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Migration, risk and livelihoods: A Chinese case

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Heather Xiaoquan ZHANG

Migration, Risk and Livelihoods: A Chinese Case



Title:

Migration, Risk and Livelihoods: A Chinese Case

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Abstract:

China has turned from a 'low risk' to a 'high risk' society since the start of the market reforms in the late 1970s. Market, while bringing diverse livelihood opportunities to rural people, has simultaneously distributed risks, and the exposure and vulnerability to them unequally among different social groups. This paper attempts to apply the risk concept to the study of one of the most socially disadvantaged groups in China, namely rural-urban migrants, through analysing the narratives of members of a migratory family of the Hui Muslim national minority from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, who run a business in the northern city of Tianjin. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the research adopts an actor-oriented perspective combined with qualitative longitudinal research methodology (or 'extended case method') to delineate a livelihood trajectory of this family, and explore the relationships between livelihood, risk, social networks, agency and public policy interventions.

Keywords:

Rural-urban migration, risk, contingency, uncertainty, livelihood, social networks, agency, social security, translocality, longitudinal research, narrative, extended case method, China.

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1 Introduction

History is in part personal history. The two are inseparable – however tiny the individual is in the shape of things.

Peter Townsend (2000: 5)

This paper tells a story of a migratory family of the Hui Muslim national minority from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in north-western China, who run a Lanzhou-style beef noodle restaurant in the northern coastal city of Tianjin in the late 2000s. It traces the geographical and social mobility of the family at different points of the life course involving three, in particular the older two (grandparent and parent) generations' unremitting efforts to sustain and secure livelihoods through initiating, engaging in and developing a range of entrepreneurial endeavours within the north-western region and later beyond.¹ It applies a risk concept in 'restorying'², examining and interpreting the meanings of the experiences of the migratory family as narrated and understood by its members, and aims to address the following research questions: How did the family initiate a small off-farm business endeavour? How did they manage to obtain start capital, information and knowledge about supply and demand, and later access the market far away from home? What uncertainties and risks did they encounter in the migratory process? What did risks mean for the family and their livelihoods? What strategies did they assume and resources draw on in their dealing with risks and contingencies³ as well as the associated frustration and despair in their pursuit of livelihood and its security? What is the role of social networks and informal institutions in pursuing, sustaining and securing livelihood? How are individual actions or agency exercised in the process? And how have these been interacted with institutions and social structure to shape China's rural/urban economy and society for the past three decades?

The research employs an actor-oriented perspective as developed by Long (1984, 2001, 2005) and represented by the 'Wageningen School' (Scoones 2009: 173). This perspective directs attention to the crucial importance of carefully recording, delineating, understanding and interpreting the lifeworlds of individuals, families and communities, and the meanings attached to these so as to investigate the ways in which micro-level complex social relationships, interactions and negotiations on the one hand, and larger historical, institutional and structural forces on the other are in constant interplay and mutually influencing, simultaneously enabling and constraining human agency. The emphasis on agency in the actor-oriented perspective requires a microscopic focus on local processes given that social change and transformations (as well as continuities) are understood as emerging 'from the differential responses (that are embedded in various social practices) to changing social, economic, cultural and political conditions' (Ye et al. 2009: 175). This has generated the spatial and temporal dynamics, and the wider structural forces are considered as not only governing and conditioning, but more importantly, being reshaped by human actions, as individuals actively and constantly seek and process information and knowledge of diverse sources, reflect on their experiences, build and extend their social networks, engage in social exchanges, interactions, and struggles based on their perceptions of their interests and differing systems of norms and values, and formulate tactics and strategies in their dealing with other actors and institutions (Long 1984, 2001, 2005).

This theoretical framework guides the study's methodological choice, which combines ethnographic fieldwork with a qualitative longitudinal, narrative analysis. The longitudinal methodology involves 'restorying', documenting and delineating the livelihood trajectory of the family, and the various entrepreneurial endeavours and business branches attempted by its members across generations through a narrative analysis, which is understood as 'a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action

1 The family's recent migratory history can be divided into two phases. The first phase, between 1980 and 2000, was characterised by intra-regional migration together with various business ventures closely linked to the supply and demand of the local and regional economy. The second and ongoing phase since 2000 has been marked by inter-regional, across country movements in a new line of business targeting the catering market of the coastal metropolis. This paper's focus is on the first phase.

2 Creswell (2007: 56) defines 'restorying' as 'the process of reorganising the stories into some general type of framework ... and then rewriting the stories to place them within a chronological sequence'.

