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Success or failure: selectivity and reasons of return migration in Sichuan and Anhui, China

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Abstract. In this paper we examine urban – rural return migration in China. We argue that the traditional success – failure dichotomy approach used for analyzing return migration is inadequate and that it must be expanded to address better the institutional context of the transitional economy. Using an empirical study of Sichuan and Anhui provinces, we analyze the selectivity of return migrants and their reasons for return, focusing not only on how returnees compare with continuing migrants, but also on their decisionmaking. The analysis indicates that returnees are negatively selected among migrants and suggests that failure migrants are more prevalent than are typically portrayed in the literature. The results also highlight family demand as an important reason for return. These findings suggest that migrants' institutional and social inferiority in the city undermines their likelihood to succeed in the destination and reinforces their desire to return when family needs arise. Our analysis raises questions about the optimism of existing studies about the contribution of return migrants in China's countryside.

Introduction

In the process of human migration, the dominant stream is often accompanied by reverse flow or a counter stream (Lee, 1966, page 283). This has already been noted in the rising trend of return migration observed within developed countries such as the United States (Lee, 1974; Pottinger, 1987), Canada (Vanderkamp, 1972), and Japan (Suzuki, 1995), as well as in developing countries such as Mexico (Orrenius, 1999; Reyes, 1997), and many countries in Africa (Hanks and Liprie, 1993). Much of the existing empirical evidence is drawn from capitalist economies, where state control over mobility is uncommon. In this paper, we examine the case of China, where a transition from a socialist economy into one more market-oriented complicates the understanding of migration, including return migration. Specifically, migrants are increasingly responding to market signals such as labor supply, demand, and wages, but their decisionmaking continues to be driven by institutional controls inherited from the previous central-planning system.

In the literature on return migration the success – failure dichotomy is focused on heavily. Typically, researchers use returnees' human-capital selectivity and their impacts on the origin to identify success returnees and failure returnees. We argue that this approach is inadequate. In this paper, we illustrate a framework based on return reasons, which shed important light on returnees' decisionmaking and the circumstances under which they decide to return. Second, we show that the family dimension should be added to the success – failure dichotomy. The importance of family demands to migrants is also a function of their institutional and social inferiority in the city. Finally, we argue that the empirical basis in the literature for emphasizing success returnees is weak and we show that failure returnees are more prevalent in China than are portrayed by existing research.

A detailed examination of return migration is key to providing a solid empirical basis for conceptualizing this phenomenon and for understanding the role of institutional factors, the extent to which existing theories are relevant, and the potential

impacts of returnees on rural development. In the following two sections, we summarize and critique the literature on return migration in general and the research on return migration in China. Then, we describe the data used in our empirical analysis, based on a survey in Sichuan and Anhui provinces. The first part of the empirical analysis examines the selectivity of return migrants by comparing them with nonmigrants and continuing migrants; and the second part analyzes return reasons as a basis for distinguishing between 'success', 'failure', and 'family' returnees.

Research on return migration

The research on return migration centers on the question whether returnees are success-migrant returnees or failure-migrant returnees (Bovenkerk, 1974). Success returnees are generally understood as those who have thrived in the destination and who choose to return to the origin. Failure returnees, on the other hand, are those who have not achieved their goals during migration, are rejected by the destination, or are forced to return (Gmelch, 1980; King, 1986; Lee, 1984). This is an important question that not only reflects the process and experiences of the original migration, but sheds light on returnees' likely impacts on their origins.

Two popular approaches to identify success and failure returnees exist in the literature. The first approach defines success returnees as positively selected migrants and failure returnees as negatively selected migrants. It is well established that migration is selective (Lee, 1966). In general, migrants are positively selected, namely, they are more advantaged and/or more able than nonmigrants to pursue opportunities and to overcome intervening obstacles of migration. Though researchers believe that return migration is also selective, there is no consensus on how and the extent to which it is selective (Gmelch, 1980; Lee, 1984). Studies of rural–urban migration generally find that returnees are negatively selective among migrants—they are poorly educated, less skilled, and older, and therefore tend to have difficulties finding jobs in cities and adapting to city life (Borjas, 1989; Lee, 1984; Newbold, 2001; Reyes, 1997). These findings emphasize human capital and reinforce the notion that "the city tends to reject migrants who are unsuited for urban life, leaving the more skilled and better suited in the city" (Simons and Cardona, 1972, page 168). From a social psychological perspective, however, it has been observed that failure migrants may choose not to return simply because they do not wish to admit having failed in the destination (Gmelch, 1980; Kenny, 1976; Suzuki, 1995). Other studies show that returnees are positively selected. According to Saenz and Davila (1992), younger and more educated Chicano migrants who left the Southwest of the USA have higher propensities to return than other Chicano migrants because the former are more capable of making 'optimistic' labor-market forecasts and responding to favorable economic conditions.

The second approach focuses on returnees' impacts on the origin: success returnees have positive impacts and failure returnees have no or negative impacts (Gmelch, 1980; Lee, 1984). Although researchers generally agree that most rural–urban migrants become more experienced and skilled by the time of return, their assessments about returnees' impacts on rural development vary. Some argue that returnees have strong positive impacts on rural development because they bring back valuable urban work experience and skills as well as capital needed for the economic development of their home communities (Ma, 2001; Murphy, 1999; Pottinger, 1987). Other researchers believe that return migrants are usually failures in the urban setting and hence they constitute inferior human capital, having little or no impact on their community of origin (Hawley, 1950). According to Gmelch (1980), few returnees can be considered important to the development of the home economy (they either have not gained many skills or are not able to apply them).

Both the selectivity and impact approaches are problematic. The selectivity definition focuses on returnees' human capital rather than why and how they return. Similarly, by examining solely the outcome of return, the impacts definition does not address returnees' decisionmaking or the circumstances under which return migration takes place. Both approaches assume a success – failure dichotomy and do not permit other dimensions of return migration. Finally, both definitions adopt a top-down perspective, in which the researcher, rather than the returnees, determines how successful they are.

