cases, as long as the grandparents are not too old and are still autonomous, both spouses can decide to migrate. However, this situation is less common for the first wave of migrants because the burden of household responsibilities on women born in this age cohort is very heavy. Moreover at this period of time male migrants were more likely to earn more than female migrants, so in Danian, households mainly decided that they would be better off if the women would stay at home. Temporal internal migration of one family member is here a strategy developed by the whole household. The male migrant does intend to return to his hometown⁶⁸. “Family ties and a sense of reciprocal obligations underpin the system”⁶⁹.

Nowadays, with the “new generation of migrants”, born after the “reforms”, this pattern is more developed because with the expansion of electronic industries in Guangdong province and the high demand of female workers, female and male migrants can earn virtually the same wage. If the young migrants are not married and migrate alone, they remit less in the long run. At first, female migrants aged 15 to 20 years old declared that they feel the obligation to send money to their parents to support the family. This is the first time for most of them to live outside the household and they have to begin to make decision for themselves. They have the relative freedom to decide what to eat, what to wear, how to spend their money, how much to save, with whom to socialize, etc. They say their experience of migration demonstrated them that they have the capability to manage their lives and to take decision on their own as well as to earn money. I observed that back in the village for the Chinese New Year, these young migrants -male and women- had very similar dating practices with what takes place in cities. For example, they were gathering at the market, chatting over a brand new motorcycle of a young male migrant.

Young married couples without children live either according to the Miao and Dong traditions with the husband’s family or in their own household. They migrate, either to the same place, or to different places, depending on the opportunities available. They delegate the farming of their arable land to the rest of the family and try to come back to help with the

⁶⁶ Yan, Yunxiang, *Private life under socialism. Love, intimacy, and family change in a Chinese village 1949-1999*, Stanford University Press, 2003, p.109.

⁶⁷ Our interviews with the peasants of the commune of Danian.

⁶⁸ Sayad, Abdelmalek, in *La double absence. Des illusions de l’émigré aux souffrances de l’immigré*, Editions du Seuil, 1999.

⁶⁹ Op.cit., Davin, Dalia, p.125.

heavier tasks. As long as they have no children, they do not send money back on a regular basis. These findings corroborate Yan Yunxiang's and his thesis of an individualization of the rural society in China. Sometimes, their parents migrate as well; but in case of stem families they alternate so that there is always one parent in the village to take care of the grandfather and/or grandmother. This task generally falls to the women but in some cases men stated that during the absence of their wives they had to carry domestic tasks "traditionally" conducted by women.

When young married couples have their first child, their roles change again. Young mothers, if they are not allowed to take their children to work with them, will stay with them in the village until they are three years old. This induces prolonged period of separation for rural households. During this time, in stem families young women will carry out their role of daughter-in-law and their new role as mothers; they will look after and educate their children, prepare the meals for all the family and help with farming. These changes in the family roles repartition and family's expectations regarding the young wives' role cause social tensions and great stresses in individual relationships. I observed in Danian some intergenerational conflicts; with for instance a daughter-in-law arguing with her father-in-law over domestic tasks. I cannot attest from this isolated observation a "rapid shift in intergenerational power relations"⁷⁰. However the traditional gender roles and the family hierarchy structure is increasingly challenged. The discourse of the respondents highlighted also the emergence of the "centrality of the husband-wife relationship in the domestic sphere [...and] the rise of conjugality"⁷¹. When couples from Guihe and Gaoliao migrate to the same place, they sometimes decide that the wife will stay in the city without a job to look after the child while the husband works. In this case, the distribution of roles within the family follows traditional patterns.

The family structure really changes when children reach the age of three; in most cases, they will then stay in the village and will be looked after by the grandparents, while the parents migrate. As mentioned above, parents do not normally keep their children with them so that they can follow "normal" schooling, as the children of migrants do not yet have access to urban public schools⁷². In this case, paternal grandparents take the place of the parents in the distribution of roles within rural households⁷³. They become responsible for looking after and educating their grandchildren⁷⁴. The couple sends money to support the children and contribute to the daily running of the household. When children are separated from their parents for prolonged period of time the subsequent relations can be difficult. Children raised by grandparents are more likely to be at risk⁷⁵ and to be raised in a son preference value system environment. For instance, the paternal grandparents may ask the support of the female youngster to help with the cooking, the farming and is more likely to be at risk to be deprived of school than a male child⁷⁶.

The villages' representatives of Guihe and Gaoliao declared while answering one of my questions that despite migration, people still tend to marry within their own village or township. This is due to the fact that the young migrants generally go to work in the same geographical areas, or in the same cities as their fellow villagers. Migrants use their networks

⁷⁰ Op.cit., Yan, Yunxiang, p.88.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² The couples that we interviewed explained that in order to register their children in an establishment in the city, they were asked to make a "donation". However, the amount exceeds a month's salary. In the cities there are schools for the children of migrants but they do not have a legal status and the quality of teaching is not necessarily in line with national criteria. Thus, the majority of the couples with children that we interviewed, preferred to leave their children in the countryside and go back once or several times a year to visit them.

⁷³ All the people interviewed said that the farming work in the village is now done by persons over the age of 40.