3 Contingency is defined as actualised risk (Taylor-Gooby 2001: 200).

or series of events/actions, chronologically connected' (Czarniawska 2004: 17). Such a methodological combination allows the voices of the 'grassroots' social actors – members of the migratory family in this case – to be heard, and their lived experiences and lifeworlds as linked to the themes of the research to be unfolded. The paper explores the meanings of the narrative about the major events in the livelihood trajectory of the migratory family, situating these in a broader context of rapid and profound societal and institutional change. It intends to provide insights into the complex processes, economic, social, historical and political changes and cultural practices, spatial, temporal and generational dynamics and social trends, and the making of history through the eyes and narratives of the social actors involved. The primary data of the research is drawn from the accounts narrated by members of the 'extended Hui family' – one belongs to the parent generation (father) in his late 40s and two male cousins in their late teens and early twenties (Images 1 and 2). The data was collected during my fieldwork in Tianjin between 2008 and 2009 investigating issues in relation to the social protection in the informal economy in China and how risks and insecurity were perceived, experienced and dealt with by diverse actors including, in this case, the informal workers themselves.⁴ The empirical data is supplemented by secondly materials, including, e.g. academic works published in English and Chinese, and relevant information retrieved from the Internet. Such data helps to provide the necessary broader backdrop against which the micro-level social actions and cultural practices constituting the lifeworlds of the migratory family as social agents are being unfolded.

Given the massive scale of rural-urban migration witnessed in post-reform China and the associated problems with the recognition of their equal citizenship rights in urban settings (cf. State Council 2006),⁵ this research is of policy relevance. The narrative analysis allows the voice of migrants, who are frequently marginalised, stereotyped and treated as 'the other' in urban China in the dominant discourse and much of the official or popular representations,⁶ to be heard not only to bring about greater diversity in 'voice' and representation, and affirmative image, but to raise awareness for researchers, relevant policy arenas and the general public of the aspirations, experiences and needs of migrant individuals, families and communities. This may result in closer public attention and targeted policy interventions to effectively tackle the problems of unequal distribution of risk and insecurity among different social groups, and the unmet needs and unevenly realised rights for the migrant population, if a more equitable and harmonious society is to be constructed, and social solidarity and cohesion to be fostered.

The analysis, through its methodological approaches, also involves an examination of the larger structural forces that have helped shape personal experiences, and wider economic and social change mirrored in individuals' life histories. In so doing, it intends to extend the existing scholarship on China's rural-urban migration and migrants' social protection via a fresh risk lens, and to contribute to a 'field in the making'⁷, namely the emerging qualitative longitudinal and narrative research methods in social sciences in general and in China's migration studies in particular.⁸

Following the Introduction, section 2 explores the subtheme of entrepreneurship and risk. Section 3 discusses the changing nature of Chinese society in relation to risk after the inception of the market reforms, and how the state and society have responded to this, as well as its implications for livelihood and its security. Section 4 examines the ways in which familial ties and social networks serve for migrant individuals and families as a buffer against risk and its materialised form – contingencies. The strategies employed by migrant individuals and families as social actors to deal with risks and insecurity in their daily

4 It was estimated that nearly 60 percent of the total urban labour force of 283 million, i. e. 168 million people were employed in the informal economy in 2006, of whom rural migrants constituted the main part (Hu and Zhao 2006; Huang 2009).

5 It is estimated that there are about 120 million migrants working in China's towns and cities, and if those employed in township and village enterprises (TVEs) are included there could be as many as 200 million or more migrants (Huang 2009; State Council 2006: 3–4). Behind these 200 million migrants are about 300 million members of their families in urban or rural settings, and together they account for some 40 percent of China's entire population of 1.3 billion (Zheng and Huang-Li 2007: 18). This suggests that some two fifths of Chinese people are directly or indirectly affected by migration and its related issues.

6 For example, in the *suzhi* (human quality) discourse, therewith "low or poor quality" (*suzhi di*, or *suzhi cha*) is often linked to such background and occupations as rural or blue-collar labour, including migrants and, insofar as gender is concerned, the female sex, particularly women of the 'lower class' (cf. Anagnost 2004; Jacka 2004; Murphy 2004).

7 Chase 2005: 651.

8 For a brief discussion of the predominance of the quantitative survey methods in social science research in China, see Judd (2009).

livelihood struggles are analysed throughout the paper. Finally I draw tentative conclusions based on the earlier discussions.

2 Entrepreneurship and Risk: the Ups and Downs of a Migratory Family Enterprise on the Plateau

I first met the male cousins of the Ma family in a market area near the entrance of a university in Tianjin in late 2008, where the family were running a restaurant specialising in Lanzhou-style beef noodles (*Lanzhou niurou lamian*) (Images 1–5). Lanzhou is the capital city of Gansu Province bordering the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in the north-western part of the country, and the Lanzhou-style beef noodle, initiated and developed by people of the Hui national minority in Gansu over 200 years ago, is a famous dish of local tradition and flavour in the region. However, most of the people promoting and selling the product and the related service to the seaboard cities are actually from rural Qinghai rather than Gansu, which is sometimes attributed to the greater risk-taking entrepreneurial spirit of the former (Cao Mu 2008).

