Navigating Multi-locality in Rural-urban and Return Migration: A Study of Young Migrant Mothers’ Experience in Beijing

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By

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Summary

During the past decades, China has witnessed one of the biggest waves of rural-urban migration in human history. Despite the ever-rising prevalence, theorisation of rural-urban migration still largely lacks specification and contextualisation. Traditionally, studies of rural-urban migration in China tend to focus on institutional barriers shaping or even defining the migration experience, and explaining how and why rural migrants are struggling at the bottom of urban society. Female migrants are especially marginalised, often portrayed either as victims with inherent vulnerability or as passive associate migrants in family migration projects. Studies about migrant mothers are even more scant, mostly referring to mothers who migrate and leave their child behind. The few studies that look at the migrant mothers who raise the child in the destination city tend to portray them as homogeneous and lacking agency. Most explore female rural-urban migration from a 'top-down' perspective, and a focus on experience is largely missing. Moreover, most existing migration theories are developed by the western scholars based on research of international migration in western contexts, and therefore may not be able to provide a contextualised understanding of rural-urban migration in China, which is deeply rooted in the specific structural and cultural environment.

This study starts with asking one big question, ‘What is it like to be a young migrant mother in Beijing?’ This study aims to obtain a more specified and contextualised understanding of female rural-urban migration via the experience of young migrant mothers in Beijing, China. After widely reviewing the literature, it is clear that some of the existing knowledge can explain some aspects of the experiences of the migrant mothers, but there is no single framework that is comprehensive enough to get the full picture of what it is like to be a rural migrant mother in the city as this study set out to do. Therefore, I chose to adopt the Constructivist Grounded Theory methods that are interactive, abductive and interpretive to develop a substantive theory that is grounded in the empirical data to expand our knowledge of female rural-urban migration as a lived human experience that is embedded in the wider structural environment as well as the radius of everyday life. With this aim, I recruited twelve women from one migrant village in peripheral Beijing to participate in narrative interviews, including follow-up interviews with seven of the twelve women one year after the first interview.

Data analysis in this study follows the standard process of coding, memoing, theoretical sampling and conceptualising as proposed by Constructivist Grounded Theory methods. Based on the analysis of the empirical data and informed by transnationalism theories and de Haas’ Aspirations-Capabilities Framework, I develop a grounded theory ‘multi-locality’. The multi-locality framework in this study is made up of four categories, multi-local capabilities, multi-
local aspirations, multi-local family network and multi-local identities. I argue that multi-locality should be understood as a contextual, relational and intersectional process that is actualised and sustained via the multi-directional flows of capabilities and aspirations and directed by multi-local familial relationships while creating a multi-local identity.

Firstly, the findings suggest that the migrant women’s migratory agency can be understood as a form of adaptive agency that is actualised by the mobilisation of capabilities and aspirations. Being aware of the institutional barriers, the migrant women in this study strategically distribute their capabilities to multiple localities, including Beijing, the woman’s home village, their husband’s home village and the future destination for return migration, in order to fulfil their aspirations to improve their current life situations as well as their future prospects. Secondly, the findings suggest that the migrant women’s capabilities and aspirations to migrate are closely related to their position in the family, not only the nuclear family, but also the expanded family network, which is specific to Chinese culture. This emphasises how migration can be a relational strategy not only to fulfil personal aspirations, but also relational aspirations for the family, most importantly for the child. Thirdly, the findings suggest that the migrant women develop a multi-local identity that is constantly being constructed and reconstructed when they position themselves in different contexts and different localities, via multi-local positionality. This shows how the migrant women’s gender identity is fluid and flexible, and it is constructed subjectively, relationally and intersectionally as they position themselves in different contexts in different localities.

This study suggests that multi-locality can be understood as the lived experience of migration itself, which connects multiple people, multiple localities and multiple timelines, and the migrant women are able to perform their constraint but real agency to adapt to the opportunities and difficulties in multiple contexts and strive for the life that they aspire to live for now and for the future. While conventionally, migration is understood as an experience of negotiating the decision to move or stay, this study expands our understanding of migration and invites us to rethink mobility as an experience of navigating multi-locality and to see migrants as active players in their own life. This study also brings the Chinese context into the theoretical conversation by incorporating the Chinese construct of family, agency and gender in the process of data analysis and theory development to unravel how agency, family and gender interact and intersect in the migration process and further complicate the migration experience. This study proposes a new perspective for understanding female rural-urban migration and points out potential directions for future research, which will ultimately advance the theorisation of rural-urban migration.
Acknowledgement

First of all, I am deeply grateful to my supervisors, Prof Robbie Gilligan and Dr Catherine Conlon for their support and guidance at every stage of my PhD study. I feel very lucky to have them as my supervisors. There were times when I struggled a bit and had no idea what I was doing, but they continued to communicate with me and inspire me. Sometimes, I even wondered whether I was a bit ‘spoiled’. When some of my other friends complained about their PhD studies, they would often say, ‘‘I’m so jealous. You have the best supervisors in the world!’’

I also want to express my sincere gratitude to all the women who participated in my research and all the mothers, children, and staff members at the community centre who assisted with the research process. Honestly, I was very nervous before I started data collection, but they all made me feel so welcomed. I would never have been able to achieve this without them.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Rural-urban migration in contemporary China

1.1.1 History, background and context

China has a long history of rural-urban migration, which can be traced back to the early twentieth century when the idea of industrialisation, modernisation and urbanisation was introduced to China by flows of foreign investments (Chi, 2010; Wu, 2016). Early rural-urban migration was largely limited to the coastal areas and it was not until the 1980s when rural-urban migration became a ‘national phenomenon’. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the government initiated a series of reforms both in the cities and in the villages, which triggered ‘Mingongchao (the wave of rural-urban migration)’ across the country. In urban sectors, the Reform and Opening up Policy signalled China’s economic transition from planned economy to market economy (Wu and Zhang, 2016). Meanwhile, in rural China, a series of agricultural and land reforms created a significant rural labour surplus (Ngai, 2016). Before the reforms, due to institutional barriers, the vast majority of the rural population remained immobile and were tied to their rural village without the right to move to the city. In response to the increasing labour demand for urban development and the problem of rural unemployment, the government gradually relaxed restrictions, and rural people were allowed and even encouraged to move to the city to seek employment (Zhu, 2008; Wu, 2016; Wissink, Hazelzet and Breitung, 2016; Deng, 2004; Li, 2019). Some even argue that in the early stage, rural-urban migration was utilised by the central government as a channel for voluntary labour transfer (Li, 2019).

As urbanisation in China continues to accelerate and re-shape the landscape in cities as well as villages, one’s decision to migrate from the village to the city began to be portrayed as not merely a passive response to wider changes in society, but also an active action to change one’s personal life worlds (Chi, 2010; Layalka, 2012). China was traditionally an agrarian country and the household used to be the basic unit of production and consumption (Wang and Zhou, 2016). Because of the economic transition from planned economy to market economy, farming is no longer able to generate enough income to sustain a good life in a modern consumer society, especially in terms of education and marriage (Wang and Zhang, 2016). This asks the rural family to seek income beyond the rural village. As many have noticed, out-migration is so prevalent that farming has become the secondary occupation of Chinese peasants while migration has become the main source of income (Wang and Zhou, 2016; Fan and Chen, 2016). Arguably, rural-urban migration has become ‘a way of life’ in rural China (Wang and Zhou, 2016; Fan and Chen, 2016).
Since the 1980s, China has witnessed the ‘largest tide of migration in human history’ (Wu, 2016). Based on the national census, there are approximately 300 million rural migrants in China (NBS, 2022). Some say that China has become a ‘country of migrants’ (Li and Wu, 2016). This means that not only are a great number of rural migrants constantly moving from villages to cities, but they also play an active role in all aspects of China’s development. They are regarded as the engine of urbanisation and economic transition (Layalka, 2012; Cao, 2019; Li, 2019), and as the special workforce that helps China secure the status of the ‘the world factory’ in the global market (Ngai, 2016). Like other countries around the world, rural-urban migration in China is an integral part of socio-economic development (Zelinsky, 1971; Rhoda, 1983; Long, 2005), but it is more complicated than an economic activity. While contemporary rural-urban migration in China is implicated in the process of urbanisation and modernisation, it is also deeply shaped by rural-urban dualism in Chinese society due to the Hukou system.

1.1.2 The Hukou system and the rural-urban dualism

A particular initiative was introduced by the Chinese government in the 1950s to regulate people’s movement. This initiative, known as Hukou in Chinese, is central to understanding the context for internal migration in China. According to the Hukou system, every Chinese person is categorised as either a rural or an urban citizen, which they inherit from their parents. A person’s entitlements to all social benefits, welfare and public services is closely related to their rural/urban status. As Nie (2014b) has argued, the Hukou system separates the ‘person’ from their entitlement. This means that rural people can physically migrate to the city, but their entitlement is still tied to their rural hometown. Despite their active participation in urban life, rural migrants are still categorised as ‘rural’. In the Chinese context then due to the Hukou system, whether one is ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ is not associated with one’s location of residence but rather fixed by one’s place of origin. ‘Rural’ is no longer a mere adjective, but a ‘legal designation assigned at birth that makes it nearly impossible for all but the most educated or successful to fully integrate into urban life’ (Layalka, 2012, p.3).

Since the 1980s, although there has been some relaxation in terms of people’s physical movement, people’s social mobility is still largely constrained (Li, 2019). In China, one’s Hukou status is a political and administrative invention that in turn becomes a form of ‘symbolic capital’ (Zhu and Wang, 2013, p.57) which further exacerbates the rural-urban divide (Andersson, 2016). Historically, urban Hukou is considered superior to rural Hukou. People who hold rural Hukou status are considered secondary citizens with lower ‘Suzhi (quality)’ (Xu, 2007). In Chinese, Suzhi can be understood as ‘human capital’, referring to one’s height, look, health conditions, skills and educational level (Zhang, 2014; Chi, 2010). Rural people are perceived as having insufficient human capital to compete with urban people in the labour market (Yang, 2016). Upon arrival in the city, most migrant workers pick up menial jobs
with minimum wages and long working hours without equal welfare benefits as urban employees (Zhu, 2008; Layalka, 2012).

In Chinese, rural migrants are usually referred to as ‘Nongmingong (rural labourers or peasant workers)’. The name Nongmingong itself implies that rural migrants are only treated as ‘cheap labour’ rather than ‘actual people’. As some have pointed out, for the rural migrants in the city, their labour is desired, but their existence is unwelcomed (Yu and Pan, 2008). Despite their contribution to the urban economy, they are largely excluded from mainstream urban society. They are seen as threats to social stability, public security and economic sustainability (Layalka, 2012; Du, et. al, 2012; Wissink, Hazelzet and Breitung, 2016). As Yang and Tang (2017) have argued, rural-urban migration creates a form of ‘physical segregation’ where rural migrants are not able to enjoy the fruits of their own labour.

1.1.3 The floating population

Many see the secondary status of rural migrants as the most explicit manifestation of inequality in Chinese society (Wu, 2016; Lyalka, 2012) as they are victims of the unbalanced and incomplete economic development in China (Wu and Zhang, 2016). Yet, it is important to point out that the Hukou system actually creates two sets of inequalities. Besides the rural-urban dualism that is discussed above, it also produces a local-nonlocal divide. According to the Hukou regulations, every Chinese citizen is registered as a citizen in their ‘place of origin’ and all their welfare entitlements are tied to this place of origin. In this sense, broadly speaking, all people who are residing in a place that is not their place of origin can be categorised as ‘migrants’.

In Chinese, migrants are often referred to as ‘the floating population’ because they are seen as being ‘uprooted’ from their place of origin. Rural migrants are particularly disadvantaged because they are caught between two sets of inequalities being both non-local and rural. Their rural origin vests them as having inferior status in the labour market while not being a local positions them as in a permanent status of ‘transition’ (Wei and Yuan, 2015) and ‘ambivalence’ (Layalka, 2012; Wei and He, 2016), making life in the city doubly precarious. They are ‘floating’ in the city now and they will never be capable of settling in the city in the future either. They are the ‘‘outsiders temporarily residing in the nation’s cities’’ (Layalka, 2012, p3).

As Xu (2007) has argued, rural migrants are just ‘work migrants’ who are only in the city temporarily before they return to the home village and settle down. Their status of ‘floating’ is portrayed as ‘alienated urbanism’ or ‘transient urbanism’ by Wu and Zhang (2016) in reference to the precarious living situation of rural migrants in the city, especially for those living in settlements of migrants known as ‘urban villages’. Another dimension of precarity arises from
rural-urban migration being foremost an economic activity and therefore largely subject to structural changes in the urban labour market (Guo and Zhou, 2013). As an example, the 2008 global economic crisis had a great impact on rural-urban migration in China, and a large number of migrants were forced to return home as a result of loss of livelihood (Chen and Xu, 2015; Cao, 2019). Thus, as many have argued, rural-urban migration in China should be understood as an ongoing process of ‘migration-return-re-migration-re-return…’ (Zhao and Lu, 2014; Chen and Xu, 2015; Wang, 2017).

1.2 Family, filial piety and the ‘culture’ of return migration

As early as in 1885 when Ravenstein published The Laws of Migration, he pointed out that with every stream of migration, there would be a counter-stream. This counter-stream migration is later referred to as reverse migration or return migration. In the Chinese context, it is almost taken for granted that rural migrants will eventually return home (Yu at el., 2014) driven as set out above by devalued human capital and Hukou restrictions, meaning rural migrants are not capable of permanently settling in the city (Chen and Xu, 2015; Cao, 2019). Yet, beyond the ‘practical level’, rural migrants' aspiration to return home is also deeply rooted in the Confucian constructs of family and filial piety.

China was traditionally an agrarian society where people’s livelihood was tied to their land, and since land was immobile, the people who relied on their land were also largely immobile (Xu, 2008, 2018; Cao, 2014). For a long time throughout history, migration was discouraged because of the belief that ‘Fumuzai, Buyuanyou (one should not travel far when their parents are still alive)’. Traditionally, migration is seen as a behaviour that is against the value of filial piety. As Xu (2018) has pointed out, Chinese society is built upon relationships which are sustained by reciprocal responsibilities and obligations. Even if people have more freedom to migrate in modern times, due to the Hukou restrictions and high living costs in the city, rural migrants find it hard to bring their parents to the city. Therefore, many feel the need to return home when their parents get old to fulfil their filial obligations to repay their parents’ love (Zhou and Xu, 2010; Chen and Xu, 2015; Wu, 2018). Moreover, as Fei (2018b) has pointed out, the foundation of Chinese society is built on ‘soil’, which values the culture of ‘root’. Even when people migrate, they are expected to return because of the traditional value of ‘Luoyeguigen (the fallen leaf should return to the root)’ (Fei, 2018a; Zhu and Wang, 2013; Cao, 2014). While many see migration as an ‘uprooting’ process, in the Chinese context, no matter how far one travels, they are always ‘rooted’ in their hometown (Chi, 2014). Some even argue that rural migrants only migrate to the city because they know that they will be able to return home at some stage in the future (He, 2020). In a sense, in China, rural-urban migration is the ‘experience’ whereas return migration is the ‘meaning’ (Lin, 2019).
However, as China transitions from a traditional society to a modern society and as China’s urbanisation and modernisation proceeds, the demographics and characteristics of the migrant population are also shifting (Wu and Zhang, 2016). Xiang (2020) points out how one characteristic of modernisation in China is that rural migrants no longer return home. They are aware that they are not capable of settling in the city, but they do not want to return to their rural villages either. They aspire to settle in towns, county-level cities or smaller cities in their home region (Fan and Chen, 2016; He, 2020; Xiang, 2020). They are rejecting agrarianism for urbanity. These young generation migrants are called the ‘new-generation’ migrants in Chinese. They have grown up in the era when China experienced unprecedented urbanisation and modernisation. Some even argue that these young migrants are already ‘semi-urbanised’ before they migrate to the city (Yang and Tang, 2017). As He (2020) has said, young migrants in China no longer feel ‘homesick’, but instead, they feel ‘citysick’.

1.3 New-generation migrants and the feminisation of rural-urban migration

1.3.1 New-type urbanisation and new-generation migrants

Since the 1980s, China’s urbanisation has proceeded at an unprecedented rate. As China became a member of the WTO and joined the global market in 2001, urbanisation further accelerated (Wu and Zhang, 2014; Ngai, 2016). In 2000, the rate of urbanisation in China was 36% and in 2019, the number reached 60%, with an increase of over 1% each year (He, 2020). As some western scholars have noted, urbanisation is developing so rapidly in China that it only takes China fifty years to achieve what most western countries achieved in two hundred years (Layalka, 2012). In 2014, China initiated ‘new-type’ urbanisation. As the Government Report has laid out, one of the goals of the new-type urbanisation is the ‘urbanisation of the rural people’. It not only includes relocating rural people to towns and cities, but it also focuses on equipping the rural people with urban knowledge via education and knowledge dissemination.

Historically, there have been two major waves of rural-to-urban migration in China (Zeng, 2014; NBS, 2011; Meng & He, 2017).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-generation migrants</th>
<th>New-generation migrants</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Born between 1960 and 1980</td>
<td>- Born after 1980</td>
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<tr>
<td>- 26.9% are women</td>
<td>- 40.8% are women.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- 8.8 years of education on average.</td>
<td>- 9.8 years of education on average.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Usually after marriage.</td>
<td>- First migration in late teens or early 20s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- To support the family.</td>
<td>- To pursue personal development.</td>
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Table 1. First generation migrants and new-generation migrants
Young migrants born after the year of 1980 are often referred to as the ‘new-generation’ migrants in China and they make up over 50% of the entire rural migrant population (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People’s Republic of China, 2019). This term was first coined by Wang Chunguang in 2010, and since then, it has been widely used by Chinese scholars (Zeng, 2014; Fan and Chen, 2016; Meng and He, 2017; Yu and Pan, 2018; Wu, 2018). The categorisation may seem a bit out-dated now since it overlooks the heterogeneity of the migrant population, but it highlights how one’s experience is embedded in the changing structure of the wider society. For example, many of the younger generation migrants grow up as left-behind children as their parents migrate to the city, and therefore many aspire to migrate from an early age (Fan and Chen, 2016), and do so immediately after leaving school (Zeng, 2014; Meng and He, 2017; Wu, 2018). Due to rapid development of urbanisation, many young people in the countryside see migration more as a path to personal development, rather than a way to purely realise economic values (Fan and Chen, 2016). Their motive for migration shifts from ‘economic migration’ to ‘economic+lifestyle migration’ (Yu and Pan, 2018, p.157). Compared with the first-generation migrants, new generation migrants are more educated and have higher expectations for migration. They are more selective about their jobs, more resistant to bad working conditions and unequal treatment, and more inclined to integrate into urban society (Ngai, 2014; Fan and Chen, 2016).

However, as many have pointed out, even if new generation migrants are more autonomous and individualistic compared to the older generation (Zhao and Ren, 2014; Fan and Chen 2016), in reality, they are faced with more ambivalence (Yang, 2014; Wei and Yuan, 2015; Wu, 2018). Wu (2018) argues that the seemingly agentic actions of younger migrants are actually a form of ‘anticipated compromise’. They take on whatever opportunities that are available to them and then adjust their aspirations. Even if many young people migrate with the goal to pursue self-improvement, in reality, upward mobility is barely possible to achieve.

1.3.2 Dagongmei

Another characteristic of new generation migrants is how the traditional male-dominated migration pattern is subverted (Li, Shen and Li, 2020) with many more women now migrating at the same life stage as their male counterparts. Differing from older women who migrate after childbirth to provide financial support to their families, the contemporary pattern is for unmarried female migrants to migrate for ‘self-development’ as opposed to ‘self-sacrifice’ (Peng, 2018). Their out-migration can be seen as a ‘modernity project’, which elevates their status from being an ‘invisible labourer’ to being an ‘urban wage earner’ (Zhang, 2014, p.21). Rural-urban migration for women has been associated with delayed marriage, greater freedom, augmented income, and a new path to more opportunities (Zhu, 2008; Zhao and Ren, 2014; Seeberg and Luo, 2017; Qiu, 2017; Wu, 2018).
In Chinese, young female migrants are often called Dagongmei. Dagong means ‘working for the boss’ which refers to a capitalist commodity exchange relation to trade labour for income (Yu and Pan, 2008). Mei means ‘younger sister’. Dagongmei specifically refers to the young and unmarried rural migrant women who work in the service sectors and factories (Wei and Yuan, 2015; Yu and Pan, 2008). While Dagongmei can be simply understood as ‘country girls working in the city’, a deeper look suggests that it is actually a social category that is constructed based on intersecting factors, including gender, age, marital status, rural/urban status as well as migrant status (Wei and Yuan, 2015). Some even argue that the category of Dagongmei is artificially invented by the urban economy to justify and reinforce the exploitation of female migrants (Yu and Pan, 2008).

On the one hand, being young and being female is the capital that the urban labour market favours, but on the other hand, young female migrants are excluded from mainstream urban society because of their inherently inferior status. They are caught between the contradictory feelings of being economically accepted and socially rejected (Deng, 2004). Even if, in general, younger migrant women have received more education than the older migrant women, they still are deemed to have less human capital in relation to the urban population. Therefore, upon arrival in the cities, they can only find jobs in factories, restaurants or in other low-skilled service sectors (Zhong and Arnett, 2014; Goodburn, 2015; Seeberg and Luo, 2017). Although young women may see migration as a path to development and betterment, many find themselves trapped in a new cycle of deprivation.

1.4 Marriage, motherhood and family migration

As some have pointed out, in China, female migrants are not inherently different from male migrants, since they both work at the bottom of the urban labour market, but what makes female migrants’ experiences different from men’s is how their gendered life course intersects with migration (Ma, 2009; Qiu, 2017; Wu, 2018). As Liu (2014) has argued, for young migrant women, migration does not necessarily bring them more opportunities and it may not be the transitioning point in life because most of them still have to return home for marriage. It seems that as soon as they are married, they will return home and settle down, and never migrate again. Following marriage, female migration takes the form of following the husband and the child to fulfil their family obligations.

Many scholars have noticed the trend of ‘familisation’ of rural-urban migration in China (Song and Li, 2012; Wang and Zhou, 2016; Liang, Dai and Ma, 2017). While the world is seeing more and more transnational and translocal families, China is witnessing a different trend. In the past, rural migrants were mostly likely to be men who migrated as a lone migrant and left their wife and child behind in the rural village (Chen, Chen and Pu, 2016), whereas in recent decades,
rural migrants tend to migrate as a ‘family’. At first, it is the wife who follows the husband to the city, and as the migrant couple settle down, they bring the child to the city, too. It is argued that the ‘familisation’ of rural-urban migration is closely related to women’s participation in migration (Liang, Dai and Ma, 2017). As some have argued, compared with the older generation, young female migrants nowadays are more likely to migrate with their husband and child after they get married (Fan and Chen, 2016). Some may argue that women are just carried along as associate migrants for the best interest of the family. Yet, many studies have suggested that migrant women who are married also actively participate in paid labour after they migrate to the city (Liang, Dai and Ma, 2017; Chen, 2018; Zhu, 2019; Li, Shen and Li, 2020).

Growing diversity within female rural migrants in China suggests growing diversity of migration experiences as well as changing migration processes, but we know very little about how this looks, as many questions regarding features of the new rural-urban migration trends remain unexplored in the literature. but we know very little about what this looks like because some questions are as yet unexplored as new feature of rural-urban migration emerges or example, what about women who stay in the city after getting married? What about women who choose to keep the child in the city?

1.5 Research aims and research questions

This study starts with asking one big question, ‘What is it like to be a young migrant mother in Beijing?’ It aims to understand the experiences of rural-urban migration from the perspective of the young migrant mothers in China, specifically, in the capital Beijing. It might seem to be an easy question to answer, since an initial literature review shows that when migration meets motherhood, life becomes doubly difficult. Traditionally, studies about rural-urban migration in China tend to focus on how the Hukou system shapes or even defines the experiences of migration, and how rural migrants are struggling at the bottom of society feeling hopeless and powerless. Most of the studies explore rural-urban migration from a ‘top-down’ perspective, and the actual experience of the migrants is largely missing. Moreover, while migration and motherhood are well theorised respectively, the interplay between migration and motherhood is considerably undertheorised.

A thorough review of the literature reported later also suggests that our current understanding of rural-urban migration is rather one-dimensional. Most existing migration theories are developed by western scholars researching migration within western contexts, and many of these theories are not able to capture the ‘logic’ behind the actions of the rural migrants in the Chinese context. Even when a study is specifically focused on rural-urban migration in China, usually an established theoretical model is directly borrowed and applied with little attention paid to how migration is a ‘localised’ experience that can be better understood from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective. Having a migrant background myself and my experience working with rural
migrants in Beijing led me to wonder whether there might be more complexity and nuance in terms of how young migrant mothers actually experience migration, a topic rarely explored.

Aware of the nascent stage of research on this topic in the literature and my own positionality, I choose to adopt Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods, which is interactive, abductive and reflexive, with the aim to generate rich empirical data to establish a grounded theory to expand our understanding of rural-urban migration as a lived human experience embedded in the wider structural environment as well as the radius of everyday life, focusing specifically on young migrant mothers. This study aims to provide a contextualised and specified understanding of the experience of rural-urban migration for young mothers who have their children with them in Beijing, informed by existing knowledge, grounded in the empirical data and constructed via my analysis and interpretation. This means that the results of this study are not only shaped by the young migrant mothers’ construction of their own life stories, but they are also impacted by my positionality as a researcher and a young Chinese woman with a migrant background. Therefore, the findings of this study and the theory that is established may not be applicable to other socio-cultural contexts, but hopefully, can provide a new perspective to understand the experience of rural-urban migration and inspire more research in the field, which ultimately advances the theorisation of migration.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

This Introduction Chapter provides the contextual information about female rural-urban migration in China and the research aims of this study.

Chapter 2 reviews both the international and Chinese literature about female rural-urban migration in the global context and the Chinese context with the aim to understand the status of knowledge and identify research gaps. This study is a Constructivist Grounded Theory study. There will not be a dedicated theory chapter because a theoretical framework will be developed based on the analysis of the empirical data. Female rural-urban migration is a relatively undertheorised area, and in this Chapter, I bring the research topic into conversation with wider migration discussion. I discuss how female rural-urban migration in China can be explored from a translocal perspective and how this study can further contextualise the transnationalism framework by integrating de Haas’ Aspirations-Capabilities Approach.

Chapter 3 sets out the methodology and research methods of this study. It explains the rationale for choosing Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods for this study. It then relates how each stage of research was carried out, including data collection, data analysis and theory development. This Chapter ends with reflections on the overall research process.
Chapter 4 profiles the research participants and the research site to set the context for reading the study findings.

Chapter 5, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 are the findings chapters of this study. Each chapter presents the research findings with a different focus. Chapter 5 focuses on the early migration experience of the young migrant mothers, including their aspirations for migration, their transformations upon arrival in the city, their efforts to maintain a close tie with their home community and their experience of transition into motherhood. Chapter 6 focuses on the mothering experience of the young migrant mothers. It explores how women in the study were actively performing agency to resist the stigma and strive to be a good mother. It also explores how the birth of the child changes the dynamics in the family and subsequently reshapes the migrant women’s aspirations for return migration. Chapter 7 further explores the migrant mothers’ aspirations for the future, including their active preparation for return migration, their personal plans for career development and their concerns about the future.

Chapter 8 discusses the grounded theory centring on the concept ‘multi-locality’ developed on the basis of the analysis of the empirical data of this study as well as the literature, especially transnationalism theories. It first reviews the current understanding of transnationalism framework. It then discusses how the data of this study can further develop the framework by incorporating the translocal perspective with de Haas’ (2021) Aspirations-Capabilities Approach. It explores how agency, family and gender can be approached from a multi-local perspective to obtain a more specified and contextualised understanding of female rural-urban migration.

Chapter 9 is the conclusion chapter. It reflects on the research aims and overall research processes of this study. It provides a comprehensive conceptualisation of the multi-locality framework and discusses how this framework can expand our understanding of female rural-urban migration in China. This chapter concludes with a reflection on the quality of the study and points out directions for future research.
2. Literature Review

2.1 Reviewing literature for a Constructivist Grounded Theory study

This study is a Constructivist Grounded Theory study. As opposed to Classical Grounded Theory, which asks the researcher to deliberately delay literature review so as to stay as objective as possible, Constructivist Grounded Theory, on the contrary, encourages the researcher to adopt an abductive approach and engage with literature throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2009, 2014a). During the entire literature review process, I have consulted a large amount of literature, including literature in both English and Chinese languages. The first phase of literature review was conducted after I chose to research young migrant mothers in China, but before I decided on my research questions. It helped identify what had already been studied and what had been overlooked in the substantive area. In this stage, I widely reviewed studies about rural-urban migration, female migration and migrant motherhood both in the global and the Chinese context.

As data collection and data analysis proceeded, I revisited some of the most relevant literature that I had reviewed in the initial stage and engaged with it more critically and purposefully. Meanwhile, based on the emerging codes and categories and pursuant to the principle of abduction within the method, I also explored new literature about the topics that had not been identified and covered in the first stage that I was directed to by the data. I reviewed literature related to topics such as how family and gender featured in the migration process and issues of return migration, while lightly touching on some theoretical works that inspired the development of the grounded theory of this study.

This Literature Review Chapter only includes the most relevant and important literature that helps build up the case for the study and set the course for theory development. In this Literature Review Chapter, I will first review how female rural-urban migration is conceptualised in the global context as well as the Chinese context. I will then discuss how the current understanding of female rural-urban migration in China can be linked to transnationalism theories in international migration and how incorporating de Haas’ Aspirations-Capabilities Approach with a translocal perspective could help improve our understanding of female rural-urban migration in China. Finally, I will point out the limitations of transnationalism theories, which inspire the establishment of the development of the grounded theory ‘multi-locality’ in this study.
2.2 Gender, family and rural-urban migration: from discovering the ‘women’ to understanding ‘gender’

As early as in 1885, Ravenstein already pointed out that women were actively participating in migration both within and beyond national borders, but it was only in the 1970s that female migration officially attracted attention in scholarship. Early studies about female migration were mostly inspired by feminist theorists who critiqued the ‘male bias’ in migration research and aimed to ‘discover’ female migrants who had been actively moving unnoticed (Morokvasic, 1984; Yazgan and Yucesahin, 2017; Piper, 2021; Kofman, 2022). Many studies have shown that women and men experience migration differently, in terms of their motives, patterns and pathways (de Jong, 2000; Curran et al., 2006; Bonifacio, 2014; Timmerman et al., 2018). However, some have also argued that only focusing on the differences between male and female migration overlooks the fact that gender is a relational construct, and the construction of gender relations has an impact across the entire migration process, starting from the decision-making to integration upon arrival (Timmerman et al., 2018).

Our current understanding about the relationship between gender and migration is largely built on feminism which recognises the bases for women’s inferior status in society and aims to liberate women from gender-related oppressions (Yazgan and Yucesahin, 2017). According to George (2005), gender is not only a ‘factor’ that shapes how one experiences migration on the individual level, but it is also a ‘structure’ that organises the relations between men and women migrants. Although patriarchy is often conceptualised as a key form of gender structure used by men to restrain women systematically (Brydon and Chant, 1989; Yazgan and Yucesahin, 2017), it is also discovered that female migrants are able to resist and restructure these gender relations during the migration process (Morokvasic, 1984; George, 2005; Timmerman et al., 2018). Therefore, as many have argued, migration is not only a gendered process, but it is also a gendering process (Christou and Kofman, 2022).

Gender analysis in most migration studies is based on the relationship between gender and migration in the First World (Brydon and Chant, 1989). As many have argued, migration is an integral part of social change, and gender is deeply embedded in the process of wider transformations. Therefore, if we hope to obtain a more holistic understanding of women’s participation in migration, we need to first position women in the specific historical, social and cultural context (Tacoli and Mabala, 2010; Camlin, Snow and Hosegood, 2014; Timmerman et al., 2018).

In a western contexts, the dominant household structure usually entails the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the caregiver under dominant heteronormativity (Morokvasic,
1984). However, in many developing countries, women have always been actively involved in production because the income of one breadwinner is not enough to support the family, and women’s migration has always been welcomed and encouraged, such as in India (Sundari, 2005), Thailand (Mills, 2007), the Philippines (Trager; 1984; Lauby and Stark, 1988) and many countries in Latin America (Jelin, 1977; Lauby and Stark, 1988). In many countries, rural-urban migration can even be seen as a female-dominated activity. Even in the countries where men outnumber women in rural-urban migration, such as South Africa (Camlin, Snow and Hosegood, 2014) and Lao PDR (Phoxay and Tollefsen, 2011), there has also been a trend of ‘feminisation of rural-urban migration’ in recent decades.

However, as many have pointed out, in many developing countries, it is not that rural women are inherently more migratory than men, but it is because women are expected to migrate to the city to provide for the family (Trager 1984; Laudy and Stark, 1988). While many studies have explored how the sexually segregated labour market reinforces migrant women’s secondary status in the city (Laudy and Stark, 1988; Mills, 1997), some studies have also found that the inherent social and biological features also gain rural migrant women more opportunities in the urban labour market. For example, Laudy and Stark’s (1988) study in the Philippines shows that even if female migrants are generally paid less than men, they are more likely to be offered a more stable job than men. Therefore, in total, their migration might create more economic returns than men. In Philippine culture, family is not only a unit of production, but it is also a ‘social grouping’ (p.485) that extends beyond time and space. For example, daughters tend to stay close to the family, even after they are married, and they are also more likely to remit to support the younger siblings back home. Therefore, they are more reliable than sons as the ‘alternative breadwinner’ of the family. Consequently, many families are more likely to send their daughters to the city to work to maximise family income.

In many countries, especially Asian countries, the patricentric family is the most significant structure that creates and sustains unequal power relations (Trager, 1984; Tienda and Booth, 1991; Laudy and Stark, 1988). Even if many studies have discovered that rural women may migrate for multiple reasons, such as personal development, education and changing aspirations (Sundari, 2005; Tacoli and Mabula, 2010; Walsh, 2014), rural-urban migration is ultimately a family strategy, especially for poor families (Trager, 1984; Laudy and Stark, 1988). However, as Curran and colleagues (2006) have pointed out, the focus of family in female migration studies is valuable but it can also risk providing a partial picture of the actual experience of female migration. Most studies about female urban migration have tried to unravel the negotiation between ‘being a good daughter’ and ‘a modern woman’. However, in many
cultures, paid labour, domestic labour and identity construction happen simultaneously (Curren et al., 2006).

As Mills (1997, p.37) has suggested, rural-urban migration is not just a physical activity, but it is “a process of self-construction, laying claim to, negotiating and at times contesting these different aspects of gender identity.” She has argued that rural-urban migration in Thailand means participation in modernity and creates a space where the pursuit of personhood and conformity to traditional roles intersect. Women’s rural-urban migration is itself motivated by the combination of economic opportunities, family obligations and personal aspiration for a glamorous urban lifestyle. Despite the ambivalent nature of gender relations that they experience, young migrant women are still actively striving to craft a life world that they aspire to live in despite anticipated hardships. Other studies in the Philippines (Łukasiewicz; 2011), Indonesia (Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003) and Albania (Caro et al., 2012) have also found that despite migrant women’s disadvantaged position in urban society, they are capable of renegotiating how they are positioned within gender based relations.