⁷⁴ See Gao, Yang and al. article for further details on this topic: Gao, Yang and al., "The impact of parental migration on health status and health behavior among left behind adolescent school children in China", in *BMC Public Health*, V.56, N°10, 2010, p.1-10.

⁷⁵ Op.cit., Yang and al.

⁷⁶ According to our informants, a system of mutual assistance between neighbors is still alive in rural areas. In this way, if both parents, or one of the parents, is unable to come back, the paternal grandparents may count on their neighbors to help them with the farming and in some cases the maternal grandparents might help as well.

to find work and therefore people from one same village are highly likely to continue to mix wherever they go. Moreover, according to Communist Party officers in Guihe and Gaoliao, this trend is strengthened by the behavior of parents. Parents tend to pressure their children into marrying early, to provide them with grandchildren, and to encourage them to marry someone from the same village, ethnic group or commune⁷⁷. The aim is to “bind” young people to their community before they discover the opportunities offered by a city life.

According to my informants, and this supports other empirical studies, for the “new generation” the migratory phenomenon is not split between the sexes in the first stages of adult life; in other words there is no difference in the number of boys and girls that migrate until the age at which people generally get married. This gender balance has an impact on the role of women within rural society. Some women, having realized that their work is worth as much as a man’s⁷⁸, use negotiating skills, resulting from migration, within the family sphere to exert an influence over their social role. Moreover, their experience in the city makes them aware of the life that their husbands can lead when they go to work away from the village; they also have an idea of their wages and of their ability to return to the village. Women who have had their own experiences of migrating, which is the case for a large majority of those born between 1980 and 1990, have gained greater empowerment and practical freedom (economic and social influence)⁷⁹. Migration contributes to transform family structures and gender role repartition in Danian. Women tend to remain less and less submitted to their husbands and family-in-law and young couples tend to ask for more intimacy.

Our interviews revealed that the first generation of male migrant was more intent on going back to the countryside after a period of migration than younger generations. This could be due to the fact that life is much easier for these men than for women in villages, as they hold a privileged status there that they do not have in the city. Women essentially return to the countryside in order to get married, because they are pregnant, or as a result of pressure from their family. In the Chinese countryside, for a long time, women reacted to family pressure by committing suicide. In some cases, migration can be a less radical escape route for women⁸⁰. Migrating also makes rural citizens more confident; for example, those who migrate but maintain a good network of relations in their village are the ones that get the most help to build their homes. Having had to face new situations in the city, learn at least a bit of mandarin, and overcome ordeals gives them certain self-confidence⁸¹. Although they continue to see the municipal authorities of their township as “the government”, they appear to be a bit less in awe of speaking with municipal “officials”. In some cases migrants can even embody a counterbalance to civil society⁸² in the relations that the population maintain with “officials”⁸³. If migration expands the field of possibilities for rural migrant workers in general, our findings demonstrate that it is especially relevant for women.

2.4. Socio-cultural impacts

Rural migration to the cities creates cultural tensions between urban and rural values. In Danian, these tensions are especially felt by the “new generation” of migrants, aged between 16 and 25, wishing to remain living in the city and be completely socially and politically

⁷⁷ This goes against Dalia Davin’s findings. Op.cit., Davin, Dalia, p.130.

⁷⁸ Male and female migrants say they earn the same amount. According to them, any difference in salary is due to the city or to the sector of activity.

⁷⁹ Jacka, Tamara, *Women’s work in rural China. Change and continuity in an Era of reform*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁸⁰ Murphy, Rachel, *How migrant labor is changing rural China*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 206.

⁸¹ Martuccelli, Danilo, *Forgé par l’épreuve. L’individu dans la France contemporaine*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2006.

⁸² For a definition of “civil society” see the thesis of Pirotte, Gautier, *La notion de société civile*, Paris, Editions La Découverte, 2007.

⁸³ For example, in the event of opposition between the villagers and the local officials, migrants will tend to play an intermediary role to ensure that the villagers’ complaints are heard. During our stay in the commune, we realized that, except for the rare rural citizens that have undergone higher education, it is the migrants that return to the village that are the least afraid of speaking with the commune officials.

For further reading on the symbolic power of language, see Bourdieu, Pierre, *Langage et pouvoir symbolique*, Paris, Seuil, 2001 or Mansbridge, Jane, *Beyond adversary democracy*, Chicago University Press, 1980, p. 103

integrated into the urban fabric. These young people are attached to their parents but they admit that, on returning to their villages, they no longer feel that they belong⁸⁴. When questioned, they proudly reply that they do not know how to farm the land; they have never done it and would not like to farm in the future⁸⁵. These generations of migrants feel that they do not belong either in the city or in the countryside.

If they are married and their spouse has remained in the village, this may tend to create problems between them because their values and life expectations might become different. The parents of these young migrants do not appear to be impressed by the changes in their children on their return to the countryside. For example, they are happy that they speak Mandarin fluently because it is a skill that can help them find work more easily (earn more and remit more) but they are not afraid that villages will lose values linked to the sense of ethnic belonging of their inhabitants. One of my informant declared: “it is not because our children won’t wear our traditional costumes anymore or won’t be able to make the traditional fabric and embroideries that we will lose our traditions and identity”. He added later on: “they have survived until now and they will continue to survive as long as the young generations remember our traditional festivals”⁸⁶. They express that in the future there will be certain adaptation and compromise between “modern” and “traditional” values, due to the great capacity of resilience of the Chinese countryside⁸⁷.