We argue that the above approaches are inadequate because they downplay the reasons for return. By allowing returnees to explain why they return, we suggest an alternative approach that foregrounds migrants' decisionmaking and experiences, and permits interpretations that are informed by contextual considerations. We show that return reason is key to understanding return migration and should be emphasized in addition to the selectivity and impacts approaches.

Several theoretical perspectives have been used to explain why and how migrants return. The human-capital approach views return migration as a result of migrants' inability to thrive in the destination (Caldwell, 1969). Focusing on reasons other than human capital, the segmented labor-market theory explains that migrants lack access to urban jobs because the labor market is segmented. For example, the majority of jobs in the urban labor market may be reserved for certain segments of the labor force defined by gender, age, or resident status (Bailey and Cooke, 1998; Lang and Smart, 2002; Solinger, 1995). Network theory, which highlights the role of a network system in facilitating the adjustment and settlement of newcomers, predicts that return migration is more likely to occur where a network system is not in place (Orrenius, 1999). In the framework of the life-cycle theory, which has most frequently been associated with residential location sequence, return migration is part of the aging process where one advances from one life stage to another (Borjas and Bratsberg, 1996). This logic can be extended to investigating regional migration when life events such as marriage entail migration back to one's origin community. Finally, the family strategy perspective foregrounds the role of the family in the decisionmaking of migration, including return migration. For example, ailing or elderly parents obligate some migrants, particularly the eldest children, to return to look after them and to run the family business or farm (Gmelch, 1980). Most of the above perspectives highlight the specific contexts in which decisions about return migration are made. Research has also identified circumstances under which migrants are motivated to return, for example, when they have reached their goals, when they are not able to find a job in the city, or when their families in rural areas need them (Lee, 1984; Pottinger, 1987).

As most studies on return migration draw upon empirical experiences in capitalist economies, they tend not to emphasize the role of the state. In socialist and transitional economies, however, state-based institutions have considerable influence over migration decisionmaking at the household and individual levels. In this paper, in addition to showing the importance of migration reasons, we argue that an institutional perspective is central to explaining return migration in China.

Return migration in China

As large-scale rural – urban migration did not begin in China until the mid-1980s, urban – rural return migration is a relatively recent phenomenon and research on return migration is relatively scant. Still, several recent studies have shown that urban – rural return migration is quite prevalent. Cai (2000, page 204) observes that return migrants in northern Jiangsu account for about one quarter of all out-migrants. Murphy (2002, page 125) cites a study that reports that 36% of rural migrants from the inland provinces of Jiangxi, Anhui, Hubei, and Sichuan have returned. Zhao's (2002)

rural-household survey in six provinces shows that the proportion of return migration is more than 38%, and Liang and Wu (2003) find that about one third of the migrants from Sichuan to Guangdong have returned. The data on which our empirical analysis in this paper is based (see the next section) indicate that more than 28% of migrants from rural Sichuan and Anhui have returned, after working in urban areas for an average of 2.9 years (Bai and Song, 2002, pages 15 and 27).

Like the general literature on return migration, most studies on China focus on whether returnees are successes or failures. Interestingly, most researchers highlight the success stories, especially returnees who have become entrepreneurs. Based on a survey in Henan province, Hare (1999) finds that failure at the destination is not an important reason for return. Drawing from interviews with more than 2000 return migrants from nine provinces, Ma (2001; 2002) argues that returnees represent a brain-drain reversal and that they play a role in diversifying the economy and promoting entrepreneurial activities in their home communities. Using the same data source, Wang et al (2003) observe that returnee entrepreneurs are an important source of employment opportunities in rural areas. Murphy's (2002) fieldwork in southern Jiangxi emphasizes returnees' roles as agents of information transfer, entrepreneurship, and economic diversification in rural communities. Similarly, Zhao's (2002) survey led to the conclusion that return migrants contribute to their home villages through investment and thus play important roles modernizing the countryside. In addition, researchers have reported anecdotal observations of the positive contributions of return migrants, including their skills, capital, experience, demonstration effect, and entrepreneurial activities (Cai, 2000, page 204; Qiu, 2001; Qiu et al, 2004). Most exciting studies, therefore, view return migration in a positive light and little attention is paid to failure returnees.

Despite the general optimism in the literature, very little systematic evidence exists to support the notion that success returnees are highly represented among return migrants. On the contrary, Liang and Wu (2003) find that return migrants are older and less educated than continuing migrants. Bai and Song (2002, page 129) observe that entrepreneurs are extremely rare among return migrants in Sichuan and Anhui. The data used in our empirical analysis in this paper (see the next section) shows that only 2% of returnees to the two provinces plan to engage in investment after their return.

Moreover, by emphasizing the success–failure dichotomy, most existing studies fail to articulate why and how migrants return. We argue that the reasons for return and the circumstances under which migrants make decisions to return are central to conceptualizing this phenomenon. We also argue that return migration in China must be understood in relation to its socialist and transitional context and the institutional factors therein. Specifically, China is making a transition from a central planning system to a 'socialist market economy' in which market mechanisms exist side by side with instruments of state control. On the one hand, the state has increasingly taken on a developmental role by actively pursuing economic reforms, opening the economy to the world, relaxing migration control, and gradually developing a labor market. On the other hand, it continues to cling on to socialist control apparatus such as the *hukou* (household registration) system that constrains rural–urban migration and limits resources to rural persons.

The details of the hukou system have been extensively reviewed elsewhere (Cai, 2003; Chan and Zhang, 1999; Yu, 2002) and are not repeated here. Suffice to say, until the mid-1980s, the system strictly controlled rural–urban migration because only persons with an urban hukou had access to jobs, housing, food, and other necessities in urban areas. Since the mid-1980s, the state has begun to relax migration control by permitting rural persons without urban hukou to work in urban areas. Such a change,

researchers argue, aimed at utilizing cheap rural labor to facilitate labor-intensive industrialization and to enable the urban expansion of cities and coastal areas (Fan, 2004a; Solinger, 1999), Yet, by continuing to withhold urban hukou from rural migrants, the state ensures that most rural–urban migrants are 'temporary migrants' and will not result in population explosion in large cities. Though recent hukou reforms have made urban hukou in selected cities and towns available to some eligible rural migrants, large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou are still resistant to accepting any but the highly skilled and resourceful migrants as permanent urban residents (Cai, 2002, page 211).