However, some also question whether women are able to completely be free from the gender-based oppression simply because of rural-urban migration. For example, Thapan (2008) has suggested that gendered cultural values may continue to persist through social networks, education and socialisation of the next generation, and the overall structural context of the country. Caro and colleagues (2012) have pointed out that rural-urban migration may actually enhance traditional gender norms. Their study in Albania has shown how rural migrant women navigate different sets of cultural beliefs upon arrival in the city. On the one hand, they are attracted to becoming a modern woman and on the other hand, they have to uphold their traditional role as a daughter and a wife. Even if many women wish to break away from the patriarchal norms, in reality, it is not easy to achieve. Therefore, as Tienda and Booth (1991) have argued, it is barely possible to pin down how gender and migration shape each other since migration is so complex in reality and there are great variations of the context in different societies. However, as Brydon and Chant (1989) write, the aim to adopt a gender lens in migration research is not to generalise whether migration is good or bad for women, and it is pointless to evaluate women’s changes of status based on a set of universal criteria.

According to Bonifacio (2014, p.1), the recognition of gender should not overlook the ‘‘presence of other social identifiers, such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and ability that intersect with lived realities.’’ Moreover, the interaction of migration and gender can take place across different life domains (Timmerman et al., 2018). Most of the studies about female rural-urban migration are based on unmarried women. It is assumed that marriage and motherhood prevents women from migration (Camlin, Snow and Hosegood, 2014; Fischer and Weber,
Even if married women migrate, they are most likely to migrate as part of the family, either as the dependent wife (Morokvasic, 1984), or as the ‘‘tied mover’’ (Lauby and Stark, 1988, p.473). While migration and motherhood are well theorised respectively, the interplay between migration and motherhood is considerably undertheorised. Moreover, how young migrant women experience motherhood can be especially complicated since they have to negotiate multiple life tasks with different requirements simultaneously (Fischer and Weber, 2004). This study aims to fill the gap of our knowledge of female rural-urban migration in China specifically by exploring the experience of young migrant mothers, who are at the intersection of being a young woman, a migrant and a mother while trying to understand how they perform their agency to restructure their urban life world despite the adversities.

2.3 Contextualising young migrant women’s rural-urban migration in China

2.3.1 New-generation Dagongmei and the dual constraints

Many studies have suggested that compared with the early female migrants who are driven out of the countryside because of poverty, young migrant women feel more attracted to the opportunities in the city (Guo, Chow and Palinkas, 2011; Zhao and Ren, 2014; Wu, 2018). Many scholars have portrayed rural women as an active agent in the decision-making process of migration. Young rural women see migration as a process of learning and they are eager to grasp the opportunities that have never been available in the countryside (Guo, Chow and Palinska, 2011). Some even see their migration as a form of rebellion against their parents and the social norms in rural China (Hu, 2012). In Guo, Chow and Palinkas’ (2011) study, almost all the female migrants had been faced with their parents’ concern about their safety before migration, but they were very determined to pursue their own development and all managed to move to the city eventually.

Compared with older migrant women, young migrant women are more educated (Zhu and Lin, 2014), and their motivations of migration and their choices of jobs are more diverse (Hu, 2012). Meanwhile, as young rural girls tend to have higher expectations for their migration, they are also more likely to suffer from poor mental health compared with older migrants because they are disappointed when they find that they cannot live up to their ambition due to the constraints in the city (Li, et al., 2014; Yang and Xia, 2008). Therefore, they are likely to end up in a more precarious situation (Zhu and Lin, 2014). Rural-urban migration may augment young women’s career opportunities, but the job options are still largely concentrated in the low-skilled and low-paid industries (Guo and Shen, 2016). Numerous studies have researched young migrant women working in factories (Ip, 2017; Sun, 2016; He and Wong, 2011), domestic services sectors (Luan and Zou, 2017; Su, Ni and Ji, 2018) and in the sex industry (Zaller, et al., 2014;
As Ip (2017, p.576) suggested, although migrant women might see themselves as “rising balloons with the potentiality of upward social mobility”, the vast majority are often still trapped at the very bottom of the social ladder. There is very little space for upward mobility in reality (Zong, et al., 2017). Some even argue that many migrant women will experience downward mobility after migration (Ye, Ge and Ye, 2005).

Many see *Dagongmei* as a specific working class in the time of economic transition in China (Deng, 2004; Yu and Pan, 2008; Wei and Yuan, 2015). Yet, others have pointed out that *Dagongmei* is a category that is co-constructed by rural patriarchy and urban capitalist economy (Ma, 2009; Wei and Yuan, 2015). On the one hand, the urban economy provides women a chance to be free and autonomous so that it can utilise their labour, and on the other hand, it adopts the traditional patriarchal values to control unmarried women to reinforce exploitation and control. According to some scholars, many urban employers actually prefer female migrants than male migrants, because rural women are seen to be more submissive (Yin, 2016) and easier to manage (Hu, 2012). Wei and He (2016) have also argued that young migrant women are caught between two sets of contradictory cultures. On the one hand, traditional patriarchal values in rural society create the submissive, sacrificial and obedient ‘Chinese sisters’ who are encouraged to repay the love of parents, and on the other hand, the urban labour market reproduces the ‘Working sisters’ who are exploited by urban labour market to reinforce their inferiority in urban society.

Chinese culture is traditionally ‘relationship-oriented’, and the family relationship is the most crucial relationship of all (Chen, 2018). Even if many have argued that young migrants are more individualistic and their migration is more diverse (Zhao and Ren, 2014; Seeberg and Luo, 2017; Peng, 2018), ultimately, rural-urban migration in China is always a family-oriented strategy, despite gender (Song and Li, 2012; Liang, Dai and Ma, 2017; Lin, 2019). No matter what their motives of migration are for young rural girls, their ultimate goal is to help their families (Zhong and Arnett, 2014; Wu et al., 2012). Being physically away from the family does not separate them from the obligation to take care of their families and younger siblings who are still in the rural villages. Their connection to rural families is strengthened through remittances. If they fail to send money back home, they might be seen as a failure (Wu, et al., 2012). Although some have argued that migration is offering rural women more independence and autonomy (Esara, 2004), it is still doubtful whether they can completely be free from the long-standing traditional construction of gender identity as a providing daughter (Yu and Pan, 2008; Zhang, 2014).
2.3.2 Romance and the dual system of marriage

In traditional Chinese culture, heterosexual relations dominate and heterosexual marriage is considered a family transaction (Wei and Yuan, 2015). It emphasises the ‘compatibility’ of the two families’ status and class (Wei and Yuan, 2015; Deng, 2014), which means that ‘rural people marry rural people, and urban people marry urban people’. In rural China, the choice of a partner largely relies on the social network based on kinship, and the most ideal is to marry ‘locally’ to protect oneself and safeguard the interest of the natal family (Zhou and Xu, 2010; Zhang and Hu, 2013; Zhu and Wang, 2013; Huang and Ni, 2020). However, it has been discovered that rural-urban migration has changed many young women’s perception of romantic relationships and marriage. Several studies have shown that most female migrants oppose the traditional arranged marriage in rural culture, and they believe that they should have the freedom to choose their own partner (Li, 2005; Paliwala and Uberoi, 2008; Zhou and Xu, 2010; Huang and Ni, 2020). In Ip’s (2017) study of female beauticians in Shanghai young migrant women were shown to intentionally delay their marriage because they prioritise work over marriage. They are capable of resisting the stigma of being unmarriable and unwanted. For those senior beauticians, who are economically independent, they do not even see the necessity to marry at all.

Yet, Ip (2017) also points out that even if migrant women seem to be resistant to conform to the traditional gender norms, they are likely to be faced with a dilemma: they see rural men as not good enough for them, but they cannot see the possibility that any urban man will want to marry them either. As many have argued, even if they aspire for romantic love, they are not always capable of realising their aspiration, especially when it comes to marriage (Liu, 2014; Wei and Yuan, 2015; Ip, 2017; Wu, 2018; Huang and Ni, 2020). As young migrant women enter the urban labour market, they simultaneously enter the urban marriage market and their perception about love and marriage will become modernised (Ma, 2009; Zhu and Wang, 2013). Rural-urban migration indeed gives rural women the chance to break free from traditional patriarchy in the home society, but it also brings new constraints (Wei and Yuan, 2015). They are not able to marry an urban man, but they are not willing to marry a rural man who has no migratory history either (Zhou and Xu, 2010). Therefore, migrant men in the city become their ‘priority group’ (Wei and Yuan, 2015).

Many young female migrants aim to marry someone from the migrant community (Guo, Chow and Palinska, 2011). They want to marry someone with similar life experience and life goals. Hu’s (2012) study based on interviews with 86 young migrants has discovered that almost all young migrants in the study prefer dating other migrants, and it is most ideal that the prospective partner is from the same region. In Huang and Ni’s (2020) study, exploring
women’s consideration of marriage, they have suggested that migrant women are aware of the boundaries in the city and are aware that it is not realistic for them to break the boundaries and marry a man that has much more human capital than themselves. As one woman in the study said, she wanted to marry a man who was in a better position than her, but “not too much better” (p.87). Therefore, Huang and Ni (2021) argue that migrant women’s choice of a marriage partner is a “realistic, rational and operational calculation” (p. 86).

Huang and Ni (2020, p.86) have defined rural migrant women’s experiences of relationships in the city as “experimental love”. This means that their aspiration for marriage is constructed based on the combination of an open mind, constant observation and careful calculation. Others have also recognised that migrant women’s aspirations for marriage are both emotional and rational (Liu, 2014; Wei and Yuan, 2015; Wu, 2018). Young migrant women are interested in integrating into urban society, but they are more concerned about their life-long happiness. Many argue that marriage presents as the most crucial way for rural women to actualise self-value (Liu, 2014; Wu, 2018; Huang and Ni, 2020). Despite the fact that migration has elevated their capabilities and aspirations, migrant women are still aware that there is no future working in the low-skilled sectors in the city, and their future will have to depend on a good marriage, which can only be achieved back home (Wu, 2018).

Many studies have shown that the vast majority of women will have to return home for marriage as a result of the institutional discrimination in the city as well as their lack of human capital (Roberts, 2002; Deng, 2004; Zhou and Xu, 2010; Wei and Yuan, 2015; Wu, 2018). While young women manage to physically migrate to the city from the village, their marriage paradoxically triggers reverse mobility from the city to the village. Zhou and Xu’s (2010) study has discovered that many young migrant women actively choose to return home for marriage because they trust their parents more than themselves. In their study in one township in Chongqing City, they have found that there has been an increasing number of unmarried women returning home for ‘matchmaking’ every year, especially during the Chinese New Year.

As Huang and Ni (2020) have argued, young female migrants’ aspirations for heterosexual romance and marriage are both traditional and modern. Even if the rural women are physically away from their rural home, they can never dissociate from their home culture (Wei and Yuan, 2015). Deng (2004) has argued that in a woman’s life, she will at least experience two migrations: from the village to the city, and then back to the village for marriage. While the former is motivated by instrumental values, the latter is driven by intrinsic values of family and gender. According to Yu and Pan (2008), female migrants’ self-recognition emerges from the negotiation of different life aspirations, which ultimately creates contradictory, shifting and fragmented identities that they have to negotiate on a daily basis.
2.3.3 ‘New urban citizens’ and the hybrid identity

In China, rural-urban migration is more than a physical movement. During the process of migration, it is likely that rural migrants will experience an identity crisis (Zhu, 2008). Most scholars see rural-urban migration as a process of ‘urbanisation’ of the rural migrants (Zhu, 2004; Li, 2005; Zhu, 2008; Ma, 2009). It is a process of learning and mastering the code of behaviour, values and lifestyle of the city. For an urban citizen, this process happens simultaneously with the process of socialisation in everyday life. For rural citizens, most of them are raised in the rural culture, and even if they receive education, most of them study in village schools. Their knowledge of urbanity largely comes from indirect sources, such as textbooks and media. Upon their arrival in the city, they have to give up old values and lifestyles to adapt to the new environment. Some even see rural-urban migration as a process of re-socialisation (Sun, 2014). As many have argued, the processes of ‘urbanisation’ and ‘de-ruralisation’ take place simultaneously, and as time goes by, their rural identity will decrease while urban identity grows (Li, 2019).

While some see the transformations as a natural outcome of exposure to urban culture (Yu and Pan, 2008; Zhu, 2008; Wang and Yan, 2011; Chi, 2014; Qiu, 2017), others have argued that migrant women may strategically choose to urbanise themselves to build up their human capital so that they can survive in the urban labour market (Zhao and Ren, 2014; Chi, 2014). Liu (2014) argues that Dagong itself is a process of physical, emotional and spiritual transformation to match the expectations of urban employers. As Wu (2008) has argued, the process of urbanisation is a considerably reflexive process. Several studies have suggested that urbanisation starts from the transformation of the rural body (Zhu, 2008; Chi, 2014). Zhu’s (2008) study about female migrants in service sectors in Guangzhou City has found that trying to look urban is used by rural women as the strategy to improve their bodily capital to adapt to urban society. Even if they are not able to settle in the city permanently, looking urban is the prerequisite for them to survive in the city. Many migrant women are having a diet, investing in skincare and working out regularly to transform their bodily image. As they lack other forms of human capital, bodily capitals become the most crucial capital to achieve upward mobility and reverse the stereotype of Dagongmei to obtain respectability (Yu and Pan, 2008).

Wang and Yan’s (2011) study about female migrants in the service sectors in Guangzhou City has also shown that working in service sectors triggers young women’s desire for consumption. However, there is a mismatch between their consumption desire and the actual consumption capability. In order to overcome the mismatch, they develop an ‘amphibian’ strategy. According to Wang and Yan (2011), the amphibious strategy means that the migrant women will restrain some desires and satisfy others with their limited income. It also means that they
will restrain their desires in some contexts and satisfy their desires in other contexts. For example, they may cut down daily expenses to save money to buy gifts for families before going back home for the Chinese New Year. As Wang and Yan (2011) have discovered, when the women consume in an urban way, they feel urban; when they restrain consumption, they feel rural again. Therefore, they shift from being urban and being rural, and being a producer and a consumer constantly, which creates an ‘amphibious’ identity. Rural migrants are seen as the outsider that float between the rural culture and the urban culture (Zhu, 2004). Other scholars have also noticed that many young migrant women experience great confusion, and they tend to question ‘Am I rural or am I urban?’ (Zhu, 2008; Huang and Ni, 2020).

In western contexts, the process of rural-urban migration and the process of ‘urbanisation’ of migrants takes place simultaneously, but in the Chinese context, due to the specific structural system of rural-urban dualism and Hukou system, there is a mismatch between these two processes (Guo and Zhou, 2013). However, as Yang and Tang (2017) have argued, the process of identity construction of female migrants is more complex in reality. They see rural migrants as constantly making trade-offs between the home culture and the new culture. It is embedded in the interaction between the different values, but it is also shaped by their interactions with other people in society. In their study, young migrants were born and raised in an era when China was going through great transformations. Before they migrate, they are already living in-between two cultures. Upon arrival in the city, some migrants aspire to integrate, and they will try to establish an urban social network, but using their learned rural values and practices; some migrants will refuse to integrate and still heavily rely on the old resources back home. Different from Zhu (2004, 2008) and Li (2019) who see rural migrants as desperately wanting to get rid of their rural identity, and different from Wang and Zhou (2016) who see rural migrants as semi-urbanised population, Yang and Tang (2017) argue that urbanisation will not completely erase the rural identity of the rural migrants. Even if they are completely modernised, it does not mean that they will forever dissociate from the rural society, because many of them will eventually return home.

Some studies have also shown that not all rural migrants aspire to be ‘completely urbanised’. Several studies on the experience of young rural migrants show that many rural migrants are not willing to give up their rural status (Nie, 2014a, 2014b; Zhao and Lu, 2014). While urban citizenship may gain them recognition and respectability, rural status can secure them actual benefits, such as right to land. Zhao and Lu (2014, p.71) have concluded that young rural migrants’ life aspirations can be concluded as ‘participating in non-agricultural work, living in apartment buildings, retaining the land and being close to families.’ As Luo’s (2016) study has demonstrated, many young migrants choose to accomplish ‘urbanisation locally’ by settling in...
the city in the home region. While in the past, rural-urban migration is often related to ‘eating bitterness’ (Yu and Pan, 2008; Layalka, 2012; Wei and Yuan, 2015), younger migrants nowadays are more likely to migrate to live a dignified life (He, 2020; Luo, 2016; Chen, Chen and Pu, 2016). Therefore, if the income in the city is not enough to support the rural family to live a decent life, then they would rather return home. Many studies have even shown that young migrants are actively choosing to return home as entrepreneurs (Liu, 2019; He, 2020).

As some have noticed, as China transitions from a traditional society to a modern society, the construct of gender and family also shifts (Qian, 2012). As Wu (2018) has argued, young women’s rural-urban migration is actually embedded in the negotiation between individualism and new familism in contemporary Chinese society. As Skinke (2016) has suggested, the temporality of migration should be understood as situated not only in the historical context, but also in the personal biographical time and family and generational time. For the mothers, who are in the stage where individual plans and family plans become intertwined, their experience of migration can be more overwhelming.

2.3.4 Migrant mothers and the double burdens

Traditionally, it is understood that heterosexual migrant couples tend to return to their hometown after marriage, and women will remain in the rural homes after return migration (Roberts, 2002). However, studies have shown that more and more migrant couples opt to stay in the cities after marriage and many migrant women even opt to give birth to their child in their host cities (Du, et. al, 2012; Ji, et al., 2018). Many migrant mothers also decide to keep their child with them, so that their child can enjoy the same life as urban children (Zhu, Wu and Chapman, 2013). Yet, the reality of being a migrant mother in the city can be overwhelming. The financial pressure to raise a child (To, So and Kwok, 2018), lack of access to urban healthcare services (Huang, et. al, 2012; Zhan, Sun and Blas, 2002; Song, et. al, 2017) and to urban education for their children (CCR CSR, 2017) and the intensified work-care conflict (CCR CSR, 2013; Xu, et. al, 2017) forces migrant mothers to alter their life path to cope with the challenges that motherhood brings.

Many have pointed out that married migrant women’s career development is associated with the distribution of resources of multiple families, especially after the birth of the child (Liang, Dai and Ma, 2017; Wu, 2018; Chen, 2018). Due to the lack of support in the hosting city, migrant mothers either have to quit their job to care for the child or leave the child in their rural village. Most studies about migrant mothers in China tend to focus on how the work-care conflict can lead to, or has led to, the decision to leave the child behind in the rural village (Murphy, Zhou and Tao, 2016; Meng and Yamauchi, 2017; Liu and Leung, 2017; Shen and Zhang, 2018; To,
In a sense, migrant motherhood has almost become the synonym of ‘translocal motherhood’. Even when the focus is on the migrant mothers who keep the child in the hosting city, the discussion is still largely concentrated on how the child further exacerbates the migrant women’s disadvantaged status in the urban labour market (Song and Li, 2012; CCR CSR, 2013; Liang, Dai and Ma, 2017; To, So and Kwok, 2018; Li, Shen and Li, 2020). There has been no systematic analysis of how their life is actually lived as a rural mother in the urban space.

Some studies have suggested that migrant mothers’ childcare practices are hugely influenced by their home culture, and they are more likely to have a more traditional lifestyle (Benza and Liamputtong, 2014; Zhao, Chen and Wang, 2015; Lisiak, 2018). Others have noted that younger migrant parents are more willing to adopt urban child rearing models because they are exposed to urban values at an early stage of life (Peng, 2018; Lin 2019). Some have even discovered that young migrants’ parenting practices are very similar with urban parents’ (Xu et al., 2017). Since many young migrants dropped out of school at an early age because of poverty, they would try to compensate their losses indirectly through their investment in their children’s development (Ma and Jacobs, 2010). Moreover, according to CCR CSR’s study (2013), the new generation of migrant parents are more likely to have experienced parental migration as a child. Therefore, they understand the pain caused by separation, and after they become parents, they tend to prioritise the well-being of the child over personal pursuit. Nonetheless, it is also discovered that young migrant mothers’ aspirations towards providing a high quality of parenthood to their children cannot directly translate into the capability to do so (Zhu, Wu and Chapman, 2013; CCR CSR, 2013), and many experience feelings of guilt and incompetence when they cannot live up to their responsibilities (CCR CSR, 2017). As some argued, migrant parents are also parents (CCR CSR, 2013). Although migrant families are different from urban local families because of their inferior status (Wu et al., 2018), migrant mothers have the same expectations as mothers across the world, which is to ensure that their children can have a better future (To, So and Kwok, 2018). They choose to endure all the hardship just to hope that their children can have a better life (Lisiak, 2018; Yelland et al., 2015).

Worldwide, transition to motherhood is associated with pleasure, achievement and maturation (Benza and Liamputtong, 2014; Esara, 2004; To, So and Kwok, 2018). It is seen as a natural part of women’s life (Zhan, Sun and Blas, 2002), and it is a momentous life event (CCR CSR, 2013). In many Asian cultures, women also see marriage and motherhood as significant symbols of adulthood (Esara, 2004; To, So and Kwok, 2018; Zhong and Arnett, 2014). However, in reality, motherhood is in no way uniform because it is deeply embedded in the
social structure as well as individual experiences (Peng, 2018). For the rural migrant mothers in China, life can be especially challenging because migration can double or even triple their burden (Paliwala and Uberoi, 2008). In China, the concept of family for a married couple not only refers to their nuclear family, but also includes the parents and the in-laws (Zhong and Arnett, 2014). Not only will the women need to take care of their husband and young child, they will also need to care for their aging parents and in-laws. Migration, therefore, creates a new sphere of domestic life across two different spaces – the nuclear family in the city and the rural family in the countryside as these obligations remain regardless of migration by the younger generation.

As many have noticed, migration has become more complicated (Czaika and de Haas, 2004) and we are now entering “a new age of diversified mobilities” (King, 2020, p.8). Female rural-urban migration should be treated as one form of migration that contributes to the diversity and complexity of human mobility. Some young women may migrate to the city to pursue personal development, and others may migrate for family reunion. Some young women may return home for marriage, and others may migrate to the city again after getting married. Some mothers may leave the child behind in the rural village, and others may choose to keep the child in the hosting city. However, all these dynamic interactions have not been captured by previous studies. Therefore, this study aims to unravel the complexity of the experience of young migrant mothers and obtain a more specified and contextualised understanding of female rural-urban migration in China.

2.4 Female rural-urban migration and the translocal space

2.4.1 Linking ‘circulation’ with ‘translocality’

In 1971, Zelinsky identified five types of migrations, namely “international migration”, “frontierward migration”, “urban-to-urban and intra-urban migration”, “rural-urban migration” and “circulation”. According to Zelinsky (1971, p.226), circulation constitutes “a great variety of movements, usually short-term, repetitive, or cyclical in nature, but all having in common the lack of any declared intention of a permanent or long-lasting change in residence.” The idea of ‘circulation’ introduced by Zelinsky challenged the conventional belief that migration was always a ‘border-crossing’ movement that aimed for permanent settlement in the destination. It suggests that migration is not always a linear process, but “a complex sequence of movement, regular or otherwise, forwards, backwards and onwards” (Skeldon, 2012a, p.46). While Zelinsky (1971) treats circulation as one form of migration that is parallel to rural-urban migration, many scholars have argued that rural-urban migration is inherently ‘circulatory’ from the beginning (Mabogunje, 1970; Banerjee’s, 1981; de Haan, 1997; Bhattacharya, 1993; Anh et al., 2012). As Mabogunje (1970, p.16) has suggested, rural-urban...
migration is never a ‘linear, uni-directional, push-and-pull, cause-effect movement but a circular, interdependent, progressively complex, and self-modifying process.’

Classical theorisation of rural-urban migration largely builds on the assumption that villagers migrate to improve individual income and prospects (Todaro, 1969; Harris-Todaro, 1970; Vertovec, 2020). In the 1970s, a new discourse emerged which moved ‘away from the migrant as an individual decision-maker and income-maximiser and towards migration as a group, usually a family decision, based on resource diversification and risk minimisation’ (Skeldon, 2012a, p.45). In the 1990s, as the theory of New Economics of Labour gained more popularity, the role of family in the migration also received more recognition, and rural-urban migration was then conceptualised as an economic activity to maximise family benefits (Vertovec, 2020). While many celebrated the new ‘turn’ in migration research, others pointed out that in low-income countries, rural-urban migration had always been a family project (Mabogunje, 1970; Banerjee, 1981; Trager, 1984; Bhattacharya, 1993; Anh, 2012). It not only refers to how family shapes the decision-making process, but it also means that family is the thread that runs through the entire process of migration.

While traditional migration is understood as an ‘uprooting’ process, the concept of circulation helps link the countryside and the city ‘by systems of backward and forward linkages’ (Rhoda, 1983, p.40), which challenge the conventional belief that rural migrants would ‘break completely with his rural background and become entirely committed to urban existence’ (Mabogunje, 1970, p.2). For example, Bhattacharya (1993, p.265) has suggested that in India rural-urban migration creates a ‘multi-centred family’ that is made up with individual members who migrate to the city and the members who stay in the village whose ties are maintained by physical, emotional and informational exchanges across different locations. De Haan’s (1997) studies on rural-urban migration in India has also suggested rural migrants usually sustain their ties to the home village, and many aspire to return permanently upon retirement. One study in Thailand also suggests that rural migrants still see their home village as the ‘nucleus’ even after years of living away (Amare et al., 2012, p.1). Anh and colleagues’ (2012, p.1104) have also argued that in Viet Nam rural-urban migration should be understood as ‘sojourn’ because rural migrants rarely give up their relationships with home and they tend to sustain an ‘interlocking livelihood’ because ‘children, futures, parents, identities and aspirations remain rooted in the countryside.’

As Skeldon (2012a) has pointed out that ‘circulation’ and ‘transnationalism’ share a lot in common, and the idea of circulation is actually one of the inspirations of the establishment of transnationalism theories. According to Brettell (2015, p.159), transnationalism is a process that is maintained ‘within the lives of individuals and families and particularly in the personal,
economic, and social connections that articulate the world they have left with the world they have entered.’’ Transnationalism theories are largely developed based on the network theories and the theory of New Economics of Labour, which emphasises the role of social network and family in shaping the experience of migration (Skeldon, 2012a). It highlights the non-linearity of migration and the exchanges and interactions between home and destination via the flows of remittances, ideas and resources. For example, Ryan and colleagues’ (2009) study of the experience of Polish migrants in London suggests that migrants tend to sustain transnational family networks both to fulfil familial obligations and to seek support. Stachowski and Bock’s (2021) study about the experience of Polish families in rural Norway has also discovered that migrants are involved in activities both in the new country and in the home community, and sometimes, migrants’ activities are foremost associated with their families in the home community. Studies about rural-urban migration have also revealed how rural migrants establish, maintain and utilise translocal family networks to navigate their life in the city (Winters, 2014; Rockenbauch, Sakdapolrak and Sterly, 2019; Djurfeldt, 2021).

Since the 1990s, transnationalism theories have been refined and improved and have become a dominant discourse in current migration research, but there is barely any advancement of the conceptualisation of ‘circulation’. The concept of circulation is still considerably limited to the application in internal migration and they are still used in a more descriptive way than a conceptual way. For example, the concept of circulation is often associated with precarity (Chacko and Price, 2021) and the feeling of in-betweenness (Anh et al., 2012), which reinforces the stereotype of rural-urban migration as ‘‘permanent displacement from village to city’’ (Skeldon, 2012a, p.44). Under this discourse, rural migrants are described as ‘‘peasant sojourners’’ (Anh et al., 2012, p.1127) who are only in the city temporarily before returning home for permanent settlement.

2.4.2 Engendering ‘translocality’
A review of the international literature suggests that transnationalism theories can be especially helpful to unravel the complexity of female migration (Leinonen, 2021; Lutz and Amelina, 2021; Christou and Kofman, 2022). According to Yecesahin (2017, pp.34 ), ‘‘Migration movement occurs within the triangle formed by the local-specific patriarchal power hierarchies, the gender mechanism of global labour forces, and the reproduction of transnational social spaces; it forms an intersectional field.’’ Some argue that female migration is largely constrained by the patriarchal structure in the destination as well as the home community. For example, Poghosyan’s (2018) study about female migrants from Armenia and Georgia suggests that migration gives the women little space or no space at all to augment their freedom and agency. This study shows that many migrant women strictly adhere to the gender norms to comply with the hegemonic gender ideology in their home society as a way to
overcome adverse experiences in the destination society. Tienda and Booth’s (1991) also question whether migration can bring any ‘real’ benefit to women since they are most likely to work in the lowest paying jobs, and are barely able to achieve any upward mobility.

However, others have also discovered that migrant women can find their own means to become powerful and resilient against adversity (Morokvasic, 1984). Some also argue that migration has the potential to modify existing gender orders and gender roles and it may fuel social changes in both the home origin and the destination society (Timmerman et al., 2018). For example, based on the narratives of the Islamic migrant women, Erman’s (1997) study has discovered that even if migrant women still conform to the ideal image of an obedient wife, they also actively challenge their husband if they believe it is best for the family interest. Ralriwala and Uberoi’s (2008a) study has also found that migration has the potential to reverse the unsymmetrical labour division in the household. Some studies have also found that gender will keep playing a role even after resettlement or return migration (Yucesahin, 2017; Zotova & Agadjanian’s, 2017). Djurfeldt (2021, p.20) even argues that “translocality in itself is thus enabled by changing gender roles.”

As Ruyssen and Salomone (2018) has highlighted, there are great variations across the globe regarding the scale of female migration, and as more and more women migrate, there is a growing diversity within the group of female migrants. As many have pointed out, the interaction between gender, family and migration can be considerably contextual, and it also changes over time as the women go through different life stages (Tienda and Booth, 1991; Curran et al., 2006; Ryan et al., 2009; Walsh, 2014). Therefore, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of female migration, we need to position the women not only in the wider structure but also in their family as well as their personal life course.

2.4.2 Rural-urban migration and the translocal space in the Chinese context

As Skeldon (2012a) has suggested, rural-urban migration in China is the most crucial contributor to the development of the circulation discourse in migration research. Yet, studies have shown that rural-urban migration in China is more complicated than ‘circulation’. In the Chinese context, it is widely acknowledged that rural-urban migration is inherently a bi-directional movement (Guo and Zhou, 2013; Pu and Chen, 2018). As Luo (2016) has argued, in China rural-urban migration is never a simple movement from the village to the city, but it is the process of negotiation of return migration and urbanisation from the beginning. In the broadest sense, rural-urban migration in China includes both outmigration and return migration (Niu, 2015; Luo, 2016). As introduced in the previous chapter, rural-urban migration is not only embedded in the specific institutional structure of Chinese society, but is also deeply rooted in the construct of family and gender in Chinese culture.
Several studies about rural-urban migration in China have also adopted a translocal perspective to explore the experience of rural migrants. For example, Zhang’s (2014) study about the experiences of three generations of migrants in one family who run a restaurant in north-western China shows how their economic and social contributions via entrepreneurial efforts help transform both rural and urban development. It highlights the resilience and creativity of the rural migrants who actively seek alternatives to overcome challenges via the maintenance of a translocal livelihood. Andersson (2004) has developed the concept of multi-local situatedness to explore rural migrants’ agency to reconstruct boundaries despite their precarious status in the city. Murphy (2020) builds on the concept of transnational families to develop the concept of multi-local families capturing interactive relationships between the family members that span across multiple locations due to rural-urban migration.

Some studies about female rural-urban migration can also be related to a translocal perspective even if transnationalism theories are not explicitly mentioned. Most adopt a social network perspective to explore the negotiation of different identities. For example, several studies have discovered that rural migrant women still heavily rely on the social network back home when they are in the city (Wang and Yan, 2011; Zhu and Wang, 2013; Cao and Meng, 2016; Fan and Chen, 2016). Cao and Meng (2016) have found that even if the migrant women actively establish new social networks in the city, they are just reproducing the relationships back home, which tends to be highly homogenous, ineffective and vulnerable. However, as De Jong (2000) has argued, while the social network framework is able to explain migration from the micro- and meso level, it is not comprehensive enough to unravel the complexity of migration aspirations. Ryan and colleagues (2008) have also pointed out that loosely adopting a social network perspective without contextualisation risks overlooking the complexity of the lived experience of migration. In the Chinese context, it is almost taken for granted that migrants’ social network is largely limited to fellow migrants and people from the neighbourhood which reinforces their inferior status in the city (Yang and Luo, 2009; Wang and Yan, 2011; Zhu and Wang, 2013; Cao and Meng, 2016). Yet, it is important that we give a closer look at how different social ties are forged, activated and sustained in different spaces and contexts (Ryan, 2011).

The translocal perspective can be helpful to unravel the experience of female rural-urban migration because it acknowledges that rural migrant women are negotiating the dual system of constraints both in the city and in the home village, which forms a translocal space. Many see female migrants as doubly disadvantaged (Sun, 2014) or doubly constrained (Huang & Ni, 2020) because they are simultaneously under the surveillance of the invisible forces in the home community as well as in the city. Despite the double constraints, several studies in China have
discovered that female migrants are capable of subverting unequal gender relations by reconstructing the translocal space by building up human capital (Zhu, 2008; Yu and Pan, 2008; Wu, 2018). Different from the normative story of suffering and victimhood, young migrant women’s narratives have shown that they can be more than “factory girls” (Ip, 2017). In Ip’s (2017) study, the majority of the rural women opted to work at a beauty salon because they wanted to learn a ‘Shouyi (skill)’ so that they would be able to start their own business. In Ma and Jacobs’ (2010) study, although the young women still ended up working in the factories, their decision to work in a factory was the result of careful consideration and they had a very clear plan to maximise the opportunities in the factories to further develop themselves by actively participating in professional training. Even if working in the domestic industry at the time of the study, the majority of the young female migrants expressed the ambition to leave the industry to find a more decent job (Guo, Chow & Palinska, 2011).

However, as discussed in Chapter 2.3, migrant women’s seemingly agentic actions are only a temporary escape from traditional gender norms until marriage and motherhood comes through, and they have to terminate their migration and return home. One of the limitations of the transnationalism theories is that they imply that although rural migrants are disadvantaged in the city, they have unrestricted capabilities to return home freely without any constraint (Skeldon, 2012a). It seems that as long as rural migrants return home, they will not be a problem anymore. However, as Anh and colleagues (2012) have argued, there are more nuances in terms of how migrants experience return migration in reality. For example, many rural migrants will not return home, and even if some migrants in the end move back home, they will not necessarily make a living by farming. According to Skeldon (2012a), the major difficulty in conceptualising circular migration is the issue of return migration, and it is more difficult to understand return migration in the Chinese context due to the specific institutional structure.