The phenomenon of migration also creates positive changes in mentalities in the countryside in terms of public hygiene and the prevention of illness. In the cities, migrant peasants are exposed to government awareness campaigns through the use of banners. They are also subjected to the critical scrutiny of urban citizens who have generally already adopted these standards. Thus, having adopted and adapted to these new rules, on returning to their village, they will present these measures to their families and to other villagers (the importance of washing one’s hands, taking children to get vaccines, etc.). This is especially true of the younger generations of immigrants who want to show off their “good manners” and to distance themselves from those who have never left the village⁸⁸. Migrants returning to the countryside, thus become a means by which the government can strengthen the effect of the public health, hygiene and disease prevention campaigns by extending these to rural populations.

Internal migration thanks to remittances play a vital role in securing and improving the material livelihood conditions of the rural population in the township of Danian. Nonetheless the impact of internal migration on rural change goes far beyond the role played by remittances; it not only allows investments, transmission of new skills, change in social norms and values but also development of social networks. To go along with this positive dynamic and to promote the sustainable development of rural areas in China it is essential that the central government implement effective socio-economic reforms that would reinforce the positive effects consecutive to migration on the countryside.

⁸⁴ Op.cit. Sayad, Abdelmalek, addresses this subject in detail.

⁸⁵ This data confirms the study carried out by ACFTU, according to which 89% of young migrants do not want to farm and only 45% of them have ever done any farming. See article by Mary Gallagher, *Changes in the world’s workshop : The demographic, social, and political factors behind China’s labor movement*, presented on 21 August at the University of Beijing during the international conference on working relations in China (unpublished article), p. 9.

⁸⁶ He makes a reference here to their ethnic festivals, for instance the *lusheng* festival, etc.

⁸⁷ As they highlight, their ethnic traditions and customs are not just a question of habit ; they go much deeper and are rooted in the sociological heritage of their childhood. For example, they all remember the traditional songs and the dates of the festivities that structure their village life.

⁸⁸ See the monographic study by Chang, Leslie T., *Factory girls*, Spiegel&Grau Trade Paperback Edition, 2009.

3. State guidelines in favor of the countryside

The three generations of presidents that succeeded Mao Zedong aimed to build a prosperous and powerful country in successive stages⁸⁹. Deng Xiaoping, by publishing the doctrine of the “Four cardinal principles”⁹⁰, tried to open the country to foreign capital with the creation of the SEZs. With the theory of the “Three represents”, Jiang Zemin tried to dismantle State companies and develop the private sector⁹¹. The fourth generation of leaders, represented by Hu Jintao since the 16th Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2002, focuses on the “construction of a harmonious society” by combating poverty and socio-economic inequality. This policy has the underlying objective of fighting the risk of disorder and social tensions that could result from the difference in the level of development and economic resource of cities and rural areas. Since 2001, the increasing number of social problems and frustrations in the countryside have required central government to intervene to prevent these from threatening the country’s stability. The government has therefore devoted the third part of the tenth five-year plan to economic and social progress in the countryside⁹². However, the eleventh and twelfth five-year plans, drawn up by Hu Jintao’s government in 2006 and 2011⁹³ went further. The revitalization of rural areas would, for the first time in the history of the PRC, become the government’s priority, taking precedence over industry, cities and the army. Every year since 2006, the nominal budget allocated by the government to the socio-economic development of the countryside has increased⁹⁴.

3.1. Towards greater economic, social and cultural “equality”

In view of promoting higher living standards in the countryside, the government has reduced restrictions on the mobility of workers, progressively relaxing the *hukou* system. Income from migration constitutes an essential component of rural household incomes. Economic growth at the beginning of the 1980-1990 decade created an increasing demand for labor, particularly in SEZs. Measures were taken to make cities more open to rural populations by allowing temporary migration⁹⁵. The suppression, in 1985, of rationing cards also contributed to the migratory phenomenon⁹⁶. The introduction of the identity card in 1989 led to the first major migratory movements from the countryside to the cities. Other reforms followed. For example, in 2001, the capital of Hebei, Shijiazhuang decided to relax conditions giving migrant peasants greater access to its labor market⁹⁷. This measure was followed by a State Directive in 2003⁹⁸, aiming to facilitate the employment of rural citizens in cities and to get rid of discriminatory policies and arbitrary taxes against them. These various measures facilitated the access of rural populations to the urban labor market, and consequently increased their revenue and that of their families in the countryside, given that migrants tend to send part of their revenues back to their village. According to a survey carried out by a State Council research group, rural migrants send 500 to 600 billion renminbi a year⁹⁹. In 2009, revenues from migration represented 73.1% of the average annual revenues of rural households¹⁰⁰.

⁸⁹ *Renmin ribao*, of 27 October 2010, Article by Zheng Qingyan which praises the merits of the government policies that have been, and will continue to be, progressively applied, and which have enabled the development of the country. In this article, the author also shows that political reforms must follow the same procedure.

⁹⁰ The dictatorship of the proletariat, the dominant role of the CCP, the marxist-leninist-maoist thinking and the socialist path.