The hukou system, therefore, has perpetuated the inferior institutional and social statuses of rural–urban migrants and given rise to a rather unique breed of temporary migrants, often referred to as the 'floating population' in China. Estimates of the floating population in the late 1990s ranged from 100 million to 140 million (Bai and Song, 2002, page 4; Cai, 2000, page 6; Jiao, 2002; Solinger, 1999, page 18; Zhong, 2000). Their migration experiences and strategies strongly depict institutional effects of the hukou system. First, they are most likely channeled to low-paid, manual jobs and the bottom rung of urban society. Despite hukou reforms, many cities continue to limit certain jobs to local residents and deny benefits to rural migrants (Cai, 2002, page 242; Meng and Zhang, 2001). Recent economic slowdown in cities and massive layoffs of workers from state-owned enterprises have put further pressure on city governments to enact antimigration policies (Zhao, 2002). Facing labor-market segmentation and institutional barriers against social and economic mobility, most rural–urban migrants are disadvantaged in the city. This, combined with their inferior human capital compared to urbanites, heightens the likelihood of migrants failing in cities and returning to the home village. Moreover, in the city, rural migrants are socially segregated. The urban marriage market, for example, is practically closed to rural migrants, such that finding a spouse and getting married usually entail return migration. This is especially the case for rural women migrants, as they are expected to stay in the village upon entering marriage (Fan, 2003).

Second, rural migrants' inferior status and precarious existence in the city strongly encourage them to think of migration as a short-term device for increasing income and to maintain their rural residence as a permanent home. This strategy explains the prevalence of split households where one or more family members pursue migrant work while others are left behind to farm; circulatory migration where migrants return during planting and harvesting seasons; and the use of remittances for building and renovating houses and for augmenting agricultural input (Fan, 2003; 2004b; Murphy, 2002, page 91; Roberts, 1997). As migrants are not motivated to stay in the city on a permanent basis, the need of the family becomes an important reason for their eventual return. For example, as rural migrant children have great difficulties getting quality and affordable education in cities, when they reach school-age their parents may decide to return to the home village (Ministry of Agriculture, 1999, pages 53, 283, 313, and 318). When family members in the village are sick, migrants may choose to return to take care of them. Similar to Mexico–US migrants who have access to farmland in the countryside, where the factor market for transferring land is underdeveloped, rural migrants in China consider land not only an economic base, but a base for all household activities (Cai, 2000; Roberts, 2006). As rural Chinese are entitled to farmland allocated by village authorities, farming is always an option for migrants if they decide to return, which is an incentive for them to maintain strong ties with the village and to engage in circulatory migration.

Inasmuch as the hukou system has controlled rural–urban migration, it has also played a central role in explaining return migration. Existing studies on return

migration, however, have not sufficiently articulated institutional factors. We argue that the institutional context is key to understanding the prevalence and decisionmaking of return migration in China. In addition, we wish to foreground the arguments that failure returnees are more prevalent than are portrayed by the existing literature and that family demand is an important dimension, in addition to the success–failure dichotomy, for conceptualizing return migration in China. As shown earlier, both arguments are rooted in the peculiar institutional context of the transitional economy.

The above has shown that return migration in China cannot be understood independent of rural–urban migration, rural–urban relations, and the hukou system. However, the body of research on return migration is small and we have little empirical information on who the returnees are and how they made their decisions. In the empirical analysis below, we aim at examining the selectivity of return migration and illustrating how return reasons can shed light on our arguments.

Data

Our empirical analysis uses data from a survey in Sichuan and Anhui that was conducted by the Research Center for the Rural Economy of the Ministry of Agriculture. The survey consisted of two parts. The first part (the 'interview records') was based on interviews with 305 households from twelve anonymous villages in two counties in Sichuan and two counties in Anhui, and interviews with thirty-nine return entrepreneurs from the four counties, and was conducted in May and June of 1999. In all the four counties selected, labor out-migrants constituted at least 20% of the rural labor force (Bai and Song, 2002, page 10). Within each county, three villages that had relatively long histories and high rates of out-migration and which represented varied locations and levels of development were selected. Then, using stratified quota sampling, fifteen returnee households (households with return migrants), five migrant households (households with continuing migrants), and five nonmigrant households (households without any migrants) were randomly selected. Specific definitions of these three groups are given in the following paragraphs. The result is a valuable volume of transcribed material, consisting of first-person accounts of migration and labor-market experiences and other household and family issues.

The second part (the 'household survey'), conducted between September and November of 1999, was a questionnaire survey of a sample of 5484 households from sixty-two counties in the two provinces (Bai and Song, 2002). The sample was derived from the existing survey database of the Rural Social Economic Survey Team (RSEST) (*nongcun shehui jingji diaocha zongdui*), a division within the National Statistical Bureau which conducts annual sample surveys of rural households across China. The household survey is a combination of the RSEST's regular annual survey in Sichuan and Anhui and a supplementary survey on return migrants for the two provinces. Of the original 7100 sample households, 5484 observations are valid and are included in the analysis in this paper (Bai and Song, 2002, page 35). In this paper, we use mainly the data from the household survey for quantitative analysis. The narratives from the interview records are excellent qualitative materials for understanding return migration from first-person perspectives and are thus used to provide insights for interpreting the quantitative results from the household survey.