Image 1: Narrator of the story: Mr Ma (马老板), the business owner (Sept. 2009)



The Ma family are among the Qinghai Hui minority people. Their native village is in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau's Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, inhabited by a number of nationalities, including Tu, Hui, Tibetan and Han, some 20 kilometres to the northeast of Xining city, the provincial capital. When I first chatted with the cousins, the older one Dragon was 22 and his younger cousin Tiger 18.⁹ Both started working after finishing the compulsory nine-year schooling and by the time when we met, Dragon had

9 For confidentiality pseudonyms are adopted for the interviewees.

Image 2: Narrators of the story: the male cousins of the Ma family (Nov. 2008)



Image 3: Ma family members: wife and mother of Dragon (Nov. 2008).



Image 4: A Ma family member: Pretty – younger sister of Dragon (Nov. 2008).



Image 5: The market street in Tianjin where the Ma family run their business (Nov. 2008).



worked for some six years and Tiger three years, and the family had run the beef noodle restaurant in Tianjin since mid-2007. Still in his early 20s, Dragon had broad work experiences: as a security guard in Xining, an assistant at a local petrol station, and an operator of a loader before starting to work in the family-run business away from home. He was also married at a rather young age of 20 in compliance with local customs, and had a daughter of three-month old. Both cousins, after starting their economic career as migrants, had travelled widely around the country in search of livelihood opportunities: from the Northwest – the Southeast – the Northeast – Northwest – Southeast again until settling in the northern city of Tianjin (Image 6).

Image 6: Operation of the Ma family business across the region and the country



Dragon's parents have two children: an older son (Dragon) and a daughter Pretty who is five years younger. With only two *mu* of land¹⁰ for the family of four, Dragon's father decided to take up non-agricultural jobs locally well before the family left their native village for the eastern coastal region: he worked as a truck driver and then a manager of a petrol station. 'He's a wage earner (*na gongzi de*)', Dragon stressed – obviously a wage earner was in a much better position than a farmer who lives on land only in terms of making a living for the family.

He didn't work for state-owned enterprises though, it was a private business. Further back, our family had big vehicles and made a lot of money. Later however, some *minor disaster* (*xiao zai xiao nan*) occurred, and as a consequence we couldn't sustain the business, so the vehicles were sold to fence away such a *minor disaster*, and my father had to start working for others (*dagong*). (Dragon's narrative, emphasis added)

At this point, Dragon tried to change the subject, but his consciously assumed casual manner in referring to the 'disaster' as *minor* aroused my curiosity. I continued this line of our conversation by asking for an example and in response, Dragon started an account of a calamitous event taking place over 12 years ago, which profoundly affected the nature and direction of the family's livelihood. Dragon's tale was later corroborated and supplemented with greater detail from his big uncle, the older brother of his father, 46-year-old Mr Ma (*Ma Laoban*) – a respectable way of address used by local small business owners neighbouring theirs at the market street in Tianjin – when we met a year later in 2009. The story goes:

The older generation of the Ma family, that is, Mr Ma's father and uncle initiated a small-scale transport business shortly after the inception of the market reforms. Still in their prime age, the brothers actively engaged in non-farm activities based on their awareness of the local conditions, and in response to the new central and local government policies to encourage rural economic diversification. Through pooling funds from several members of the extended family, they first gathered enough money to buy a tractor in 1980 as the authorities of their own and neighbouring villages attempted to lease or sell the collectively-owned assets such as agricultural machinery at local 'auctions' at the start of agricultural decollectivisation. Mr Ma's father, though having only two-three years' schooling, was a clever man, and therefore had been trained as a tractor driver (*tuolajishou*) by the village collective through attending the county government organised special training course during the collective era. With the necessary skills, pooled labour and the newly bought second-hand tractor, the family started their first micro-transport business, as Mr Ma recalled,

We brought home the tractor, but work was very exhausting. Why? Because we had to upload the tractor with heavy construction materials like stone and sand spade by spade all day long and the pay was low by today's standard: only 40–50 yuan a day. However in the early 1980s and when we were short of cash, this money was quite good. (Mr Ma's narrative)