⁹¹ Scientist, lawyers and entrepreneurs were admitted into the CCP to prevent them from creating a separate and anti-establishment party.

⁹² http://english.gov.cn/official/2005-07/29/content_18334.htm. Consulted on 3 May 2010.

⁹³ http://english.gov.cn/official/2006-03/14/content_227248.htm. Consulted on 3 May 2010.

⁹⁴ At the National People’s Congress in 2010, the Prime Minister Wen Jiabao announced that rural areas received 800 billion renminbi, 13% more than the previous year. *Le monde*, Tuesday 16 March 2010.

⁹⁵ The first reforms only really opened the cities up to a certain type of rural citizen: the rich, talented or educated (see Wang, Fei-Ling, op. cit., p.51). They create the specific category that Dorothy Solinger calls the “proto-citizens” (see voir Solinger, Dorothy J., *Contesting citizenship in urban China*, University of California Press, 1999, p. 289). These citizens had a temporary urban residence permit (the “blue-stamp *hukou*”) giving them the same rights as the urban population. Later on they were able to transform this permit into an urban *hukou*.

⁹⁶ Prior to this measure grain rations could only be collected at the place where the *hukou* was registered.

⁹⁷ Chan, Kam Wing et al., “Is China Abolishing the Hukou system?”, in *The China Quarter*, 195, September 2008, p. 602.

⁹⁸ http://english.gov.cn/official/2005-07/29/content_18346.htm. Consulted on 3 May 2010.

⁹⁹ Op.cit., *Guowuyuan yanjiushi ketizu*, State Affairs Council Research Group, p. 62.

¹⁰⁰ *Zhongguo renmin yinhang diaocha tongji si*, Department of survey and statistics, People’s bank of China, *Nongmingong shouru ji jiating zhichu qingkuang*, *Income and household expenditure of migrant worker*, op. cit. *Renkou yu laodong li pi shu (2010)*, *Green book of population and labor (2010)*, p. 43.

Migrants play a central role in the distribution of wealth between cities and rural areas, and in the development of the latter. Danian is quite representative since the money that is sent to the countryside is generally spent on building comfortable houses, buying consumer goods or setting up small family businesses¹⁰¹. These investments improve the living conditions of rural populations and could, in the long run, provide access to comfort levels closer to those enjoyed by urban populations. The positive impact of migration and remittances on rural areas would, however, be limited without the socio-economic reforms in favor of the countryside implemented by the central government.

In view of further increasing rural revenues and reinforce this positive dynamic, the government announced, at the 2003 NPC, that it would create an Agricultural Commission responsible for ending illegal taxes on rural populations and introducing one common tax¹⁰². Through these measures the government hopes to reduce the fiscal pressure on the rural population and indirectly increase its revenue. Before being adopted on a national scale, this measure was first tested in the province of Anhui, and then in twenty other provinces across the country. In the regions where it was implemented, the tax on rural populations decreased by 30%, which represents savings of 230 renminbi a year for rural households¹⁰³. The government hopes progressively to level out the purchasing power of urban and rural populations, which in the long run will stimulate the national economy with an increase of domestic demand.

Then, in 2004, the government turned to reforming the agricultural credit cooperatives, left over from the Mao era¹⁰⁴. These were fragmented and not very viable; the leaders aim was to bring them together and make them financially viable, enabling them to meet the financing needs of farmers, and thereby allowing them to invest in the economic and social development of their villages or communes.

In 2005, central government also abolished taxes on the countryside¹⁰⁵. This constitutes a radical reversal of roles; rural citizens no longer pay taxes and instead receive subsidies for the fields they use to grow cereals. In Danian, farmers received 20 renminbi per Mu per year in 2007 and 2008, and 30 renminbi per Mu in 2009¹⁰⁶. In order to implement these objectives, the State decided to allocate a budget of 339.7 billion renminbi to the farming sector in 2006, 42.2 billion more than the year before¹⁰⁷.

These measures, taken by the governments since the beginning of the 21st century, were strengthened and developed in 2006. During the first session of the NPC, the Chinese authorities highlighted the need to build « a new socialist countryside »¹⁰⁸. They declared that the urban parts of the country had reached a level of development that enabled them to support the countryside¹⁰⁹. In this way, the government aims to increase the subsidies given to farmers for the purchase of farming machinery, or to farm certain cereals. It also plans to expedite the development of rural infrastructures, in other words, to modernize the countryside by connecting villages via roads, giving rural population greater mobility towards the cities for non-farming employment. These government initiatives confirm the new approach taken by its leaders to promote backward areas of the country's economy and share with it the fruits of growth. Measures have also been taken to enable the countryside to

¹⁰¹ Op.cit., *Guowuyuan yanjiushi ketizu, State Affairs Council Research Group*, p. 8-112.

¹⁰² *Renmin ribao*, 10 March 2003.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Renmin ribao*, 6 March 2004.

¹⁰⁵ In 2001, the government abolished the grain tax throughout the country, and the tax on the countryside; only the agricultural tax remained and this was abolished in 2005. See op. cit. <http://english.gov.cn/index.htm>; No. 1 central document issued; and interviews with the inhabitants of the Commune of Danian.

¹⁰⁶ Interviews with the peasants of the commune of Danian and with the Secretary of the Party for Gaoliao and Guihe (9_070210 et 1_020210). One mu = 675 m².