Moreover, our current knowledge of female rural-urban migration is largely based on the experience of unmarried migrant women. It is taken for granted that migrant women will return home for marriage and settle down in their home village, and for those who remain in the city, they will send the child back home. Yet in reality there are more diverse patterns of migration and return migration or circularity. Even though transnationalism theories are able to capture the interaction and exchanges between the rural home and the hosting city, they do not suffice to unravel the nuances of how family, gender and agency plays out during the process of rural-urban migration and return migration.

As Heisler (2008) has pointed out, transnationalism has almost become an umbrella term without any specification, and what we need is not a new theory to conceptualise
transnationalism. Rather, we need a more ‘specified and contextualised’ approach to understand how transnationalism is achieved and sustained in the actual migration process in the specific context. Therefore, this study aims to obtain a more specified and contextualised understanding of female rural-urban migration via the experience of young migrant mothers in Beijing, China. Based on the analysis of the empirical data, I propose that female rural-urban migration in China can be understood as a process of ‘navigating multi-locality’. It suggests that multi-locality can be understood as the lived experience of migration itself, rather than a mere livelihood strategy. This study also brings the Chinese context into the theoretical conversation by incorporating the Chinese construct of family, agency and gender to understand how capabilities, aspirations and identities play out during the process of rural-urban migration. The detailed discussion of the multi-locality framework is included in Chapter 8.

2.5 Conceptualising agency in the migration context

The agency vs structure debate has been lying at the centre of migration theorisation for decades. Many scholars have been trying to solve the puzzle from different perspectives using data from various socio-cultural contexts. In recent years, more attention has been paid to a non-dichotomous approach, which aims to bridge the divide between agency and structure. Among all the attempts, de Haas’ (2021) Aspirations-Capabilities Approach is a relatively successful one that moves beyond the agency/structure dichotomy by conceptualising migratory agency as ‘a function of capabilities and aspirations’. As de Haas (2021) has argued, one’s capabilities and aspirations simultaneously shape the patterns and experiences of migration. In order to unravel how capabilities and aspirations together shape one’s experience of migration, we need to first understand what ‘capabilities’ mean in the migration context. According to de Haas (2021), capabilities can be understood as a migrant’s access to economic, social, cultural and bodily capitals that are subject to the negative liberties that prevent movement and positive liberties that facilitate movement. In the Chinese context, rural migrants’ capabilities are also evaluated based on their human capital and they are often seen as ‘lacking capabilities’ because they are rural, uneducated and unskilled (Zhu, 2004; Wissink, Hazelzet & Breitung, 2014; Yang, 2014; Wei & Yuan, 2015). These incapabalities often define the rural migrants’ inferior status in urban society, which in turn reinforces the stereotype that compared to the urban citizens, rural migrants ‘lack’ agency.

Recent studies about migration, especially young people’s migration, have highlighted the crucial role of ‘aspiration’ in shaping the process of migration. Based on the Aspirations-Capabilities Framework proposed by de Haas (2021), including ‘aspirations’ in the conceptualisation of migration helps to capture the subjectivity and individuality of the migration process. Actually, when Mabogunje (1970) published his *Theory of Rural-Urban*
Migration, he had already pointed out that rural-urban migration is driven by the villagers’ pursuit of ‘the good life’. Many studies have also loosely referred to the concepts of desire, goal, pursuit and want to explore the motivation of rural-urban migration (Layalka, 2012; Fan & Chen, 2014; Wu, 2018). However, according to de Haas (2021, p.2), in the migration process, aspirations not only refer to people’s life aspirations in general, but they are also shaped by their ‘perceived geographical opportunities here and there’. Based on his definition, aspirations have two layers of meanings. The first layer refers to the more general understanding of aspirations. The second layer touches upon the spatiality of aspirations, which is more relevant to the migration context but not explored thoroughly by de Haas. Simply combining these two aspects of aspirations does not clarify how aspirations play out in the migration process, and it may only create more confusion. For example, as de Haas has argued, in order to make migration happen, the potential migrant needs to have the aspiration to migrate in the first place. Otherwise, the migrant will choose to stay in the home region despite being equipped with the capabilities to migrate, or become a ‘forced’ migrant who moves against his/her free will.

As Appadurai (2014) has pointed out, in order to be capable of aspiring, one has to have the ‘capacity to aspire’ first, which is embedded in one’s capabilities as well as perceived capabilities. This is also in line with de Haas’ (2021) model that maps out how aspirations are constructed based on one’s capabilities and perceived capabilities. However, it has also been noted that in many cases, there is the discrepancy between one’s capabilities and aspirations, which is conceptualised as the ‘aspirations gap’ (Appadurai, 2004). Czaika and Vothknecht (2012) summarise two ways that migrants use to overcome the mismatch between capabilities and aspirations. The migrants will either improve their capabilities to actualise their aspirations or to lower their aspirations to match the level of their capabilities. However, they also question whether this might lead to a limited understanding of the relationship between capabilities and aspirations, since there is a risk of further victimising those who are not ‘capable’ enough to actualise their aspiration but at the same time not willing to lower their aspirations.

A review of the Chinese literature suggests that there might be a different perspective to understand agency as a capacity of adaptation. The concept of ‘adaptation’ that I adopt here derives from Confucianism, and was first proposed as a sociological concept by the Chinese sociologist, Pan Guangdan, in 1933. The original Chinese concept is ‘Weiyu’, which is later translated into English as ‘adaptation’ by Pan, and further developed by many Chinese scholars. Fei (2017, 2018b, 2018c) argues that adaptation is one’s capacity to reach a compromise with the environment in order to realise one’s aspiration, which means that the individual will change their own behaviours and attitudes to adapt to the structure. As Zhai (2017, p.278) has suggested, the social construction of reality is ‘a product of the compromise between an agentic actor and the social structure’.
The Chinese understanding of agency and freedom is largely based on the belief that individuals are always constrained (Qian, 2012). Therefore, agency shall not be evaluated on the basis of whether one is constrained or not, but how one reacts to the constraints and restructures the constraints to realise their aspirations. As Qian (2012) has suggested, the capacity to compromise shall be understood as ‘take the road in the middle’, and this is the agency and freedom that is valued in Chinese culture. This provides an alternative understanding of agency as a reactive, flexible and non-resistant capacity. Seeing agency as a capacity of adaptation values the migrant as an active agent who has the capability to live the life that they have a reason to pursue (Sen, 1999), which suggests that the performance of agency can be considerably subjective and contextual. This helps us move beyond the agency-structure dichotomy and provides a new angle to explore agency with a culture-sensitive perspective.

2.6 Gaps Noted in the Literature Review
2.6.1 Lack of theorisation
Migration studies can be broadly divided into two main categories. Most of the earlier works on migration were based on internal movements. For example, the first migration theory, Ravenstein’s (1885) Laws of Migration, built on internal migration in the UK. Many seminal works in the 1960s and 1970s also largely drew on the observation of internal migration and laid the foundation for migration theorisation, such as Sjaastad’s (1962) The Cost and Returns of Human Migration, Todaro’s (1969) and Harris-Todaro’s (1970) Model of Labor Migration, Mabogunje’s (1970) Theory of Rural-Urban Migration and Zelinsky’s (1971) Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition. However, since the 1980s, the attention has gradually shifted to international migration as a result of mass immigration and transnational movement around the world. Most of the migration theories that we use today are developed based on international migration, including the social network theories and transnationalism theories. Many of the recent studies are focused on how social networks are forged and maintained in the transnational space via transnational connections (Geroge, 2005), transnational family networks (Ryan et al., 2009), transnational conjugalities (Tamburlini, 2018), transnational caregiving (Paliwala and Uberoi, 2008), and transnational parenting (Haagsman and Mazzucato, 2021). Even if some scholars manage to adapt transnationalism theories to explore internal migration by adopting a ‘translocal’ perspective, there is often a lack of contextualisation in terms of how the translocal space is forged and sustained in the context of internal migration.

Quantitatively, internal migration has always been more significant than international migration (King & Skeldon, 2010). Despite its ever-growing large volume, internal migration is largely absent in migration research today. As some have noticed, internal migration is ‘deliberately excluded’ (Skeldon, 2005, p.3) and ‘effectively erased’ (Hickey & Yeoh, 2016, p.642) from current migration discussions, textbooks and global reports. Even when internal migration is
finally mentioned, the author usually simply adds a short sentence claiming that the same applies to internal migration, or ‘the internal counterpart’ (Massey, et al., 1993, p.433). Arguably, internal migration has become a ‘miniature’ of international migration.

Rural-urban migration should count as the most researched form of internal migration. However, a review of the literature shows that during the past decades, our understanding of rural-urban migration has not really improved. A review of the Chinese literature has discovered that some scholars are still using the Push-Pull Model to explore the experience of rural-urban migration (Zhou and Xu, 2010; Zhao, 2015). Moreover, based on the dichotomous understanding of the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’, rural migrants are consequently labelled as a homogenous group of migrants who have less human capital. Rooted in the rural-urban dualism, rural-urban migration is usually understood as ‘a transfer of labour from a traditional, land-intensive technology to a human capital-intensive technology with an unending potential for growth’ (Lucas, 2004, p.29). Some have even argued that any work trying to conceptualise rural-urban migration only ends up reinforcing ‘a simple bipolar division: between a traditional and a modern society; between rural and urban; between agricultural and industrial; and between undeveloped and developed’ (Skeldon, 2012b, p.154). Building on the conceptual divides, theorisation of rural-urban migration can only be partial and fragmentary. Moreover, the conceptualisation of rural-urban migration as labour migration is largely based on the assumption that rural-urban migration as an economic activity is dominated by ‘young working-age men’ (Selod and Shipil, 2021), which is relatively gender-blind. Very little is known about the female migrants (de Haan, 1997) despite more and more women are actively moving to the cities to seek a better life (Anh et al., 2012).

As Selod and Shipil (2021) has pointed out, rural-urban migration can be more complicated in reality and it can be considerably contextual because it is embedded in the specific social, cultural, economic and political structure of the country. For example, some studies suggest that rural-urban migration is a ‘problem’ that needs to be solved (Rhoda, 1983; Amare et al., 2012) whereas others see rural-urban migration as ‘development’ that should be welcomed (Lucas, 2004; Long, 2005). Some believe that rural-urban migration is mostly motivated by income differentials (Todaro, 1969; Harris-Todaro, 1970) while others call for a more comprehensive approach to capture the multiplicity of the decision-making process (Mabogunje, 1970; de Haan, 1997; Anh et al., 2012; Seldon & Shilpi, 2021). While some see rural-urban migration as a desperate escape from poverty (Mazumdar, 1987), others argue that rural-urban migration is only a temporary strategy over the life course (Anh et al., 2012; Chacko & Price, 2021). In a way, rural-urban migration is a ‘universal phenomenon’, but it is not experienced in a universal way, and it is difficult to come up with an umbrella theory that captures all the complexities of rural-urban migration.
While rural-urban migration is a contextualised experience, as Mabogunje (1970) has suggested, we need to look beyond context because studying migration in a specific context has the potential to shed light on how we can research migration in the future. From the literature, we can see how the early work on internal migration has laid the foundation for migration theorisation. As Skeldon (2005) has suggested, internal migration and international migration should not be treated as two exclusive migrations, but they should be understood as one integrated system of human mobility. Yet, our system of knowledge about international and internal migration is far from integrated. It is often fragmented, exclusive and dichotomous. For example, as discussed previously, circulation and transnationalism theories have many similarities, but there is barely any theoretical conversation between the two lines of thinking. This study aims to bridge this gap by bringing female rural-urban migration in China into conversation with transnationalism theories. This does not mean that I will simply use the existing transnationalism framework to analyse the empirical data of this study, but I will try to develop a substantive theory based on the specific Chinese context to expand our current understanding of transnationalism theories. I hope this can help us rethink human mobility in a more grounded way and retheorise migration not just as internal or international, but “as relational and constitutive sets of social processes embedded within specific historical and geographical contexts” (Hickey & Yeoh, 2016, p.644).

2.6.2 Lack of contextualisation

A binary understanding of ‘here’ and ‘there’

Although the transnationalism theories propose a non-linear perspective that opposes the conventional understanding of migration as an ‘uprooting’ experience (Brettell, 2008), it still assumes that there are two ends of the migratory journey, the home and the destination. While engaging in the grounded theory process of cycling back and forth between literature and empirical data for this study, such a binary portrayal appeared inadequate when migration experience often includes multiple potential destinations.

A static understanding of family in the migration process

In most migration studies about female rural-urban migration, family is either utilised as a unit of analysis as in ‘family migration’ (Morokvasic, 1984; Lauby and Stark, 1988; Liang, Dai and Ma, 2017; Song and Li, 2012; Li, Shen and Li, 2020), or conceptualised as the constraint of individual mobility (Liu, 2014; Wang and Zhou, 2016; Yazgan and Yucesahin, 2017; Zhu, 2019). Based on insights generated through this study, I suggest that, rather than conceptualising family as the constraint of migration, we can also understand family as the ‘mediator’ of migration. A review of the migration literature has shown that while in the western literature, family is always conveniently equated with the nuclear family, in Chinese literature, there is an overemphasis on the expanded family, which is associated with
responsibilities, obligations and filial piety. Moreover, it is often overlooked that as women go through different life stages, the construct of family also shifts, which may in turn shape women’s experience of migration.

**A one-dimensional understanding of gender and identity**

Based on the transnational/translocal framework, migrants are always portrayed to have a ‘hybrid’ identity and sometimes, migrants are described to experience the feeling of ‘in-betweenness’ (Zhu, 2008; Wang and Yan, 2011; Huang and Ni, 2020), which can lead to great confusion and frustration. The above conceptualisation fails to capture the intersectionality of identity construction during the migration process. Moreover, it is overlooked how return migration can further complicate identity re-construction. For example, some migrant women may actively retain their rural identity and follow the rural norms despite their exposure to urban culture (Nie, 2014a; Zhao and Lu, 2014; Luo, 2016). This study design specifically sets out to include a focus on such a gap in the literature.

**A partial understanding of agency**

There is a common misunderstanding about transnationalism/translocalism. That is migrants have unconstrained freedom to return home (Brettell, 2008; Skeldon, 2012a; He, 2020). Yet, as others have noticed, sustaining a translocal life may not be as smooth as some have portrayed, since the migrants have to navigate the constraints both in the hosting society as well as in the home of origin (Heisler, 2008). They are under the dual constraints (Ma, 2009; Wei and Yuan, 2015; Wei and He, 2016). However, this does not mean that they are completely deprived of agency. As Andersson (2014) has argued, rural migrants are able to reconstruct boundaries and overcome precarity via multi-local situatedness. Therefore, it is imperative that we look beyond the constraint and try to understand rural women’s agency as a capacity that is embedded in the specific context, not only in terms of the wider structure, but also in terms of the women’s specific life stage.

2.7 Summary

As Zelinsky (1971) has said, migration is not only a physical activity, but it is also a social activity. Migrants are not only moving from one place to another, but they are constantly navigating and adapting to the different structures, which in turn shapes the individual experience of migration and ultimately creates intensified and diversified forms of human mobility that we witness nowadays (Hickey and Yeoh, 2016). Since Ravenstein (1885), many scholars have tried to conceptualise internal migration, especially rural-urban migration. Many assume that we have already known enough about internal migration (Nestorowicz and Anacka, 2019), but as others have pointed out, we know about the scale, the patterns and the motives of internal migration, but do we know enough about how it is experienced on the individual level (Yang et al., 2013)?
During past decades, China has witnessed great transformations, in terms of the introduction of new-type urbanisation, new migration policies and the relaxation of *Hukou* restrictions, and all development inevitably shapes the experience of rural-urban migration, especially among the younger female migrants who grow up in the era of mass migration and urbanisation. It seems that our understanding of rural-urban migration lags behind the dynamics of changes in reality. This requires us to look beyond the existing theories and discourses with the aim to expand our understanding of the experience of rural-urban migration.

After widely reviewing the literature, it is clear that some of the existing knowledge can explain some aspects of the experiences of the migrant mothers in this study, but there is no single framework that is comprehensive enough to get the full picture of what it is like to be a rural migrant mother in the city as this study set out to do. This in no way implies that the existing conceptualisation of rural-urban migration is wrong or has no value at all, but it suggests that in order to have a better understanding of female rural-urban migration, we need a more specified and contextualised approach to understand migration as an integral part of the lived experience of everyday life. With this aim, I adopt the Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods that is interactive, abductive and interpretive to develop a substantive theory to obtain a more specified and contextualised understanding of female rural-urban migration.
3. Methodology and research methods

3.1. Introduction

This study is a Grounded Theory study. Grounded Theory is not merely a research method, but a systematic and transparent way to do research and build explanations of social processes (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021). It is a way of thinking (Morse, 2009), or a ‘‘constellation of methods’’ (Charmaz, 2009, p.128). In this study, the overall research process, including literature review, data collection, data analysis and theory development, is specifically guided by Charmaz’s (2009, 2014a) iteration of the method, the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach. The following sections first introduces the emergence, development and application of Grounded Theory and then moves on to explain why Constructivist Grounded Theory is chosen for this study and how it is operationalised throughout the research process.

3.2 Emergence, development and application of Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory emerged as a response to the scepticism by quantitative scholars who treated qualitative studies as uncredible and ungeneralisable (Charmaz, 2014a; Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021). In order to reclaim the legitimacy of qualitative research, Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed a set of research practices that incorporated two opposing strands in the traditions of social research, positivism and pragmatism, with the aim to produce ‘‘quality’’ qualitative research (Corbin, 2009, p.51). They proposed what they claimed as a systematic qualitative research approach named Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in their foundational textbook The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Since then, it has become one of the most popular qualitative research methods (Morse, 2009). Interested in social processes, Grounded Theory is often used as a tool to unravel the complexity of social phenomenon through inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended (Charmaz, 2009, 2014a) research strategies aimed at developing a theory that is grounded in the empirical data in the specific context (Morse, 2009; Corbin, 2009; Charmaz, 2014).

Since its emergence, successor strands of Grounded Theory have been developed, with new iterations reflecting differences in ontological and epistemological standpoints. These include further development by the original developers, Glaser and Strauss themselves, as shown in Glaser’s (1978) Theoretical Sensitivity and Strauss’s (1987) Qualitative Data Analysis, respectively named as the Glaserian and Straussian Grounded Theory by Stern (1995). During past decades, Grounded Theory witnessed a ‘‘genealogy of development’’ (Morse, 2009, p.16), with milestones such as Scharzman’s (1991) Dimensional Analysis, Charmaz’s (2014a) Constructivist Grounded Theory, Clarke’s (2005) Situational Analysis and the more recent
Critical Grounded Theory (Belfrage and Hauf, 2017). As many Grounded Theorists have explained, the variations of Grounded Theory reflect departures in ontological and/or epistemological premises, which only reflect the different research styles of scholars proposing successor iterations, but are not complete departures from the original Grounded Theory. While they constitute a productive critique of each other, since all the different strands still emphasise the core values, or the ‘essences’ (Bryant, 2019, p.30) of inductive inquiry and the practices of coding, memo-writing, theoretical sampling, constant comparisons and theory development, they at the same time endorse key foundational premises of the method. As Bryant (2019) points out, despite the variations, the motivation to conduct a Grounded Theory study should be generating a substantive theory that deepens the understanding of a specific phenomenon. This task entails the researcher looking beyond the rules, traditions and instructions to seek the methods best suited to the research project and use that method flexibly to develop a theory that is original and credible. Therefore, Grounded Theory should never be treated as a set of fixed rules or guidelines that the researchers must follow step by step (Corbin, 2009).

Since Grounded Theory was first introduced by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, scholars from diverse disciplines, including education, nursing, public health, sociology, psychology, business and more have used Grounded Theory or elements of Grounded Theory methods in their empirical research. In recent decades, Grounded Theory has also been adopted and adapted by migration scholars to gain a more contextualised understanding of the experience of migration. For example, Sheridan and Storch (2009) used Grounded Theory to explore the experience of Vietnamese and Polish immigrants in Ireland in an intercultural context. Redman-MacLaren and Mills (2015) adopted Transformational Grounded Theory methods to decolonise research methodology based on their participatory action research. Kim and Hocking (2016) combined Straussian Grounded Theory with an occupational perspective to interrogate Korean immigrants’ responses to overcome the disruption of everyday life in New Zealand while Plöger and Barkos (2021) incorporated institutional ethnography with Reflexive Grounded Theory to explore the transition process of newly-immigrated students in German school to unravel the interaction between migration, education and multilingualism.

Migration scholars in China have also been attracted to using Grounded Theory methods in their research, such as Xiao and Chen (2007) who explored migrant workers’ well-being at work, Liu (2013) who explored new generation migrants’ motives of entrepreneurship, Gao and Zhang (2022) who investigated the risk factors of return migrants’ entrepreneurship and Wu and Sun (2020) who delved into the life experiences of migrant children to understand their experience of social adaptation. Jing (2017) has even argued that Grounded Theory can be especially convenient for Chinese researchers because the ‘coding-abstracting-theory building’ process proposed by Grounded Theorists is very much in common with the ‘typology-cause-
reason’ model of argumentation embedded in traditional Chinese rhetoric theory developed by Mozi.

A review of the literature shows that despite many Grounded Theorists' ambition to produce quality qualitative research, many studies that claim to be a Grounded Theory study fall short of meeting the ‘large’ goal set by the method of devising a substantive theory, especially some of the Chinese studies, featuring instead of the rigorous systematic account of process the method demands a tendency towards vagueness in reporting the research process and the lack of theory building. Yet, Timonen et al (2018) in proposing a pragmatic Grounded Theory approach highlight how most Grounded Theory studies in practice aim for mid-range theories or refinement of established theories but still feature novelty and have scholarly merit.

In the case of the migration Grounded Theory studies discussed above many only follow the Grounded Theory procedures and end with more of a description of a core or major process, rather than a concept or a theory that leads to advancement of migration theorisation. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that most of the studies are conducted in a very specific context and usually with ‘double’ or even ‘triple’ disadvantaged groups. Using Grounded Theory is considerably helpful to challenge dominant discourses that portray migrants as completely powerless and deprived of agency. Adopting Grounded Theory methods helps the researchers situate the research participants in their own life world and understand their experiences from their own perspectives. This subsequently inspires the researchers to identify the alternative and creative pathways that migrants adopt to overcome the difficulties in life. Thus a fresh perspective is provided that allows their agency, resilience and strength come into view that may be otherwise overlooked or misunderstood with a pre-determined set of theoretical agendas.

As Corbin (2009, p.41) has highlighted, Grounded Theory analysis is ‘‘relaxed, flexible, and driven by insight gained through interaction with data rather than being structured and based on procedures’’, making Grounded Theory inherently fluid and adaptable (Charmaz, 2009). Researchers have the autonomy to adapt the methods to accommodate the specific research design in the specific research context (Morse, 2009; Corbin, 2009). As Fei (2008) has argued, the debate is never about which version of Grounded Theory is the right one, but it is more important to talk about how we justify and defend the version that we choose for our own project. The next section will talk about why Constructivist Grounded Theory is most suitable for this project and how it may help deepen our understanding of the experience of female rural-urban migration in China.
3.3 Choosing Constructivist Grounded Theory

3.3.1 Research questions and research aims

As concluded above (see Chapter 3), initial literature review shows how rural-urban migration has already been widely researched by scholars from various perspectives and disciplines such that it may seem that there is a ‘saturation of migration theorisation’. However, a review of the literature has also suggested that rural-urban migration is a complex and contextual phenomenon, which current migration theories are insufficient to explain.

This study is interested in the experiences of young migrant mothers in Beijing, China. It aims to expand our understanding of rural-urban migration through the experiences of a specific group of people at a specific time in a specific socio-cultural context. As argued in my literature review above, the experience of young, rural migrant mothers in the city is under-researched and we need a more specified and contextualised approach to understand migration as an integral part of the lived experience of everyday life. Constructivist Grounded Theory sees individual experiences as situated and embedded in the specific structural environment, which moves beyond the dichotomous understanding of the relationship between the individual and the structure. This helps capture the complexity of the lived experience of the research participants (Charmaz, 2009, 2014a) and the ‘messiness of social realities’ (Morse et.al, 2021, p.179). Different from Classical Grounded Theory which promotes the development of completely novel theory or a formal theory, Constructivist Grounded Theory aims to establish a middle range theory or a substantive theory that speaks to the specific context that may improve our understanding of rural-urban migration through the experiences of young migrant mothers in China.

3.3.2 Epistemology and positionality

While Glaser and Strauss’ original Grounded Theory is motivated to obtain an objective explanation and generalised conceptualisation of the social phenomenon from the perspective of an external observer, Charmaz’ Constructivist Grounded Theory (2009, 2014a) seeks an interpretive understanding of the experiences of the research participants from their own perspectives. According to Charmaz (2009, 2014a), there are multiple social realities, constructed by the research participants in their specific settings and simultaneously co-constructed by the researcher during the research process. Constructivist Grounded Theory agrees with social constructionism that social realities are constructed, but goes a little further to acknowledge researcher positionality as also part of the construction of the multiple realities research participants are experiencing and constructing (Charmaz, 2009, 2014a). As Charmaz (2014a) has explained, the word ‘constructivism’ itself suggests that subjectivity is an inherent part of the research process. In this research tradition, the role of the researcher is not to find the
‘truth’, but rather only an interpretive understanding of the researched experiences based on their construction of the meanings of the data (Huntley, et al., 2021).

**Researcher positionality**

Bryant (2019) and Jing (2017) address how theory is generated arguing that although Grounded Theory emphasises the ‘emergence’ of theory, the theory never naturally ‘emerges’ from the data. First of all, the researcher chooses the line of inquiry they wish to pursue (Stern, 2009), and then in order to make the ‘leap’ from data to theory, the researcher, depending on their value system, skills and even mental capacities, purposively jumps over the gap between the empirical and the conceptual (Jing, 2017). Therefore, in a Constructivist Grounded Theory study, the issues of positionality and reflexivity matter throughout the research process, including data collection, data analysis as well as theory development.

As noted in the review of both international and Chinese literature, there is a growing trend to adopt Constructivist Grounded Theory in migration studies. Many have noted that Constructivist Grounded Theory methods can be especially helpful to tackle ethical issues when researching the migrant population (Sheridan and Storch, 2009; Plöger and Barkos, 2021). It has been adopted to explore the experiences of international marriage of female immigrants (Fernbrant, Agardh and Emmelin; 2017), refugees and asylum seekers’ experiences of parenthood in the destination countries (Hedstrom, et al., 2021; Huntley, et al., 2021) and female immigrants and refugees’ experiences of intimate partner violence (Njie-Carr, et al., 2021). As Plöger and Barkos (2021, p.414) have proposed, ‘‘We understand our role as researchers not necessarily in giving voice to somebody or advocating for someone, but rather in integrating oppressed and marginalised voices into dominant discourses to which we have access due to our own hegemonic privileges.’’

While designing and conducting this study, I am aware that as a young Chinese woman studying in a western country, I may be perceived as ‘privileged’ compared to my research participants, which may potentially impact my relationship with them. Moreover, being a researcher who has experience working with and researching migrant communities in China as well as being a migrant woman myself, my prior knowledge and personal experiences can be expected to shape the research process and interpretation of the empirical data. While many researchers promote the idea of blocking, erasing or ‘bracketing’ (Backman and Kyngäs1999) all preconceptions, so that prior knowledge will not obstruct the production of original and novel ideas, Charmaz (2009) and Bryant (2019) argue that rather than purporting practising ‘objectivity’, researchers should acknowledge their identity and positionality as integral to the ‘data’ and engage with it reflexively. From this perspective, the aim is to gain contextualised and specified understanding of the experience of rural-urban migration in China while being
aware of researcher positionality. This position aligns best with my own ontological perspective and thus I considered Charmaz’ (2009, 2014a) Constructivist Grounded Theory a suitable approach for this study.

3.3.3 Abductive reasoning

A researcher’s positionality is not only related to their subjectivity, but is also linked to his/her knowledge of literature. The “mega myth” of Grounded Theory is that conducting literature review before data analysis will contaminate the research process and many researchers deliberately avoid literature review so as not to break the rule of induction (Morse, et al., 2021, p.295). Glaser and Strauss (1967) first proposed that researchers should stay away from existing knowledge in order to develop new theories, but as Bryant (2007) has noted, Strauss himself later also lightly touched upon how literature might assist the researcher with theory building. More recently, especially after Charmaz (2014a) explicitly promoted an abductive approach, more and more Grounded Theorists have started to see the value of literature informing the research process from the outset. Bryant (2019) now argues that in a Grounded Theory study, the process of literature review should better be understood as ‘engaging with’ literature to avoid confusion and misunderstanding. While in the initial stage of analysis, the research can be inductive, as analysis proceeds, in order to move from data to theory building, researchers need to adopt an abductive approach (Timonen, Foley and Conlon, 2018; Bryant, 2019; Morse, et al., 2021). Moreover, after a grounded theory is developed, the researcher may need to take a deductive approach to compare the grounded theory with the extant knowledge to justify and legitimise the theorising of the researched phenomenon.

This study is a PhD project and Thurlow (2020) argues that a completely inductive approach is not compatible with a postgraduate project, since reviewing literature is crucial in the early stage of the PhD programme for the submission of proposals, ethics application and progress reports. In many cases, prior literature review can help researchers, especially the novice researchers, pinpoint the focus of the study and frame their research aims (Timonen, Foley and Conlon, 2018) and explore different angles and possibilities (Fei, 2008). Analysis can even become more productive by engaging with literature during the research process (Timonen, Foley and Conlon, 2018).

As noted above, in a Constructive Grounded Theory study, the researcher does not aim to develop a completely novel theory, but rather construct a substantive theory that can provide new insights to the existing literature or challenge existing theories and question preconceptions (Bryant, 2019; Morse et al., 2021). This requires the researcher to maintain a close conversation between data and literature throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2009, 2014a). We can even argue that literature is also a part of ‘data’ that informs the research process in a
Constructivist Grounded Theory study. While many are sceptical about Grounded Theory because it may seem that the research process is entirely guided by the ‘data’, as Bryant (2017, p.156) has suggested, “all is data, but data is not all” because it is the researcher who brings the data to life and elevates the data to a conceptual level that ultimately leads to advancement of existing knowledge. A Constructivist Grounded Theory approach provides research participants a chance to tell their own stories constituting the data from which theory is generated, and also fully acknowledges the role of the researcher in the research process and particularly in theorising the researched phenomenon.

3.4 Operationalising Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods

3.4.1 Overall research process and strategies

The overall research process of this study builds on Charmaz (2009, 2014a) and Bryant’s (2017) Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods, which is interactive, flexible and reflexive. It adheres to the standard process of coding, memoing, theoretical sampling and conceptualising, but is also adaptive to the specific research context and research timeline. The chart below illustrates the main stages of the research process leading on to explain the stages of data collection, data analysis and theory development in more detail. One thing to note is that even if the different stages are discussed in separate sections, it does not mean that the research process is a linear process and all different stages are conducted independently and chronologically. Rather, the overall research process is made up of multiple rounds of data collection, data analysis, engaging with literature and theory development as shown in Figure 1 below.
3.4.2 Data collection

3.4.2.1 Recruitment

Before data collection, I identified several organisations in Beijing that could act as the gatekeepers for this study. One organisation agreed to assist with the research process. The NGO provided early education programmes in one migrant village in Beijing, and all the research participants were recruited from this migrant village with the assistance of the NGO. A detailed introduction of the research setting is included in Chapter 4.1.

As a result of Covid, the centre was closed for six months. I started data collection as soon as the centre resumed its programme after Beijing lifted the restrictions. According to the centre manager, many of their service users who would have matched the inclusion criteria had left Beijing because of the pandemic, and she was not sure how many new service users might be interested to participate in the research. She suggested that I could do some volunteering work at the centre. On the one hand, I would have the chance to be familiar with the actual environment that the migrant women were living in, and on the other hand, the migrant mothers at the centre would be familiar with my presence and feel more relaxed and comfortable when they were approached and invited to participate in the research. While the issue of volunteering is still controversial in scholarship, my experience suggests that it can be considerably helpful, not just in terms of building rapport and recruiting participants, but also regarding my understanding of the women’s experiences, which will be further discussed in Chapter 5.3

Reflections on positionality.

This study aims to explore the experience of rural-urban migration of young migrant mothers, who have been silent and invisible in previous studies. There are studies about young migrant women, and there are studies about migrant mothers, but there is barely any study that specifically looks into the experience of young migrant mothers. I chose to recruit women who were aged 18-28 and first migrated to the city before the age of 23 because I wanted to capture their current experience as a young migrant mother as well as their past experience of being a young migrant woman, in order to understand the experience of multiple life transitions and the process of negotiation and adaptation along the course of migration. I chose to recruit women who initiated first migration by themselves because I wanted to explore the young women’s experience and performance of agency, which had been largely absent in existing literature.

Initial inclusion criteria:

a) aged 18-28
b) with a rural Hukou
c) who first migrated before the age of 23
d) who initiated first migration by herself
d) who is currently living with her child(ren) in Beijing
e) whose child is over three years old (if the woman has more than one child, she shall have at least one child that is over three years old)

In the beginning, I chose to recruit young mothers whose child was aged three and above because I wanted the women to have already experienced ‘enough’ of motherhood to tell their stories. However, after having interviewed six migrant mothers, theoretical sampling principles directed me to include mothers with younger children having noted in the first sets of interviews how participants recalled the first two years after childbirth was most overwhelming, both physically and emotionally, and greatly shaped their experience of migration and aspiration for return migration. This directed me to include women with younger children still experiencing the transition into motherhood to capture this on-going interaction between motherhood and migration as the young women were actually experiencing the changes in life. Yet, it also appeared necessary that these new mothers would have some time to experience motherhood and reflect on their experience, so I decided to recruit more women whose child was aged one and above. After discussing with my supervisors, we refined the inclusion criteria following theoretical sampling principles as follows:

a) aged 18-28
b) with a rural Hukou
c) who first migrated before the age of 23
d) who initiated first migration by herself
d) who is currently living with her child(ren) in Beijing
e) whose child is over one year old (if the woman has more than one child, she shall have at least one child that is over one year old)

Overall, twelve women were recruited from the migrant village. Ten women were recruited with the assistance of the centre manager. That means that they were identified and introduced to me by the centre manager. Two women were recruited via snowball sampling, one of whom was introduced to me by another research participant, and the other one was introduced to me by a migrant mother at the centre who did not match the inclusion criteria herself. Among all the twelve research participants, seven agreed to have a follow-up interview with me one year later. The profile of all research participants is included in Chapter 4.2.
3.4.2.2 Interviewing

Using narrative interviews for data in CGT study

Interview is the most widely adopted method in Grounded Theory studies (Timonen, Foley and Conlon, 2018). As Charmaz (2014) has suggested, Grounded Theorists often use intensive interviewing in their study to obtain in-depth and first-hand information about the personal experience of the research topic. They tend to ask open questions and create an interactive space for the participants to narrate their own life stories. Studies about young migrant mothers in China are scant, and our understanding of the lived experience of young migrant mothers are even more lacking. According to Elder (1994), lived experience refers to the first-hand subjective experience of the individual in their own life world, and I believe it is imperative to explore the actual experiences of the research participants from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective. Therefore, I decided to use narrative interviews which are open and interactive to capture the lived experience of the young migrant mothers.