The business developed and in a short span of three years, the family accumulated sufficient capital to purchase a second-hand truck. The decision to engage in and expand the transport business was strategic and opportune. Most of Qinghai Province is geographically located on the Plateau, remote and difficult to access by train,¹¹ and thus its economy, communities and people have heavily relied on highways for travel and transport locally and beyond. Major highway networks connecting Qinghai and its neighbouring provinces (Qinghai–Tibet, Qinghai–Xinjiang, Qinghai–Gansu, Qinghai–Yunnan) were constructed during the earlier period of the People's Republic from the 1950s to 1970s. The initiation of the market reforms injected new dynamics into the local and regional economy, and therefore helped create a high demand for local transport skills and services. The Ma family took full advantage of the emerging opportunities by starting and developing their business against such a background, and this livelihood strategy soon began to bear fruit: half a year after they bought the truck, they took a bank loan and bought a brand new vehicle. By the mid-1980s, Mr Ma, then in his early 20s, learnt to drive the big vehicle and

10 One *mu* is equivalent to 1/60 of a hectare.

11 The full-range of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway linking Xining and Lhasa through Golmud was constructed in the early 2000s and officially started operation on 1 July 2006.

the family business continued to grow: in 1989, taking a second bank loan they bought a tanker, which allowed them to switch the transport business from carrying construction materials to petrol.

This decision however involved considerable commercial and social risk as was borne out by later development of the event (the *minor disaster* referred to by Dragon above). Yet, it was a strategic move based solidly on the actors' knowledge of the local geographical and market conditions, comparative advantages, new government development policies and plans targeting the region, and the livelihood opportunities potentially arising from all this.¹² The native village of the Ma family, though located in a remote and poorer region in the north-west with low quality of land and low per capita area of land use, is nonetheless endowed with certain advantageous conditions within the region: it is located in relatively low-lying land and in proximity to the provincial capitals of Xining and Lanzhou. The area benefits from extensive transportation networks constructed in the Mao era as a result of the state targeted infrastructural investment, and during the reform period, the networks have continuously been upgraded and extended to meet the increasing need of rapid industrialisation regionally and nationally. The greater mobility of people, flow of goods and information, and the increasing openness of the region to and interactions with other parts of the country since the early 1980s, coupled with a sense of urgent need felt by individuals and families to make a living through diversifying livelihoods and expanding income channels, meant that many local people, particularly those with better education and skills, consciously and persistently sought information on and took advantage of the emerging livelihood opportunities within and beyond the region. Better livelihood chances associated with the market, however, involve risk of various kinds, and the Ma family was typical among the local rural entrepreneurs in respect of playing out their agency and taking the risks in their attempt to enhance livelihoods by maximising gains and striving for business success.

Mr Ma is the oldest of five sons. By the late 1980s his father had retired from the family business, and he and one of his younger brothers took over to manage the business together with their uncle. Over the years, the originally familial-tie-based relationships as the sole source of support and resources were gradually extended and reconfigured to entail wider social and business relations, which also include formal institutions, such as banks for loans in the process of business development and expansion. The new generation carefully nurtured personal friendships, established trust, which was often based on their ethnic and religious association with the Hui Muslim identity, and extended social networks through economic and social exchanges and interactions. All this played an important role in obtaining useful information and business contracts, in the development of their economic careers, and particularly in their decision on switching to the new branch of business: in 1989 the Ma family moved their business to Golmud (*Ge'ermu*), a city in central Qinghai 870 kilometres to the west of their native village. They set up a petrol station and engaged in long distance trade of petrol between Xinjiang, which possesses rich oil and gas reserves, and Qinghai which, strategically located at the centre of the vast Northwest, serves as the gateway to Tibet and the transport hub in the region. They also bought a house together with a courtyard as the base for their new business and family residence. Mr Ma recollected,

The central government emphasised developing the western region, and Golmud was designated as a key development zone in Qinghai Province. It is at the centre of communication that one must pass on the way to Tibet to its southwest, Guansu's Dunhuang (an ancient city and a popular tourist site along the historical Silk Road – note added) to the north and further on to Xinjiang. All the vehicles needed refuelling when they reached Golmud but there were few filling stations. When we saw this, we started to consider doing some business there. Through our business contact, we set up a petrol station and transported oil from Xinjiang to Golmud. (Mr Ma's narrative)

Golmud is a new industrial and the second largest city in Qinghai just after the provincial capital. Lying in central Qinghai and at the southern edge of the Qaidam (*Chaidamu*) Basin,¹³ it holds a strategic position on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and in its surrounding areas. It is the hub of several major road net-

12 For comprehensive discussions of the historical, economic and social development in Qinghai, including its physical and human geography, see Goodman (2004); Li et al. (2004).

13 Known as China's "treasure basin" for its abundant reserves of oil, natural gas, minerals and precious metals, and other natural resources.

works connecting Qinghai–Tibet, Qinghai–Xinjiang, Qinghai–Gansu National Highways. About 80 % of the goods and materials going into and out of Tibet are transported through Golmud (Anon., unknown date). The city has an airport, the second one in Qinghai, which was constructed in the early 1970s and started operation in late 1974. By 1984 the eastern section of the Qinghai-Tibet railway linking Xining and Golmud was completed, and between the late 1980s and early 1990s the Golmud-Kunlun Economic Development Zone was planned and then set up. All these developments injected new types of economic activities and dynamics into the city, its surrounding areas and the region, which set the stage for the Ma family to demonstrate their ingenuity and entrepreneurship.