Both parts of the survey included the labor force aged 16 years to 65 years and considered three segments of the labor force—continuing migrants, returnees, and nonmigrants (Bai and He, 2002; Bai and Song, 2002). Continuing migrants were defined as individuals who at the time of the survey had migrated to work outside the village for at least three months. Returnees referred to migrants who returned before January 1999 and had since stayed at the village (that is, those who had remained in the village

for at least nine to eleven months). Nonmigrants were those who had never migrated to work. In our judgment, some revisions of the above definitions would ensure more convincing findings. First, six months, rather than three months, is a more customary definition of out-migration and is the one used in most macro-type surveys, such as China's 2000 Census. Second, we prefer to define migrants as those who crossed county boundaries (rather than moving merely outside the township), again a definition consistent with migration studies both in and outside China. Third, we define returnees as migrants who returned before October 1998 (rather than January 1999). This revision not only requires a longer duration of stay after return but screens out circular migrants who return in the beginning of the year for the Spring Festival. Circularity is common among rural migrants, who regularly return during the Spring Festival and planting and harvesting seasons only to leave again after a short stay. Their strong ties to the home community and to the land reflect a strategy of spatial and sectoral diversification of household labor (Roberts, 1997). Our revised definition minimizes the possibility of diluting returnees with circular migrants. Although there is no guarantee that returnees would not migrate again (see also table 6), under our definition returnees had already stayed in the village for at least twelve to fourteen months, which clearly distinguishes them from circular migrants who normally return for just a short period of time. In other words, by using stricter definitions, we arrived at a more convincing sample of migrants and returnees. Using our revised definitions, we find there are a total of 1718 continuing migrants, 654 returnees, and 10 213 nonmigrants in the household survey (table 1).

Though Anhui is geographically closer to China's developed eastern seaboard, it shares with Sichuan low levels of economic development, a large volume of surplus rural labor, and a relatively long history of labor out-migration (Ma et al, 2004). Rural population accounts for greater proportions of the population in the two provinces than the nation as a whole. According to the 2000 Census 73.3%, 73.2%, and 63.9% of

Table 1. Comparison of continuing migrants, returnees, and nonmigrants.

	Continuing migrants	Returnees	Nonmigrants
Number	1718	654	10 213
Human capital			
Age (average years)	26.50	37.52 (34.73) [a]	38.79
Education			
average number of years	8.67	7.41	6.89
junior secondary school and above (%)	78.86	55.35	46.35
Training [b] (% trained)	37.31	8.72	7.13
Social			
Gender (% male)	67.23	41.13	55.28
Marital status (% married)	47.50	90.67	87.82
Child(ren) at school age (% with) [c]	33.99	48.93	42.36
Economic (household)			
Arable land per capita (mu) [d]	1.06	1.29	1.36
Annual income per capita (yuan)	1885	1888	1850

[a] Age at the year of return.

[b] 'Training' refers to whether respondent has received training for nonagricultural work.

[c] Between 7 and 15 years as most children in rural China do not continue school beyond the junior secondary level.

[d] 1 mu = 0.16 acre.

Sichuan's, Anhui's, and China's populations, respectively, were rural (Population Census Office, 2002). The levels of educational attainment in the two provinces are lower than the nation as a whole. In 2000, the proportions of the rural population with senior secondary level of education were 3.1%, 3.5%, and 5.3% in Sichuan, Anhui, and China, respectively. The GDPs per capita for Sichuan and Anhui were 4815 yuan and 5076 yuan, respectively, in 2000, much lower than the national level of 7063 yuan (National Bureau of Statistics, 2002). The large size of the rural population and low levels of economic development in the two provinces resulted in a large and relatively unskilled surplus labor force. Over the past two decades, therefore, Sichuan and Anhui have been major origins of rural – urban migrants, especially to destinations in eastern and southern China (Fan, 2004b). At the same time, some migrants have indeed returned to the origin villages. According to the household survey, of the 2372 migrants in the sample, 654, or 28%, have returned (table 1).

As observed earlier, the body of research on return migration in China is quite small. Most studies, like ours, focus on selected provinces rather than the entire country. Nevertheless, as most origin provinces of rural – urban migrants are less developed and have a large labor surplus, we expect that findings in Sichuan and Anhui will echo, if not represent, observations in other origin provinces that are in similar situations.

The selectivity of return migration

We examine the selectivity of return migration by comparing the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of continuing migrants, returnees, and nonmigrants (table 1). As expected, migrants—including continuing migrants and returnees—are positively selected in terms of human capital as they are younger, more highly educated, and more likely to be trained for nonagricultural work than nonmigrants. There are, however, clear distinctions between continuing migrants and returnees. Returnees are older, less highly educated, and less likely to be trained for nonagricultural work than continuing migrants, but are younger, more highly educated, and more likely to be trained than nonmigrants. Though returnees appear to fare in between the other two groups, in quantitative terms they are more similar to nonmigrants than to continuing migrants. For example, 55.4% and 46.4% of returnees and nonmigrants, respectively, compared with 78.9% of continuing migrants, have had education at or above the junior secondary level. Only 8.7% of returnees and 7.1% of nonmigrants have had nonagricultural training, compared with 37.3% of continuing migrants in that category. These results suggest that returnees are considerably less positively selected than continuing migrants.

The social variables highlight the role of the family in return migration. Though migration is more selective of men than of women, the proportion of men among returnees is the lowest in the three groups, indicating that women are considerably more likely than men to return. Similarly, though migration is more selective of single than married persons, the proportion of married persons is the highest among returnees, hinting that getting or being married is an important factor of return migration. In the same vein, continuing migrants are least likely and returnees most likely, to have children at school age. All the three social variables, therefore, strongly suggest that family demand is correlated with return migration and that family factors affect women and married persons in particular. As described earlier, split households are prevalent among migrants, whose typical arrangement is one where the husband pursues migrant work and the wife stays in the village to farm and to care for the young and the old (Fan, 2003).

As in most rural surveys, the household survey documents economic development at the household level. Thus, even though the two economic variables arable land and

income are expressed in per capita terms, they refer to the entire household rather than just the migrants, returnees, and nonmigrants who participated in the survey. Returnee households are in between (continuing) migrant households and nonmigrant households. Arable land per capita is the lowest among migrant households, depicting that they have more severe labor surplus than the other two groups. Annual income per capita is similar between migrant and returnee households and is the lowest among nonmigrant households, reflecting in part economic gain from migration.