So what kind of data do narrative interviews generate? As McAdams (2005) suggests, people are active storytellers who construct and re-construct their life story along their life course in their given social, cultural and historical settings. Narrative approaches consider people are both experiencing their life, and creating and interpreting the experience at the same time in a meaningful and coherent way (King and Hicks, 2006). Some see narratives as ‘life reviews’ (Turunen, Dockett and Perry, 2015). Others see narratives as an ‘adaptive coping’ and ‘constructive learning’ process (Blagov and Singer, 2004). Therefore, people should be respected for their creativity, agency and resilience when they make meanings of themselves and the world around them.

Life stories are not the same as life histories. Life stories are based on the reflection of the past, the experience of one’s current life and one’s projection of their future life (McAdams, 2005; Turunen, Dockett and Perry, 2015). Thus, the approach facilitates obtaining a holistic understanding of migration as an on-going process in life, which was initiated in the past, is experienced at this moment and oriented towards the future. Telling one’s life stories can be ‘an experience of the experience’ at the particular moment in life (Haynes, 2006). However, some might question the credibility and accuracy of self-articulated narratives. As Haynes (2006) has pointed out, ‘story’ should not be misunderstood as fiction, fragmentation, distortion or imagination, but it is a version of the reality of the narrator. Whether the story is made up of facts or distorted memories, it is the reality that is constructed by the narrator. Storytelling is about ‘stepping back’ (Blagov and Singer, 2004). It is a process of self-making (Bruner, 1991) and self-presentation (Turunen, Dockett and Perry, 2015). Moreover, migration is a ‘gendered’ process. Men and women have different interpretations and experiences of their own migration.
McAdams (2005) has argued that there are the hegemonic life stories told by power elites, while women and socially marginalised populations are largely silenced. The missing voice of women is the reflection as well as the consequence of the disadvantages of women in patriarchal society. Despite the growing number of rural women moving into the city, the voices of female migrants are still relatively absent (Zhu, Wu and Chapman, 2013).

As a Constructivist Grounded Theory study, the aim of the study is not to find out what ‘actually happened to’ these young migrant mothers. Rather, it aims to explore how they perceive and interpret their life as a young woman, a migrant and a mother. In a way, it is a reflexive process. They are talking about what events happened, what went wrong, what they could have done, and what they are going to do. Therefore, by conducting a narrative interview, the researcher is not simply collecting retrospective data that explains what happened, but also why that happened and how the narrator experienced it and how they make sense of it from their ‘temporal’ position at the moment of the interview (Bruner, 1991; Haynes, 2006), which helps to develop a grounded theory that can provide a specified and contextualised understanding of how young migrant mothers in China experience migration.

Narrative interviewing
According to Riemann (2006), a narrative interview consists of four stages: ‘developing a trusting relationship’, ‘starting the interview with a generative question’, ‘the main narrative phase without any interruptions’ and ‘the closing phase in which additional questions and answers are possible.’ Although narrative interviews are known to be open and unstructured, sometimes, the researcher may need to ‘interfere’ during the interview to direct the focus of the conversation in line with their research focus. For example, Riessmann (2008) points out participants may get lost or confused, or can feel stressed when they are simply told to tell their stories without any specific questions. In this study, none of the participants had ever been interviewed or given the chance to tell their stories, so in many cases, the women were embarrassed in the beginning of the interview because they did not know what to say. Therefore, in the interviews in this study, the first part tends to be more ‘informational’ (Charmaz, 2014a) to collect some basic information, such as their age, their home of origin and the names of their children. This serves to break the ice and socialise the woman into the interaction so that we could then move on to discuss how they came to Beijing and how they became a mother. While the narrative interviews in this study were very much participant-led, I did refer to a set of questions to ‘warm-up’, to probe and to guide and reassure the participant about what I wanted to talk about with her so as she would not ‘get lost’ among her own narratives. This is one form of data co-construction between researcher and participant.
Drawing on Riemann (2006) and Riessman (2008), the narrative interviews in this study consisted of a generative opening question, a main narrative stage focusing on two topics of ‘migration stories’ and the ‘motherhood stories’ and additional questions. Although I aimed to collect data about two different topics, in the actual interviews, these two storylines were usually intertwined. Many women would start to talk about their experiences of relationships, marriage and motherhood as they described their migration experiences. In this case, I would not interrupt, but note down the things that the participant had talked about and came back to it for more clarification later. Therefore, although the participants had the freedom and autonomy to construct their own life stories, I would need to ask follow-up questions or ask for clarification when necessary to make sure the stories told were coherent and meaningful. See Appendix A for the outlined interview schedule.

The narrative interviews usually lasted for about an hour. Several interviews lasted for 90 minutes but I did not set a time limit because I wanted to give the participant the autonomy to talk freely. I wanted to know as much information as possible before I could identify emerging codes and categories. I also noticed that as the interview proceeded, the participant tended to become more open and talkative. In the beginning, some women tended to tell their stories in a way that they saw as ‘appropriate’ or ‘desirable’ rather than what they actually felt and experienced. As they felt more relaxed and comfortable, they started to share more of the ‘ugly’ sides of their life. Actually, a lot of the rich data and unexpected stories were generated towards the end of the interview.

However, I also realised that it could be exhausting for both the interviewer and the interviewee to have such a long conversation. After having the first six narrative interviews and doing some preliminary analysis of the data, I formed a rough scheme of emerging codes and categories, and a sense of what I wanted to pursue further in the study. Charmaz (2014) acknowledges that as a Grounded Theory study proceeds, we might need to alter our interview strategies to serve different purposes. Therefore, in the following interviews, I chose to play a more active role in guiding the direction of the interview by asking more targeted questions based on the data that had already been collected and analysed. The interview questions were still open-ended, but I would be more involved in the interview process by asking questions more purposefully and only pursuing the topics that were most relevant to this study to avoid generating too much data. For example, I would ask questions like ‘Some mothers have said xxx, what do you think of it? Do you have anything to share?’ Therefore, even if I was the one that was asking the questions, the flow of the interview was still being led by the research participants, and I was only the bridge that connected the different experiences of the participants. These interviews were more effective and time-efficient while generating data that was more focused, which built up the
Theoretical sampling and follow-up interviews

After interviewing twelve participants, I decided to pause data collection and conduct more focused analysis of the interview data. This stage is guided by the principle of theoretical sampling in Constructivist Grounded Theory. According to Charmaz (2009, 2014a), theoretical sampling happens after the researcher has identified some codes and categories after preliminary Grounded Theory analysis. These codes and categories may have the potential to contribute to the development of a grounded theory, but at this preliminary stage, they are still not robust enough to be elevated to a more conceptual level. Therefore, in order to fill the gaps, Charmaz (2009, 2014a) suggests that the researcher go back to the field and collect more data to explicate and amplify the categories. For example, during preliminary analysis, ‘imagining return’ emerged as a significant code, but a deeper analysis showed that the process of ‘imagining return’ was very complicated, and the current data did not suffice to fully explain what was going on here, such as how did the women’s imagination for return change over time, how did the birth of the child shape the women’s aspiration for return and how their aspiration for return was constructed. An example of the process of theoretical sampling regarding the code ‘imagining return’ can be found in Appendix B.

Categories were generated from research participants’ stories constructed in the specific context that in turn generated new questions and directions of inquiry not anticipated or recognised during the first round of interviews. The focus of further data collection indicated that returning to existing research participants had good potential to generate the data sought. The focus for this second round of data collection was to generate more focused categories rather than new emergent categories, and involved going ‘deeper’ rather than ‘wider’. In addition, I had already built good rapport with the participants during the first round of data collection, the research participants provided very rich data and were now familiar with what interviewing involved. This positioned them in a more powerful role within the research process. I anticipated follow-up interviews with the same participants could co-construct good quality data. I arranged a second interview with a subset of research participants to collect more focused data in response to the gaps in the first sets of data. In total, I had a follow-up interview with seven research participants. As I conducted the follow-up interviews, I recognised that I had saturated my categories and therefore I decided to end data collection.

3.4.3 Data analysis and theory development

Initial coding and focused coding

According to Charmaz (2014a, pp.111), coding refers to “categorising segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarises and accounts for each piece of data.” It is a way to
organise, synthesise and systematically analyse the data. The process of coding prepares the ground for conceptualisation and theory development. The coding process of this study consisted of three main stages: initial/open coding, focused coding and theoretical coding. While here the coding process is described after the description of the interview process, my methodological approach involved the coding process being undertaken in tandem with data collection.

In the stage of initial coding, the aim is to break up the data into segments in order to capture all the processes and actions while identifying all potential lines of inquiry via word-by-word, line-by-line and incident-by-incident coding and the researcher should be completely open and remain close to the empirical data (Charmaz, 2014a). Usually, initial coding is followed by focused coding. According to Charmaz (2014a), focused coding is to identify the most analytically powerful initial codes and build up categories and conceptual analysis. However, as Charmaz (2014a) has suggested, initial coding and focused coding may not always follow a chronological order, since the researcher will need to move back and forth to make comparisons and determine the theoretical direction of the analysis. The example in Table 2 shows the process of moving from initial codes to focused codes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial codes</th>
<th>Focused codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting married earlier than expected.</td>
<td>The mismatch between plan and reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having pre-marital pregnancy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting married due to pregnancy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare being undervalued.</td>
<td>Learning about motherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing motherhood.</td>
<td>Downward mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing the days when still single.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling trapped.</td>
<td>Regaining freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Losing the chance to socialise.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling isolated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiring to return to work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiring to be liberated from childcare.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling hopeless.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Moving from initial codes to focused code

The stage of focused coding involves multiple rounds of coding in order to sort out a large amount of data. During the process, some focused codes are further specified while others are categorised. For example, the focused code ‘navigating work-care conflict’ is refined as ‘navigating the tension between childcare obligations and personal pursuit’ to provide a more contextualised understanding of the process. Meanwhile, the focused codes ‘adapting to be a mother’, ‘learning to be a mother’, ‘being reflective’, ‘referring to personal upbringing’ and ‘critiquing rural parenting’ are categorised as one focused code ‘making sense of motherhood’ to prepare the ground for emerging categories.
After initial coding and focused coding, three main stories were identified: the migration story, the motherhood story and the return story. The focused codes related to each story are demonstrated in Table 3 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Migration Story</th>
<th>The Motherhood Story</th>
<th>The Return Story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations for migration (imaginings, motives)</td>
<td>Getting married</td>
<td>Having to leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming a migrant (leaving school, leaving home, getting their way around the city)</td>
<td>Getting pregnant</td>
<td>Returning for a better life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming urban</td>
<td>Making sense of motherhood</td>
<td>Following the child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still feeling rural?</td>
<td>Resisting the stigma</td>
<td>Preparing for return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion and segregation</td>
<td>Challenging the norms</td>
<td>The separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building up capabilities</td>
<td>Doing mothering my way</td>
<td>Building up assets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chasing opportunities</td>
<td>Navigating deprivations (relative deprivation, childcare poverty)</td>
<td>Holding on to the urban dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following the flow</td>
<td>Negotiating conflicted feelings</td>
<td>Regaining freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living one day at a time</td>
<td>Acknowledging limitations</td>
<td>Starting over?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mismatch</td>
<td>Doing my best</td>
<td>Forever a migrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aspirations for child</td>
<td>Navigating the uncertainties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Living one day at a time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Main stories identified after initial coding and focused coding

**Mapping and clustering**

After preliminary analysis, seven main processes were specified: aspiring for migration, becoming a migrant, being a migrant in the city, becoming a mother, doing mothering, aspirations for the child and imagining return. In order to fully explore each process and build up categories, I adopted the strategies of mapping and clustering. Below in Figure 2 is an example of the young women’s overall migration process in this study.

Figure 2 Young migrant women’s overall migration process in this study
In order to build up the categories, each process was further contextualised. Below in Figure 3 is the example of how the process of ‘aspiring for migration’ was contextualised in this study.

Figure 3 An example of the process of ‘aspiring for migration’ in this study

**Memo-writing**

Besides clustering and mapping, I also used the strategy of memo-writing during the process of data analysis. Memo-writing started early in the research process, as soon as I had started initial coding. Memo-writing is a crucial method in Grounded Theory studies and it helps the researcher actively interact with data, codes, categories and literature (Charmaz, 2014a). Memo-writing can take place when the researcher analyses one code, one interview, one process or one category, and it can capture the comparisons, connections and conversations between different codes, interviews, processes and categories. Appendix C and Appendix D contain some examples of the memos that were written during the process of data analysis.

**Theoretical coding and theory development**

After each process was fully explored, and categories developed, I started theoretical coding. According to Charmaz (2014a), theoretical coding refers to the process of selecting, coding and abstracting the categories that have emerged during focused coding and aims to conceptualise the relationships between these emergent categories. This study adopted an abductive approach during the process of theoretical coding and theory development. Narrative can be a helpful tool in a Grounded Theory study, but it also asks the researcher to be theoretically sensitive and
adopt an abductive approach to build up theorisation from details (Bryant, 2019). By abduction, researchers can be open to variations, inconsistencies, contradictions, make comparisons and choose the one line that they aspire to pursue to theorisation. According to Charmaz (2009, p.137):

‘‘When a grounded theorist encounters a surprising finding while engaging in research, he or she (1) considers all conceivable theoretical ideas that could account for the finding, (2) returns to the field and gathers more data to put these ideas to test, and (3) subsequently, adopts the most plausible theoretical interpretation.’’

During the multiple rounds of coding, I identified several concepts as relevant to contribute to the theory development in this study, including agency, capabilities, aspiration, family, identity and return migration. As mentioned earlier in this section, in the stage of theoretical coding, the goal is to develop a substantive theory that links these concepts to conceptualise the studied process. First of all, the study aims to understand the migrant women’s experience of rural-urban migration in China, and therefore, the goal of theory development should be to address how these concepts can be understood in the specific context of this study. In order to achieve this, I first widely reviewed the migration theories, aiming to explore how these emergent concepts were theorised in the migration context. During this stage, I came upon de Haas’ (2021) Aspirations-Capabilities Approach. This theory conceptualised the relationship between agency, capabilities and aspirations, and at that point, it seemed to have the potential to contribute to the theory development of this study. I then tried to interrogate the empirical data with de Haas’ framework. Appendix E contains an example of the memos that were written during this process.

After critically analysing de Haas’ theory and the empirical data, I found that de Haas’ theory provided a potential perspective to understand the relationships between agency, capabilities and aspirations, but it is not sufficient to fully capture the complexity of how they interact in the specific context of this study. For example, it lacks explanation about how identity is constructed and reconstructed and how family plays a part in the process of rural-urban migration in this study. In particular, it is not capable of explaining how return migration and the aspiration for return migration shapes the experience of migration in this study. Moreover, de Haas’ theory is developed based on international migration, and it was not sufficient to capture the interaction between agency, identity and family in the Chinese context.

In order to address these issues, I reviewed more Chinese literature on agency, identity and family while going back to some migration literature. During this process, I first found that transnationalism theories had the potential to contribute to the theory development in this study by further conceptualising the process of construction of identity and family in the process of
migration. However, transnationalism theories were developed based on international migration and even if they had also been adopted by scholars researching internal migration, they were not able to answer the questions regarding the aspirations for and experiences of return migration in this study. Meanwhile, after reviewing some Chinese literature, I came upon the concept of ‘Weiyu (adaptation)’ developed by a Chinese scholar Pan Guangdan, which provided a new perspective to understand agency as a capacity of adaptation in the Chinese context. This concept helped to explore the decision-making process of migration in this study.

At this point, I had identified de Haas’ Aspirations-Capabilities Approach, transnationalism and ‘adaptation’ as three theories/concepts that I could build on to develop the grounded theory of this study. I then went back to the empirical data and explored how I could make use of these theories/concepts to tell the stories of the research participants in this study, and developed the concept of ‘multi-locality’. On the one hand, multi-locality captures the interaction between multiple localities that are involved in real-life rural-urban migration in the Chinese context. On the other hand, multi-locality connects agency, family and identity in migration theorisation. With this concept in mind, I reviewed more migration literature and I realised that multi-locality had already been adopted by some scholars in migration studies as well as livelihood studies. However, I also found that how the concept was conceptualised and used was a bit different from what I proposed in this study based on the data in this study. The conceptualisation of multi-locality in this study had the potential to further develop the concept of multi-locality.

After multiple rounds of analysis and reviews of literature, the following concepts were established: multi-local capabilities, multi-local aspirations, multi-local family network and multi-local identities. A grounded theory that captures the relationships between the concepts was therefore developed: multi-locality as multi-directional flows of capabilities and aspirations to maintain multi-local familial relationships while creating multi-local identities. More detailed discussion about the grounded theory will be included in the Discussion Chapter.

3.5 Reflections

3.5.1 Reflections on the interview process

All interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for the research participants. In the first round of data collection, all interviews were carried out in the community centre when the women came to the centre to participate in the activities. I chose to interview the women in the classrooms at the centre for several reasons. Most women lived in one-bedroom apartments in the migrant village, and some co-resided with their in-laws, making finding a safe and private space in the woman’s home to conduct an interview difficult. Also, these women were very busy, so incorporating the interview with time they were spending in the centre anyway meant it
was not an additional time burden. Most had no childcare options and so needed to have the child with them when being interviewed, and so in the centre their child could play with other children leaving a dedicated period of time to talk with me. However, children were usually co-present in the interview setting and at times participants had to attend to their needs and in a way shift between being a participant of a research project and being a mother of a young child. It got messy in several interviews, and some women had to call an end of the interview because of the child’s needs. Some may argue that the quality of the interview was negatively affected by these external demands, but in keeping with this being a Constructivist Grounded Theory study, I observed how the environment itself also contributes to the construction of the narratives told by the interviewees. Participants might be complaining about the difficulties of being a mother and then caught a glimpse of their child and started to talk about how much they loved their child. These instances gave me a glimpse of their on-going negotiation of their different selves as a process in action that was insightful for my theory building.

By the time of the follow-up interviews, most of the women had stopped coming to the centre, and two women had already moved back to their hometown. Therefore, the research participants were given the opportunity to pick a location or format for the interview that worked best for them. For example, phone interviews were conducted with the two return migrants, Chen Xi and Mei and the one participant, Bo, who was still in Beijing but found it difficult to attend an in-person interview due to the working schedule. Ping had started working in the community centre as a teaching assistant, so the interview took place in the community centre out of her working hours. Dan Dan also chose to come to the community centre for the interview, but after the interview she offered to walk me to the bus station because it was on her way to her son’s kindergarten. She showed me where she lived and she said that if I wanted to talk to her again, we could meet in her house. Qiu Xia had started a restaurant in the migrant village with her husband and the interview was carried out in one of the private rooms in the restaurant. Guo Ying suggested that we meet in Starbucks in a shopping mall where she would go with her son and her husband during the weekend.

While the first round of the interviews were carried out in a set-up research environment, the follow-up interviews took place in an environment that was constructed by the research participants. By giving the research participants the freedom to choose the location of the interview, I got to see a part of the ‘world’ they were actually living in or the part of their ‘world’ that they wanted to show me. I also discovered that they were more like ‘themselves’ during the interviews. They still talked about their aspirations for the child, but they also started to talk about their plans for themselves, whether it was to pursue a career or to further their education. This shows how having a follow-up interview can expand our understanding of the
experience of the research participants, to see their life as an on-going process. However, I also want to point out that only seven out of twelve women agreed to take part in the follow-up interviews. It is possible that only those whose life has gotten better are happy to participate, and those who are still struggling feel reluctant to talk again.

### 3.5.2 Reflections on the analysis process

One of the features of a Grounded Theory study is that data collection and data analysis takes place simultaneously. However, in reality, it is not always possible to achieve this, especially when this study was conducted during the Covid pandemic. As a result of the pandemic and the travel restrictions in China, data collection was delayed. Even after data collection started, there was always a sense of uncertainty in terms of whether there would be another lockdown that could pause data collection again. Therefore, during the process of data collection, there was the time pressure to try to collect a certain amount of data within a condensed period of time. I felt obliged to move faster to get the data that I would need for analysis. During the first stage of data collection, on average, I had two interviews per week. After each interview, I only had a few days to transcribe and review the data while preparing for the next interview, which means that I was not always able to fully analyse one interview before moving on to the next one. I was aware of the limitations, and therefore, after having my 6th interview, I decided to take a pause in order to immerse myself in the data for analysis and reflection. This proved to be a very productive period of time. I identified some of the gaps in the data and decided to modify the inclusion criteria for the following interviews. The interview process resumed after I had completed some preliminary analysis of the first six interviews and identified some emergent topics.

After having the 12th interview, I decided to pause data collection again for a dedicated period of time to complete focused Grounded Theory analysis before conducting more follow-up interviews. Theoretical sampling and having follow-up interviews helped overcome the limitations of not having enough time for data analysis in the first round. Many have acknowledged that Grounded Theory analysis can be time-consuming and it is never a linear process, and in this study, there were also multiple rounds of data analysis that pointed out multiple potential directions. Engaging with literature was also an integral part of the process, and this required more work to select and review relevant literature to sharpen the analysis and build up a grounded theory. All these factors can make Grounded Theory analysis especially challenging for a novice researcher.

### 3.5.3 Reflections on positionality

Charmaz (2014a) argues that in order to understand the experiences of the participants, the researcher should stay as close to the participants' world as possible. Based on my experience,
‘being there’ through volunteering is not just for the benefit of me as the researcher to study the participants, but it also gives the participants a chance to ‘study’ me before the interview. For the migrant women, I was not just a researcher who came to the migrant village out of the blue and asked them to fill out a Consent Form and then dug up their life history. Even if I did not approach any potential participant individually before the interview, because they had seen me at the centre regularly, they treated me as someone who was genuinely interested in their life and cared about their life.

These issues regarding open, willing and informed consent for research participants highlight issues to do with positionality of the researcher and how to manage bias and prejudice as an ‘insider’ as well as how to build an equal relationship with the research participants as an ‘outsider’. My experience of researching the migrant women in this study shows that whether the researcher is the insider or the outsider does not necessarily depend on how the researcher positions themselves in the research context, but it is more about how the research participants position the researcher in their own life world, which is related to each participant’s life history and background as well as how the researcher presents him/herself during the entire research process.

One of the most interesting findings while researching these young women is that they sometimes saw me as an ‘outsider-ly insider’. This means that in general, they saw me as an insider, a young Chinese woman who was familiar with the traditions, values and norms, but as a woman, they saw themselves as more experienced because they were married and they were mothers whereas I was still a student. Therefore, when telling me their stories, they did not often see themselves as a ‘disadvantaged’ research participant, but acted like a ‘life coach’ with more experience and maturity than me while trying to teach me some life lessons. I noted a willingness to talk about ‘ugly things’ in life so that I and other young women could learn from them and not make the same mistakes as them. In a way, they seemed to feel more empowered in constructing the narrative that they would like to deliver to other young women based on their personal experiences. For example, at the end of the interview, several women asked me, ‘How old are you? Do you have a boyfriend? Your parents are okay with it that you are still single at this age?’ After finding out that I was single, some women would tell me, ‘You need to get a boyfriend when you are still young. Otherwise, there will not be any good ones left for you’, while others would say, ‘Don’t care about what other people say to you. Never feel pressured to marry because of what others say. Focus on your study. Do what you want to do.’

According to some researchers, my positionality, as a privileged female researcher, might jeopardise my relationship with the research participants. However, beyond the research context, I am also a young Chinese woman who has to negotiate the same gender norms and
expectations. The so-called ‘privilege’ as an educated researcher might just be something that we create ourselves to reinforce the unequal power dynamics between us and the research participants. We might act in an overly protective way to safeguard the interests of the research participants and end up losing sight of their resilience and strength. Many have talked about how research can empower the marginalised population. However, my experience suggests that the migrant women are already ‘powerful’ in their own life. Their experience is their power. Participation in the research only gives them a channel to demonstrate their power, and it should be the role of the researcher to provide a safe and encouraging space for them to openly share their experiences. As Hui Min has said,

‘Well, I’m not really sure what you want to achieve by talking with me. But I just feel that if my experience can help other women, it will be…you know… Not just for migrant women. Local women, too. It can be really helpful.’

3.5.4 Reflections on the quality of the study

There is no universally agreed evaluation criteria for a ‘good’ qualitative study. Different schools of Grounded Theory methods have also developed their own standards to evaluate the quality of a Grounded Theory study. For example, in Glaser’s (1978, 1998) definition, a Grounded Theory study should be evaluated based on its workability, relevance, fit and modifiability; in Strass and Corbin’s (1990, 1998) version of Grounded Theory, the quality of the research should be judged by the quality of the data, the plausibility and value of the theory, adequacy of the research process and the empirical grounding of the theory (Charmaz and Thorberg, 2021). According to Charmaz and Thorberg (2021), in a Constructivist Grounded Theory study, the quality should be considered based on credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. This final section will reflect on the overall research process of this study based on these four criteria.

**Credibility**

According to Charmaz and Thorberg (2021), credibility relates to the quality of the data that is collected by the researcher. Good quality data should provide the researcher with the opportunity to fully explore the researched phenomenon. Not only does it depend on what raw data is offered by the research participants, but it also involves how the researcher makes sense of and interprets the data. This is especially relevant when the researcher encounters unexpected responses or witnesses surprising actions of the participants. During the process of data collection, I was very fortunate to talk to young migrant mothers who were honest, open and generous enough to share their life stories with me. Although in a Constructivist Grounded Theory study, the researcher also plays a role in the construction of data, it is also important that the researcher respects the participants’ autonomy to construct their own life stories from their
own position in life by listening respectfully and tolerating divergent points of view. As a Constructivist Grounded Theory study, this study is a co-construction by the research participants and the researcher. While the researcher plays an active role in choosing the specific direction or focus of the study, all the codes and categories are embedded in the empirical data and lay the foundation for the establishment of a substantive theory that captures the complexity of the interaction between womanhood, motherhood and migration.

**Originality**

According to Charmaz and Thorberg (2021), originality should be judged based on whether the study is able to refine or improve our current understanding of the researched process. As Mabogunje (1970, p.2) has said, what a research study should aim to achieve is that “*new insights are provided into old problems and new relationships whose existence may not have been appreciated previously are uncovered.*” Rural-urban migration is indeed an ‘old problem’. This study starts with an aim to question the existing knowledge about rural-urban migration and address gaps, such as women’s and mothers’ underrepresentation in the migration literature. Women’s and mothers’ migration is often portrayed as part of a family migration project, and their agency is seldom explored. Moreover, since migration is not only a physical experience, but also a socio-cultural experience, the specific structural environment of Chinese society can also provide great insights into how migrants interact with and negotiate the bigger forces with their constrained agency. Therefore, although this study does not develop a completely novel theory that can explain all forms of human mobility, it does provide a fresh perspective to understand migration via the experiences of young migrant mothers in China.

**Resonance**

According to Charmaz and Thorberg (2021), resonance refers to the researcher’s capability, not just to describe the research process, but also to develop concepts comprehensive enough to capture the complexity of the researched process. The theoretical contributions of this thesis that will be set out in the following chapters move the analysis of the data beyond the descriptive level and towards an abstract and conceptual level, which ultimately provides us with a more specified and contextualised understanding of rural-urban migration for young women and mothers. We will return to resonance as an aspect of quality in the final chapter.

**Usefulness**

According to Charmaz and Thorberg (2021), usefulness is related to how the insights of the study can inform policy changes and inspire future research. Again we will return to this as an aspect of quality in the final chapter.
4. Introduction of the research participants and the research site
4.1 Introduction
This chapter introduces the research setting and the research participants of this study. It first introduces the location and the environment of the migrant village. The migrant village is not only the research site where the study was conducted, but it is also the space where most of the migrant women’s daily activities are carried out. It then introduces the basic information of the research participants, including their age, number/gender of their children, their educational level and their work status. For the women who participate in the follow-up interview one year later, it also introduces the changes in their circumstances identified in the follow-up interview.

4.2 Research setting
Before data collection, I identified several organisations in Beijing that could act as the gatekeepers for this study. One organisation agreed to assist with the research process. This NGO offers various activities to parents and children aged 0-6 in one migrant village in Chaoyang District, Beijing. According to Chaoyang District People’s Government of Beijing Municipality, Chaoyang District covers an area of 470.8 km² and is home to approximately 3.45 million residents¹, which makes it the largest and most populous district of urban Beijing. It is described as the ‘economic powerhouse’ and ‘window for foreign trade’ of Beijing, with over 10,000 international corporations, 455 foreign company headquarters and 124 international financial institutions operating in this district. There are 144 villages in Chaoyang District, and the research participants of this study were recruited from three villages in this district. The three villages used to be three separate villages. As more and more migrants chose to settle in this area, these three villages expanded and finally merged into one ‘migrant enclave’, which will be referred to as the ‘migrant village’ in this study.

According to the NGO, the migrant village is currently home to approximately 20,000 people, and most of the residents are rural migrants. This migrant village is completely segregated from outside Beijing with guarded gates. Within the migrant village, there are supermarkets, restaurants, shops, hairdressers’, clinics, police stations, kindergartens, playgrounds and leisure centres. Most of the residential houses in the migrant village are two-storey buildings with individual one-bedroom apartments. Most of the rooms are equipped with an indoor bathroom, but do not have a separate kitchen area, so many residents can only use electric cookers for cooking. Most rooms do not have heating. Some rooms are installed with air conditioning, but

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¹ According to Chaoyang District People’s Government of Beijing Municipality, residents refer to all Chinese citizens who have been actually living in Chaoyang District for over six months, despite their Hukou status.
most of the women in this study are reluctant to use air conditioning because they cannot afford the bills. Many women have also said that in the beginning, they only chose to come to the community centre because there was free heating in the winter and free air conditioning in the summer. The photos below were taken during the fieldwork and they capture the environment inside the migrant village.
4.3 Research participants

Overall, twelve women were recruited from the migrant village. Among all the twelve research participants, seven agreed to have a follow-up interview with me one year later. Table 4 below introduces the basic information of the research participants. A more detailed description of each participant is included in Appendix F.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of child</th>
<th>Age of child</th>
<th>Age of first migration</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Follow-up interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bo</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1 (daughter)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Still in Beijing. Daughter in kindergarten. Work as a waitress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chen Xi</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2 (daughter, unborn)</td>
<td>3, 1 month pregnant</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Back in own hometown. Elder daughter in kindergarten. Caring for the younger daughter at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Dan Dan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1 (son)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Vocational high school</td>
<td>Unemployed, E-commerce</td>
<td>Still in Beijing. Son in kindergarten. Work as a clerk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fen</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2 (sons)</td>
<td>5, 2.5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Junior high school</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Guo Ying</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1 (son)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Junior high school</td>
<td>Teaching assistant</td>
<td>Still in Beijing. Son in kindergarten. Still work as a teaching assistant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Hui Min</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2 (daughters)</td>
<td>4, 2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Junior high school</td>
<td>Sales assistant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1 (daughter)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 Profile of research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender (children)</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Kai</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2 (son, daughter)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Junior high school</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1 (son)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>Unemployed, Back in husband’s hometown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Caring for the child at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Nan Nan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1 (daughter)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16/17</td>
<td>Junior high school</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ping</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1 (daughter)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>Unemployed, Still in Beijing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Work as a teaching assistant at the centre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Qiu Xia</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1 (son)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Unemployed, Still in Beijing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Son in kindergarten. Running a restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>with husband in the migrant village.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4 Summary

This Chapter gives a brief introduction of the research site and the research participants. The following chapter is the first Findings Chapter of this study, and it will present the findings about how the migrant women aspire for rural-urban migration, navigate the urban life upon arrival in the city and negotiate their new roles as migrant mothers in Beijing.
5. Crafting the urban self
5.1 Introduction
This is the first Findings Chapter of this study. It presents an analysis of young migrant mother’s pre-migration experiences in the rural village, their early migration experiences and their experiences of transition into motherhood as a young migrant woman. It will start with a discussion of the young women’s early life experiences in the rural village which shaped their capabilities and aspirations to migrate. It then moves on to discuss how rural-urban migration was experienced by participants upon their arrival in the city, portrayed as an ongoing process of negotiation of different capabilities, aspirations and identities. A complex interaction between ‘home’ and ‘destination’ via various forms of physical, emotional and aspirational exchanges features in this analysis. Finally, how the unexpected occurrence of pregnancy and motherhood further complicated their experience of migration is considered.

5.2 Aspiring for migration
5.2.1 To repay parents’ love
In rural China, migration has become a way of life (Fan & Chen, 2016). It not only changes the lives of those who move, but it also has a great impact on those who are left behind, especially the children (CCR CSR, 2013). Almost all the migrant women in this study have experienced parental migration as a child. Retrospectively, they believed that their parents were only in the city to endure the hardships so that they could have access to better education and not end up being a rural labourer in the future. Therefore, when the young women found out that they were not doing well in school, they felt guilty. They believed that staying in school would be a ‘waste’ of their parents’ money since they would not be able to go to a university anyway. Therefore, it was wise to quit school early and migrate to the city to release the burden of their parents.

This was especially common for those women who had younger siblings. As many studies have shown, in a rural family with low socio-economic status, children have to compete for the limited resources, and the elder child usually feels the pressure to make the ‘right’ choice for the best interest of the family, which is deeply rooted in the Confucian perception of family obligations (Cai, 2014; Qian, 2012). As Hui Min said,

‘To be honest with you, I wanted to stay in school. I wanted to keep going to school, but our financial situation did not allow me to stay in school, especially with all the siblings that I have. I just felt that I wanted to ease the burden of my parents. I did not want them to work that hard. My younger brother was doing quite well in school, so I decided to drop out.’
None of the women in this study were forced to drop out of school to provide for the family. Most women reported that their family financial situation was ‘alright’ as both parents were working in the city, and their parents were also willing to invest in their education. Even when they failed the college entrance examination, their parents were still willing to support them to repeat one year. Yet, the young women themselves were reluctant to be the ‘burden’ of the family. They knew that they had disappointed their parents. Nevertheless, they still wanted to be the good daughter that could make their parents proud, and they believed that migration could provide them with the alternative to actualise their aspirations.

5.2.2 To prove myself
Many women recalled that when they decided to quit school and become migrant workers, their parents warned them that they would be ‘treated worse than dogs by the urban people in the city’ because they did not have a university degree. As Ping said,

‘If you have a degree, you are able to find a good job, and if you do not have a degree, it will be difficult for you to get a job. I just want to show them I can still make a living without a degree!’

Bo also recalled that her father strongly opposed her idea to give up education and migrate to the city.