¹⁰⁷ Op.cit., <http://english.gov.cn/official/workreports.htm>.

¹⁰⁸ <http://english.gov.cn/index.htm>; No. 1 central document issued, and <http://english.gov.cn/official/workreports.htm>.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*: « We need to implement a policy of getting industry to support agriculture and cities to support the countryside ».

benefit from scientific progress and its most basic applications, such as having access to running water, the constructions of fermentation vats, electricity in all homes, etc.¹¹⁰

These different measures in favor of rural populations may aim, in the long term, to give them the same economic rights as those enjoyed by urban populations. This includes the right to work, the right to decent housing and the right to benefit from scientific progress and its applications. The State not only started to provide greater economic « equality » for rural populations; it also implemented social and political reforms, although the scope is still very restricted, to help rural citizens to catch up with urban citizens.

The Chinese government now allocates part of the revenues generated by economic growth to the development of welfare policies in the countryside. In addition to the minimum wage (*dibao*)¹¹¹ and the compensation paid to elderly persons without children to support them, since 2001, the central government has established a health insurance system for the countryside called the “New Rural Cooperative Medical System” (*xinxing nongcun hezuo yiliao zhidu*)¹¹². In 2002, it went even further by announcing that before 2010, all rural households would have to sign up to this insurance. This locally managed system is directly subsidized by the State. In 2006, it declared that it would increase contributions from 20 renminbi a year per inhabitant to 40 renminbi; to this end it has provided an envelope of 4.2 billion renminbi¹¹³. In the interviews we carried out in Guihe and Gaoliao rural citizens recognize the effectiveness of this system in the event of serious illness. Before its implementation poorer rural households could find themselves in a state of severe vulnerability and poverty if a family member fell seriously ill, having to pay exorbitant fees in comparison with household incomes. The implementation of healthcare and minimum wage systems, although still imperfect, offers rural populations certain social security. By developing them and broadening their scope, the government could provide equal social guarantees for both urban and rural citizens.

In order to establish the material basis to achieve this objective, during the 2006 NPC, the prime minister Wen Jiabao announced that the State had planned to invest more than 20 billion renminbi over the next five years to build and renew rural hospitals¹¹⁴. Despite these measures, as long as the countryside lacks maternity insurance, unemployment, accident insurance and pension systems, it will take a long time to achieve a balance between the social rights of urban and rural populations. This is all the more important since a large number of migrants work informally in cities and therefore do not contribute to social security plans¹¹⁵. The central government has, in vain, attempted to establish a pension system in the countryside to provide coverage for people over 60¹¹⁶. An article in *China Daily* published on 25 June 2009 announced that the central government had decided to launch a “new-type rural social pension pilot programs”. This pension program, aimed at the working population over

¹¹⁰ Third part, article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, signed and ratified by China.

¹¹¹ The local and commune authorities and the officials in the villages decide who qualifies for these benefits. According to our interviews it appears that the classification used during the Maoist era, creating a dichotomy between those that are able to work and those who are physically incapable of working, is rooted in the mind of local officials.

¹¹² In 2003 the NRCMS was defined as “[It] provides mutual help and benefit, mainly focusing on and curing heavy diseases. It is organized, led and supported by the government and with voluntary participation of the farmers. The system is financed jointly by individuals, collectives and government,” “Guanyu jianli xinxing hezuo yiliao zhidu yijian” (“Opinions about the introduction of NRCMS”), Guobanfa, No. 3 (16 January 2003), <http://www.jsbst.gov.cn/dftnewsdisplay.php?newsid=436>, quoted by Klotzbücher, Sascha and al., “What is New in the “New Rural Co-operative Medical System”? An Assessment in One Kazak County of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” in *The China Quarterly*, 201, March 2010, p. 38.

¹¹³ http://english.gov.cn/2006-03/05/content_218920.htm. Consulted on 3 May 2010. The province and the region must not disburse less than 10 renminbi per participant. As an indication, in the commune of Dalian in 2007, when the NRCMS was established, peasants had to pay 10 renminbi per year and per person; in 2008, this rose to 20 renminbi and in 2009 to 30 renminbi (according to our interviews with the Guihe Party officials 1_020210).

¹¹⁴ Op.cit., http://english.gov.cn/2006-03/05/content_218920.htm. Consulted on 3 May 2010.

¹¹⁵ More than 40% of the national working population are thought to work in the informal sector. *Shehui lan pi shu. Zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce, Blue book of China's society. Society of China analysis and forecast 2011*, shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, Social sciences academic press, p.28-38 and Peng Xizhe, 2009, *Zhongguo feizhenggui jinye fazhan baogao: laodongli shichang de zai guan cha. Report on China's informal employment development: Survey on the labor force market*, Chongqing chubanshe, Chongqing press. According to a survey carried out by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in 2008, some 120 million workers were illegal (http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/20090325_402547406.htm).

¹¹⁶ A first system tried out in 1986, and then established in 1992, the *Basic Program for Rural Social Security Insurance at County Level*, was shut down in 1998, considered to be unsatisfactory. See Wang, Dewen, *China's Urban and Rural Old Age Security System: Challenges and Options*, Institute of Population and Labor Economics, CASS, published on the following website : http://www.kas.de/db_files/dokumente/7_dokument_dok_pdf_7974_2.pdf, consulted on 5 May 2010.