The above suggests that returnees are not as positively selected as continuing migrants. Put in another way, the least positively selected migrants are most likely to return. This seems to support the notion that returnees are mostly failures rather than successes, a point to which we shall return in the next section of the paper.

In order to evaluate statistically the differences between the three groups, we conduct a multinomial logit regression (table 2). The regression quantifies the effect of an independent variable on the three possible outcomes (dependent variable)—continuing migrant, returnee, and nonmigrant—when controlling for other independent variables. We use returnees as the reference group for the dependent variable. Thus, the odds ratios depict the likelihood of becoming a continuing migrant or a nonmigrant versus being a returnee. The independent variables are based on the indicators described in table 1. The standardized regression coefficients specify the relative importance of independent variables in predicting the dependent variable outcomes.

The chi-square statistic for the null hypothesis is 3340.2, which shows that the model as a whole is statistically significant. All the regression coefficients, except those of education, training, and children at school for nonmigrants and income per capita for migrants, are significant. All the signs of the regression coefficients, except that of gender for nonmigrants, are as expected. Both the odds ratios and the standardized

Table 2. Multinomial logit regression on continuing migrants, returnees, and nonmigrants (returnees constitute the reference group).

	Continuing migrants			Nonmigrants		
	regression coefficient	standardized regression coefficient	odds ratio	regression coefficient	standardized regression coefficient	odds ratio
Intercept	4.0813 **			2.9587 **		
Human capital						
Age (years)	−0.0740 **	−0.4869	0.929	0.0203 **	0.1336	1.021
Education (years)	0.0645 **	0.1063	1.067	−0.0095	−0.0156	0.991
Training (yes = 1)	1.6827 **	0.2942	5.380	−0.0306	−0.0054	0.970
Social						
Gender (male = 1)	0.3178 **	0.0876	1.374	−0.6453 **	−0.1778	0.524
Marital status (married = 1)	−1.3052 **	−0.2763	0.271	−0.5632 **	−0.1192	0.569
Child(ren) at school age (number)	−0.1187 **	−0.0524	0.888	−0.1388	−0.0612	0.870
Economic (household)						
Arable land per capita (mu)	−0.0787 **	−0.3405	0.924	0.0152 **	0.0657	1.015
Annual income per capita (yuan)	0.00005	0.0222	1.000	−0.0001 *	−0.0483	1.000

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.

regression coefficients indicate that the model is more powerful in explaining the differences between continuing migrants and returnees than the differences between nonmigrants and returnees, supporting an earlier observation that returnees are more similar to nonmigrants than to continuing migrants.

Age is the most important independent variable in predicting the continuing migrant – returnee outcome, as it has the largest standardized regression coefficient. As age goes up by one year, individuals are 1.1 times [1] more likely to be returnees than continuing migrants. The interpretation of age is not straightforward, however, as it correlates with physical capability, stage of the life cycle, and experience. Training in nonagricultural work is the third most important variable. Individuals who have had training are 5.4 times more likely to be continuing migrants than returnees. Education is the fifth most important variable. As education goes up by one year, individuals are 1.1 times more likely to be continuing migrants than returnees. These human-capital variables reinforce the notion that returnees are negatively selected compared to continuing migrants. The social variables gender, marital status, and children at school age are, respectively, the sixth, fourth, and seventh most important variables. Men are 1.4 times more likely to be continuing migrants than returnees; married persons are 3.7 times more likely to be returnees than continuing migrants; and as the number of children at school age increases by one, individuals are 1.1 times more likely to be returnees than continuing migrants. These results again underscore family responsibility as a determinant of return migration. Finally, arable land per capita is the second most important variable. Individuals with one more mu of arable land per capita are 1.1 times more likely to be returnees than continuing migrants. This suggests that land endowment may be a factor affecting whether migrants return. Annual income per capita is not a statistically significant predictor of the continuing-migrant versus returnee outcome.

In terms of the nonmigrant versus returnee outcome, the social variables gender and marital status are the first and third most important predictors. When controlling for other variables, men are 1.9 times more likely than women to be returnees than nonmigrants. Though this result apparently contradicts the observation in table 1, it reflects the comparison between returnees and nonmigrants when controlling for other variables and is probably due to men's higher propensity to migrate to begin with. Married persons are 1.8 times more likely to be returnees than nonmigrants. The only other three significant variables are arable land per capita, annual income per capita, and age. As arable land per capita goes up by one mu or as age increases by one year, individuals are 1.02 times more likely to be nonmigrants than returnees. The odds ratios of annual income per capita indicate that there is no significant difference between returnees and nonmigrants even though the coefficient is significant. Notably, the coefficients for education and training, two prominent human-capital variables, as well as for the social variable children at school age, are not significant. Again, this reinforces an earlier observation that returnees are similar in human capital to nonmigrants. Inasmuch as migrants are positively selected, the relatively negative selectivity of return migrants suggests that they are more likely failure migrants than success migrants, a point we shall expand in the next section. Our findings are in general agreement with those by Zhao (2002, page 381), who observes that returnees are predominantly married and are between continuing migrants and nonmigrants in terms of age and level of educational attainment, and those by Liang and Wu (2003), who also highlight the negative selectivity of return migrants.

[1] For the purpose of easy interpretation and understanding, we take the reciprocal of the odds ratio if it is under 1 and we interpret it in the reverse order. For example, one additional year of age increases the likelihood of being a returnee versus being a continuing migrant by $1/0.920 = 1.076$ times.

Success, failure, and family returnees

All migrants are not the same. Likewise, all returnees are not the same. As argued earlier, the popular approaches of identifying success and failure returnees based on their selectivity and impacts are inadequate. Rather, analysis of return reasons emphasizes migrants' decisionmaking and experiences, and facilitates exploration of perspectives including, and in addition to, the success–failure dichotomy. The Sichuan and Anhui survey, which includes reasons for return migration, offers a unique opportunity to utilize our suggested approach.