‘My dad was like…you know…you can go out, but I’m not giving you a penny anymore. You have to earn a living by yourself so that you can understand how difficult life is. My dad gave me 1,000 or 2,000 yuan before I left, and he thought I would just come back home after I spent all that money. I was also very stubborn at that time, so I decided not to go back home even if you begged me.’

Bo said that she did not even return home for the Chinese New Year. She kept working hard until she managed to save 20,000 yuan.

‘I gave the money to my dad, and he said, ‘You chose this path yourself. In a few years, you’ll find out that you will be driven out of the city because you are not as educated as others. They will get promotions and you will not, because they have a degree.’ I told him, ‘It’s my own business now.’’

For many young migrant women, their sense of confidence, or ‘blind confidence’ as Ping said jokingly, was largely built on their perceived capabilities, or their ‘self-efficacy’ (Bandura, 1977) as well as their perceived opportunity structure in the city (de Haas, 2021). They believed that as long as they worked hard, they would be capable of living a good life in the city. As some young women have described, they do not really have a goal, and they just want to see what it is like out there in the city and what they are capable of achieving. Or, as some women
explained, they also wanted to ‘see the world’, like other young people who had already migrated to the city.

5.2.3 To see the world
For young people in rural China, rural-to-urban migration has almost become a ‘rite of passage’ (Mondain & Diagne, 2013). As many women said, they could not even think of anyone they knew that had never migrated to the city. As Guo Ying said,

‘A lot of people in our village had migrated to the city at a very young age, so I suppose I did yearn for leaving home and going to the city all along.’

Whilst most women had never stepped out of their village before they officially left home for the city, urban culture had been constantly fed to them via media and textbooks. Some even say that the young generation in rural China are already ‘semi-urbanised’ before migration (Yang and Tang, 2017). They see rural culture as backward and urban culture as advanced, and they are no longer satisfied with what rural society can offer. As Ping said,

‘You see it on TV. People are always saying that Beijing is where the emperor used to live, so it must be much more advanced…like the traffic, the education…and people in Beijing must be more ‘civilised’ than the people in the countryside. At least, they won’t swear that much. They are more polite.’

Besides, the established migrant networks in the cities also greatly improve the young women’s capabilities and aspirations to migrate. According to their friends who had already been working in the city, migration was a journey to greater fun and freedom. For the rural students, the temptation of migration was very hard to resist, and they were curious about what working in the city would be like. As Bo recalled,

‘She had been working in the city for two or three years already, and she said, ‘It’s fun working here. At the reception in a restaurant.’, so after graduation, I just decided to go with her.’

For the young rural girls, migration to the city is neither a great adventure nor a painful flee from deprivation. When explaining why they chose to migrate to the city, many women just shrugged and said, ‘What else can I do?’ Yet, this does not mean that the young women are completely aimless and just following the flow. For most of the young women in this study, the value of migration is not only about what they can get from migration, but lies in the experience of migration itself. As some women have said, migration means ‘Rushehui (entering society)’, which suggests that they are no longer a dependent daughter in the family or a student in school, but an independent working woman in a wider society who has the autonomy to live the life that they aspire for.
5.2.4 To build up capabilities
As Zhao and Ren (2014) argues, nowadays the young women are most likely to be attracted to the city because they hope to find a place that is good for them to explore different opportunities and build up capabilities so that they can have more choices in the future. De Haas (2021) also argues that besides the instrumental value, more and more young people are attracted to move out of their home region for the intrinsic values of migration, such as exploration and personal development. As Dan Dan said,

‘I was young and I just wanted to try different jobs, so that I would have more choices in the future.’

As many women have described, in rural China, opportunities for young women are especially limited. After leaving school, it is either ‘marriage’ or ‘migration’. They could have just stayed home and married the man that their parents had picked for them, but they were not willing to. They chose to migrate to be the master of their own life. Therefore, migration offered them an escape route or an ‘exit’ (Hirschman, 1970) to modernity and freedom, where they could have more control of their own life. However, they were also aware that their migration would only be temporary, since they would have to return home for marriage eventually, but at least migration would give them a few years’ time to be free and explore, and they wanted to seize the chance to make the best use of the time in the city. Jun studied in a teacher’s college in her home province, and she was offered a job in a kindergarten in Beijing after graduation. As Jun said, she did not hesitate for a second before she decided to take the offer.

‘We will have to return home eventually. It is just not realistic to stay in Beijing permanently. Working in Beijing is a ‘gold plating’ process. It gives you benefits after return. It will be much easier for me to get a job in the future. I can quickly be promoted to be the executive director of a kindergarten after I return home.’

Although migration is imagined to be a path to a new beginning in life, the young girls are very clear that their stay in the city is only going to be temporary. Many studies have suggested that despite young migrants’ aspirations to enjoy urban life, many still plan to return home in the future (Liang and Fu, 2015; Lin, 2019; Gan and Zhang, 2022), and this is especially true for young migrant women due to the gendered nature of their life course. For the young women in this study, their migration is never the end, but a means to an end, which is to return home to get married and establish their own family.

5.3 Leaving to return
Many studies suggest that rural parents regard their daughter’s marriage as a strategy to achieve upward mobility, and they will inculcate their daughter with the idea of ‘marrying an urban man’ so that she will strategically make an effort to secure an urban husband upon their arrival
in the city (May, 2010; Goodburn, 2015). However, according to the women in this study, neither their parents, nor they themselves have ever aspired to elevate their social status via marriage. As Nan Nan said,

‘For me, I was just in the city for a few years to work, and then I would return home. Before I actually got married, I had already been thinking that I should return home to get married when I turned twenty.’

On the one hand, as a rural migrant, they are not ‘good enough’ for an urban man, and on the other hand, they do not want to take the risk of marrying a man who is from a place that is far away from their hometown. In rural China, patrilocal marriage (Fei, 2018c) still dominates, and since it is barely possible for a migrant couple to permanently settle in their hosting city, the wife usually has to move to their husband’s hometown after getting married. Being physically away from her own family means that the woman will have little access to support, both physically and emotionally, and it is even believed that women who get married and move out of their home region are more likely to be treated poorly by their husband and in-laws, and even become victims of domestic violence. As rural migrants are seen as ‘unreliable’ by urban citizens, people in the rural areas also think that people outside their home region are ‘unreliable’. The stigma and mystery of ‘Yuanjia (marrying to a faraway place)’ is so deeply rooted in the rural culture that some women would deliberately choose to return home for marriage. As Fen said,

‘I feel that the good ones will look for a partner in the local area. Like those who are rich or who are from a rich family. People will compete to marry them. Those who are left single are those who are not good enough to find a partner in their local area, so they have to look for someone from outside.’

Whilst the young women aspire for true love and romance, when it comes to marriage, they tend to be more careful. In Chinese culture, marriage is always a ‘family project’ (Fei, 2018c). The basic principle of marriage in rural China is ‘Mendanghudui’, which means that people should find their partner from within their own social circle. Put simply, rural people marrying rural people and urban people marrying urban people. In a sense, marriage in traditional Chinese culture is not a way to expand but secure the family’s resources. Therefore, for the rural migrant women who are not able to secure a ‘good’ husband in the city, the best choice is to return home and marry someone that can be vetted by families, friends and matchmakers back home.

Many scholars have argued that migration is inherently a gendered process (Ma, 2009; Ma, 2018; Christou and Kofman, 2022). In the Chinese context, young women’s aspiration for return demonstrates the gendered nature of rural-urban migration. In this study, the women’s
aspiration for return is an integral part of their experience of migration. Although the young women do not aspire to settle in the city in the beginning, after they spend some time in the city and become more ‘urbanised’, new aspirations start to emerge.

5.4 Becoming urban
5.4.1 Talking ‘urban’
Learning to speak Mandarin is the first step of the urbanity project. When the young women were in the rural village, they never had any chance to practice Mandarin. Instead, they talked in their own dialect. Most women only started to learn Mandarin after they started working in the city. As Bo recalled,

‘Say, you have been working for a year, and you are finally able to speak some Mandarin, and then you go back home to visit your families. Then you automatically speak Mandarin to the people back home. People will then say, ‘You’ve been working in the city for one year, and you have forgotten your own dialect?’ Or, you stay for a while back home for the Chinese New Year, and then you come back to the city to work. You just forget how to speak Mandarin! You have to switch between Mandarin and your own dialect, like back and forth. It took me about two years to be able to speak Mandarin fluently.

As Zhu (2004) has suggested, learning to speak ‘the language of the city’ is a significant part of the identity project of the young women (Zhu, 2014). In most cases, speaking Mandarin is not only an agentic act to fit in, but also a requirement of work. Since most women are employed in the service sectors, such as in retail, catering or beauty, they are required to speak Mandarin when they interact with their customers. Thus, being capable of speaking standard Mandarin itself is an urban capability not only assists the rural women to integrate into urban society, but it also improves their employability in the urban labour market.

5.4.2 Looking ‘urban’
The young women admitted that they only realised how ‘countrified’ they were when they arrived in the city. Ping came to Beijing after she graduated from senior high school, and as Ping recalled, back then, she had really short hair and she never used any make-up.

‘I was so ugly back then! My cousin used to say that I had ‘blind confidence’ in myself, but I did not understand what she meant then. But when I look at my old photos, I realise how much I have changed. Geez! I kind of understand why I was not able to find a boyfriend then! I was just ugly!’

Ping said that when she first came to Beijing, she never did her hair or eyebrows nor did she use any foundation or lipstick. Once, as Ping remembered, she was stopped at the gate of the female
dormitory by the guard, because the guard thought she was a man. Only then did Ping realise how ‘rough’ she looked. Later, Ping started working as a manicure artist, and she got to meet many urban women through work, who looked very ‘delicate’ and ‘pretty’. Gradually, Ping started to pay more attention to her looks. She started using expensive skincare products and wearing make-up which would cost her 1,000 to 2,000 yuan a month. According to Ping, she was very willing to invest in skincare, and even after childbirth, she never skipped her daily skincare routine, and she would always use facial masks before going to bed.

Several studies on the consumption behaviours of young migrant women suggests that their aspiration to become an urban consumer is on the one hand to resist the ‘negative’ feedbacks received from other people, and on the other hand a natural response as a result of the emergence of new reference groups for them to look up to (Zhu, 2004; Zhu, 2008; Qiu, 2017). Many women would start to compare their own body image with the urban women. As many migrant women have said, urban women are slim, stylish and refined, whereas they themselves are ‘Cungu (a country girl)’, who are fat, ugly and rough.

According to the women, looking ‘urban’ requires effort especially money. Those who share less family obligations tend to have more financial autonomy to spend their income as they like, while those who have a strong motivation to provide for the family tend to save up and send most of their income back home and miss out the opportunity to invest in the urban lifestyle that they aspire for. For example, Nan Nan recalled that although she would also go to the shopping mall with her friends sometimes during the weekend, since she felt obliged to send her income to her parents back home, she seldom invested in herself, and when she looked at other young women in the city, she sometimes felt inferior. It is not that Nan Nan did not want to look good, but she was just not capable of actualising her aspirations. In a sense, looking urban has become a luxury, and only those who have ‘extra’ money have the right to look pretty and stylish.

5.4.3 Working ‘urban’

Studies have shown that compared with the older migrants, the young migrant women are more selective about the jobs that they take on (An et al. 2018; Hu, 2012). The financial gain is not their priority. On the contrary, they are more concerned about the working environment, the relationship with colleagues, and most importantly, what they can learn from their work. They tend to quit their job as soon as they are not satisfied with their work. In this study, most women have changed their jobs several times. Sometimes, they got bored and wanted to try something new and other times, they felt that they were treated unfairly by the employers, which they were not willing to tolerate.
Qiu (2017) argues that young migrants tend to change their job frequently to demonstrate their fight for autonomy, which she describes as a passive protest. Wu (2018) also notices that when the young migrants find out that their life is different from what they have imagined, they will actively choose to change their job. In a sense, they are no longer willing to be ‘treated worse than dogs’ like their parents. However, it is noticeable that even if the young women seem to be more selective about their job, in reality, they are just moving from one bad job to another bad job, and upward mobility is seldom achieved (Qiu, 2017; Wu, 2018).

As Sun (2014) argues, migration to the city can be conceptualised as a process of re-socialisation, where the women’s perception and pursuit of career development is both urbanised. It might be right that the young migrant women are being irrational and impulsive, and sometimes, many even assume that young migrants are not as hard-working as the older generation because they only care about having fun (Qiu, 2017; Li, 2019). However, the young women’s experience in this study suggests that not only are they hard-working, but they are also reflective. They try first, make mistakes, learn from the experience, and then make a better choice, or what they perceive to be a better choice. Jun worked in a factory when she first came to the city, and after only six months, she decided to quit her job and return home to continue her education.

‘I was working for about six months, and I felt that it was not right. You worked nine to five every day. It was really boring, and it’s not helpful for your future, like after you get old…You need to have some skills, which are good for your future, so I told my parents that I wanted to go back to a teacher’s college and work in a kindergarten.’

While many blame the urban labour market for blocking the young migrants path to upward mobility, the young women’s experiences in this study suggest that they may be disadvantaged as a rural migrant, but they can also build up their capabilities and eventually achieve success through entrepreneurship. For example, Ping realised that there was no future working in the factory, and she was sick of the exploitation of the urban labour market, therefore she started learning manicure and succeeded in opening her own manicure studio in Beijing.

‘In the beginning, I rented a small room in a relatively deprived area. It was pretty harsh. There was no toilet in the room, and we had to use the public toilets outside. Gradually, it got better, and we were able to move into an apartment in a nice neighbourhood. We first shared the apartment with other tenants, and later we were able to rent the entire apartment…I just suddenly felt that life was so good!’

5.4.4 Loving ‘urban’

According to the women, it is common to marry early back in their rural hometowns. Girls are expected to find a partner and get married as soon as they leave school. As Bo said,
‘In my hometown, people marry at a very young age. When you turn 18 or 19, people will start to arrange dates for you. They say if you do not marry early, all the good men will be gone, and you are left with the ones that no one wants to marry. Before I left home, they also asked me to pick a man first and then go to the city, but I was not willing to. I wanted to find my own husband.’

Most women saw early marriage as ‘backward’ and ‘outdated’. Even if no women deliberately migrated to escape early marriage, they indeed managed to enjoy more freedom to find their own partner and delay their marriage. As Dan Dan said,

‘When I first arrived in Beijing, I was working at a kindergarten, and our director told us not to date any random guy. She said she would help us find a potential marriage partner in the city. I said to her, ‘No, thanks! I would rather find a boyfriend by myself.’’

Compared with a date arranged by family members or relatives, most young women prefer meeting their future husband in a more natural setting, such as their workplace or a social occasion. For example, Kai and Guo Ying both met their husband at their workplace, and Hui Min met her husband when she was hanging out with friends. Although some women may still take the offer of an arranged date, they tend to be more careful about their decisions. Ping was introduced to her husband by her neighbour in Beijing. According to Ping, she did not rush herself to have a relationship because she wanted to spend enough time getting to know him before making any commitment.

As many young women said, ‘looking good’, ‘being generous’, and ‘being hard-working’ is what they looked for in a potential husband. They did not care about the man’s place of origin, occupation or socio-economic status. As Chen Xi said,

‘You have to love each other. People back home do not care about love at all. For them, as long as you can live a life together, it’s perfectly fine. I think most people who are single tend to have the same thought as I do.’

However, they were also aware that their range of choices for a marriage partner was quite limited in the city. Most migrant women have a rather limited social network in the city. The people that they have an opportunity to meet every day are most likely to be other migrants. Even though family members or friends in the city sometimes help to introduce them to potential marriage partners, in most of the cases, they are more likely to introduce them to a man who is from the same home region as the woman but is currently working in the city, rather than a local man in the city. As many women said, they did not have any chance to get to
know any local people. As a result, those who are aiming to find their husband through social interaction in a natural setting are mostly likely to end up marrying another migrant.

5.4.5 Living and aspiring ‘urban’
Studies have shown that young migrants are able to adapt to an urban life more quickly and they are more eager to integrate into urban society by participating in urban leisure activities (Zhu, 2004; Zhu, 2008; Qiu, 2017). Due to their augmented financial capabilities, the young women realise that an urban lifestyle is actually attainable. Although studies have shown that the income of the young migrants is not enough to support them to live the same life as the urban people (Wang & Yan, 2011), most of the women have managed to obtain their preferred level of urbanity.

Bo recalled that when she was single, she used to go to the karaoke, cafes and pubs with colleagues after work, which she referred to as the ‘upper-class activities’. Chen Xi remembered that before she got married, she would go cycling with friends, have barbecue parties, or go on trips to the nearby cities during the weekend. Other women, like Hui Min and Dan Dan were enthusiastic about trying new food, such as street food and even western food.

As their capabilities improve, their aspirations to stay in the city gradually emerges. Even the women are aware that they will have to return one day, they still can’t help aspiring to continue staying in the city, and some women realise that actually they do not want to return home anymore. As Jun said,

‘I thought my hometown was very ‘backward’ and I did not want to return home. I wanted to work in Beijing to make more money.’

The young women’s aspiration to stay in the city is not illusionary or pure imagination, because migration has upgraded their capabilities as well as their sense of value (Qiu, 2017) and therefore they now have the ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai 2004). As Mei said,

‘When I was working, I found that I was really good at my work. I’m just not a ‘study’ type of person. I did better than all my colleagues. I always came first in monthly evaluations. I rarely came second. I worked really hard, and I was not a lazy person at all. I am willing to fight for the life that I aspire for.’

5.4.6 Feeling ‘urban’?
While most women see themselves as ‘urban residents’, deep down, they are still very clear that they will never be ‘really urban’. The feelings of segregation and exclusion are experienced most strongly when it comes to marriage. Although the young women hope that they will be able to choose the man that they want to marry, they are also aware that their range of choices for a marriage partner is quite limited in the city, as a result of the social segregation in the city.
As Bo has said, they do not have any chance to get to know any local people at all. As a result, those who are aiming to find their husband in the city are most likely to end up marrying another migrant. This means that they tend to look for someone from the ‘same level’, which is shaped by the combined factors, including their individual choice, the hierarchical marriage market and the influence from families and friends. As Hui Min said,

‘I had thought about marrying a local man, but I also felt that I was not able to…Honestly, men in Beijing will not lay their eyes on us. We are migrants, and our own conditions are too ‘low’, like education and others. What I meant to say is that…they are up there, and we are down here. We will never meet on the same level.’

In rural society, it is commonly believed and taken for granted that ‘rural people marry rural people’ (Deng, 2004). As Wei and Yuan (2015) have argued, while migration provides the young women a chance to achieve upward mobility, marriage, on the contrary, will pull them down the social ladder and lead to downward mobility because they will be most likely to end up marrying a man from their rural social network. Even if some women might actively choose to marry an urban man in exchange of the urban resources, most often, their choices are limited to those who are much older, or who are widowed or even disabled (Wei & Yuan, 2015).

Bo once dated a Beijinger. As she recalled, she had just turned 20 and the man was already 38, and unemployed. They were dating for a while, but she decided to break up with him after she met his parents.

‘I felt that his parents did not like migrants. Maybe they thought that migrants were not reliable. Gradually we met less and less, and just broke up in the end. I just gave up.’

Many women have described their migration to the city as a path to growth and development. They have become more mature and more capable. Other studies have also shown that migration is a ‘modernisation project’ (Zhao & Ren, 2014; Huang & Ni, 2020) that has a positive impact on women’s evaluation of self-value and perception of love and marriage. Yet, even if they may look more urban, and sound more urban, they never feel urban, and they are not confident to say that they ‘have become’ urban. They still label themselves as ‘rural’ in spite of having been working and residing in the city for years. They have been urbanised to some extent, but neither are they able nor are they willing to leave behind their rural identity completely because that is what makes them who they are. In a way, they are still a rural woman, but only with an urban dream.
5.5 Living in between two worlds
5.5.1 Bi-directional flows of support

If migration is simply treated as a physical movement from one place to another, we may easily come to the conclusion that whatever happens in the place of origin is the past, and the migrants will start their journey with a fresh mind, ready to embrace whatever the city has to offer. Yet, in reality, migration is not just ‘jumping over the fence’ and leaving everything behind. They arrive in the city with fragments of their home culture, such as their perception of family and filial obligations, and when they are in the city, they may undertake various transformations, but there are still things that remain unchanged or even get reinforced.

In the women’s narratives, their hometown is often referred to as ‘Laojia’, which means ‘the old home’. It is ‘old’ not because it is in the past, but it is something that will not change over time. For the young migrants, the city is never their home, but merely a place for them to work and make a living, and their ‘root’ is still in their rural hometown. Lin (2019) and Cao (2014) both argue that young people still attach great importance to the value of family despite their exposure to modern culture. Lin (2019) even argues that the young migrants, who are moving between the countryside and the city, tend to put more focus on family.

In this study, most women call home every day, and they also go back home to visit frequently during holidays or for special family events, like weddings, birthdays or funerals. Some young women also said that whenever they felt tired in the city, they would go back home to take a break. When they go back home, they never go with ‘a pair of empty hands’. They will give their parents ‘red envelopes of cash’ or gifts. When they are not able to be physically back home, they also regularly remit to support even if they are not expected to. In traditional Chinese culture, the daughter does not shoulder the responsibility to care for her parents because she is expected to marry into another family and eventually she will no longer be a part of her natal family (Fei, 2018b, 2018c). Yet, all the young women in this study have always been actively remitting, not out of any pressure from their parents, but out of their aspiration to repay their parents’ love. Some women felt more obliged to remit to compensate for their physical absence. Even those who only cared about having fun, like Bo, started to remit shortly after they started working.

Moreover, online shopping has made it much easier for the young women to support their family from afar. As Dan Dan said,

‘Like toilet papers and washing powder. Just what you need on a daily basis. My mom doesn’t need to ask me. Every one or two weeks, when I feel that they may run out of something, I will just order online, and the products will be directly delivered to my mother’s place.’
Yet, the flow of remittances is not unidirectional, not just from the city to the countryside, but from the countryside to the city, too. Since most of the young women’s parents also used to work as migrant workers, they are aware that making a living in the city is not easy. Especially after the child was born, they feel that the young couple must have been struggling financially to make ends meet. Guo Ying said that her in-laws think that they are ‘poor’ and whenever they went back to the village to visit, her in-laws would never let them pay for anything, and her in-laws would always give them some money before they left. Dan Dan also mentioned that her mother sometimes offered to transfer some money to her. Additionally, several women also received huge financial support when they purchased a property back home. Several women mentioned that their parents and in-laws even helped them pay for the deposit of the property.

5.5.2 Following the old norms
In spite of being physically away from their rural home, the young migrant women are still not capable of resisting the pressure from parents nor the norms. Even if many young women feel more empowered as a result of migration, it is illusionary to think that they have become agentic. Urban culture and financial independence is not powerful enough to cut their ties to their natal home or to diminish the influence of the culture that they were raised in. In most cases, the migrant women voluntarily follow the rules back home after carefully calculating the pros and cons of the consequences of their choice. The decision is usually made based on their perceived capabilities to actualise their aspirations and the perceived position that they will be in if they make certain decisions.

For example, most women admit that when they reach a certain age, they start to feel anxious because they feel that it is the time to get married. Hui Min got married when she was 22 years old and according to her, she had been thinking about getting married even before meeting her husband. On the one hand, she left home when she was 16 years old, and she had been working really hard in the city, so she felt that she wanted to find someone to rely on so that she would not have to work that hard anymore. On the other hand, she felt that she was ‘old’ and she should find a husband then. As she said,

‘I was 22 years old, and I was already thinking about getting married…People back in my hometown are pretty…backward…I think the thoughts of the people in Beijing are more advanced. I wanted to settle down and I happened to meet my husband… My parents were also rushing me to get married, so I had no other option.’

Likewise, Mei also decided to get married when she was 25 years old because she was tired of looking. She had dated several men while she was in the city, but she was not able to find an ideal marriage partner. After reaching a certain age, many young women will be pressured to marry. It seems that when they are ‘old’, they are automatically deprived of their freedom to
choose. They are not qualified to be ‘picky’ anymore and they should take whoever is available to them.

Most women said that they look up to the urban women who delay marriage for career development, but realistically, they do not have the capacity to deal with the potential adversity that a delayed marriage could bring them. In one aspect, even if they delay marriage, it is very unlikely that they will achieve great success, and in another aspect, they may risk losing the chance to secure a good man or end up becoming ‘unmarriable’ because they are too old in the marriage market. Although the young women are physically in the city, they still feel inclined to accomplish certain life tasks according to the ‘rural timeline’. It seems that when they are ‘old’, they are automatically deprived of their freedom to choose, and if they fail to get themselves married by a certain age, they will bring shame to the family because people will assume that ‘there must be something wrong with them’.

Contrary to some studies which conclude that rural-urban migration is a process where the young migrants’ rurality becomes thinner and urbanity becomes thicker (Zhu, 2008; Wu, 2018), the women’s experience in this study suggests that the negotiation and construction of their identity is more complicated in reality, and motherhood makes it even more complex by bringing a different set of capabilities and aspirations.

5.6 Disruption of motherhood
5.6.1 The mismatch
In this study, while most of the young women planned to delay their marriage to enjoy life and pursue personal development in the city, in the end, many still ended up getting married much earlier than planned as a result of unexpected pregnancy. For many young women, marriage was never part of the plan until they found out that they were pregnant. Their pregnancy came so unexpectedly that all their plans for the future were disrupted. Most women saw themselves as hard-working and career-oriented before they became a mother, and they had managed to obtain what they wanted through years of hard work. In spite of all their effort, motherhood has brought them back to the starting line. As Ping said,

‘You get married and you have your child. All of a sudden, your life goes back to the very beginning. It is pitiful. I am living in a migrant village again…I worked so hard. I was so ambitious. I managed to give myself a good life, but, in the end, after getting married and having a child, I am living the same old life again. Just liken when I first arrived in Beijing.’

Though most women were working in the low-skilled and low-income sectors in the city, they did not experience any financial pressure. They were capable of sustaining the urban lifestyle
that they aspired for, and many were also capable of providing for their families back home. Yet, after having a child, the expenses of raising a child, especially in the city, exposes their disadvantages as a working-class migrant. Milk powder, diapers, activities and educational programmes keep adding to the financial burden of the young migrant couple who were not well-off in the first place (CCR CSR, 2013). As described by Bo,

‘We bought a house back home, and the mortgage is 3,000 yuan a month. My daughter no longer uses diapers now, but the milk powder costs 1,000-2,000 yuan a month. Our rent is 1,500 yuan a month. Petrol for his car, 2,000 yuan a month. And our living expenses, about 3,000 yuan. His income is 12,000 yuan a month, so if you do the math, we will not have any money left.’

As many women said, they felt ‘defeated by reality’. In order to make ends meet, the migrant women have to cut down all the unnecessary expenses, and when they use the word ‘unnecessary’, they are usually referring to all investment in themselves, including clothes, make-ups and skincare products. As many women have said, they have quit their job to care for the child at home, so they are completely dependent on their husband financially, and they will have to ask their husband to give them money whenever they need to buy anything for themselves. As Ping said,

‘Before I got married, I am not exaggerating, all the skincare products that I used would cost 1,000 to 2,000 yuan, just what I used on a daily basis. But after I got married and had my daughter… Luckily, I got to hoard some products, so I did not need to buy any new ones for the first year. But they ran out this year and I had to buy new ones. I only bought one or two products when I really needed them. They only cost a few hundred yuan. But my husband would be unhappy. He would ask me, ‘Why are you buying skincare products again?’ But I had not bought any new ones for so long!’

In most cases, the young women’s husbands are relatively generous, and will voluntarily hand over their income, or pay for the entirety of household costs, which makes it easier for the women to overcome their feelings of the loss of independence. Yet, many women still feel guilty. As Mei said,

‘Before I had my son, I did not care about how much I spent, whether it was 5 yuan, 10 yuan or 50 yuan. But now, even if I only spent very little money on myself, I would feel guilty, as if I had spent a lot. The quality of my life decreased so much! Sometimes I ask myself. Why did I get married? Why did I choose to have a child? I was living a really good life back then. Why did I have to marry and have a child just because it was the right thing to do? And now I am living in misery.’
Many women have reported that becoming a mother makes it impossible to sustain the urban lifestyle that they used to have. They feel that they have been ‘abandoned’ by the mainstream society. As Bo complained,

‘When I was working before, our manager would ask us to go to karaoke or pubs after work. But you have kids now, you cannot go to pubs anymore, even cafes. You no longer have access to those ‘upper-class’ activities. All you see is the ‘lower-class’ stuff. Like hanging out with other moms in the migrant village. All you talk about with them is about kids. ‘Oh, your baby is chubby, what do you feed him?’ ‘You baby looks healthy, what’s your tip?’ Or, ‘How much is the baby’s clothes?’ Just this. You don’t get to talk about the ‘upper-class’ stuff, like ‘Where did you go shopping today?’ Or, ‘I saw a pretty coat, let’s go and get it next time.’’

For many women, migration initially provides them with a chance to imagine a future that they want to live in, but marriage and motherhood breaks their imagination and once again, they are deprived of their autonomy to choose a life that they aspire for. In some cases, they are even deprived of the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004; Czaika & Vothknecht, 2012). Many women have demonstrated that there is a mismatch between their aspiration and reality. Migration has hugely elevated their aspirations for life, but motherhood drags them down the social ladder, and back to the old days when they are incapable, dependent and inferior. Motherhood takes away the women’s ‘camouflage of urbanity’ and exposes their ruralness again. It is not that they have lost all their capabilities over night, but it is because they are not capable of actualising these obtained capabilities anymore. They still have the ‘capacity to aspire’, but they have lost the ‘capacity to realise’ their aspirations (Czaika & Vothknecht, 2012). Yet, this does mean that they have given up trying and aspiring completely.

5.6.2 Regaining control
In traditional Chinese culture, the idea of ‘Nanzunnvbei (Men are superior and women are subordinate)’ is prevalent. Yet, in this study, the young women’s experience suggests that not only are they capable of reversing their inferior status in the family, but they are also actively redefining their gender identity to achieve an alternative sense of value. Most young women in this study have accepted that they should prioritise the needs of the family over their personal goals. Since they are not contributing to the family financially, it is their responsibility to take care of labour within the household. They feel a great sense of achievement when they are capable of accomplishing all the chores. Yet, even if they willingly take up the title as the ‘primary caregiver’ of the family, they feel that their labour should not be taken for granted. As Ping recalled,
‘It was in summer, just several months ago. My daughter just started to walk, and she would throw everything she saw on the floor, and make the room really messy. I also had to do the laundry and mop the floor every day. Sometimes, when my husband came back home from work, if he saw that the laundry was not done, the floor was dirty or dinner was not ready, he would get annoyed. He would say, ‘I was working all day and I am finally home, only to find that the laundry is not done, the floor is not mopped and dinner is not cooked! What have you been doing all day?’’

Ping said that many mothers she knew had had the same experience, and they told Ping not to care at all and just leave the child with the father for one day, and he would figure it out himself. Therefore, one day, Ping told her husband that she was going out and he would be in charge of the house for one day.

‘I told him that I was going to take a break and have some fun. I told him to do the laundry, mop the floor and prepare meals for our daughter and then I went to my friend’s place and I got a facial. I hadn’t had a facial for so long! When I got home, he was really mad, but I didn’t care!’

The young migrant women in this study do not see their status as inferior to their husband in any way. Even if unpaid domestic labour is often seen as trivial, the young women in this study see themselves as making significant contributions to the well-being of the family. Most importantly, as many women have said, their pursuit of self-development is not over, but only temporarily suspended in order to accommodate the family needs. As the child grows up, hopefully, they will be able to pick up what they have left behind and be back on the right track again.

5.6.3 Back on the right track
In the first interviews, most women are not happy with their life because of the mismatch between their aspirations and reality. Many said that they had given up aspiring and just wanted to get by. However, them being ‘pessimistic’ might be their coping strategy that they employ to avoid disappointment. In reality, the young women are still working hard to improve their life situations, and it turns out that their life is getting better.

In the first year, Bo said that they wanted to buy an apartment in her hometown, but she did not think it would ever happen because they would not have the money. Yet, one year later, not only had Bo and her husband paid the deposit for an apartment in the city in her hometown, but they had also bought a car.

According to the women, although there are still uncertainties and difficulties in life, they genuinely feel that their life will get better and better. During the past year, both Bo and Dan
Dan have got a new job; Qiu Xia has opened a restaurant with her husband in the migrant village; Ping has started to use the social network platform to sell fruits to earn an alternative source of income; Guo Ying has passed the examination for the teaching permit; Mei has finally been able to buy an apartment in her hometown with her own savings; Chen Xi has moved back to her hometown with her two daughters, and she is much happier now because she has more support from her parents and grandparents. These achievements might seem trivial, but for the young women themselves, it is a process of constant negotiation of different capabilities, aspirations and identities. According to the women, being a mother consists of a process of constant changes, readjustments and alterations. Compared with their old self as a young migrant woman in the city, it seems that the autonomy that they have been working so hard to obtain vanishes as soon as they become a mother. However, as many women have said, it is just a ‘phase’ and the moments of struggles should not define who they are and what they are capable of achieving. As Chen Xi said,

‘The first three years…it’s the most difficult time. Now I’m on TikTok, and I often see videos of mothers with a young child complaining about how helpless they feel. Like they don’t have any support and their in-laws do not give them any money. Things like that. Sometimes I will leave a comment. I just want to tell them that everything will be alright when your child gets older.’

5.7 Summary

For the young migrant women participating in this study, migration is not simply a physical move from the rural village to the city, but an ongoing negotiation between their aspirations and the multi-local realities. The rapid development of mass media and rural education, along with the established migrant networks together shapes young people’s imaginings of the city, which gradually fuels their aspirations for migration (Czaika & Vothknecht, 2012; de Haas, 2021). Even when they are physically residing in the village, they have already scripted their own version of urbanity and the life that they aspire for. Migration is so pervasive that it could be said that these young women are already semi-urbanised before they actually arrive in the city.

As de Haas (2021) asserts, one’s aspirations for migration not only shows how she wants to live her life, but they also reveal her evaluation of the ‘opportunity structure’ at home and in the destination city. While the young women are aware of the limited opportunities that are available to them at home, they are not always sure about what the city can offer them and whether they are capable of seizing the opportunity to improve their life. As Xiang (2018) has argued, the Hukou restrictions no longer pose a major threat to the everyday life of young migrants in the city, since it only restricts migrants’ access to some urban services, like healthcare and education, not seen as crucial by young, single women. In line with Xiang’s
findings, the young women interviewed for this study seldom talk about the Hukou restrictions. Instead, they are more concerned about their personal incapacities, such as their low educational achievement, their low income, and even their age. The institutional barriers that have received great attention from scholars and policy makers have been trivialised even taken for granted by these young migrants, and as a result, the institutional barriers are no longer seen as a problem, since neither are they capable nor do they aspire to settle in the destination city anyway.