Between the late 1980s and mid-1990s after relocation to Golmud the Ma family largely focused on running the combined petrol transport and filling station business. They did well: by 1996 the business had grown from a mini-enterprise of transporting construction materials via an old tractor and a few family hands in the early 1980s into a private transport firm having four, five tankers of the best make of the day, a cross-country jeep and a petrol station employing a number of workers, with a total asset value of over 500,000 yuan, which represented substantial wealth by the local and national standard of the time.¹⁴ The family, by the account of the third generation Dragon, had become the ‘top well-off one locally’ (*dangdi shou fu*). ‘While others were making a living locally my father and uncle had worked away from home (外出打工), made a lot of money, owned large vehicles and established own transport firm. To use a present-day terminology’, Dragon continued, ‘while others were still striving for it, my family had already attained the goal of “relative prosperity” (*yijing xiaokang le*). We were rich then.’

All this and the prospect of the family business were changed overnight when a disastrous fire took place on 15 October 1996. Mr Ma’s narrative brought us back to that moment:

In the early evening of that day, a big fire occurred ... The tankers parked in the courtyard of the residential area caught fire ... We lost everything – four tankers together with petrol, property, the business. Workers and relatives staying in that corner were injured and about 20 households in the neighbourhood were affected: some people suffered from burns and houses were damaged to varying degrees. Six people suffered from serious burns, and we immediately sent them to a local hospital for treatment. We spent some 70,000 yuan on their hospitalisation in less than a week. In the end we didn’t have any money left so once the injured became a bit better they were discharged and brought back to the native village ... My uncle and two tanker drivers were disabled by the burns ... We lost our livelihoods, and the fruit of our 16 years’ hard work vanished into thin air overnight ...

The third generation of the family, Dragon offered his understanding of the consequences of the disaster,

We were turned from the top well-off into penniless, and my father from the owner of a booming business (*laoban*) into someone working for others (*dagong*) – all happened overnight ... Fortunately nobody died, and most of those injured recovered later ... On top of the financial loss, my family had to pay the medical expenses for the treatment of the injured ... My parents had to borrow money using our family house as collateral. Most of the money was spent on the high medical cost ... It has taken many years to pay the debt and we’ve only just recovered from this. (Dragon’s narrative)

Dragon was at primary 4 or 5 studying near the native village [thus didn’t see the fire] and Tiger was 6 also staying with the grandparents. Therefore the severity of the accident, its impact on their parents and its implications for the family’s livelihood only gradually sank in as they were growing up. The devastating impact of the event on the family was much more than what could be measured by money alone to include deep psychological and emotional shocks, as Dragon described:

Everyone was shocked ... The fire engines came but the fire was too big to be brought under control. It was the biggest fire ever seen in that area and the local TV news continuously covered it for many days ...

Nowadays when we work in the kitchen and the cooker or wok with cooking oil overheats, my father would become jumpy and frightened saying how afraid he is of fire ... The burnt-down premises in Golmud are still there: nobody has dared to touch it. The land belongs to us but my parents haven’t

14 Qinghai’s rural per capita net income in 1997 was only 1,320 yuan (Anon. 1999).

gone to see it since the accident: they don't want to ... As we grew up we sometimes would like to know what on earth had happened and what were the causes, but my parents didn't want to say much. This has become a forever pain in their hearts and a shadow in their lives that they'd rather leave behind ... (Dragon's narrative)

3 Risks and Formal Institutions

This destructive event seemingly specific to the Ma family in effect points to a wider and general issue, namely the real danger of risk and contingency faced by people in their daily lives and the threat such risk posed for livelihood. This raises the question of how to deal with such risk in a society witnessing rapid and drastic change in the structure and organisation of production, consumption and other activities. Before the reforms, China could be deemed a 'low risk society' in both economic and societal senses. State tight control over the economy and society, public and collective ownership of the means of production, and the non-existence of a free market meant that the state and collectives were the main bearers of most risks involved in economic and social activities, and therefore for ordinary citizens there was a sense of certainty and security in most aspects of their lives, including in particular employment and social security. The rapid penetration of the market forces into all aspects of everyday life following the initiation of the reforms combined with many structural changes in the economy and society has fundamentally altered such conditions. While the reform has brought greater livelihood opportunities and choice, as evidenced in the Ma family's entrepreneurial success, this has gone hand in hand with increasing uncertainties, risks and livelihood insecurity evidenced as well in the havoc that wrought upon the family business and livelihood.