Returnees in the household survey were given eight possible reasons of return and were allowed to select up to three reasons without ranking them (table 3). The majority—56.6%—selected three reasons; 25.7% selected two reasons; only 17.4% selected one reason; and 0.3% were missing values. The percentage in table 3, therefore, were computed based on the total number of selections (1559) rather than the number of returnees (654). Indeed, it is common for return migration to involve multiple reasons, as it is common for migration decisionmaking to include multiple considerations (Lee, 1966).

In order to gain a better understanding of the contextual meaning of the return reasons, we examined the interview records and selected narratives that best articulate these reasons. All the names used in the narratives below are pseudonyms.

When individuals select 'age' as a return reason, they may be referring to the physical demand of migrant work and the difficulty of thriving in the destination. For example, a 49-year-old man comments: "I am over 40 years old. I am not able to take on tough physical jobs any more" (Ministry of Agriculture, 1999, page 349). However, age can also reflect the stage of life cycle; for example, after children have grown up, their demand on family income would decline. An example is a 60-year-old man who returned from migration after he had earned enough to pay off all the debts that were incurred during the raising of his six children (Ministry of Agriculture, 1999, page 359).

In the interview record, many women cited 'marriage' as a reason for return. Although none of them explained the reason in detail, existing research has shown that rural women are highly marginalized in the urban marriage market and that most will instead marry someone in the countryside (Fan, 2003; 2004a; Fan and Huang, 1998). This reflects their institutional and social inferiority in the city. Qingju is a Sichuan woman who worked in Shanghai as a maid and in restaurants for three years (Ministry of Agriculture, 1999, page 215). She was interested in making money via migrant work, and did not want to return to the home village until her parents had arranged for her to get married. Once married, her husband asked her to stay in the village and thus she gave up the idea of pursuing migrant work.

Table 3. Reasons for return migration.

Reason	Explanation	Percentage of responses ($N = 1559$)
Age	too old to continue migrant work; advanced stage of life cycle	5.90
Marriage	returning to get married	9.49
Childbirth	returning to have children	11.10
Caregiving	taking care of family member	22.71
Health	injury or sickness	2.82
Job	difficulties of finding work in the destination	23.22
Investment	returning to invest in the origin	1.09
Other	other reasons	23.67

'Childbirth' is another important reason mentioned by many women returnees in the interview record. As for those selecting marriage, these women did not elaborate the reason but assumed that it was self-explanatory. Indeed, it is widely understood that migrants who do not have urban hukou have difficulties accessing health care and raising children in cities. Lanzhi, an Anhui woman, returned from Shanghai when she became pregnant (Ministry of Agriculture, 1999, page 94). Even though she is reluctant to stay in the village and prefers to do migrant work, having a young child means that she has no alternative but to stay.

Related to the above is 'caregiving', which reflects the strong ties rural migrants have with their origins and their likelihood to return when family needs arise. Jiacai, a Sichuan man who had worked for many years in Guangdong in construction and factories, decided to return when his parents became sick (Ministry of Agriculture, 1999, page 451). He and his two brothers made an arrangement such that they each take care of their parents for two years. Jiacai is the oldest of the three brothers and is therefore the first to shoulder this responsibility. After two years, one of his siblings would return from migrant work. This example illustrates that family strategy is central for understanding not only out-migration but return migration as well.

'Health' refers to returning because of injury or health problems. Yiming, whose leg was injured due to an accident in a mine, returned to Anhui and did not pursue migrant work anymore (Ministry of Agriculture, 1999, page 184). Although his contract stated that he was entitled to a compensation of more than 8000 yuan, he was able to secure only 4000 yuan from his employer. Yiming's example shows that rural migrants are engaged in hard work and are easily exploited. Their lack of access to health care and their precarious social position in the city means that once injured, they have few options but to return home.

Although the large volume of rural–urban migration in China suggests that labor demand for migrants is strong, the difficulty of finding work in the destination—the 'job' reason—is in fact an important reason for return. Lejun, an Anhui man who worked in Shanghai for two years, indicated that migrant work was exhausting and difficult to find (Ministry of Agriculture, 1999, page 176). After the construction company he worked for was dissolved, he could not get six months of back pay nor could he find another job. Although the difficulty in the labor market reflects, in part, migrants' human capital and the economic development of the destination, migrants' lack of urban hukou often means that they are disadvantaged and are the first to be let go. For example, Bingliang, an Anhui man working in a mine in Huainan, was laid off together with all other migrant workers after an explosion that killed twenty people (Ministry of Agriculture, 1999, page 84). In part because many factories in the city were laying off workers and in part because Bingliang did not have connections, he could not find another job and decided to return home.

Finally, 'investment' refers to returnees using their gains in income and skills from migrant work to invest in their home communities. Yongning, an Anhui man, is an example of investment returnees (Ministry of Agriculture, 1999, page 30). Using a second-hand truck, he went to Shanghai and did transportation work. After two years, he learned that the government of Anhui was promoting a housing project. This is how he described the decision to return:

> "Why don't I go home and build a brick factory? As the housing project is sponsored by the government, the market for bricks should not be a problem. Plus, labor in the home village is cheap. I won't be spending too much to hire workers. I should do it before anyone else."

Upon selling his truck for 28 000 yuan, he returned home and started a brick factory.

Among the seven 'non-other' categories, job and caregiving are the leading return reasons in the household survey, accounting for 23.22% and 22.71%, respectively, of all responses and illustrating that both push and pull reasons are important. On the one hand, the difficulties finding jobs reflect constraints in the labor market of the destination, as well as migrants' poor human capital; returnees selecting this reason are rejected by the destination. On the other hand, family responsibility, such as caring for family members, exerts a strong pull for migrants to return. This reason reinforces an earlier observation that family demand is a prominent factor in return migration. In addition, the two other family reasons—childbirth and marriage—are the third and fourth most important reasons for return. They are followed by age and health, both individual characteristics that may negatively affect one's ability to work in the destination. Interestingly enough, investment is the least important return reason, accounting for only 1.1% of all selections.