The young women may see migration as a solution to their immediate problems in life, such as poverty and deprivation, boredom and gender oppression, and yet they are fully aware that it will not give them what they aspire for in the long run, which is to ‘return home, get married and settle down’. Like many studies have suggested, despite young migrant women’s aspiration to live an urban life, it is still common that most of them will return home for marriage when they reach a certain age. Although the women are physically away from home, their tie to the family and hometown never weakens, but strengthens, creating a translocal kinship network (Perth & Sakdapolrak, 2020; Rockenbauch, Sakdapolrak & Sterly, 2019), which is actualised and reinforced by the bi-directional flow of remittances and obligations.

The women in this study are all originally from a rural village and they are all in Beijing at the time of the study. They all marry at a relatively young age and they are all raising a young child in the same migrant village. However, if we take a closer look, we will know that there is great diversity in terms of how they end up in their current position in life. For example, most women had been to several different cities before they settled in Beijing. Some women chose to marry the man that they met in Beijing, while others chose to return home and marry a man from their hometown. Several women, like Fen, Nan Nan and Kai, had actually returned home for marriage but chose to migrate to Beijing again. While Fen and Nan migrated to Beijing mainly to accompany their husband, Kai migrated with the aspiration to pursue career development. Sometimes, migration could also happen spontaneously. For example, Bo decided to migrate from Guangzhou to Beijing just because a friend said that Beijing was more ‘fun’.

The young women in this study do not just have one aspiration, and migration is not the only important thing in their life. They have in fact several intersecting desires and wishes that they want to achieve, and migration only happens to offer them a chance to accomplish what they want at that specific moment in life. People who migrate to the city may have completely different aspirations, and people who have the same aspiration may have very different migratory journeys. Therefore, it is not fair to classify a group of migrants as autonomous or victimised just because they make the same decision to move.
It is widely acknowledged that people’s aspirations change over time (de Haas, 2021), but what is often overlooked is that people also have multiple aspirations simultaneously (Appadurai, 2004). The multiplicity and simultaneity of aspirations complicates the experience of migration and we see further forms of this when pregnancy is part of the migration experience. This analysis shows that migration indeed improves women’s capabilities and aspirations for life in general, but motherhood brings in a new set of aspirations which bumps into their existing aspirations. The constellations of aspirations then create multiple intersecting spaces, and it is the on-going negotiation between aspirations and realities that makes up the fabric of their everyday life in the city.
6. Cultivating an urban child

6.1 Introduction
The preceding chapter introduces the young women’s journey to Beijing, and their experience of transition into motherhood. According to the women, motherhood interrupts their pursuit of independence and freedom, and some even feel that motherhood leads to the collapse of the urbanity project that they were once devoted to. Yet, this chapter will show how the birth of the child does not necessarily terminate the women’s pursuit of modernity, but takes it in a new direction, which is to become a good mother capable of supporting their child to live a good life in the future. As the chapter unfolds, women’s capacities to retain respectability by fighting multi-layered stigmatisation and building up capabilities will be introduced. Detailed analysis of how the migrant mothers ‘do’ mothering in their everyday life and how they construct their aspiration for the child will be provided before moving on to the discussion of how their expectations for their child shapes their aspiration for future migration. Finally, in the last section we will explore how migrant mothers adjust their aspirations based on their perceived capabilities, as well as the child’s individuality.

6.2 Stigma
For decades, rural migrant parents have been labelled as uneducated, deprived and neglectful (Huang, 2013; Xu, et. al, 2011; CCR CSR, 2013). The stereotype is then passed on to their child, who is believed to be ill-mannered and undisciplined (Gao, 2013), which further exacerbates stigmatisation of migrant parents as incompetent, resulting in a generational reproduction of disadvantages.

As some women suggested, as a rural mother in Beijing, dealing with stigma becomes part of their everyday life. Chen Xi and other migrant mothers take their child to the playground every day, and they notice how there is an invisible line that separates the local children from the migrant children.

‘Once we were at the playground. A child, I think he is local, wanted to play with my daughter and other migrant children. He kept running towards us. And then an older lady rushed over and picked him up and said, ‘I am the babysitter. The parents have asked me not to let the boy play with the non-local children.’’

Chen Xi says that she was a bit upset at first but now she is used to it. She is aware that migrant parents are considered to be incompetent, and to care only about making money, such that they never bother to educate their child, and therefore local parents worry that the migrant children will be a bad influence on their child. Sometimes, a local mother, who is ‘very nice’, will invite
migrant children to play with their child, but according to the migrant mothers, most of the time, it is taken for granted that local children play with local children, and migrant children play with migrant children. There is no interaction between the two sides and the parents will remind their child to stay on their side only and not try to cross over the line.

Being aware of the stereotype, Chen Xi is especially cautious when she interacts with urban people because she is afraid that any of their behaviours will trigger anti-migrant hostility. For example, when Chen Xi takes her daughter to the shopping mall, she will never let her daughter play with the free toys in children’s shops unless she has bought something from the shop.

‘Those local kids…when they go in the shop, they just grab a chair and start to play with the toys confidently. Their mother will just stand behind them watching, whether they have bought anything from the shop. The shop assistant does not care at all actually, but I am just afraid that she would find us annoying or troublesome.’

Studies have shown that people from disadvantaged groups tend to experience the ‘threat of stereotype’ more frequently than the actual discriminatory attitudes, which means that they do not necessarily experience any discrimination, but they are always worried that any of their behaviours might trigger discrimination (Gao, 2013). There is a saying in Chinese, ‘Zibujiao, fuzhiguo’, which means that if a child does not behave, the parents should be blamed. Chen Xi says that she is worried that if she let her daughter play with the free toys in the store, and her daughter breaks any toy or has a fight with other children over a toy, not only will her daughter be labelled as the ‘wild migrant child’ who has no manners, but she will also be blamed for not disciplining her daughter and be labelled as the ‘incompetent migrant mother’.

While some see the normalisation of the stereotypes as ‘problematic’, others argue that being able to ‘brush it off’ and going on with life also demonstrates an alternative sense of agency to resist the stigma and cope with the feeling of shame and relative deprivation (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2021). This is a first step in migrant mothers distancing themselves from other ‘incompetent migrant parents’ by acknowledging the stigma and working on their own capabilities. Yet, rather than passively accepting the stigma, other women are more proactive to fight the discrimination. Fen recalled that once she was walking with her two boys in the migrant village, one old lady saw them coming and said, ‘Oh god! Another one with two children!’ Fen says that back home, almost every mother has two children, some even have three. As a mother of two boys, Fen used to feel proud of herself, but after she came to Beijing, she suddenly experienced a strong sense of inferiority.

‘Here in Beijing, wherever you go, the local people will give you a dirty look. They look down upon you! They think that you are a rural migrant, how are you capable of
raising two children? What are you going to do when they grow up? It’s really irritating! I am responsible for my own children, and it is none of your business!’

Fen says that she does not take the hostility seriously, but she is doing her best to protect her child from any potential discrimination. For example, she always tries to dress her son well because she knows that people will judge her child by the way he looks, and if her son looks untidy or slovenly, people will conclude that he looks terrible because he is a migrant child, and this is how he should look because his mother is too poor to take a good care of him.

As a rural mother in Beijing, the women are faced with ‘triple stigmatisation’. They are ‘poor’ because of their low economic status. They are ‘ignorant’ because of their low educational attainment. They are ‘incompetent’ because of their lack of parenting knowledge. All these stereotypes have been experienced as the external pressure that motivates the young mothers to be a better mother. They aspire that their child will not be looked down upon as a ‘country bumpkin’ but rather will be capable of integrating into urban society, and moreover, they aspire to obtain respectability by living up to the urban standard of good parenting. The women know clearly that they are not as rich and capable as the urban mothers, and they may attempt to rationalise their inferiority just to make life easier, but they also know this does not mean that they are as incapable as they are portrayed.

6.3 Keeping the child in Beijing
In a way, migration, by sustaining a multi-local livelihood, provides rural households with a chance to strategically allocate human resources to maximise family income (Thieme, 2011), but at the same time, it further exacerbates the stereotypical portrayal of rural parents as irresponsible because they tend to prioritise monetary gains over the well-being of the child. Different from rural parents who leave the child behind, migrant mothers in this study have willingly chosen to keep their child in Beijing, and even if sometimes grandparents offer to help with childcare so that they can go out to work, the women themselves will turn down the offer. As Guo Ying said,

‘Yes, if I left my boy in the rural village, my in-laws would care for him, and I would have more time to do my own things. However, you would lose something too, and that would be your child. Your child would still call you Mama, but he would never be as close to you as my son is to me. My son knows what I am thinking about just by looking into my eyes.’

Guo Ying used to be a left-behind child, so she knows very well how difficult it is to grow up without a mother. Therefore, Guo Ying is determined to keep her son in Beijing so that he will not experience what she has experienced as a child. Like Guo Ying, other women who have experienced parental migration as a child also admit that they choose to keep the child in
Beijing because they do not want to make the same mistake as their own parents. As they have noticed, nowadays it is still prevalent back home that the parents leave the child with the grandparents while they pursue career development and freedom in the city. For decades, this has been seen as the most economical way to raise a child in the countryside.

Many women say that people back home could not understand why they insist on keeping the child in Beijing when they are struggling to make ends meet. Sometimes, the parents and in-laws will try to persuade them to send the child back so that they can find a full-time job and ease the financial burden. Mei says that some people even think that it is wrong of her to stay home to care of the child.

‘People have different aspirations. You can aspire for money, and you may feel that your child is not important, and it’s fine. But for me, I can work and make money later too, but the first three years of his life are more important… If I miss one year of his life, there is no way to make amends. Well, as long as I know what I want.’

According to the women, leaving the child with the grandparents could save them a lot of trouble now, but it could cause more trouble in the future. They are not willing to risk their child’s future just in exchange for a few years of freedom and ease. Many migrant mothers have noticed that it is common for the parents to leave their child in the rural village with the grandparents and then have to return later when their child reaches puberty because the grandparents are no longer able to discipline the child. Yet, they believe that it will be too late to make amends because it will be barely possible to correct the child’s behaviour then and his future will be ‘ruined’.

As many women have said, no matter how difficult life is, they will never leave their child behind. Although the development of transportation and telecommunication has made trans-local care work possible (Herrera, 2020; Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2020), the women in this study recognise that the physical presence and continuous engagement of the mother is irreplaceable. The young women may complain that they have to care for their child by themselves because they have no choice, but in reality, they have many options. In most cases, the grandparents are happy to care for the child for them, and their husband is also supportive of sending the child back home. Notwithstanding, it is the mother who is determined to keep the child in Beijing. Some may argue that the women are deprived of agency because they feel obliged to conform to the gender role as a mother. Yet, if agency is understood as a relational capacity (Burkitt, 2016) that arises from the interdependent and entangled interactions between the mother and the child, it can also be argued that the migrant mother’s choice to keep the child in Beijing and care for the child by themselves also demonstrates their capability to
perform agency, which functions via the interaction between their capabilities and aspirations to be a good mother and to have a good child (de Haas, 2021).

6.4 I don’t want my child to fall behind at the starting line

6.4.1 Following the urban way

As many women have explained, ‘The parent is the first teacher of the child’. The migrant mothers in this study acknowledge how in having a rural parent, their child already falls behind at the starting line compared with the urban children. Yet, migration has provided migrant women with a chance to catch up with urban parents by introducing them to the urban parenting knowledge and resources. By investing in early development, the migrant mothers aspire that they can at least narrow the gap between their child and the urban children, so that their child will not grow to be a country bumpkin like themselves. According to the women, modern parenting has almost become a competition, and the competition starts as soon as the child is born. They have learnt that the first three years are crucial to the child’s development, so they are devoted to investing in early education, so that their child will have a higher starting point in life and therefore will not lag behind other children in the future.

According to the women, back home, there are very few chances to access early development programmes. There might be some organisations that deliver similar services, but most often they will be in the town or the nearby city, and the price is usually quite high. Therefore, early education is still greatly inaccessible to most rural families. Most women feel that they are lucky because migration has exposed them to the urban parenting culture and provided them with the resources to actualise their aspiration for their child. However, as the migrant mothers have said, exposure to urban parenting knowledge and resources does not automatically translate into the actual capabilities to be an urban mother. Some women notice that many migrant parents in Beijing are not willing to send their child to the early education programme at the centre even if it is free because they see it as useless. Therefore, as some women have suggested, there are many ways to be a better mother, and it only depends on whether the mother herself is willing to do the hard work. As Mei said,

‘Every month I spend several hundred on picture books, and two or three hundred on toys. Most are educational toys. Like the climbing frame, the spinning top, the scooter and the basketball stand. You never see these things in other children’s houses.’

Mei also invests great energy in building up her son’s learning capacities by reading together with her son, playing games with her son, and playing poems and music to her son to ‘train his ears’. Mei has jokingly said that it costs nothing to raise a child in the countryside because as long as the child is not starving or freezing, the parents’ job is done. Other women also mentioned how their investment into early childhood education was ‘taunted’ and seen as
ridiculous by the people back home. Yet, they believed that all their work would pay off, because they had already noticed that their child outperformed other migrant children and rural children in terms of linguistic abilities, social skills and vocabulary. As Ping said,

‘All the time and effort that I have invested in our child and all the books that I have bought for our child will pay off. When she starts school in the future, she will just do better than all the other children.’

Studies have shown that migrant parents universally have very high expectations for their child because they hope that their child will not take on the same life path as them (Xie, 2013; Zhang, 2015). They strongly believe that ‘Knowledge can change one’s fate’, and whether a child is good or not should be judged by his grades and academic performance, and therefore, their child’s interest and potentiality is usually neglected (Xie, 2013). However, in this study, the young migrant mothers believed that the aim of education was more than going to a university.

The migrant mothers agree that it is important to receive education, but it is very dangerous to be ‘a nerd’. Sometimes, it is even believed that ‘too much’ education can be harmful because too much education can make a child ‘stubborn’ and ‘unsociable’. As many women have explained, they would rather have a child who does poorly in school but is lively and friendly, than a child who does well in school but is depressed and withdrawn. The young migrant mothers in this study suggest that exposure to urban culture upgrades their perception of parenting. As the migrant mothers have said, for the children back home, if they want to take part in any extracurricular activities, their parents will need to take them to the city, and the range of options are also quite limited compared to what they are able to have in Beijing. The migrant mothers admit that Beijing offers them access to diverse extracurricular activities that they would never have had a chance to expose their child to if not for migration. For example, Qiu Xia started to have parent-child swimming sessions with her son when he was nine months’ old. Now Qiu Xia’s son is four years old, and she still takes her son to swim at least once a week during the weekend, and she also plans to send her son to learn diving when he is a bit older to build up his courage.

Like Qiu Xia, many women aspire that their child can play a sport, like Taek-won-do and martial arts, or a musical instrument, like the piano. As many women have said, they are not only investing in extracurricular activities so that their child can have a hobby, but they are also investing in a fallback plan in case their child does not do well in school. By exploring diverse activities, they hope that their child will be able to find out what he is good at. Having a skill or speciality can then help them secure a livelihood in the future, so that they will not end up being a physical labourer like them. For example, many women mention that they want their daughter to learn dancing, and if their daughter has a talent, she can be a dancer when she grows up. Or,
if their child is good at a sport, he may become an athlete or a trainer. According to the women, every child is born with a talent, and it is their job as the mother to inspire their child to find out what the child is good at and try her best to support whatever the child aspires to do.

6.4.2 Resisting the rural way
As most migrant mothers have described, they don’t dream big, and they only hope that their child will be able to live a life that is slightly better than theirs. As a result, the migrant mothers are referring to their own rural upbringing as a mirror. They try to avoid making the same mistakes as their own parents, so that their child will not grow up to be just like them who are passive, self-contemptuous and lacking human capital in the urban milieu.

Zhang (2015) has concluded that the rural migrant parents can be categorised into three types: the democratic, the authoritative, and the indifferent, and most rural migrant parents in his study belong to the ‘authoritative’ group. However, the young migrant mothers in this study, based on their description, can be seen as embodying ‘the democratic’ because they respect their child as an equal individual whose opinion should be valued and respected, rather than see them as an ‘appendage’ who must be submissive and obedient. Studies have shown that corporal punishment is still prevalent in many migrant families (Huang, 2013; Xie, 2013), and some women in this study also admitted that they used to be bad-tempered and would end up beating their child because they did not know what else they could do. Guo Ying admits that she used to believe that ‘Beating makes a filial child’ and it was very rare for her to sit down and listen to her son. However, now she has learnt from books and the media about how to communicate with her son, and she has become more patient. Mei even sticks notes with the message ‘Calm down!’ on the wall, on the table, on the lamp, almost everywhere in the house, so that she will be reminded to control her temper when she disciplines her son.

Likewise, Bo has also been learning about ‘emotion management’ so that she can be a good role model for her daughter.

‘Like yesterday, I could not find my phone charger anywhere. I kept looking and finally I found it in the bin. I knew immediately it was my daughter because I scolded her yesterday, and this was her revenge.’

Now Bo is learning to be more patient with her daughter, and whenever she talks to her daughter, she will kneel down so that her eyes can match her daughters’ because she does not want her daughter to feel inferior and looked down upon.

Most women describe their own parents as ‘authoritative’, and they were never given the chance to make a choice, since their parents would have already arranged everything for them ‘for their own good’. Different from their own parents, the young migrant women believe that
no matter how young the child is, he/she should always be respected as an autonomous individual. The young migrant mothers believe that growing up in a democratic family means that the child will have a chance to get to explore what he/she aspires to in life, and therefore, will not feel the pressure to follow the flow. For example, Bo’s daughter is only four years old, and Bo has noticed that her daughter already has a strong opinion.

‘Every morning, when she gets dressed, she will open the wardrobe herself, and choose the outfit that she likes. After that, she will choose a pair of shoes that matches her outfit. If she does not like the shoes, she will refuse to wear them. When we go shopping, she will pick the clothes that she likes. She knows what she wants.’

6.4.3 Is the urban always the better?
As a rural mother in Beijing, the young mothers are devoted to raising a child who can live up to the urban standard so that he will not be looked down upon by the local people. Yet, some women also question whether, in the long run, it is right to mould their child into the desired image of an urban child, since they will have to leave Beijing and return home one day.

Chen Xi moved back to her hometown with her daughter shortly after the first interview, and in the follow-up interview, she says that her daughter is always bullied because she is too polite.

‘These children back home. They are savage! When we first came back last year, whenever she went out to play, she would end up crying. They bullied her and they would not play with her. Sometimes they would snatch her toy, and she was too afraid to take it back.’

Chen Xi recalled that when they were in Beijing, all the children they met were friendly, and she wondered whether it was because she had always been telling her daughter to be polite, and in the end, her daughter had become too ‘soft’.

However, as some women have suggested, despite the stigmatisation, sometimes, the children back home can be more relaxed and natural than the urban children. They have noticed that although the urban children are supposed to be more confident and more polite, they sometimes can also be more self-centred. Fen remembered that once her sons had a fight with a local boy over a toy, and the boy’s parents quickly grabbed the toy, fearing that her sons would take the toy away. Fen said that back home if the child had a fight with other children, the mother would be more relaxed and would ask the child to share the toy, but in Beijing, the parents would tell their child to hold on to the toy and never give it to others.

‘Those urban children, they are just too fragile! They cannot suffer from any disappointment.’
As expressed by the women, they are devoted, but they are never doting. Most women describe themselves as quite ‘chilled’. For example, when their child has a fight with other children over a toy, they will not intervene because they believe their child is capable of handling conflicts by themselves; when their child falls, they will not rush over to pick him up, and they will encourage the child to stand up himself. Guo Ying even describes herself as ‘lazy’ because she seldom helps her son if her son is capable of accomplishing the task himself.

Even if many migrant mothers are hopeful that their child will be able to slowly catch up with the Beijing children, they are afraid that their child might be disadvantaged academically compared with the children back home. At the time of the interviews, most of the women’s children have not reached the age for elementary school, and some have not even been enrolled in a kindergarten. No matter what stage the child is currently at, the migrant mothers all agree that the quality of education in Beijing is much better than that back home because the teachers are younger, the facilities are better, and it is more focused on the overall development of the children and children ‘learn while playing’ whereas the kindergartens back home only ask the children to sit quietly and memorise characters and numbers.

According to some migrant mothers, although the educational system in Beijing is supposed to be more advanced than that back home, what their children are learning in school might be of little help for their academic progression in the future. According to the women, they will have to return home when their child reaches the age for elementary school due to the institutional barriers, and as Hui Min has said, she is worried that if her child returns home for elementary school, he might fall behind because the children back home know more Chinese characters and her child will be disadvantaged because she only knows how to play games. Guo Ying also acknowledges that the kindergartens in Beijing do not teach as much ‘knowledge’ as the ones back home.

‘The kindergartens back home pay more attention to exam results. For example, they are already teaching the children basic maths, like one plus one and two plus two, as well as Pinyin and characters.’

Guo Ying admits that although her son has more access to extracurricular activities in Beijing, he lacks the ‘knowledge’ that is required to successfully move on to elementary school. Thus, Guo Ying plans to return home one year before elementary school to enrol her son in a preschool programme, so that her son will be able to catch up with the students back home.

It is commonly acknowledged that schools in Beijing are more centred on the ‘quality education’ of the child, which is opposed to the traditional ‘rote learning’ prevalent in most

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2 The Chinese phonetic symbols.
rural schools. The migrant mothers recognise the benefit of quality education, but they also feel that it only works with the rich families in Beijing. As many women have said, the Beijing children are not their child’s future rivals, but the children back home, and if they only aim to look up to the Beijing parents, their child might potentially lag behind the children back home.

6.5 Returning for elementary school
6.5.1 Returning sooner than later
As discussed in the previous section, it is barely possible for the migrant children to study in a public school in Beijing due to their non-local status. Even if the migrant parents manage to enrol their child in a private school in Beijing, their child has to return home for the college entrance examination because the educational policy stipulates that a student can only sit the college entrance examination in their place of origin that is registered in the Hukou system. Therefore, as many women have said, since their child has to return home anyway, if he aspires to go to a university, it is always better to return sooner than later because migration can possibly interrupt academic progression, resulting in failure in the examination, and they do not want to take the risk.

Moreover, in China, the educational policy in different regions vary. For example, in different regions, the textbooks, curriculum, exam papers and evaluation systems can be different. For example, Bo is from Henan Province, one of the most populated provinces in China. As Bo has explained, the number of students that take the college entrance examination every year in her home province is much larger than that of Beijing. Therefore, back home, the competition to get into a university is more intense, and the students are more hardworking. Some women also mention that the exam questions are also more difficult in their hometown. Thus, a child that is educated in Beijing can be disadvantaged if he returns home for the college entrance examination in his hometown because of the ‘knowledge gap’. As a result, most migrant mothers plan to leave Beijing when their child starts elementary school at the latest so that their child can have more time to adapt to the educational system, the curriculum and the teaching style back home.

6.5.2 Choosing an urban school
According to the migrant mothers, their job as a parent is not just to send their child to any school, but to send their child to a ‘good school’. They are very clear that their child is not eligible to study in a public school in Beijing, but neither are they willing to send their child to a privately-run migrant school due to the low quality of education. For the migrant parents who aspire that their child can proceed with education, the best option is to return home and enrol their child in a ‘good school’ in their hometown.
When talking about their plan for return, the women are very determined that they will not move back to the rural village or town that they come from. They are convinced that they should settle in the city because they want their child to be educated in an urban school. As Bo said,

‘Nowadays, all the younger parents, who have received some level of education, know that they should send their child to study in the city because the educational resources are much better in the city.’

According to Bo, even before her daughter was born, when she and her husband were considering buying a house, they made sure that the house was in the city and it was in a good school district, so that their daughter would have access to good quality elementary school and high school if they had to return one day. Because of their rural status, if the women want their child to be enrolled in a public school in the city, they should either own a house in the school district like Bo or pay extra money to the school as sponsorship. If the parents do not have any connections in the city, it might be difficult to secure a seat in a public school, and they will have to send their child to a private school instead if they insist on sending their child to an urban school. Even if the private schools will cost more, the migrant parents are willing to pay for the fees so that their child will receive the same education as the urban children.

The women believe that if their child is able to study in the city, it is more likely for him to achieve academic success in the future. It is widely acknowledged that rural education is very backward because it promotes rote learning and it lacks resources, and as a result, rural students usually have poorer academic performances than their urban counterparts (21st Century Education Research Institute, 2013). Since the rural students and the urban students will need to pass the same exam in order to make it to a university, the migrant mothers believe that if they fail to send their child to an urban school, he will not be capable of competing with the urban students in the college entrance examination.

Besides, as complained by the migrant mothers, the teachers in the rural schools still tend to use the local dialects while teaching. In most cases, the child can barely understand any dialect because he has been living in Beijing since he was born, and the women themselves are also used to talking in Mandarin at home. Therefore, studying in a rural school can be challenging for their child, both academically and psychologically, because it will also be difficult for their child to make any friends because of the language barriers.

6.5.3 Returning with the child

As discussed in the previous section, the young women can easily choose to send the child back home while they remain in Beijing for their personal pursuits, but they are not willing to. They
are determined to return with the child. According to the women, it is very likely that they will move to a city close to their home village after leaving Beijing so that their child can be educated in the city. Therefore, even when the women choose to ‘return home’, they will still be a ‘migrant mother’. Or, as some women have said, they will become a ‘Pei-du Mama’. In Chinese, ‘Pei’ means ‘to accompany’, and ‘Du ’ means ‘learning’. Therefore, usually, it is understood that a Pei-du Mama’s job is to migrate with the child to the place where the child is educated to provide care.

Some may argue that motherhood deprives the young women of their migratory agency, and they are forced to conform to the gender role to be a good mother. However, it is often overlooked that aspirations are relational. Not only do the young women have aspirations for themselves, but they also have aspirations for their child and their family, and when different pursuits collide, they have the autonomy to choose what they perceive as best for themselves. As Guo Ying has said, whatever is best for her son is best for her.

‘You have to return anyway, and you are not alone anymore. You do not return for the sake of other people. You return for your own good. It’s all for you. It’s for your child. And it’s for your family.’

According to the migrant mothers, their aspiration is now lived through their child. They have chosen to ‘foreclose their own timeline’ so that they can better focus on cultivating their child, so that he will be capable of living a good life in the future (Omar, 2022, p.1210). As many women have explained, most rural parents do not have ‘aspirations’ for their child, they just let the child grow ‘freely’. However, they are different. Not only do they have aspirations for their child, but they are willing to take actual actions to realise their aspirations. Yet, their aspirations for the child shall not be understood as their aim to ‘control’ the child and force the child to achieve what they are not able to achieve in life, like other rural parents. As Mei said,

‘It’s like flying a kite. I only need to make sure that the kite does not fly off track.’

While migration greatly elevates the women’s aspirations by introducing them to new ‘reference groups’ and makes them see the potentiality to look up to the Beijing mothers, at the same time, they are also very clear that they should not naïvely believe that as long as they do their best, their child will achieve success in the future and ‘change his/her fate’.

6.6 Aiming for the middle

After the birth of the child, the child becomes the ‘trophy’ that the women feel most proud of. Their aspiration for the child has been internalised as the motivational capacity (Czaika & Vothknecht, 2012), which continuously pushes them to build up their capabilities so that they can live up to the urban standard of a good mother. Having a child that is disciplined,
independent and smart demonstrates their capabilities as a mother, which in turn improves their 
sense of value and eventually elevates their status in the hierarchy of discrimination. As Mei 
said,

‘I did not even complete elementary school, but I am capable of raising my son to be so 
well-behaved. It is indeed a great achievement.’

Some women even feel that, in some aspects they do better than many urban mothers. It is even 
arguable that the migrant mothers in this study have managed to elevate their social status via 
their cultivation of the child. However, the migrant mothers are also aware that it is not easy to 
maintain their status in the ‘hierarchy of discrimination’, since their perceived capabilities in the 
long run is largely constrained by their rural status and financial well-being. Although they are 
willing to do their best, they also know that their ‘best’ is only the ‘average’ to the urban 
mothers in Beijing.

The young migrant mothers suggest that migration has upgraded their perception of mothering 
and elevated their aspirations for the child. Yet, they are also aware that aspirations are only 
aspirations. Many women say that they do not dream ‘big’, which is both their well-being 
enhancing mechanism to avoid disappointment and their recognition of their limitations. As Hui 
Min said,

‘I am under a lot of pressure… I know that I’m not able to give them the best of 
everything, but at least I should give them the ‘medium-level’ one.’

As Fen has said, all parents have the same aspiration, which is ‘Wangzhichenglong, 
wangnvchengfeng (hoping that the son grows up to be a dragon and the daughter grows up to 
be a phoenix)’. Most migrant women attribute their current difficulties in life to their low 
academic achievement. They are most afraid that their child will take on the same life path as 
them and end up being trapped in the cycle of deprivation. They are convinced that as long as 
their child makes it to a university, he will be able to live a good life, instead of struggling to 
make a living like themselves. Xie’s (2013) study demonstrates that migrant parents firmly 
believe that education can lead to upward mobility, and they sometimes set their aspirations 
very high hoping that their child can achieve what they themselves were not able to achieve 
when they were younger.

At the time of the first interview, Ping’s daughter just turned one year old, and Ping was already 
concerned about what if her daughter would not do well in school and fail to make it to a 
university. Yet, Ping has made up her mind that she will ‘stifle the possibility in the cradle’ by 
inculcating the aspiration to go to a university in her daughter’s mind from an early age.
‘The universities, like Peking University and Tsinghua University…You can go in and have a tour there. When she is a bit older, I will take her there, the good universities. Then she will start to feel that universities are great, and she will feel gravitated towards going to a university herself.’

Hui Min says that it is ‘horrifying’ just to think of her daughters ‘entering society’ at a young age and ending up as a migrant worker like herself. Yet, the women are also aware that growing up in a migrant family will potentially have a negative impact on their child’s ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2004). As Bo said,

‘I am most scared about that (my daughter will drop out of high school and become a migrant worker like me)…because I have not been a good role model for her.’

Many women recall that they used to be very anxious because they feared that their child would not be able to compete with other children in the future. As Guo Ying said,

‘For example, other children get 100 in the exam, but my child gets 99. Or, other children are learning this, but my child is not. What if he is not able to catch up with other children? What if he lags behind? But later, I realise that there are other children who are not learning either. Will they be able to catch up? And even if he has the chance to learn, will he be able to grasp? I think he will have a lot of pressure. Gradually, I feel less anxious. As long as he tries his best, I think it is good enough.’

As the child gradually grows up, the migrant mothers’ aspirations for the child slowly change from ‘I want my child to achieve what I failed to achieve’ to ‘As long as my child is not as deprived as me’. Bo’s daughter started kindergarten one year ago. Before her daughter started kindergarten, Bo was very determined that it was important to go to a university, and she could not even imagine her daughter growing up to be a migrant worker like herself. However, when Bo finds out that her daughter may not be a ‘study type of child’, her aspiration for her daughter starts to change. According to Bo, her daughter just started to learn writing characters and making simple calculations. She finds that her daughter is struggling with her homework which other children find very simple.

‘We’ve all been students once. I know how stressful it is to stay in school when you are not doing well. There is no use forcing her if she is not doing well in school. I think it will be hurtful to her.’

As the women have said, they will keep aspiring for the child, but meanwhile, they are also ready to accept the fact that their child is just not born a dragon nor a phoenix. As Chen Xi said,
‘She does not have to be ‘outstanding’. There are more people who are ordinary than who are outstanding. But as long as you can have a slightly better and happier life than us, it will be the best.’

6.7 There’s only so much that I can do
Willing to accept the ‘ordinariness’ of the child on the one hand demonstrates the women’s understanding of the child’s autonomy and individuality, and on the other hand shows their perceived incapability to provide enough support to ‘transform the fate’ of the child. As most women have said,

‘When he grows up? Then it’s not up to me anymore…I don’t know. When he grows up, if he makes it to a university, he settles there, if he fails, he moves back home.’

Indeed, migration has improved the women’s capacity to aspire as a mother by introducing them to new role models (Czaika & Vothknecht, 2012) and new resources (de Haas, 2021), but it has also exposed their disadvantaged status. As many women have said, their child does not even have the same starting point as the urban children. They strive to minimise the gap and catch up with the urban mothers by fostering the child’s capabilities, choosing a good school and supporting the child’s educational needs, but there is still no guarantee that their child will succeed.

The migrant mothers are aware that they will never be able to compare with the urban mothers no matter how hard they try. For example, the parents in the city, if they find out that their child is not doing well in school, will hire a private tutor for their child, or manage to send their child to a good school even if he fails the exam. The rich parents can even send their child to study abroad or get their child a good job in the city, even if their child fails to make it to a university. Yet, as the migrant mothers have said, their child will have to depend on himself because, as the mother, there is ‘only so much’ that she is capable of doing.

As the women have said, they aspire for the future, but they are also aware that the future is beyond their control. As the women have said, they will try to provide ‘the best’ to their child, but whether their child can make the best of it will be completely dependent on the child him/herself. As Mei has said, if, after everything that she has done for her son, in the future, her son still ends up as a rural labourer, then it is her son’s fate, and there is nothing that she can do to change it. As many women have said, they can only make sure that they do whatever they are capable of doing and then take the future as it comes.

Many women see themselves trapped at the bottom of the social ladder, and therefore, even if it is only a small leap upward, they will experience a great sense of achievement, because they will not be at the bottom anymore. The women are aspirational and realistic at the same time.
They do aspire for upward mobility, but they are also aware of how far they can actually go based on the capabilities that they possess at the moment as well as the capabilities that they are likely to obtain or lose in the future. Although it seems that their child is gradually catching up with the urban children, the migrant mothers are clear that they will never be able to compete with ‘top-class’ urban parents, in terms of their capabilities to provide their child with continuous support. As the young women have said, rather than feel anxious about what they are not capable of doing, it is more efficient to focus on what they are capable of doing and do it well. As Ping said,

‘I just want to do my best, so that I will not feel guilty, and my daughter will not blame me in the future.’

The women in this study constantly remind themselves to be ‘realistic’ and ‘dream small’. However, this does not mean that they have given up aspiring for their child or they have deliberately lowered their aspirations to avoid disappointment. On the contrary, they will continue to aspire for the best and provide all the support that their child needs to fare but also be ready to accept the ‘worst’. That is, even if one day, their child might grow up and end up being a migrant worker just like them, they will still accept it because at the end of the day, it is their child’s life, not theirs. As Mei has said, even if his son wants to be a tractor driver, she will still be proud of him, as long as he is happy.