16, will be tried out in 10% of the country's regions for a year before being extended to the rest of the country if it works. If it does work, at the age of 60, tax-paying rural citizens will receive a pension. This program, which has yet to be implemented, nevertheless, is another sign of the government's willingness to close the gap between cities and rural areas. Certain progress has been made by the government since 2006 to guarantee rural citizens the right to social security and social insurance, enjoyed by urban citizens in the formal economy for many years.

In the 2006 NPC, Wen Jiabao also announced that primary and secondary schools would become completely free in the countryside¹¹⁷. This measure aims to get rid of school fees and additional costs burdening domestic budgets. This policy was supplemented in 2007 by the financing of one meal a day per child in schools¹¹⁸. In the long run, this approach could establish a balance, in terms of education, in cities and the countryside, and thereby equal opportunities. However, this is not yet the case¹¹⁹. Villages generally get the teachers with the least training. Government spending on education in rural areas, aiming to guarantee the right to education¹²⁰ and nine obligatory years of free schooling, is estimated at 218.2 billion renminbi over the next five years¹²¹. Although there is still a long way to go, these are the first government attempts to subsidize education in rural areas, as it has done for decades in the cities.

The measures taken at the end of the 1990s by the government of President Jiang Zemin to reassure the countryside, which was a subject of increasing concern for these leaders that had emerged from it, were taken up and developed by the Hu Jintao – Wen Jiabao tandem. Political discourse has become more paternalistic towards rural populations, which the Party seeks to integrate into a prosperous, “democratic” and culturally advanced socialist country¹²². Thus, the 2006 eleventh five-year plan, explicitly aimed to start providing similar economic, social and cultural advantages to both urban and rural citizens. These policies and the Party's willing attitude in favor of the countryside are a sign of a profound change in government policies. Their secondary effect is to consolidate the legitimacy of the central government in the eyes of the hundreds of millions of rural inhabitants who now feel less left out¹²³. But as the survey carried out by the People's Bank shows, in practice, these measures continue to be insufficient; although government subsidies increased as a percentage of real rural household income between 2007 and 2008, they decreased between 2008 and 2009¹²⁴. Considering that the nominal amount of State financing has increased, the cause may be found in soaring inflation, in corruption or in the embezzlement of public funds by local governments to make up for the suppression of the taxes on rural areas. However without continuous efforts from the central government in order to implement macro socio-economic policies in favor of the countryside, the positive dynamic of development could not be sustained. In order to be sustainable, macro and micro socio-economic positive changes must constantly reinforce each other. This positive dynamics would stimulate in the long run investment and economic

¹¹⁷ Op.cit., http://english.gov.cn/2006-03/05/content_218920.htm. Consulted on 3 May 2010. According to the persons interviewed, parents only have 50 renminbi a year to spend on books, pens, insurance, etc.

¹¹⁸ <http://english.gov.cn/index.htm>: No. 1 central document issued and interviews with peasants in the commune of Danian.

¹¹⁹ Bian, Yanjie, « Chinese social stratification and social mobility », *Annual review of sociology*, vol. 28, 2002, p. 91-116 ; Zhou, Xueguang et al. « Educational stratification in urban China : 1949-94 », *Sociology of education*, vol. 71, N°3, July 1998, p. 199-222 ; and Rocca, Jean-Louis, « Une sociologie de la Chine », Paris, Editions La Découverte, 2010, p. 52-56.

¹²⁰ Op. Cit., Third part, article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic Rights.

¹²¹ Op.cit., http://english.gov.cn/2006-03/05/content_218920.htm. Consulted on 3 May 2010.

¹²² Preamble to the Constitution of the Popular Republic of China, after the 2004 amendment.

¹²³ For example, in Danian, when we asked the villagers whether their living conditions between 1980 and 2010 had improved (*cong 1980 nian dao 2010 nian zhijian, ni de shenghuo huanjing yousuo gaishan ma?*) they almost all replied that they had. And to the following question: “Do you think that the government is responsible for this?” (*ruguo ni renweiyou gaishan, zhe zhong gaishan shi laiyuanyu zhengfu de zhengce me?*), the persons interviewed replied yes and, in particular, mentioned the new roads built (although not yet tarred) which facilitate motor travel and migration.

¹²⁴ Op.cit., *Zhongguo renmin yinhang diaocha tongji si*, Department of survey and statistics, People's bank of China, *Nongmingong shouru ji jiating zhichu qingkuang, Income and household expenditure of migrant workers, Renkou yu laodong li pi shu (2010)*, Green book of population and labor (2010), p. 43.

growth at the local and national levels. Government's efforts in favor of the rural population tend also to affect civil and political rights¹²⁵.