It is unclear why 'other' accounts for such a large proportion—23.7%—of responses. Though the household survey does not provide direct information on what constitutes other reasons, researchers who have analyzed the interview records document the following additional reasons for return migration: children reaching school age; taking care of farmland; building a house; migrant work too exhausting; and difficulties in adjustment (Bai and Song, 2002, page 42). The first three reasons represent family responsibility and the last two reasons depict migrants' failure to thrive in the destination. It is probable that these additional reasons too are included in the 'other' responses in the household survey.

All in all, the distribution of return reasons lends strong support to two observations made earlier, namely, returnees as a whole are negatively selected and family demand is a very important reason for return. These findings challenge conventional wisdom in two important ways. First, contrary to most studies on China that emphasize success returnees such as entrepreneurs, this study shows that these returnees are rare but that failure returnees—those who are rejected by the destination and who have difficulties surviving there—are prevalent. Second, the data provide compelling evidence for the family as an additional dimension to the conventional success–failure dichotomy. The importance of the family not only reinforces the well-established household-strategy approach but underscores the institutional perspective. Specifically, lacking access to permanent urban residence, most rural–urban migrants in China have few options other than leaving other family members behind, keeping their farmland in the origin village, and eventually returning when family needs arise. Migrants returning for family reasons do not fit neatly into the success–failure dichotomy as they neither choose to return after they have succeeded in migrant work nor are they forced to return after being rejected by the destination. We argue, therefore, that a better conceptual framework for return migration in China is one that addresses three groups—success, failure, and family returnees.

To illustrate further the validity of this framework, we examine the selectivity of these three types of returnees. As the survey allowed multiple selections of return reasons, we use the scheme in table 4 (over) to assign returnees to the success, family, and failure groups and their variants. We exclude age as a return reason for the success, failure, and family groupings because, as described earlier, age may depict highly varied factors, including difficulty with physically demanding work and advanced stage of life cycle. Although excluding age reduces the information in the data, we decided that clarity of interpretation is a high priority.

The high proportion of returnees belonging to the family/failure/age category (4) indicates once again that most return migrants are driven by multiple reasons. Our focus, however, is on the more clear-cut success, failure, and family categories.

Thus, the comparative analysis below involves only categories 1 through 3 of table 4. We expect that success returnees are most positively selected, failure returnees are most negatively selected, and family returnees are between success and failure returnees in terms of selectivity.

The demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the three returnee groups confirm our expectation (table 5). Success returnees' average age at return is the oldest

Table 4. Groups of returnees.

Group	Reason(s) for return [a]	Number of returnees	Percentage of returnees
1. Success	investment; investment and any other reason	17	2.60
2. Family	marriage or childbirth or caregiving; (marriage or childbirth or caregiving) and other	178	27.22
3. Failure	health or job; (health or job) and other	101	15.44
4. Family/failure/age	(marriage or childbirth or caregiving) and (age or health or job); (marriage or childbirth or caregiving) and (age or health or job) and other	310	47.40
5. Other	other only	46	7.03
6. Missing	no response	2	0.31
Total		654	100

[a] See table 3.

Table 5. Comparison of success, family, and failure returnees.

	Success returnee	Family returnee	Failure returnee
Number	17	178	101
Human capital			
Age at return			
average age at return (years)	36.41	33.66	34.71
< 25 (%)	11.76	16.95	26.00
25–34 (%)	35.29	43.50	25.00
35–49 (%)	47.06	33.33	36.00
50+ (%)	5.88	6.21	13.00
Education			
average number of years	8.12	7.57	7.34
secondary school and above (%)	58.82	60.11	50.49
Training (% trained)	17.65	7.87	6.93
Social			
Gender (% male)	52.94	51.69	61.39
Marital status (% married)	100.00	93.82	81.19
Household size (average number of people)	4.00	4.46	4.33
Child(ren) at school age (% with)	35.29	54.49	44.55
Migration experience			
Total time of migration (years)	2.90	2.80	2.80
Average longest spell (months)	11.00	10.23	9.85
Economic (household)			
Arable land per capita (mu)	0.81	1.21	1.30
Annual income per capita (yuan)	1749	1944	1703

(36.4 years), but the age breakdowns indicate that they are the most productive ages compared with the other two groups. About 47% of success returnees were between 35 and 49 years of age and 35% of them were between 25 and 34 years of age at the time of return. Thus, more than 82%—the highest percentage among all groups—of success returnees returned between the ages of 25 and 49 years. They have gained experience and skills through years of migration but are still young enough to be adventurous, for example, by starting their own businesses, after returning to the origin. Failure returnees had younger average age at return (34.7 years), but their proportions under 25 years (26%) and over 50 years (13%) were the highest among all groups. This age distribution suggests that they are disadvantaged because significant portions of them either have little work experience or are past the peak productive years. The age distribution of failure migrants supports the observation we made earlier that interpretation of age as a return reason is not straightforward. Family returnees have the youngest average age at return (33.7 years). Their high concentration in the 25 – 34 age range (44%) reflects the life stages when family demand is the greatest, including getting married, giving birth, supervising young and school-age children, and caring for elderly parents.

In terms of educational attainment and training, the evidence again shows that success returnees are the most positively selected and failure returnees are the most negatively selected. Success and failure returnees have the highest and lowest average number of years of education, respectively, and the success and failure categories also contain the highest and lowest proportions of respondents with nonagricultural work training, respectively. In both respects, family returnees are between the success and failure groups. The failure returnee category also has the lowest proportion with a secondary level of education among the three groups.

Interestingly, 62% of failure returnees are male, which probably is related to the higher representation of men (67.2%) among migrants to begin with. The more balanced gender composition of family returnees clearly depicts the sociocultural expectation on women to play more central caregiving roles than men. The high proportion of success returnees being married—100%—reflects not only their older average age but their positive selectivity, which is an advantage in the marriage market. In contrast, the large proportion of failure returnees in the youngest cohort and their relatively negative selectivity probably explain why only 81.2% of them are married. As expected, of the three returnee groups, family demand on the family returnees is the greatest, as indicated by their having the largest average household size and the highest percentage of respondents with children at school age.