While societal change has happened at an unprecedented pace, the development and establishment of appropriate institutions for managing change and the risks accompanying it have been slow and, in most cases, lagged behind. This is reflected in Dragon's account of buying insurance against risk and contingencies for the family business:

We living in the remote area couldn't get much information (*xinxi bise*). Even at present day people over there are much less informed as people here. Back in 1996 there were even no mobile phone services in our native village ... Due to lack of information, my parents were unclear about insurance. People didn't understand, they didn't have much knowledge about it ... Perhaps they didn't insure, or only insured part of it and the insurance they bought didn't cover accidents like this. The insurance companies may not have come to our area to sell and explain their products. Because of this we had to bear the huge loss ourselves. (Dragon's narrative)

Commercial insurance, such as property and automobile insurances, as a risk transfer or risk mediating instrument developed slowly in China even in large coastal cities until the late 1990s. This was further compounded by the delayed government legislation. For instance, China only promulgated its first Insurance Law in 1995 and the regulation on compulsory automobile insurance was only introduced in July 2006. Implementation, enforcement and compliance with the laws and regulations were uneven across the country with remote regions lagging far behind in this respect. There was also a low sense of risk formed in people who grew up in a relatively secure environment before the market reforms together with a mentality or belief that the state would still ultimately act as an underwriter of risks for private businesses.¹⁵ Furthermore, there was a low awareness and unavailability of insurance information and services in remote and peripheral regions, as indicated in Dragon's remarks above. All this rendered the Ma family vulnerable to the damage wrought by the actualised risks, namely the devastating accident.

Social security schemes, especially health insurance which functions as a risk-pooling social safety net covering contingencies, such as serious illness-induced healthcare expenses, and would help rural people absorb external shocks, alleviate harm caused and protect livelihood through strengthening resilience, collapsed in the wake of agricultural decollectivisation as the provider, the rural commune, was

¹⁵ This was evidenced during my interviews with Mr Ma, who, while recollecting his experiences in relation to the 1996 disaster, said for a few times, 'the government didn't help us'.

dismantled in the early 1980s. In the years that follow healthcare services at all levels underwent de facto privatisation and functioned much like for-profit entities as the central government considerably reduced its financial commitment to supporting healthcare in a process of fiscal decentralisation and overall commoditisation of post-reform Chinese society (Duckett 2010). While hospitals and medical personnel were motivated to charge increasingly high user fees for medicine and healthcare services in the wider context of the health system reforms, a growing number of people, in particular rural residents, became uncovered by any health insurance, generating new health risks and vulnerabilities. This was evidenced in the sharp rise of the proportion of people uncovered by health insurance in rural China: from 10% in the late 1970s to 87% in 1993 and 84% in 1998 (Development Research Centre of the State Council, 2005), combined with hiking healthcare cost: per capita annual expenses on personal health services rocketed from 11 yuan in 1978 to 442 yuan in 2002 – an increase of 4,400 percent (Blumenthal and Hsiao 2005: 1167). Serious attempts to rebuild the rural public health system in the form of a New Co-operative Medical Scheme (NCMS) was not initiated nationally or in the native village of the Ma family until quite recently: the NCMS was piloted in parts of rural China in 2002 followed by gradual nationwide implementation in 2008. As a result there was no formal institutional support available for the Ma family back in 1996 in coping with the calamity as materialised commercial and social risks.

4 Social Networks as an Informal Social Safety Net

The huge financial loss and the injuries of family members, employees and neighbours together with the high medical expenses and considerable debt incurred led to the bankruptcy of the Ma family's transport business, causing a serious setback in the entrepreneurial ambitions and economic careers of the middle generation Ma brothers. In the absence of any formal institutional support or protection, the Ma brothers resorted to the reserves of their original social networks for emotional and material support – the familial ties and personal friendships that they had possessed and maintained through their close 'backward linkages': at the end of 1996 the Ma family withdrew from Golmud to their native village. For the Ma brothers the home village played multiple roles in providing basic security and an informal social safety net: as a fall-back base equipped with tangible resources, where their small pieces of land, housing, and other personal or familial assets were 'stored' allowing for meeting the immediate subsistence needs of their families and themselves; and as a source of intangible resources providing for them comfort and warmth, meeting their practical, psychological and emotional needs, and giving them a sense of attachment, relatedness, roots, identity and belonging.