3.2. Towards greater civil and political "equality"

Although we lack critical distance, in 2010, the Chinese government seems to have opened the way to greater civil "equality" between urban and rural populations. During the NPC and CPPCC sessions held in March, the government announced the gradual reform of the *hukou* system starting with smaller cities¹²⁶. This announcement came with the above-mentioned change in tone in the press and in official discourse towards rural populations. The government wants to give a more protective image than it had in the past, with publicity campaigns stressing the importance of the role and the sacrifices of migrant workers in the development of the Nation. The government is possibly sensing that the cohorts of migrants born in the 1980s and 90s are beginning to develop a "strong desire for equality and democracy"¹²⁷. According to statements reported in the Chinese press¹²⁸, it appears that young migrants feel as urban as the urban citizens. They have ambitions, they no longer want to accept non-qualified jobs, as their parents did, and they demand training¹²⁹. Moreover, trends and demographic predictions by experts indicate that as of 2010 the availability of a work force of working age (16-60) will start to decline (as a result of the birth control policy) and, with rising life expectancy, the rate of dependency is increasing and will continue to increase to reach a critical level by 2030¹³⁰. The ruling elite is aware of this "double transition"¹³¹ and its potential to cause social problems and has therefore, since 2000, launched number of reforms in favor of the countryside. Press articles suggest that the country is getting ready to welcome a significant number of rural citizens in the country's larger cities. Professor Lu Bin, the director of the department of urban and regional planning at the University of Beijing, foresees the movement of 325 million people towards large cities by 2030¹³². According to this expert, 70% of new arrivals will come from the countryside¹³³. This information shows that the government has planned reforms in the medium term that will give rural populations greater mobility. Since the authorities directly control the press in the PRC, these articles can be seen as propaganda to calm tensions resulting from inequality in the treatment of urban citizens and rural migrants. Here the target is clear: public opinion, especially educated and urban public opinion, which is thus being prepared for the slow changes to come.

During a press conference on 29 March 2010, Yin Chengji, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, announced that before July a regulation related to the health insurance system would be established to protect workers migrating to the city. This declaration suggests that they could be given access to the same healthcare in cities as urban citizens. Moreover, on 14 April 2010, during an announcement on the admissions policy of primary and secondary schools in the capital, the authorities declared that children that did not have a Beijing *hukou* would, in the next three to five years, be admitted into

¹²⁵ As China has signed, but not yet ratified, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, we consider it irrelevant to address the question from a human rights perspective. We will however approach the issue from the perspective of the difference in citizenship that exists between urban and rural populations in the PRC.

¹²⁶ *Renmin ribao* of 3 March 2010 ; *China Daily* of 6-7 March 2010

¹²⁷ *China Daily* of 3 March 2010: According to Han Changfu, Minister of Agriculture, the new generation of migrants reject the city-countryside gap; they demand equal treatment in terms of employment, access to public services and civil and political rights.

¹²⁸ *Renmin ribao*, *China Daily* of 3 March 2010 and 23 March 2010.

¹²⁹ According to the results of a survey carried out by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published in *China Daily* on 23 March 2010, 71% of the migrants interviewed belonging to the new generation wished to train, enjoy themselves and make the most of modern city life. The results of this survey are consistent with what we observed among the migrants that returned home for the Chinese New Year to the commune of Danian.

¹³⁰ Hu, Ying ; Cai, Fang et Du, Yang. "Shi er wu" shiqi renkou bianhua ji weilai renkou fazhan, *Population changes in the twelfth five-year plan period and projection of future population development trends*, in *Renkou yu laodong li pi shu (2010): zhongguo renkou yu laodong wenti baogao n°11, Green book of population and labor (2010) : Report on China's population and labor n°11*, Social sciences academic press, China, p.71-76.

¹³¹ For additional reading on the notion of "double transitions" see the work of Yang Yao and Cai Fang.

¹³² In the cities of developing countries it is common to see an abundant unqualified or poorly qualified workforce that accepts to work for low wages. When there is no control on the movement of workers to the urban centres, this decreases salaries in the cities, leads to the appearance of shanty towns, etc. (Lewis transition). Until now, the Chinese government has prevented this downward spiral, thanks to the rigidity of its migration control policy.

¹³³ *China Daily* of 30 March 2010

establishments located near their place of residence without having to pay extra fees or donations¹³⁴. If this measure is applied, it would give almost equal access to education to rural and urban citizens as, in practice, only students with excellent results can be recommended to elite schools and migrant children will need various years to make up for lost time¹³⁵.

During the sessions of the 2010 NPC and the CPPCC, the question of the *hukou* was taken up on a daily basis by the national press¹³⁶. The tone had been set on 1 March, when thirteen newspapers from different regions took the noticed and noticeable initiative of publishing a joint article on this subject. They invited the members of parliament who would meet two days later in Beijing to draw up a precise agenda on the reform of the household registration system¹³⁷. The policy of relaxing the *hukou* system is already effective in twelve provinces and municipalities- Shanghai is one of these¹³⁸. In Foshan, a town in the province of Guangzhou, the temporary residence permit was abolished at the beginning of the year to be replaced by a residence permit which allows its holders to benefit from the same rights as the urban population. After seven years, these individuals can submit a request to obtain a permanent residence permit¹³⁹. If the local authorities are economically and socially satisfied by these measures, everything seems to indicate that in a few years time, the criteria to obtain an urban *hukou* could be relaxed throughout the country.

This development is part of a multifaceted policy to upgrade the rural areas of the country regardless of compromising the traditional balance of power, without, however, threatening the single party. In the 11th NPC, held in March 2010 in Beijing, an amendment was put forward at the beginning of the session, and adopted on 14 March¹⁴⁰, specifying that the proportion of elected representatives should be the same for urban as for rural areas of the country¹⁴¹. In the previous system, rural areas were under-represented whereby rural constituencies were four times the size of urban constituencies¹⁴².