In terms of migration experience, success returnees have both the most years of migration as well as the longest spell in the destination. The failure group has, on average, the shortest spell. These results are consistent with a number of studies which point out that accumulation of migration experience is positively related to the selectivity of the returnees (DaVanzo and Morrison, 1978; Lee, 1984; Ma, 2001; 2002).

Households with success returnees have the least amount of arable land per capita. This suggests that success returnees are less likely to be attracted by agricultural resources and that they are less likely to engage in household farming when compared with the other two groups. This observation is consistent with their return reason of investment. In contrast, households with failure returnees have the largest amount of arable land per capita, suggesting that migrants who are forced to return are also motivated by the availability of land resources. Households with failure returnees have the least income per capita among the three groups. Somewhat unexpected is that households with family returnees have higher income per capita than those with success returnees. There are two probable reasons why households with success returnees do not have the highest income per capita. First, investment as a return

reason depicts intention rather than outcome. Returnee investors may or may not succeed in their investment endeavors. Second, as the income per capita data includes household income from all sources, the income by success returnees maybe offset by lower income of other household members.

In addition to differentials in selectivity, the economic activities returnees engage in (after their return) also support the notion that success returnees are ranked the highest and failure returnees are ranked the lowest (table 6). More than half of family returnees and 44% of failure returnees, compared with less than one quarter of success returnees, engage in 'other' economic activities, which include traditional household farming. Close to 59% of success returnees, the highest proportion among the three groups, work in the commercial farming sector. Success returnees also have the highest proportions among all groups running factories and running service businesses, such as owning a restaurant, a store, or a nightclub. These activities are consistent with their return reason—investment—and also demonstrate that they are the group that are most likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities and provide employment opportunities to other villagers. In contrast, 18% of failure returnees are employed, rather than employing others, in nonagricultural work, compared with only 5.9% of family returnees and none of success returnees.

Compared with the premigration period, the vast majority of success returnees have expanded the scale of their economic activities (82.4%), improved their overall economic situation (88.2%), and used more skills in their current work (76.5%). The proportions of family and failure returnees with these experiences are considerably lower. These results indicate that success returnees have achieved the most economic gains and have improved their skills most via migrant work. This, combined with the distribution of economic activities, suggests that success returnees are in an advantaged position to have positive impacts on their origin communities and that they chose to return rather than being forced to return. Indeed, less than 12% of success returnees indicate a desire to migrate again. Failure returnees, on the other hand, have

Table 6. Economic activity of success, family, and failure returnees.

	Success returnees	Family returnees	Failure returnees
Main economy activity (%)			
commercial farming [a]	58.82	38.64	34.00
animal husbandry or fishery	0.00	1.71	1.00
transportation	0.00	0.57	1.00
running factories	11.76	0.00	0.00
employed in nonagricultural work	0.00	5.68	18.00
running service businesses	5.88	1.14	2.00
other [b]	23.53	52.27	44.00
Scale of economic activity (% with increased scale)	82.35	17.26	17.35
Overall economic situation (% in improved situation)	88.24	22.02	20.41
Requirement of current work (% using more skills)	76.47	31.55	25.51
Plan for the future (% who will migrate again)	11.76	19.66	29.70

[a] For example, growing fruits.

[b] 'Other' includes returnees who engage in household farming for mainly noncommercial purposes, which probably explains the large proportions of returnees selecting this category. The data does not provide breakdown between household farming and other activities.

made relatively little economic gain from migration and are in an inferior position to exert positive economic impacts on their origins. Despite the difficulties in their previous migration, 30% of failure returnees want to migrate again in the future. Family returnees appear to be somewhat better off than failure returnees but are considerably behind success returnees.

Summary and conclusions

Return migration is central for understanding human mobility. In this paper we have focused on urban – rural return migration and its interpretation in China, where the coexistence of market mechanisms and institutional forces complicates the understanding of migration. We have argued that the decisionmaking of rural migrants reflects their institutional and social inferiority in the city, which undermines their access to resources and hence their likelihood to succeed at the destination, motivates their maintaining strong ties with the home village, and impels them to return when family needs arise. Results from the empirical study of Sichuan and Anhui provinces, two major origins of rural – urban migrants, support our argument that the conventional success – failure dichotomy approach is inadequate and that family demand is an important component in the conceptualization of return migration.

Existing research has tended to use a success – failure dichotomy approach, whereby success returnees are defined as those positively selected and having positive impacts on their origins, whereas failure returnees are defined as those negatively selected and having no or negative impacts on the origin community. This approach downplays the circumstances under which migrants return. In our analysis, we emphasized return reasons as a more powerful analytical tool for understanding the decisionmaking of return migrants. We showed that return reasons shed important light on the contexts of return, which are especially important in China, where migrants' decisions are not only explained by market forces but are driven by institutional controls inherited from the central-planning tradition.

Our empirical analysis indicated that return migrants are negatively selected among migrants, and are more similar to nonmigrants than to continuing migrants. This was done via examination of the human capital, social, and economic indicators and via a multinomial logit regression comparing the three groups.

Our analysis of return migrants showed that they range from the highly successful, namely, those returning to invest in the home village, to those rejected by the destination and forced to return. However, we found that satisfying family needs associated with marriage, childbirth, and caregiving are extremely important reasons for return. Conceptually, the family component does not fit neatly into the success – failure dichotomy approach; and, empirically, our analysis showed that family returnees are between success and failure returnees in terms of selectivity and their economic activities after return. These results support the family-strategy theoretical perspective. They also strongly suggest a need to expand the success – failure approach to including more context-sensitive dimensions.

From a theoretical point of view, our findings in this paper reinforce the importance of an institutional perspective for understanding migrants' decisionmaking processes, especially in economies that are making structural transformations. Empirically, the results highlight the prevalence of failure returnees and raise questions about the extent to which return migrants can contribute to the economic development of their origin villages. In this paper we have not investigated the social impacts of return migration, which have potential to foster change in China's countryside (Fan, 2004b; Lou et al, 2004). For policymakers, our findings suggest that reducing institutional barriers may be the best strategy to enable rural migrants to succeed and contribute to rural economic development.

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