After relocation to Golmud in the late 1980s, the Ma brothers had maintained close links with their native village through regular visits, making significant contributions to the support of their retired parents, and investing substantially in housing, other facilities and personal relationships with members and leaders of the local Hui community, with which they were associated religiously and ethnically. In other words, the contractual relationship and socio-economic exchange, instead of being terminated or lying dormant during their physical absence, were actively and carefully maintained through constant social interactions, and hence, the validity, as well as the associated rights and obligations of their membership of the extended family, the Hui and village communities at the origin. For example, in return to their financial support, the elderly took care of the school-age children, including Dragon and Tiger, farmed the land, looked after the houses and other familial assets for the Ma brothers, kept them informed of new developments in the village and its vicinity, and helped foster the links with the village elite on their behalf. According to the younger generation – Dragon and Tiger, their parents each own a large courtyard comprising 7–8 rooms built in a traditional style. Spacious well-built houses are expected for members of the local elite, with which the Ma family became identified alongside their business success, and serve as a status symbol. When they suffered from the accident and the subsequent career setback, the reserve tangible and intangible resources, including the physical, economic, social and symbolic capital, were all mobilised to mediate the devastating impact and alleviate the external shocks. As another example, the Ma family houses, in addition to their practical functions, were used as collateral for loans required for repaying the debts (see Dragon's narrative above) and future risk-taking, migratory entrepreneurial endeavours as demonstrated in the later development of the Ma family enterprise (see the beginning of the article).

The following three years between 1997 and 2000 were a period of great economic uncertainty and a real test for the Ma family in terms of their adaptability, endurance, resilience and will. Initially Mr Ma behaved like a defeated man: he stayed at home doing little but feeling sorry for himself at the broken business and the irrevocable loss. After a year's rest, the sheer need of survival combined with an undying dream of becoming rich or an aspiration for making a better life for his family and himself drove him onto another entrepreneurial endeavour: in 1998 he organised a team of more than a dozen villagers and set off on a gold-digging venture in the Altai (*Aertai*) Mountains in northern Xinjiang bordering Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia thousands of kilometres to the northwest of his native village. The start capital of some 10,000 yuan was gathered through pooling borrowed funds, though this time from a larger pool of his expanded locale-based networks of relatives and friends. The decision to take the risk was like before firmly rooted in the actors' indigenous knowledge of the rich natural resources reserves in the vast Northwest region: the Altai is known as the 'Mountains of Gold' (meanings in Mongolian and Turkic languages). However Mr Ma was unlucky this time: While there was gold in the Altai Mountains, his team of migrant workers could not bear the climate in northern Xinjiang, which was very different from what they were used to in Qinghai. The strong moral obligations intrinsically entailed in the spatially- and religiously-based close kinship ties and social relations rendered Mr Ma unable to continue, as he related:

My team set off to exploit gold. While we indeed found gold, the weather in the Altai Mountains was too hot for the migrant workers (民工) to continue digging. In the meantime, I had to pay their wages. In the end I couldn't afford the operation any more, and decided to withdraw. This venture cost me the pooled funds of some 10,000 yuan and when I got back home in a year's time, I only had three yuan left in my pocket. (Mr Ma's narrative)

In 1999 after the unsuccessful gold-digging attempt, Mr Ma relied on his driving skill for livelihood, which was still in high demand, earning about 1,500 yuan per month (just below 20,000 yuan per year). While his wage as a driver was high compared with the regional or even national average of the time,¹⁶ Mr Ma's concerns showed clear longer-term and 'risk-conscious' 'orientations' as indicated below:

I have a family who must eat, drink, shit, and pee (吃喝拉撒 – meeting the basic subsistence need – note added). We must also have some savings for rainy days, e.g. unexpected events or contingencies (三长两短) like illness. This wage wouldn't do. So in 2000, I took the family to Shanghai and started a restaurant business. (Mr Ma's narrative)

This move, while apparently driven by sheer survival needs was, in effect, carefully thought and planned based on the key actors' knowledge about available resources, reflections on and learning from the earlier setbacks and lessons, an appraisal of uncertainties and risks involved in inter-regional migration as measured against potential opportunities and gains, and longer-term considerations of security and livelihoods to include the middle generation's old-age support and the coming-of-age younger generation's employment and earning prospects. According to Mr Ma, by 2000, 60–70 percent of his *laoxiang* friends, or the place-based, religion- and ethnic-associated personal relations and kinship ties, including two of his other younger brothers, had gone outside of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau to run Lanzhou beef noodle restaurants in different parts of the country, and one of his younger brothers did business in Shanghai. He also reckoned that the risk involved in running a catering business in large cities could be considered 'zero' (*ling fengxian*) compared with that involved in the previous petrol transport and trade business. Balancing all this combined with a close familial linkage serving as an initial stop-over support and point of contact, and again pooling of borrowed funds as initial capital, Mr Ma, together with his business partner brother, went to Shanghai to embark on a completely new business– the Lanzhou beef noodle restaurant.