The rural world, often stereotypically associated with immobility, is actually changing rapidly, both due to structures undergoing transformation - government rural development policies implemented since the beginning of the 21st century¹⁴³- and to migrant agency - the migratory strategies adopted by families and, to a certain extent, by individuals to achieve their objectives and aspirations¹⁴⁴. According to development experts these macro and micro socio-economic changes should reinforce each other and favor the development of the countryside in particular and in the long run the sustainable development of China. On the one hand migrants and urbanites would recognize such new opportunities and invest (economic, social and cultural investments) in their hometowns and the countryside. On the other hands,

¹³⁴ *Renmin ribao* of 15 April 2010 ; *China Daily* of 16-18 April 2010.

¹³⁵ For further reading on the Chinese education system see Chicharro, Gladys, "Le fardeau des petits empreneurs. Une génération d'enfants uniques en Chine", Nanterre, Société d'ethnologie, 2010.

¹³⁶ This subject made the front lines *China Daily*.

¹³⁷ The article stated the following: " We want the hundreds of millions of Chinese people, whether they live in the north or the south of the country, whether they live in the city or in the countryside, to have the same opportunities in terms of employment, healthcare, pension, access to education and the right to travel freely. We want the system currently in force to disappear with our generation so that our descendants can enjoy the sacred rights conferred by the Constitution".

¹³⁸ "A ministry report said 12 places, including Hebei, Liaoning, Shandong provinces, the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Chongqing Municipality, had launched pilot programs to experiment with a system that narrowed differentiation between rural and urban residents." Article published in *China Daily* on 31 March 2007; http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-03/31/content_840877.htm. Consulted on 5 May 2010.

¹³⁹ *China Daily* of 9 January 2010.

¹⁴⁰ *China Daily* of 5 March 2010.

¹⁴¹ *China Daily* of 15 March 2010.

¹⁴² Since the 1995 amendment; prior to this, a rural representative stood for eight times more people than an urban representative. This representation system had been established in 1953 to prevent cities from being under represented when the majority of the population lived in the countryside. Currently, the high rate of urbanization and government policies in favour of the countryside, have led legislators to revise this law, which is almost 60 years old, and which no longer corresponds to the facts on the ground. However, there is still a long way to go. For example, as the election of representatives is based on a system of household registration, representatives elected to represent a rural area due to their rural *hukou*, can actually live in the city with a temporary permit.

¹⁴³ *China Daily*, "weekend edition", March 6-7, 2010 : As the prime Minister Wen Jiabao highlighted in the opening of the 11th PNC on Friday 5 March 2010, the high rate of economic growth in urban centres has led to an increase of incomes in the city and to an improvement of living conditions there. But it has also widened the existing wealth gap between urban and rural social sectors.

¹⁴⁴ According to the interviews we carried out in February 2010 in the town of Dalian, migration is seen as a major historic-social change by the most of the rural population.

increase in the purchasing power of the rural population would induce a rise in the domestic demand and stimulate economic growth in China.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework used in this article and derived from A. Sen capability approach allowed to emphasize on the role played by agency and structures in the development process of rural China. The implementation of migratory strategies by rural citizens enables them to achieve their aims and aspirations. It is a result of household decisions that have a strong impact on the Chinese countryside and contribute to redesign China's rural landscape. As we have pointed out through the case study of Danian Township, internal migrations have economic, demographic and social effects. These dynamics from the bottom accompany, supplement, develop and even elicit the policies established from the top by the Chinese government since the beginning of the century. Rural citizens are fully aware of these government initiatives. All the people that I interviewed, when asked which decade they prefer or had preferred, replied, without exception, that they preferred the 2000s¹⁴⁵. They explained that over the last decade, the government has multiplied the measures in favor of the countryside by building roads, allocating subsidies for the construction of new homes, or bringing small villages together to build water pipes, to name but a few. In general, rural citizens hope that this socio-economic development policy will continue and be developed with, for example, the creation of a pension system for rural populations¹⁴⁶. The establishment of a pension system would relax the current pressure on children, who are obliged by law (law of 1996) and tradition of "filial piety" to support their parents once they can no longer work and earn their living. In this context, migration is the preferred strategy for the rural population to achieve their socio-economic objectives, but it is part of an institutional context that is developing in a positive direction. Admittedly, as long as the *hukou* system continues, thus maintaining legal inequality, total convergence is impossible. But for the first time, this system is being seriously challenged and the temporary *hukou* system could be abolished in the medium term. If in the short run migration has appeased social tensions by increasing the opportunities available to rural populations, in the long run, without profound structural and institutional changes, it might also generate more and more frustrations.

¹⁴⁵ Our question in Mandarin was the following : *ni zui xihuan na ge shidai ? 80 nian dai? 90 nian dai? Xin shiji di yi ge shinian?* And to our question regarding the most important change that had occurred in their lives between 1980 and 2000 (*qing ni shuo shuo cong 1980 nian dao 2000 nian, ni shenghuo de zhuyao bianhua shi shenme?*), they replied that migration had enabled them to improve their lives.

¹⁴⁶ In particular see interview 3_030210.