6.8 Summary
While the migrant mothers in this study see themselves as inferior to the urban mothers in Beijing, they do believe that they deserve more respect than most rural mothers and migrant mothers. Although the migrant mothers are aware of their limitations, they are determined that they should at least do better than the rural mothers and other migrant mothers. Guarnizo (1997) introduces the concept of ‘dual frame of reference’ to suggest that international migrants tend to frequently compare the life situation back home with that in the destination to cope with the feeling of dissatisfaction. This means that when the migrants find out that life back home is actually worse than what they have now, even the most horrendous situation in the destination will appear to be tolerable or even pleasant (Rye, 2019). Anthias (2008, 2009, 2012a) has proposed the concept of ‘translocal positionality’ which helps understand how the experience of identity can transcend the geographical boundaries with the development of translocal reference groups that span across multiple locations. Based on the experiences of the young migrant mothers in this study, it can be argued that migrant women in this study have developed a ‘multi-local frame of reference’. They constantly compare themselves with local mothers in Beijing, the migrant mothers in the migrant village, and the rural mothers back home. They may feel incompetent when they are not able to live up to the urban standard, but at least they can do
better than other rural mothers and migrant mothers. Even if their child may not be able to compete with the urban children in Beijing, as long as he is more disciplined, cultivated and independent than the rural children and other migrant children, they will feel satisfied.

Analysis of women’s experiences show that there is not a universal standard of motherhood. People’s perception of what motherhood entails and how the obligations of a mother should be performed is the result of historical, cultural and environmental factors as well as the mother’s perceived capabilities. Undoubtedly, the resources that a family owns defines the status of a family (Xu, 2012), but the family member’s capability to mobilise the resources shall not be defined by the status of the family. The capabilities of migrant mothers in this study are constrained, but they are not completely deprived of agency. Migrant women are living in the space where the city and the countryside interface, and inevitably, their understanding of motherhood is shaped both by urban culture and by rural tradition. Some women strictly adhere to the urban parenting style and completely reject the rural style; some recognise that rural parenting style is outdated, but still see it as helpful to them; others are open to what the city offers, but also acknowledge the benefits of being a relaxed parent like most rural people. It is also observed that the migrant mothers’ aspirations for their child tend to change as their child grows up.

Migrant mothers in this study are not blindly taking in everything that the city offers, and neither are they completely rejecting what they have learnt from their own rural upbringing. They are inventing their own form of childcare and child rearing philosophy, which is oriented towards their aspirations for their child, but also situated in their current position in life. They endeavour to make the best use of the limited resources that are available to them and try their best to assist the development of the child, so that they will be capable of living a happy and satisfying life in the future. However, it is also noticeable that according to the migrant women’s narratives, there is diversity in terms of what they see as the ‘best’ life is for the child, which is closely related to their perceived capabilities and aspirations. For example, in this study, the women who are relatively ‘better-off’, like Qiu Xia and Bo, are more likely to invest more in their children’s education, and they almost see themselves as the same as the urban parents; the women who are ‘more educated’, like Jun and Chen Xi, tend to have higher expectations for their child, since they see how education benefits themselves. Yet, the women who are ‘less educated’ and less ‘well-off’ tend to have lower expectations for their child. On the one hand, they are aware of their own limited capabilities of investing in their child’s education. On the other hand, they only aspire that their child can live a life that is slightly better than theirs.
Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, the young migrant women never aspire to settle in Beijing and they have always been aware that they will have to return home one day. Yet, it is the birth of the child that makes the ‘idea’ into ‘reality’. If, as some have suggested, the migrant women used to sustain a translocal livelihood, motherhood adds more complexity to their experience by creating a multi-local life world. The migrant women have to redistribute their capabilities and aspirations to different local levels to fulfil respective family obligations. While it is taken for granted that rural migrants will eventually return home, the women’s experiences in this study demonstrate that their aspiration for return migration is a process of negotiation of different capabilities and aspirations, and they are not just focused on how to improve their immediate life situation, but they are also oriented towards the future. The migrant mothers will continue to construct and re-construct their multi-local life world to overcome the uncertainties of the future.
7. Contemplating the future

7.1 Introduction

This is the last chapter of the three Findings Chapters. The first Findings Chapter—Crafting the Urban Self shows the young women’s migratory journey to Beijing, their experience of ‘urbanisation’ and how becoming a young mother impacts their experience of migration. The second Findings Chapter—Cultivating an Urban Child describes how the Beijing experience shapes the young mothers’ mothering practices, how their aspirations for their child change over time and how their aspirations for their child further shape their capabilities and aspirations to leave Beijing and return home. This final Findings Chapter will introduce how the young women imagine their future. Firstly, this chapter will describe how the young women construct their aspirations for return and actively build up their capabilities to secure a desirable future, and then move on to the discussion about how migration between the countryside and the city creates an expanded family network that further shapes the women’s perception of the future. Lastly, this chapter will highlight how migration can have a long-lasting impact on the life of the young women, and how the young women navigate the uncertainties of the future.

7.2 Returning for a better life: The good life is in Beijing, but the better life is back home.

7.2.1 Aspiring for a good life

As discussed in Chapter 5.1.3 Leaving to return, the young migrant women in this study never aspire to settle in Beijing permanently. Some studies suggest that were it not for the Hukou restrictions, the vast majority of the rural migrants would prefer remaining in their host city permanently (Wang, 2015). It seems that as long as the Hukou restrictions were gone, the migrant families would live in Beijing care-free. However, other studies also suggest that the Hukou system shall not be seen as the one and only factor that defines the rural migrants’ capabilities and aspirations to settle in the city (Xiang, 2018). In compliance with Xiang’s (2018) argument, findings in this study also suggest that what drives the young migrants to actively leave Beijing and return home is not necessarily their rural status per se, but their perceived incapabilities to sustain a good life in Beijing.

Although there is not a universal standard of ‘the good life’, it is generally recognised that life in Beijing is supposed to be ‘better’ than that in the rural village, which is what motivates the young women to leave home in the first place. In Beijing, they have a higher income; they have access to more job opportunities; they are exposed to more advanced culture. Yet, if they are
not capable of living up to the Beijing standard, then no matter how good life is in Beijing, it is of no use to them. As Guo Ying said,

‘You can insist on staying in Beijing, despite all the hardships, but for what?’

Many women in this study feel that there is no future for them in Beijing. They are aware that no matter how hard they try, they will always be the incapable rural migrants who are struggling to make a living. They will never be capable of buying a house in Beijing; they will still be living in the one-room studio in the migrant village; they will still be working as a physical labourer, earning the minimum wage and having no work contract; their child will be studying in a privately-run migrant school, and will most likely fail the college entrance examination and end up being a migrant worker too.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that the young migrant women are completely hopeless and powerless. They may not be capable of living a good life in Beijing, but with the assets and experiences that they have accumulated via working in Beijing, they are confident that they will be able to improve their life situation if they make a wise choice, which is to leave Beijing and return home.

7.2.1.1 Improved quality of life

According to the young women, returning means foremost that they will have better living conditions with lower living costs. Most migrant families live in a one-room studio in the migrant village. Some women complain that there is no sunlight in the room, and they are living ‘in complete darkness’. Some women say that the room is so tiny that there is no space for them to even fit a study desk for their child. Others do not have heating in the room and have to move back home with the child in winter to escape the cold, and then come back to Beijing again in spring. The migrant mothers themselves do not mind living in the migrant village and enduring the hardships, but they do not want their child to suffer. As Chen Xi has said,

‘It’s not like back home where you have a good living environment, and you have a bigger house. You are much happier back home. Now we live in this rented room…Sometimes, I feel…do I bring my daughter to this world to suffer? I feel sorry that I have given birth to her.’

Most migrant couples in this study have already purchased a house back home, either in the city or in the town, with savings that they have accumulated via working in Beijing. According to the women’s descriptions, their house back home is more spacious, and located in a decent neighbourhood, with easy access to schools and all necessary facilities. As Ping complained,
‘I really miss our house back home…I sometimes wonder why I have to endure the hardships and suffer in Beijing while I have such a big house back home?’

The young migrants admit that they are capable of earning more than the people back home, but they also realise that no matter how much they earn in Beijing, it is never enough to support them to sustain a good life, since the living costs are so high. Migration indeed provides the migrants a chance to accumulate their financial capabilities to pay for the deposit of a house back home, but after deducting the monthly mortgage repayments, the rent, the bills and the childcare expenses, there is really not much left for them to ‘enjoy life’. As Mei said,

‘In Beijing, we are only making a living, but back home, we can live a life’.

7.2.1.2 Improved sense of settlement

In Chinese, migrants are often described as the ‘floating’ population, and the young women also label themselves as ‘Beipiao (the Beijing floaters)’. It is widely acknowledged that migration provides migrants with more freedom, but it can also lead to the feeling of alienation (Xu, 2017). When women are younger, they enjoy roaming aimlessly and chasing opportunities, which is the privilege of being young and single. Yet, as they get older and establish their own family, many women say that they are now ‘tired of floating’ and aspire to settle down. Most migrants feel that they are ‘floating’ in Beijing largely because they are living in precarity. Many women report that they have moved multiple times across Beijing. Sometimes, they have to move because of government demolition. Other times, they are asked to move out on a short notice by their landlord. As Guo Ying recalled,

‘We had to move every two or three months, for all kinds of reasons…When we were looking for a place to stay, sometimes the landlord would refuse to rent their house to us because we had a young child. They would say that we would be noisy or whatever. Finally, we met a landlord who did not mind us having a child. We have been living here since then.’

Feeling tired of ‘being kicked around’, the young migrant couples aspire to have their own house. They believe that only when they have their own house, will they be able to settle down and only when they settle down, will they have the right to aspire for a good life. As many have said, being financially capable of owning a house back home has always been one of the goals of migration. It has been widely recognised that ownership of a house in the hometown is a symbol of success, but according to the young migrants, it is more than a trophy to show off.

As many women have said, having owned a house back home means that they can leave Beijing and return home anytime when things do not work out. The house back home is their ‘fallback position’. They may feel anxious when they are not capable of living up to the Beijing standard
of a good life, but as long as they have their own house back home, they will not worry so much, since there is always a place that they can return to, which actually provides the migrants with more opportunities to imagine their future. They have more confidence to navigate the uncertainties of the future, since at worst, they will just pack up and move back home, and they will still have a rooftop over their head.

7.2.1.3 Improved subjective well-being

Most of the migrant women imagine their future return as a ‘strategic retreat’ to live a better life, and this is not just them trying to normalise their incapability to settle in Beijing, but it is embedded in their perception of happiness and their subjective evaluation of how and where they can actually live a happy life. As Yang and Tang (2017) argues, as the women age and establish their own family, their perception of happiness also shifts and evolves. According to the young women in this study, when they are younger, they aspire to go to the big cities to make more money, but now, as many have said, they prioritise their own happiness. As many women have said, they are not in the position to enjoy life in Beijing, since they can barely make ends meet. No matter how much money they make, they still feel obliged to keep working harder and making more money to provide for the family because everyone is eagerly fighting for a living in Beijing, and they do not want to fall behind, which can make many young women feel especially anxious. Most young women agree that moving back home means that they will suffer from less financial pressure because ‘everyone is poor back home’. This does not mean that people back home are actually living ‘poorly’, but as Chen Xi has explained, the ‘cost of a good life’ is much lower back home.

‘People back home are like…I only need to make a little bit of money, like 10,000 yuan or 20,000 yuan. That will be enough to live comfortably. They spend a lot of their income on having fun.’

Chen Xi notices that people back home know better about how to enjoy life. They are more ‘romantic’ and they celebrate all the smallest things in life. Some women even envy those who live in the rural village. As Dan Dan said,

‘Although they do not have a lot of money, I think their life is much more comfortable than ours. They are also busy, but they are only busy in spring. They will get a part-time job in summer, and rest in winter. They don’t do anything in winter. My dad does not work at all in winter. He just plays mah-jong all day. That’s real happiness! No work for three months. Playing mah-jong every day. Much better than us! We have to work endlessly, and we are not making a lot of money either.’

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As many women have said, they don’t dream big anymore, and they only aspire to live a simple and peaceful life. They now see it as pointless to sacrifice their own happiness just to compete with other people in order to be seen as ‘successful’. As Guo Ying said,

‘Some people might think that I return home because I am not capable of making a living in Beijing, but others might think that I have made a fortune in Beijing, and I am coming back to buy a big house. People have different options. I might think that her life is a mess, but she might actually feel that she is having a good life.’

7.2.2 Staying to return
Despite the aspiration to improve their life situations via return migration, the women also agree that one needs to have already possessed the basic assets to be capable of living a decent life after return. As Chen Xi said,

‘If you have a house. If you have a car. You can actually live a good life back home. Yet, for the people who do not own a house back home, life may not be that good.’

Therefore, it is fair to say that the reason why the women are still in Beijing despite their desire to return home is that they want to make the best use of their time in Beijing and keep building up their capabilities to make sure that they have accumulated enough assets to secure a livelihood after moving back home. According to the migrant women, not only are their aspirations multi-layered, but they are also multi-local. When they are in Beijing, they aspire for money, and only when they return home, they can aspire for life satisfaction.

Other studies have also concluded that young migrants tend to accumulate human capital by working in the city so as to improve their life after return (Lin, 2019). It can be argued that while the migrant couples are busy making a living in Beijing, they are also ‘waiting to return home’. In a way, their capabilities and aspirations are ‘displaced’ as a result of migration. They obtain their capabilities in Beijing only to channel them back home to actualise their life aspirations in the future, and subsequently, their construct of a good life drives them to keep improving their capabilities in Beijing, which creates a circulation of capabilities and aspirations between home and Beijing.

Most women admit that they are only in Beijing now because they are going to return soon. The women’s aspiration to return home is like the one missing piece of puzzle that makes their life in Beijing meaningful. They genuinely believe that as long as they endure the hardships for now, they will be capable of living a good life back home, which on the one hand, motivates them to keep building up their capabilities, and on the other hand, neutralises their feeling of inferiority, since they are not driven out of Beijing due to their incapability, but they actively choose to return home for a better life.
7.3 Multi-local livelihood and the split household
7.3.1 The left-behind father and the estranged husband
The migrant mothers in this study know that it will be ideal if they can return home together as
a family, but in reality, it might not always be possible. As mentioned in the last section, the
women are very clear that their income will drop greatly after return, and if they want to sustain
the life that they aspire for and provide the child with a good life, it is only possible that the
father remains in Beijing to provide for the family, while they get a part-time job close to home
and care for the child. As Bo said,

‘I am going back. Her dad will stay here. The income back home is really low. Yes, we
don’t have to pay any rent, but you still have other expenses…His work is here. His
boss is here. He will have to stay here. I will return home to care for my daughter.’

Some women expect that even if they return together as a family, it is likely that the father will
have to migrate again later when they find out that the income is not enough to support their life
back home. In many cases, as the women predict, their family income will drop by almost 50%
after return. For example, many women say that their husband can easily make 12,000 yuan a
month in Beijing, but after return, it will be a positive estimation that he can make 7,000 yuan.
Even if they themselves will be able to return to work as the child grows older, they do not
expect that they will be able to make more than 3,000 yuan a month. As many women have
explained, they will not need to pay for any rent after return, which will save some money, but
the living costs will not be especially lower if they choose to settle in the city, especially
regarding the child’s education. As Bo further explained,

‘Like tutoring. People back home attach great importance to tutoring. It costs thousands
every month… Students go to tutoring centres as soon as they start elementary school.
And extracurricular activities. I have asked. It costs thousands every month too.’

As many women have said, sustaining a multi-local livelihood is not an option, but a necessity.
They are aware that separation from their husband is not good for their relationship, but if they
have to choose between the husband and the child, they will always choose what is best for the
child. As Jun said,

‘People say that your spouse should rank first, and your child should rank second. But I
don’t think that I am able to do that. I will always prioritise my child.’

Some women even say that they are only with their husband for the best interest of the child. As
many women have said, they marry their husband because they are pregnant with his child, or
because they feel obliged to fulfil a life task, and they are only with their husband because they
want the child to have a complete family. Yet, even if they know that they may become distant
with their husband if they live separately, they don’t think that it will lead to actual separation or divorce because they are now tied to each other by the ‘shared interest’. As Mei said,

‘If he does not want to be with me anymore, I am completely fine with it. It does not matter to me at all. There is really nothing for me to dwell on in this relationship. And the most important thing is that…he will never divorce me. He knows that if he leaves me, he will need to spend a lot of money getting a new wife. He once said this himself. He said that he would never leave me. Why should he bother? Well, I guess this is life.’

7.3.2 Extended multi-local family network

7.3.2.1 Aspiring for a ‘small’ family

In traditional Chinese culture, it is the norm for the married couple to live with the man’s families (Fei, 2018c). This is especially true if the man is the only son or the eldest son of the family because he is expected to take up the responsibilities to care for the parents. As many women have complained, they are taught to ‘keep quiet’ and ‘behave’ when they are with their husband’s families in order to be a good daughter-in-law. Many young women have been trying to avoid conflicts, but it is just not possible to ‘let it go’ all the time. Some women say that sometimes they will just ‘lose it’ when they cannot stand it anymore. Many young women believe that conflicts are inevitable unless they live away from their in-laws because ‘distance brings peace’. Moreover, the women also hope that distance can bring more freedom. As some women have complained, they hate to live under the surveillance of their in-laws. As Ping complained,

‘And living with my mother-in-law…Well…We used to be strangers to each other, and all of a sudden, we had to live with each other. We had different lifestyles. Completely different. When I was there, wherever I went, she would follow. I am a young woman and I want to hang out with other young mothers. Even if I don’t know anyone there, I get to make some friends. I thought I could hang out with them, but my mother-in-law just would not leave me alone for one second! It was a bit annoying.’

Likewise, Nan Nan also aspires to live away from her in-laws because her in-laws always intervene when she educates her daughter, and she envies other young couples who have moved out of their parents’ house.

‘When you see other young couples, whenever they have any conflict, it is just between the two of them. The in-laws never interfere.’

As discussed in the previous section, the young migrants are eager to own a house. One of the reasons is that they will then be able to move out of their in-laws’ place and have their own ‘small’ family. The young women say that nowadays more and more young couples back home
choose to live separately from the in-laws. On the one hand, migration has elevated their capabilities to pay for a house in the city and sustain an urban lifestyle. On the other hand, they feel that they have been transformed by the urban experiences and they can no longer co-reside with their in-laws because they have completely different lifestyles. Some women even say that many in-laws do not want to live with their son and daughter-in-law either because they also want to live comfortably and enjoy their later years. Fei (2017) argues that rural-to-urban migration has transformed the traditional family structure in rural China, where the young couples establish their nuclear family in the city and the parents stay behind in the village, which is now seen as a win-win strategy for both the young couple and the elder parents to live a desirable life.

7.3.2.2 Being close ‘enough’ to families

The young women do aspire to live their own life freely, away from the control of their in-laws, but this does not mean that they want to live in complete isolation. According to the women, when they plan for their future return, they still aspire to be close ‘enough’ to their families. When the women were younger, they felt that the transport system was very advanced and traveling across different places had become more affordable, and they did not see distance as a problem at all. Yet, now as a mother, travelling back and forth between home and Beijing with the child has become more challenging. Especially, as many women have said, after the child starts school, it will be even harder for them to travel. If they move back home, whether it is to her hometown or her husband’s hometown, at least they will be close to one side of the family, so that they will not need to travel across different places during holidays. Moreover, as their own parents and in-laws age, the migrant women now feel obliged to be physically close to them to take up the filial obligations.

As many young women have said, since they aspire to settle in a city, it will be most ideal that they settle in the city where some of their families have already settled, so that they can ‘look out for each other’. Guo Ying and her husband are currently considering buying a house back home for their future return.

‘My husband’s sister is also considering buying a house in Linyi City, so I am thinking if we also buy a house there, we will be able to help each other. In the future, if my in-laws want to see their grandchildren, they can just come over and then they will be able to see both of them. It will save a lot of trouble. My husband likes Weihai City, but if we move to Weihai, we won’t have any families there. We have no one there. No friends. If you need any help, it will be very difficult. You are all by yourself. If we go to Yantai City, my aunt is living there, so I will feel more assured.’
As a result of rural-urban migration, the traditional extended family in rural China is transformed into an extended family network that is made up of independent ‘small’ families that are scattered across different geographical spaces but still closely tied to each other by family obligations. In some cases, even the ‘small’ family itself is split up into even smaller units. As discussed in the previous section, sometimes, the grandparents reside in the home village, the father works in the big city, and the mother and the child settle in the small city close to the home village. Many studies have explored how multi-locality is deliberately utilised as a livelihood strategy by migrant families (Thieme, 2011), but this study suggests that multi-locality can also be the lived experience of migration itself. Both the migrants and the non-migrants are weaved into the extended family network that spans across multiple localities. The migrant women are positioned at the intersection of various relationships, which further impacts their capabilities to settle down and shape their aspiration for future migration.

7.4 Holding on to the urban dream

7.4.1 In between the rural village and the big city: settling in a ‘small’ city

In the past, most rural migrants aspire to build their own house in their home village to showcase their success in the city, but many recent studies have shown that nowadays, younger migrants are more likely to purchase a house in the city in their home province, instead of returning to their home village (Nie, 2014a, 2014b; Han & Yu, 2020). The findings in this study also suggest that most women are aware that they are not capable of settling in Beijing, but they are not willing to move back to their home village either. As Bo said, ‘Back home in the village, it is very different. There’s no supermarket and no grocery store. If you need anything, you have to drive 5km to the market, and it is really inconvenient, and because of this, people are no longer willing to raise their child in the village.’

As the women have said, due to the growing disparity between the village and the city, it has been taken for granted that return migrants should settle in the city. Some women even feel that if they are not capable of settling in the city, they will ‘fall behind’ and be seen as a ‘failure’. The migrant women admit that they will never be capable of settling in Beijing, but it does not mean that if they leave Beijing, they will be capable of settling anywhere they like. Like Mei, most young women aspire to settle in the city, but they are also aware that they are only capable of settling in a ‘small’ city. Xiang’s (2018) study also finds that not all the rural migrants in Beijing aspire to settle in Beijing and most of them prefer to settle in a small city or town in their home province. Xiang (2018) suggests that the return migrants make up an emerging class
of ‘small capitalists’ in their home society by settling in a small city and running a small business.

The findings in this study further demonstrate that settling in a small city is both an active choice, and a compromise. It is the ‘best’ choice based on the migrants’ perceived capabilities and aspirations, or as Nie’s (2014b) study has suggested, settling in a small city close to home is the ‘road in the middle’. As the young women have said, if they want to sustain a good life, they need to ‘dream small’ and ‘be realistic’. As Mei said,

‘If we can buy a house in a city close to our hometown and settle there, I will be very happy.’

7.4.2 Back to zero?
Even if the young women expect that they will leave Beijing soon, this in no way means that they will just start to live their life back home as if they have never left. Return migration does not mean that they will leave behind everything that they have obtained in Beijing and start all over again. As Guo Ying said,

‘What I have learnt in Beijing will never be taken away from me. It’s not like you are really starting from zero. It’s not like when you just left school and arrived in the city to work. For me, return is not being back to zero. You have experience, both in life and in work. No matter where I live, I will always be able to find a job that I aspire for, as long as I am willing to fight for it.’

Guo Ying is now working at the community centre as a teaching assistant, and she is aware that she will have to move back home soon since her son is approaching the age for elementary school. Recently, Guo Ying has been thinking about her career development and she has applied for a certificate to work in the kindergarten. According to Guo Ying, with the certificate, she will be able to work in any kindergarten after return. Like Guo Ying, Ping is also planning to work in early development after return. Ping is now a volunteer at the centre, and she is considering becoming a full-time staff member after her daughter starts kindergarten.

‘The centre is really great. I will have to work anyway when my child is older, and I think that it will be great if I can find an organisation like this back home, so that the children back home can also have a space to play and learn.’

Like Guo Ying and Ping, many young women see return migration as a new chapter in life. They aim to bring back their ‘Beijing capabilities’ and translate them into actual capacities to sustain a good life. As de Haas (2021) argues, migration gives the migrant a chance to accumulate both the economic capabilities to purchase the resources or assets for a successful return and the socio-cultural capabilities to actively utilise their knowledge, skills and social
relationship to improve their life. For example, many women plan to start their own business after return.

Moreover, as many women have explained, the experience of migration itself is a valuable asset not only in terms of the accumulation of human capital but also in regards of how it opens up their eyes and motivates them to keep aspiring and improving their life, which is defined as the ‘intrinsic value’ of migration (de Haas, 2021). Most women say that although they are to return in the future, they never regret their decision to migrate, and if they were given a second chance, they would still choose to migrate. As Mei said,

‘Why will you not go out? Isn’t it great to see the world? You will know what kind of life there is in the world. What’s it like to be at home? And what’s it like if you go to the city? Then you will fight for the life that you aspire for. Rather than quietly accept what you have now. If you find out that you are able to live such a great life, and you are willing to work hard to live that life that you aspire for, isn’t it wonderful?’

7.4.3 Retaining rural status

Despite the aspiration to settle in the city, the women do not wish to give up their rural status. Contrarily, many hope to retain their rural status for benefits in the long run, for themselves as well as the child. The findings show that the women only aspire to access the urban services and do not necessarily want to have an urban Hukou. On the one hand, they know that it is barely possible to obtain an urban Hukou, and they do not bother to think about it. On the other hand, obtaining an urban Hukou means that they have to give up the rights that are entitled to them by her rural status. One of the benefits that the women do not want to give up is access to land. According to the young women, as a rural resident, they are entitled to obtain agricultural land in the countryside, which is not possible for urban residents.

Although studies have shown that young people are no longer willing to be confined to the village and do agricultural work (Zhao & Lu, 2014), they still see ownership of agricultural land as a valuable asset, or a long-term investment for their future settlement (Nie, 2014b). As Dan Dan explained,

‘My dad and I, we are the only ones in the family who own agricultural land. My mom is a migrant, and she is not registered in our village, and I was the only child back then, so my dad and I were distributed 8 mu³ land in total. I’ll say that 3 mu belongs to me. With the 3mu land that I now have, even if I don’t have any money, at least I can grow

³ 1 mu=666.7m²
something myself, and I won’t starve...Even if I don’t have much money, I have land. If I sell the land, I will become a ‘rich lady’.

Dan Dan’s grandfather passed away recently, and her father inherited some of her grandfather’s land, which means that in the future, Dan Dan will be entitled to own more land, if her father passes away. Even though she has two younger sisters, she believes that since she is the eldest, she will be entitled to a larger portion than her sisters. Dan Dan says that she is not worried about her future at all, since even if she is no longer able to make a living in the city, she can always return to the village and do farming, and she will never starve. Moreover, a rural resident can also purchase ‘Zhaijidi (land for housing)’, which is not accessible to urban residents. According to Dan Dan, the land in her village will only cost her a bit over 10,000 yuan. Dan Dan says that she is now saving up so that she will be able to purchase a piece of land next year.

According to the women, ownership of land is not only valuable for sustaining a livelihood, but it is also linked to long-term benefits. Many women notice that their home village is undergoing great transformations as a result of urbanisation and agricultural reforms (Nie, 2014b), and they are afraid that if they give up their rural Hukou, they might lose the opportunity to benefit from the development. As Chen Xi explained,

‘If there is any big development project in the village, like demolition, or if the government distributes land or anything, if I move my daughters’ Hukou elsewhere, they will not be able to have those benefits.’

Li’s study (2013) explores rural migrants’ experience of urbanisation, and his study suggests that the vast majority of the rural migrants, especially those with a university degree, do not hope to obtain urban Hukou. Over 50% of the migrants who were born after the year of 1990 are reluctant to give up their rural Hukou for urban citizenship. According to the women in this study, retaining the rural status while settling in the city means that they can enjoy the long-term rural welfare while accessing the urban services in their everyday life. In a way, rural residents are more ‘privileged’ than urban residents, since they can move to the city, purchase housing in the city, enjoy the urban services, while maintaining their rights to all the rural benefits, whereas urban residents will never be entitled any right to any rural land or welfare.

7.5 Forever a migrant

7.5.1 Forever a migrant wife
Due to the tradition of patrilocal marriage in rural marriage, it is taken for granted that in the future, the women will move to their husband’s hometown after leaving Beijing. When the migrant woman married her husband, she would automatically see her husband’s hometown as
her ‘old home’, even if her husband is not from the same region as her. Her husband’s hometown becomes her ‘hometown’ which is not really her hometown. As Fei (2018a) argues, women in China do not have a ‘home’, since they will forever be a follower. For the women who married a man from a different region, it is fair to say that their ‘return migration’ is not ‘return’ at all, but a new episode of ‘out-migration’ because they are again moving away from a place that they are familiar with to a new destination.

Bo is from Henan Province while her husband is from Anhui Province. Bo says that whenever she is back home with her husband, she barely talks because she does not speak the Anhui dialect. Bo recalls that once she went grocery shopping and bought some meat, and she was tricked by the vendor because she spoke Mandarin.

‘I asked him how much, in Mandarin. They were all talking in dialect, so he must have found out that I was not from here, and I would have no idea about how much it should cost, so he charged me more.’

Later, Bo went back home, and her husband asked her how much the meat cost, and he felt that the vendor charged her more than it should be, so they went to the vendor again.

‘My husband could speak the dialect, and he asked the vendor whether he charged me more. The guy then said, ‘Ah, I don’t know. I thought your wife was not from here. You know.’ In the end, he returned the money to us.’

As Bo further explains, even if they have to deal with the exclusion in Beijing, compared with the small cities, Beijing is actually more ‘inclusive’ because everyone speaks Mandarin, and people will not tell where you are from, and will not judge you by the way you talk, but in Anhui, as soon as people find out that you are a migrant, they will try to take advantage of you.

‘Aha, you are a migrant! It is you migrants that we want to trick!’

Sometimes, Bo says that she does not even have to say a word before people can tell that she is a migrant.

‘Once we went to a restaurant, I did not even say anything, and the boss asked my husband, ‘Your wife is not from here, right?’ We were really surprised, and he said, ‘Girls from the north and girls from the south look different, you know?’ I just laughed.’

Most women feel reluctant to move away from their own families and relocate to their husband’s hometown, and some women manage to resist the tradition of patrilocal marriage by using the child as an ‘anchor’ to fix the family firmly to the place that she aspires to settle. As Dan Dan said,
‘I want my son to be registered here, in my hometown. If he is registered here, he will go to school here, and it is more likely that we will settle here in the future.’

Dan Dan says that she had been deliberately delaying the process to have her son registered because she was waiting for a chance to convince her husband and in-laws to have her son registered in her hometown. Yet, Dan Dan feels that her husband and in-laws do not really care about it, and her husband actually prefer having her son registered in her hometown.

‘I think, it is mainly because my husband’s hometown is more remote whereas my hometown is closer to Beijing. Having a Hukou in my hometown is actually more valuable.’

7.5.2 Forever a migrant mother

As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is taken for granted that the mothers shall return with the child as the primary caregiver. Many believe that after their child starts school and grows up, they will be liberated from childcare and will be able to settle down and enjoy life. Yet, in reality, as the journey of motherhood continues, their journey of migration is also likely to continue.

Nan Nan and her husband aspire to send their daughter to an urban school, but at the moment, they do not plan to purchase any housing in the city.

‘It’s meaningless to buy a house now. It’s just for the few years when your child is in school. It will not have any value in the future. When the child is in school, you can just rent a house there and take care of her. What I’m thinking about is that when my daughter grows up in the future, we will settle where she settles.’

Like Nan Nan, many women expect that even after their child completes education, gets a job and gets married, it does not mean that they will finally be able to settle down. As some have said, it is likely that they will migrate again to the place where their child settles to care for the grandchild. As Jun says,

‘I don’t want my daughter to have too much pressure in the future. If she wants to care for her child by herself, I will be supportive of her choice. But if she does not trust her mother-in-law and wants me to help her care for the child, I will be happy to do that.’

However, unlike Nan Nan and Jun who will possibly become a ‘migrant grandmother’ in the future, Dan Dan is very determined that she will not sacrifice her own life just to follow her son for the rest of her life.

‘I don’t care at all where he settles in the future. If he settles in a place that is far away from home, and he does not need me to care for his child, I am more than happy to live
Dan Dan further explains,

‘I just want to live a happy life. You spend the first half of your life caring for your child, and then you spend the latter half of your life caring for your grandchild? That is insane!’

However, Dan Dan also suggests that if she has made enough money, she will support her son financially from afar while living her own life, but if she is not capable of providing enough financial support for her son, she will have to take the responsibility to care for the grandchild, which she refers to as ‘Youqianchuqian, Meiqianchuli (If you have the money, you offer money. If you do not have the money, you offer strength.)’.

‘But, if you settle really far away from home, and you ask me to move there to care for your child, I am not going. If you do not want to care for the child by yourself, you send him back to me. Then you will not be able to see your child. You make the choice.’

The young women in this study are still in the very early stage of motherhood, with a pre-school age child, but they have already expected to sustain the multi-local livelihood for the rest of their life, either by providing support from afar, or by migrating again to the place where their child settles. They will forever be the mother of their child, and forever prioritise the needs of their child. As Fei (2018b) argues, in Chinese families, the parents’ job is never done, no matter how old the child is. Whether the women are returning to their own hometown, or their husband’s hometown, their aim is that their child will have a good environment in which to grow and thrive. As many women’s narratives have suggested, after they marry their husband, they have to follow their husband, and after they give birth to their child, they have to follow their child.

7.5.3 Unsettled settlement: Leaving again?
Even though many migrants see their return as settlement, it is likely that they will pack up and leave again when they find out that they are not capable of living the life that they aspire for back home. Liang and Fu’s (2015) research also shows that a great number of return migrants will migrate again after they return home. Undeniably, the migrants have greatly improved their capabilities via working in Beijing, but it is questionable as to what extent their Beijing capabilities are ‘sustainable’.

For example, many migrant couples have accumulated enough savings to pay for the deposit of a car or a house back home, but they feel a great financial pressure to repay the monthly mortgage payment. According to the young women, their savings are a ‘one-time’ asset, and if
they are gone, they are gone. Therefore, many women may have a ‘higher’ starting position back home after return, but whether they will be capable of securing their position and sustain a desirable lifestyle is largely dependent on their capability to continuously generate income, which requires them to either secure a stable job or have a successful business.

As Mei has complained, although she and her husband were able to pay for the deposit of a car and an apartment in the city, it had cost all of their savings, and now they have to live on a tight budget. Since her husband’s business is deemed to have failed, Mei believes that if they choose to settle back home, their life will not get any better in the future and they will have to accept their fate and just live poorly. However, if they choose to migrate to Beijing again, at least, there is still a chance for them to keep building up their assets so that their next return can be slightly more successful.

‘Next year, we may need to make a choice, to pick a new path… I’m considering whether we should go back to Beijing. The child can go to a kindergarten anywhere. If we go back to Beijing, my mother-in-law will be able to pick him up from school, and I will be able to get a full-time job. Shall we move back to Beijing? Or shall we stay home?’

Similarly, Chen Xi is also considering moving back to Beijing again because life back home is ‘too relaxing’.

‘In Beijing, we were all living in the migrant village, and the living conditions were not so good, but I feel that people there are all very motivated and ambitious. Everyone is busy working and making money…Whether you are a deliveryman or you work at a takeaway, you are always working hard.’

As Chen has explained, ‘the better life is always elsewhere’, and it is human nature that people are always seeking a better life, but at the end of the day, the better life is always in ‘the bigger city’.