All this happened within a larger context of drastic economic restructuring, particularly in the state-owned enterprise sector, and rapid social change and transformations. By the early 2000s, Chinese eco-

¹⁶ In 1999 China's average per capita annual disposable income of urban residents was 5,888 yuan and the rural counterpart was 2,210 yuan (Yang and Xin 2002: 145), while the rural counterpart for Qinghai Province was less than 1,490 yuan in 2000 (Zhu 2002: 292).

nomy evolved out of the public ownership-dominated structure into a much diverse one with the public, private and mixed ownership contributing to about one third of the national GDP respectively (Lu 2002: 1). The ownership pluralisation went hand in hand with the continued growth of an urban informal economy, which constituted much of the rapidly expanding private sector, where most rural-urban migrants found themselves engaged in.¹⁷ Systemic reforms of the formal institutional mechanism for controlling population mobility – the household registration system – were piloted, giving rise to easier access to urban market and facilities by rural-urban migrants. In addition, an urban housing market gradually emerged in the process of the housing reforms, providing the possibility of residential rental housing for people in cities, particularly for non-locals and rural migrants with families. In the meantime, the extant regional development gaps continued to widen manifested partly in the increasing income discrepancies between both urban and rural areas and inland and coastal regions.¹⁸ Information and knowledge of such wider structural change and macro-processes, and the associated new livelihood possibilities and opportunities were first transferred through the actors' close and extended social networks; and then selected and processed at the receiving end by the Ma brothers as social agents to inform migration decision making: this time it involved inter-provincial, inter-regional, cross-country movement towards the eastern coastal metropolis, where this tenacious Hui family would stage a new phase of the 'play' in respect of their migratory entrepreneurial experiences and endeavours.

5 Conclusion

This paper applies an actor-oriented perspective and a risk concept to the study of rural-urban migration in China by employing qualitative longitudinal and narrative research methods. It analyses a particular case – the Ma family of the Hui national minority from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in the remote region of the country. Through closely and carefully documenting, delineating and analysing the narratives of the members of the family across two generations, it details a livelihood trajectory which is full of life's vicissitudes, unveiling a process which involves sustained generational and translocal efforts to seek alternative livelihoods (to farming), to develop, expand and deploy a wide range of social resources in dealing with hardships, difficulties, uncertainties, risks and contingencies, as well as with other actors, social relations and institutions, in an attempt to meet the basic material, socio-cultural and emotional needs, as well as to create a better life for its members in rural and urban settings. The paper argues that human agency as manifest in the entrepreneurship, ingenuity, diligence and perseverance of the Ma family, despite the differences and variations in individuals' life courses and experiences, echo, to some extent, the spirit, aspirations and struggles of the large migrant population. It is this industrious and enterprising group who have, individually and collectively, helped bring about China's economic and social transformations over the past three decades, and as such recreate its urban and rural development landscapes. It is in this sense that we can still claim today that 'people are the real drivers in the making of history' (Mao 1945 [1991: 1031]).

The fresh risk concept employed in the analysis directs our attention to the changing nature of risk, vulnerability and insecurity in Chinese society during market transition, revealing patterns and trends of the increasing unequal exposure to and distribution of risk among different social groups. The paper argues that while China has increasingly turned from a 'low risk' to a 'high risk society' in all the term's conceivable senses, and its consequences have been experienced and borne by millions of ordinary people, as exemplified in the story of the Ma family, policy interventions and institutional responses to the emerging situation in relation to risk are far from sufficient. While the carefully nurtured and expanded informal social networks, and negotiated and maintained membership rights in local communities served as

17 See Note 4.

18 See Note 9 for data on urban-rural income inequalities for 1999. In 2000 the urban-rural income gap further grew: with an urban annual per capita income of 6,316 yuan versus its rural counterpart of 2,253 yuan, the urban-rural ratio (with rural as 1) rose to 2.80 as against the mid-1980s' figure of 1.8 : 1 (Wang 2004). Regional income gaps manifest in the per capita income ratios between the western and eastern regions: between 1980 and 2002 this ratio rose from 1 : 1.92 (with western region as 1) to 1 : 2.59, respectively (Wang 2004), suggesting that the largest disparities have occurred between the coastal and inland areas, which to a large extent also overlaps with urban-rural inequalities.

intangible social resources for the Ma family to cushion and mitigate the impact of the disastrous accident as materialised commercial and social risks, to strengthen resilience and gradually recover from the external shocks, such individual efforts and strategies only work best in conditions where the state takes effective actions in the form of public and social policy making to protect the livelihoods and rights of all its citizens in transcendence of the existing institutional arrangements and barriers based on the urban and/or rural differentiations or hukou status. Improving, expanding and enhancing formal social protection mechanisms and their accessibility by socially disadvantaged groups – the rural-urban migrants in this case – are therefore vital for mobile livelihoods to be sustainable and secure, and ultimately flourishing, which, as demonstrated in this paper, have and will continue to affect both urban and rural families and communities, and for reaching the officially declared goal of constructing a fair and just society of social harmony and common prosperity.

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