‘People here in the village aspire to go to the town, and people in the town aspire to go to the city. And the people in the city aspire to go to Chengdu (the provincial city). And the people in Chengdu aspire to go to a city that is even better, like Beijing.’

Nevertheless, even Mei and Chen Xi aspire to migrate to Beijing again, they do not expect to settle there, just as they first arrived in Beijing when they were younger. What is different is that now they are married, and they are mothers. Therefore, they do not dare to migrate carelessly unless they are sure that moving is the best choice for the family because the ‘cost of migration’ is higher now. For Chen Xi and Mei, since their children are still young, even if they
finally decide to migrate to Beijing with the children again, they will still have to return home when the child reaches the age for elementary school.

Mei and Chen Xi’s story suggest that despite the aspiration to migrate to Beijing again, it is possible that the young migrant women will not have the courage to actually make the move. Since all the women in this study are determined to be with their child no matter what, it is less likely that they will leave the child behind while they themselves move to Beijing again. Otherwise, they will not even think about returning home together with the child in the first place. Moreover, since they mainly choose to return home so that their child can have a better future, they will not take the risk to bring their child to Beijing again. In this case, if they still aspire to sustain a good life, as many women have explained, the only feasible way is that the father remains in Beijing to work and provide for the family, while they, as the mother, settle back home with the child.

7.6 Living one day at a time, but keeping on aspiring

As many women have said, the better life is always elsewhere, but there is only one good life for them, which is ‘the best life that they are capable of living now’, and therefore, they should only focus on what they can do now, since it is impossible to plan for anything when there will be so many uncertainties in the future. Although all the young women admit that they will return one day, sooner or later, many are still not sure exactly when and where to return. Most women agree that they will leave Beijing when their child reaches the age for elementary school, but they may have to return earlier than expected, like Mei who had to return home with her son because her husband lost his job due to Covid, or they might keep staying in Beijing to see how things work, like Qiu Xia who considers keeping her son in Beijing if he can be enrolled in a school in Beijing, whether it is a private or a public school.

The women are aware that the future is beyond their control because there is only so much that they can do, whether as a worker or a mother. Yet, they no longer feel constrained by their incapacities, since rather than dreaming about success and wealth, it is better just to accept their own limitations and take the future as it is. As Ping said,

‘If I only have 1,000 yuan, I can still live a life. I can just move back to the village. I can grow some vegetables on the farm. We can still make a living. 1,000 yuan is still enough to buy some rice and food. We can still get by. Most importantly, it is impossible that we will only have 1,000 yuan a month!... I mean, it might not be as bad as what you are imagining.’

Like Ping, most women describe themselves as ‘flexible’ in terms of their future plan. For example, if they are capable of obtaining all the required documents, they will send their child to a Beijing school, but if not, they will just pack up and move back home; if they are capable of
buying a house in the city, they will settle there with the child, but if not, they can just return to the village and live a peaceful life; if they are not able to make a living after return, they can migrate to the big city to work again.

Having been a migrant and being able to migrate again gives the young women more options in life. In a way, migration not only augments the young women’s actual capabilities, but also improves their resilience to survive the unexpected failures in life. It can even be argued that compared with the urban poor who are stuck in the city, the migrants are actually luckier because there is a place that they can return to if things do not work out in the city. They can return to a smaller city, a town or even back to their village. Therefore, for most migrant mothers, when being faced with the inevitable return, they do feel pitiful, but they do not feel angry or upset in the slightest way.

When women were younger, many said that they only wanted to ‘live one day at a time’, and back then, they really did not have any plan because they had no idea what they were capable of doing and what they wanted for life. Yet, now, when the women say that they want to ‘live one day at a time’, it is not that they really do not plan for the future at all. They have actually become more future-oriented. Whatever they do is for a better future. Yet, the future is no longer defined by success, but satisfaction.

As Fei (2018c) argues, women’s agency lies in their capabilities of ‘adaptation’, which is to change their own state of mind and behaviours to adapt to the changes in the environment. Different from western society, traditional Chinese society is built upon “economy of scarcity” (p.108), and therefore, Chinese culture is largely focused on the value of ‘satisfaction’, which is to limit one’s desires to improve subjective well-being. As the women have said, as long as they feel that they have done their best, they will feel satisfied.

This does not mean that young women have given up aspiring completely. Even if the future is beyond their control, they are ready to take the future as it is, because as the women have said, no matter how difficult life is, there is always a way out, and they believe that as long as they are willing to work hard, life will only get better and better. As Chen Xi said,

‘Life is getting better. At least the people that I know. Everyone’s life is going well. Most of them have already bought a house in the city. Those who do not yet own a house are working hard and saving up in order to purchase a house and give their child a good life. Everyone is thinking about how to make life better. I hope our life can also get better in the future.’
7.7 Summary

De Haas (2021) defines people’s aspiration to migrate as their general aspirations for life and their evaluation of where they will be capable of actualising their aspirations. Czaika and Vothknecht (2012) believe that one needs to have both the ‘capacity to aspire’ and the ‘capacity to realise’ in order to actualise their aspirations. When there is a mismatch between their ‘capacity to aspire’ and their ‘capacity to realise’, migrants will either choose to lower their aspirations, and accept life as it is, or keep building up their capacities to catch up with their elevated aspirations (Czaika & Vothknecht, 2012). This analysis shows however how women in this study perform an alternative form of agency to resist segregation and deprivation, by transferring their Beijing capabilities to their home society, and utilising the ‘capability differentials’ to improve their life situations for the future.

Different from older migrants, these young migrants are reluctant to endure the hardships in the city just to make a living, when they position themselves in their home society and realise that, with the capabilities that they have accumulated in Beijing, they can actually live a more comfortable life back home. The migrant women’s aspirations for a good life after return is not just “wishful thinking” but “thoughtful wishing” (Appadurai, 2004, p.82). The women are constantly positioning themselves in the ‘multi-local frame of reference’ that they have developed during the years as a rural migrant in Beijing, trying to identify the most suitable position for themselves in this big web of relationships and resources that spans across multiple localities. As a result, their aspiration for return is no longer an ‘imagine’, but a reality that is simultaneously constructed by the circulation of capabilities and aspirations. They have made the money and they have gained the experience, and they have managed to channel them back to their destination of return and craft the framework of the good life that they aspire for. In turn, their aspiration to return and the perceived capability to live a good life after return motivates them to keep accumulating assets so that they will be capable of living a better life in the future.

Some women, like Dan Dan, feel that the good life is in the countryside where she could live a self-sustainable life. Some women believe that the good life is in the small city where the cost of life is lower. Some women, like Chen Xi and Jun, say that the good life is always in the big cities, like Beijing, where there are more opportunities for them to pursue career development. Not only are these migrant women’s aspirations for return shaped by the structural differences in different places, but they are also impacted by their understanding of family and gender which are constantly reconstructed as they are exposed to the urban culture. Most women in this study take it for granted that they will move to their husband’s hometown due to the tradition of patrilocal marriage, but they aspire to settle in the city and live separately from their in-laws. However, for some migrant women, even if they aspire to settle in the city, they still have to
move back to the village to live with their in-laws. For example, Nan Nan admits that she does not want to live with her in-laws, but they do not have the money to buy a house in the city either, and they will have to move back to her in-laws house in the village. Moreover, as some women have suggested, it is also possible that they will settle close to their own parents because their region is more economically developed and they will have more support from their own parents, which is better for their child.

While it is almost taken for granted that the migrant women in this study aspire to ‘return’ in the future, it is found that their aspirations are individualised and subject to changes over time, which is dependent on their perceived capabilities of sustaining a good life in the future. For example, while most migrant women aspire to settle in a city, some women, like Dan Dan and Ping, are open to the idea of settling in the countryside, recognising that it is possible that they may not be capable of settling in the city in the future. Even if the women aim to settle down in a small city after leaving Beijing, it is possible that they will continue to move across different localities to realise their multi-local aspirations. For example, both Chen Xi and Mei had returned home by the time of the second interview, and they were both already thinking about moving back to Beijing. Yet, while Chen Xi was more concerned about her own career development, Mei was more realistic because they just needed the money to sustain a decent living.

For most migrant women in this study, their ‘return’ is not really return migration, but onward migration. They will move to a new place and start a new life. Even for those women who are not capable of settling in the city, and have to move back to the rural village, they still feel that they are no longer able to adapt to the life back home because they have been ‘transformed’ by the urban culture. It seems that once one has left home, there is no going back. Or, is there any migration that can be defined as ‘return migration’? As the young women have said, even if they physically settle down, emotionally and spiritually, they will forever be on the move.
8. Discussion: Navigating Multi-locality

8.1 Introduction
This final chapter discusses insights emerging across the full study, employing the grounded theory method, ‘multi-locality’ emerges from analysis of the empirical data as a key process capturing the experiences of young migrant mothers in contemporary Beijing. The findings suggest that multi-locality should be understood as a contextual, relational and intersectional process that is actualised and sustained via the multi-directional flows of capabilities and aspirations and directed by multi-local familial relationships while creating a multi-local identity. This provides a new perspective for understanding female rural-urban migration in China while pointing out potential directions for future research. In the following sections, I will talk about how the issues of agency, family and gender play out in the migration process and can be unpacked with a multi-local lens. Based on the empirical data, I argue that multi-locality shall not be simply understood as a living arrangement or livelihood strategy, but it should also be recognised as the lived experience of migration itself, which deserves more conceptualisation and theorisation on its own right in future migration research. Finally, I will reflect on how grounded theory helps ‘localise’ the theorisation of migration in this study and provides a non-binary approach to unsettle the construct of boundaries and categories in migration research to achieve a more holistic and dynamic understanding of rural-urban migration in China.

8.2 From ‘trans-locality’ to ‘multi-locality’: specifying and contextualising the migration process
It has been widely accepted in migration research that migration shall not be understood as a linear process. Numerous empirical studies have suggested that migrants tend to sustain a close relationship with the home society upon their arrival in the destination. This discovery gave rise to the development of the transnationalism framework, which highlights the exchanges and interactions between home and destination via the flows of remittances, ideas and resources (Heisler, 2008; Brettell, 2015). Transnationalism emerged in the wake of the era of mass international migration, and it acknowledges that migration transcends geographical boundaries as well as social, cultural, economic, political and ideological boundaries (Heisler, 2008). According to Brettell (2015, p.159), transnationalism is a process that is maintained ‘within the lives of individuals and families and particularly in the personal, economic, and social connections that articulate the world they have left with the world they have entered’. Later, based on transnationalism theories, the concept of ‘translocalism’ was introduced to break down the analysis from the nation-state level to a local level and obtain a more contextualised understanding of the experience of migration. In recent decades, many scholars have adopted a
translocal perspective to explore the experience of female rural-urban migration in China. These studies suggest that female rural-urban migration in China is a translocal experience, involving a process of constant negotiation of different obligations and identities both in the home of origin and the destination city (Zhou & Xu, 2010; Chi, 2014; Yang & Tang, 2016; Cao & Meng, 2016; Lin, 2019). However, based on the empirical data, I found that translocalism theory does not suffice to capture all the ‘wrinkles’ of the experiences of the young migrant mothers in this study, especially in terms of how they construct and reconstruct their aspirations for return migration over time, and how the idea of return migration simultaneously shapes their everyday life in the city. The young migrant women’s experiences suggest that the complexity of female rural-urban migration is not only embedded in the specific institutional structure of Chinese society, but it is also deeply rooted in the gender relations and family values in Chinese culture. Traditionally, gender and family is conceptualised as the fixed structure that constrains women’s mobility, but women’s stories in this study show how the construct of gender and family is not fixed but fluid, and how women are capable of restructuring gender and family during the process of migration to actualise their aspirations. Unfortunately, the current translocalism framework is not able to capture these dynamics.

This study does not aim to develop a novel theory to conceptualise the process of female rural-urban migration, but it hopes to establish a substantive theory that unravels how ‘translocalism’ is achieved and sustained in the Chinese context. Informed by transnationalism theory and based on the findings of this study, I argue that young migrant mothers’ experiences of migration in this study should be understood as a process of navigating multi-locality. Multi-locality is not a completely novel concept, but it is most often adopted in livelihood research and has recently attracted increased attention as more people are living a multi-local life due to the development of transportation and technology as well as blurred life-work boundaries (Lapintie, 2022). Despite its growing popularity, as a concept and a framework, multi-locality is still relatively new and undertheorised. In most existing studies, multi-locality is often conceptualised as a living arrangement or a livelihood strategy that is either the cause or consequence of migration. For example, Weichhart (2015, p.61) defines multi-locality as ‘individuals, social groups, or economic subjects pursue their basic and/or their economic interest concurrently or alternately at several places’, which still treats multi-locality as a residential arrangement to maximise economic benefits.

Alternatively, this study shows that multi-locality can be theorised as the lived experience of migration itself. On the surface level, the multi-locality framework that I propose here refers to the multiple localities that are involved in the migration process, which highlights the multiplicity and temporality of rural-urban migration in China. From a translocal perspective, migrant women are portrayed as being caught between two different worlds, the rural home and
the receiving city. Yet, from a multi-local perspective, migrant women navigate multiple worlds as they simultaneously juggle multiple family relationships. All these translocal relationships together create a multi-local space that spans across multiple localities and multiple timelines. On a deeper level, the multi-locality framework offers a new perspective to understand agency in the context of female rural-urban migration. The current understanding of migratory agency from a translocal perspective in the Chinese context either emphasises how migrants as incapable of staying and ‘forced’ to return because of the Hukou restrictions and gender norms (Zhou & Xu, 2010; Wei & Yuan, 2015; Niu, 2015; Huang & Ni, 2020), or assumes that migrants have unlimited capacities to return whenever they want (He, 2020). Yet, in this study, the women’s experiences suggest that their performance of migratory agency, whether to stay or return, is based on a combination of emotional, aspirational and rational considerations.

De Haas (2021, p.2) conceptualises migratory agency as ‘‘a function of capabilities and aspirations’’. The multi-locality framework unravels how migratory agency can be understood as multi-directional flows of capabilities and aspirations to fulfil multi-local family obligations. During the process, women’s performance of agency is to some extent constrained, but they are not completely deprived of agency. As they navigate multi-local familial relationships, they simultaneously re-position themselves within the household and beyond to create more space for agency. The fluidity and subjectivity of the multi-local space helps us understand migratory agency as a relational and situational capacity, which bridges the long-standing agency-structure divide in scholarship.

The multi-locality framework in this study is situated in the specific Chinese context as well as the specific demographic characteristics of the research participants, and therefore, it may not apply to other socio-cultural contexts. However, as we are already living in the ‘age of migration’ (Castle, de Haas & Miller, 2014) and moving towards the age of ‘hyper-mobility’ (Xiang, 2020), we need to break down the boundaries and expand our current understanding of migration. Hopefully, the multi-locality framework that I propose here can provide a new lens to help us obtain a more contextual, relational and intersectional understanding of female rural-urban migration as a process of constructing, maintaining and negotiating a multi-local life world. The following sections will discuss how agency, family and gender in the context of rural-urban migration can be approached respectively with a multi-local perspective, and then move on to a more comprehensive discussion of how the multi-locality framework refines our current understanding of rural-urban migration and points out new directions for future migration research.
8.3 Migratory agency as multi-directional flows of capabilities and aspirations

8.3.1 Multi-local capabilities

De Haas (2021, p.2) conceptualises migratory agency as ‘a function of capabilities and aspirations’. This perspective moves beyond the conventional conceptualisation of rural-urban migration as pure labour migration that is motivated by economic reasons and brings together the objective and the subjective, and the micro and the macro. Analysis of data in this study discovers that negotiating capabilities and aspirations is a significant process in migrant women’s lives, but the process is more complex than the model de Haas (2021) has proposed. According to de Haas (2021), capabilities can be understood as a migrant’s access to economic, social, cultural and bodily forms of capital that are subject to the negative liberties that prevent movement and positive liberties that facilitate movement. In this definition, capabilities are understood as ‘fixed assets’ which can be inherited, obtained and deprived of. Yet, the experience of the young migrant mother’s migration suggests that migrant women’s capabilities are not fixed, but mobile, and the mobility/immobility of capabilities jointly shapes their perception, performance and experience of migratory agency.

Based on the data of this study, we see how women’s agency can lie in their capacity to ‘mobilise’ and ‘strategically distribute’ their capabilities in order to actualise their aspirations, a process consequently leading to the ‘multi-locality’ of capabilities. If capabilities are seen as multi-local, it means that they can be transferred and channelled to different destinations, such as in the forms of material assets, information and resources, which lays the foundation of transnationalism theories. However, different from transnationalism theories that see the flows of capabilities as unlimited and unconstrained, women’s experiences in this study suggest that some capabilities do not transcend geographical boundaries and are relatively ‘localised’. To clarify, this is to say that when an individual is positioned in different contexts, whether in terms of the wider socio-cultural environment or one’s life course, some of the capabilities are considerably context-based and are not transferable. For example, some ‘urban’ vocational skills which are largely dependent on the urban economic structure and labour market as well as some capacities that young migrant women manage to obtain when they are single are now deemed as useless as a ‘stay-at-home mom’.

Conventionally, it is assumed that the young migrant mothers are deprived of capabilities. However, based on the findings of this study, I would argue that even if some capabilities cannot be transferred and translated into actual capacity to improve their immediate life situations, it does not mean that these capabilities are useless because they can be reactivated and readopted when circumstances allow in the future. For example, in the follow-up interviews, several women are back to work and some women are actively preparing to return to
work by participating in training programmes. Moreover, since most migrant women know very well that they will have to return home in the future, not only are they building up the urban capitals that can help them live a good life in Beijing at the moment, but they also need to retain the essential rural capitals that will help them secure a good future after return migration. For example, in China, one’s Hukou status is seen as one form of ‘symbolic capital’ (Zhu & Wang, 2013, p.57). While it is widely accepted that the rural status is the ‘root cause’ of migrants’ lack of capabilities in the city, most rural migrants are not willing to change their rural Hukou to urban Hukou (Nie, 2014a, 2014b; Zhao & Lu, 2014). Most migrant women in this study also say that they will never give up their rural Hukou and they will not transfer their child’s Hukou to the city either. Even if they are excluded from many urban benefits at the moment, they see their rural status as a capital that can secure their welfare for the long-run. As Zhao and Lu (2014) have argued, while urban Hukou may gain rural migrants’ recognition and respect, rural Hukou can bring them actual benefits, including land and property, and rural migrants are not willing to exchange the tangible capitals just for an urban ‘title’.

While many believe that migration elevates migrants’ capabilities (Zhu, 2008; Zhao & Ren, 2014; Huang & Ni, 2020; de Haas, 2021), this study shows that migration is not a process where migrants simply become ‘more capable’. In a sense, migration expands the ‘reservoir of capabilities’ of the young women. As the young women pick up new capabilities, they do not necessarily leave behind their old capabilities. Even if their capabilities are limited, they are able to mobilise and utilise different capabilities in different contexts. Besides, migrant women also obtain the ‘capacity to’ build up and mobilise their capabilities, which subsequently improves their ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2004). As Wu’s (2018) study has shown, compared with the non-migrants back home, women with a migration experience are in general more confident in themselves because migration has proved their capabilities, even if they will have to return home in the future. In line with Wu’s (2018) research findings, the young women in this study also believe that even if they will have to return home someday, they will be capable of living a good life.

Nevertheless, we should not romanticise the young migrant women’s capabilities. Even if migration offers them the opportunity to improve their capabilities, they are still aware that their capabilities are relatively limited. They are rural migrants, and that is not going to change no matter how hard they try. They are not capable of obtaining an urban status, and they are not willing to give up their rural status either. Therefore, they need to be strategic in terms of how they mobilise and distribute their capabilities not only to improve their current life situations, but also to secure a good future, for themselves, their child and their family. For the migrant women in this study, migration is not only an economic activity, but it is also an aspirational project. It is their aspiration that guides the acquisition, accumulation, utilisation and
distribution of capabilities. This is where aspirations come through as the ‘navigational capacity’ (Rao & Walton, 2004) that helps the migrant women find their way around amidst all the uncertainties in life.

8.3.2 Multi-local aspirations

According to de Haas (2021, p.2), in the migration process, aspirations not only refer to people’s life aspirations in general, but they are also shaped by their ‘perceived geographical opportunities here and there’. This definition highlights the spatiality of migration aspirations as a process of negotiating the opportunities and constraints in the place of origin and destination. Therefore, when migrants consider the option to migrate, they are simultaneously considering the option to stay. The women’s experiences in this study also suggest that they have the aspiration to stay in the city, but they also have the aspiration to return home. As King (2020) has critiqued, migration scholars tend to assume that being a migrant is the most important thing in a migrant’s life. In this study, the young migrant mothers have multiple aspirations. In many cases, migration itself is not the aspiration per se, but it is the tool to actualise other aspirations in life. Sometimes, the different aspirations are complementary or supplementary. For example, when the women were younger, their aspiration for out-migration and their aspirations for economic independence can be achieved simultaneously. However, in other circumstances, different aspirations can be conflicting, such as their aspirations to stay in Beijing for self-improvement as a young woman and their aspiration to return home so that their child can have a better future as a mother.

As Appadurai (2004, p.82) has pointed out, aspirations are not pure imaginings, or “wishful thinking”, but “thoughtful wishing”, which is grounded in the reality that the migrant women are situated in at the moment. As a rural migrant, their ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2004) is largely constrained. They are not capable of fulfilling all their aspirations in one place at one time as many urban residents, and therefore, they have to distribute their aspirations to different localities and different timelines based on their perceived capabilities. For example, according to the women, when they are in Beijing, they only aspire for money, and only when they are back home, they will be able to aspire for quality of life.

While rural migrants are often portrayed as struggling at the bottom of the urban society, if we adopt a multi-local perspective, we may discover that migration has equipped them with multi-local capabilities, which expands the geographical map of their aspirations. This means that thanks to migration, they are now capable of imagining different futures in different localities with their multi-local capabilities. Even if they are not capable of settling in Beijing, they do not have to return to the village either. They have obtained the capabilities to settle in the town or city in their home region to continue to pursue their urban aspirations. Moreover, the on-going
(re)construction of aspirations also melts the boundary between the past, the present and the future. Before moving, migration can be experienced as an aspiration. Upon arrival in the city, the young women keep on constructing and reconstructing their aspirations, which may lead to settlement, return migration or onward migration. After returning home, migration can be experienced as a memory, which may become a new aspiration for a new migratory journey, if things do not work out back home. From a multi-local perspective, there is always a ‘virtual locality’ for future migration beyond ‘here’ and ‘there’ because they can choose from multiple ‘theres’ which would never be available to them if not for migration, which demonstrates an alternative performance of agency that can be conceptualised as a capacity of ‘adaptation’.

8.3.3 Migratory agency as a capacity of ‘adaptation’

8.3.3.1 Conceptualising the capacity of ‘adaptation’ in the Chinese context

While the young women in this study may seem powerless and hopeless at first glance, a closer look reveals that they are actively performing their agency in their own way. The findings show that rural-urban migration is a dynamic process that is motivated by the discrepancy between capabilities and aspirations. Czaika and Vothknecht (2012) summarise two ways that migrants use to overcome the mismatch between capabilities and aspirations. The migrants will either improve their capabilities to actualise their aspirations or to lower their aspirations to match the level of their capabilities. However, the migrant women in this study construct a third way, which is to relocate to a place where their capabilities and aspirations can naturally become a match. In this sense, relocation includes both the mobility of capabilities and aspirations and the mobility of the migrants themselves.

In this study, this process of experimentation, exploration and negotiation of multi-local capabilities and multi-local aspirations can be conceptualised as a process of ‘downward adaptation’, which means that the migrant women transfer the capabilities that they have obtained in Beijing to a less developed locality so that they can make the best use of ‘the discrepancy of capabilities’ to actualise their aspirations. By doing this, the migrant women do not have to accept fate and give up aspiring as a result of their disadvantages in Beijing, but they are able to strategically allocate their capabilities and accordingly modify their aspirations to make the match happen. In this context, downward adaptation should not be equalised as downward mobility. Even if the rural migrant women are relatively inferior compared with many urban citizens, as a potential return migrant, they have already secured a higher position in their home community with the capabilities that they have accumulated so far, which may actually lead to the experience of upward mobility in home society.

As introduced in Chapter 2.5., the concept of adaptation is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, which should be understood as one’s capacity to reach a compromise with the
environment in order to realise one’s aspiration (Fei, 2017, 2018b, 2018c). Seeing migratory agency as a capacity of adaptation values the migrant as an active agent who has the capability to live the life that they have a reason to pursue (Sen, 1999). Based on the interviews, the migrant women’s aspirations can be concluded as settlement in a city where the child can receive quality education, which requires several essential capabilities, including local Hukou, ownership of a house and proximity to a good school district. Therefore, when the women consider where to settle in the future, they are actually choosing a destination where they are capable of obtaining and utilise the essential capabilities despite the constraints. According to the women, constraints are fixed, but they are ‘mobile’. If their aspirations cannot be realised here, they can leave and migrate to the locality where their aspirations can be realised, or at least where they will have the ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2004).

Therefore, in this study, adaptation is not to passively respond to the external environment and accept fate, but it is to seek a balance between one’s capabilities and aspirations. The process of adaptation is a mixture of integration, avoidance, confusion, question, alteration, aspiration and everything, which challenges the traditional understanding of agency as pure resistance, protest and aggressiveness. It is the agency to modify individual behaviours, plans and attitudes to adapt to the environment and use the constrained but real capabilities to realise one’s aspirations.

8.3.3.2 Family as the mediator

The Chinese understanding of agency and freedom is largely based on the belief that individuals are always constrained (Qian, 2012). In a sense it echoes the concept of ‘constrained agency’ that has been promoted by some western scholars in recent years (Briones, 2011; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Gulati & Srivastava, 2014). In the Chinese context, family is often regarded as the most powerful ‘constraint’ that limits one’s freedom and autonomy, especially the women who are seen as subordinate, submissive and dependent (Deng, 2004; Wei & Yuan, 2015; Wei & He, 2016; Qi, 2017; Liang, Dai & Ma, 2017). In most migration studies, family as a constraint manifests itself in the form of patriarchy and filial piety that pressures women to migrate in a certain way to fulfil family obligations (Zhou & Xu, 2010; Wei & He, 2016; Liang, Dai & Ma, 2017; Zhu, 2019). Based on the findings of this study, I suggest that, rather than conceptualising family as the constraint of migration, we can also understand family as the ‘mediator’ of migration.

Family as the mediator means that family is the inherent aspiration that guides the women through their decision-making processes. As mentioned in the previous section, aspiration can be a ‘navigational capacity’ (Rao & Walton, 2004, p.24), and when the women perform their agency to aspire, family is the benchmark that they refer to so that they can make the ‘right’
choice. When the women are younger, the aspiration to make the best choice for the family can be a ‘hidden’ aspiration, which is often covered up by their claim to pursue independence and explore the world. However, if we look deeper, we will find that when, where and how the women migrate is all closely related to the socio-economic status of the family as well as the women’s position in the family. Even if they do not migrate to deliberately provide for the family, they still aspire to release the burden of the parents by moving away from home and becoming financially independent to prove themselves and make the parents proud. As the women grow and pick up new roles in the family, their aspiration to make the best choice for the family becomes more ‘visible’. When different aspirations collide, ‘family’ is the mediator that helps the young women negotiate all the different pursuits, desires and opportunities, since as long as they choose what is best for the family, they are making the right choice. In a way, ‘for the family’ has almost become the ‘golden standard’. Even if the women may not be able to contribute to the family income or maximise the family interest, they will make sure that at least they will not bring shame to the family.

It may seem that the conceptualisation of family as mediator still tends to tilt towards the view that sees family as the constraint, since migrant women are still following ‘the rules’. However, their choice to pursue what is best for the family shall not be equalised as simply conforming to the norms. Contrarily, it should be understood as a process of compromising that is resulted from the negotiation of multiple aspirations, and this is their performance of adaptive agency. This highlights the relationality of agency (Burkitt, 2016). In the context of migration, migrants can perform their migratory agency to fulfil relational obligations, and in this study, the migrant women obtain great sense of achievement via fulfilling their family obligations as a daughter, a wife and a mother, which, in many cases, helps neutralise the feeling of inferiority as a result of stigmatisation and segregation in Beijing.

8.3.3.3 Rethinking the agency to ‘return’

As many have pointed out, rural-urban migration in China is inherently a ‘bi-directional’ movement (Guo & Zhou, 2013; Wu, 2014; Pu & Chen, 2018). Most studies about return migration in China still treat the Hukou restrictions as the main cause of return migration, while the agency of the return migrants is largely ignored. Even when agency is considered, it is most often understood as a form of ‘passive agency’ (Niu, 2015; Liu, 2019; Cao, 2019). It is believed that migrants choose to return home to avoid the potential negative consequences of staying rather than an active choice to live a better life. From a multi-local perspective, the migrant women’s aspiration for return migration is not only shaped by their incapacities to stay, but also by their capabilities and aspirations to return.
In this study, the migrant mothers’ aspirations for return are largely constructed based on their aspiration to provide a good life and a good future for the child. Not only do the migrant mothers have the aspiration to return, but they also believe that they have the capabilities to sustain a good life after return. According to the women, even if they are very clear that they will return someday, the decision to return is never casually made. Where to return, when to return, who will return with the child and who will stay in Beijing all need to be carefully thought through.

However, we also need to bear in mind that even if return migration is experienced as an autonomous action to seek a better future, there is a risk of justifying and rationalising the disadvantages that migrant mothers are experiencing in Beijing by only talking about the positive prospects of return migration. It is possible that migrant women deliberately construct their aspiration for return migration as positive so that they can overcome their feelings of incompetence and inferiority. The follow-up interviews of two return migrants also suggest that life may not be as good as expected after leaving Beijing. However, this shall not diminish the agency of the migrant women at the time when they make the decision. Moreover, according to the return migrants, even if life is not easy, they are still actively striving to improve their life situations, including considering migrating again.

As discussed in the previous section, migratory agency can be performed as a capacity of adaptation, and the women’s decision to return home constitutes them exercising their adaptive agency to negotiate their multi-local capabilities and multi-local aspirations. Therefore, returning shall not be seen as the opposite of staying, but it is an option that is constructed simultaneously as the migrant women experience migration in Beijing. What I would argue is that, in this study, return migration should be explored as a phase that is actualised by the migrants’ capabilities and aspirations as any other forms of migration. According to the women in this study, return migration has always been an integral part of their plan for rural-urban migration from the beginning. One may even argue that rural migrants only migrate to the city because they know that they will return one day (He, 2020). However, the findings of this study suggest that even if the idea of ‘return migration’ has always been haunting the migrant women, as they spend more time in the city and experience various life transitions, their perspective on return migration also changes. In the beginning, they may feel that return is inevitable and it is taken for granted. They do not even dare to think about staying in the city for long. After some time as they become more ‘urban’, they start to feel like staying in the city longer. Some women even aspire to settle in the city permanently. However, after the birth of the child, the ‘idea’ of return migration becomes a concrete plan, or even a ‘virtual reality’. They are once again reminded of their rural status and they have to carefully consider the option to leave Beijing and return home.
As many studies have suggested, young migrant women are living a translocal life in the city as they constantly move across the village and the city (Deng, 2004; Ma, 2009; Wang & Yan, 2011; Huang & Ni, 2020). In line with these research findings, when young women are single, they are sustaining a translocal lifestyle, but after they become a mother, it gets more complicated. There is no longer one ‘here’ and one ‘there’, but multiple ‘heres’ and ‘theres’. Arguably, the intersection of motherhood and migration in particular makes young migrant mother’s lives multi-local.

### 8.4 Doing motherhood and doing family in a multi-local context

As Fei (2018a, 2018b, 2018c) has pointed out, family is the core of Chinese culture, and one can never fully understand the logic of the Chinese people without first understanding the culture of family, which is deeply rooted in Confucianism. To begin with, as many scholars have already argued, the traditional construct of ‘family’ in the Chinese context is very different from the western model of a nuclear family. As Fei (2018b) has described, the Chinese model of a family should be understood as an ‘expanded family’, which is relatively elastic. In different contexts, the expanded family network can be as small as a nuclear family, and as big as a big web of relationships that includes all the extended family members, relatives, friends and even neighbours. As a result of marriage, the expanded family network is further expanded to include the family members of the partner when two individual families are connected and intertwined. For women, marriage can be a turning point in life because their position in the ‘family’ is elevated up from a dependent daughter to a ‘female master’ of the newly-established household. This means that she has to fulfil her obligations to make sure that everyone in the family can be taken care of, including her own parents, her in-laws and most importantly, her child.

A review of the migration literature shows that while in Western scholarship, family is always conveniently equated with the nuclear family, in Chinese literature, there is an overemphasis on the expanded family, which is associated with responsibilities, obligations and filial piety. Overall, it is treated as an institution to monitor and discipline an individual's behaviours. However, based on the findings of this study, I argue that in the context of rural-urban migration, ‘family’ should be understood as a multi-local family network, which is not only conceptually elastic as Fei (2018b) has pointed out, but also ‘spatially fluid’. In this multi-local family network, multiple familial relationships span across multiple localities and are linked to each other via the flows of capabilities and aspirations. The multi-local family network hereby creates a space that is “facilitating, rather than encapsulating, as permeable, expanding, and fluid rather than as correlating with a metaphor of a rigid and bounded structure” (Wilson, 1994, pp.272), which allows the migrant women to be agentic via the maintenance of relationships.
Based on the data of this study, it is discovered that there are three main family projects going on in the migrant women’s everyday life simultaneously. One is the ‘filial piety’ project, one is the ‘marriage project’ and another one is the ‘motherhood project’. The traditional construct of a Chinese family is largely built on the idea of co-residence (Fei, 2018b). In the past, all family members reside in the same household and all these projects can be done inside the same household. However, according to the women in this study, the traditional structure of a ‘big family’ in rural China is gradually dissolved into spatially separated but emotionally and spiritually interconnected small family units as a result of rural-urban migration. We may assume that doing mothering is the most significant project that is going on in the migrant women’s life, but the findings in this study suggest that motherhood should not be simply understood as a stand-alone life task in the mother’s life, but it should be seen as the intersection where migration and family meet. The migrant mother’s aspirations for the child not only shapes their aspiration for return migration, but it also impacts the life of other family members because the intergenerational chain of care within the family is disrupted and re-structured as the women have to put aside other family obligations for now to concentrate on raising a good child. This does not mean that they have rid themselves of other family obligations. Instead, they assign different relationships to different local levels based on their priority in the specific context in order to strike a balance among multiple relationships, which transforms the traditional model of an ‘expanded family network’ (Fei, 2018b) to a multi-local family network. Consequently, migrant women now strategically allocate their capabilities and aspirations to fulfil multi-local family obligations.

When migrant women only possess limited capabilities, the capacity to prioritise is more crucial. Since it is impossible for the migrant women to be physically in multiple localities at one time, they will need to demonstrate their agency to re-arrange family obligations and distribute their capabilities and aspirations to different ‘local levels’ based on their priority. For example, as shown in this study, the ‘motherhood project’ is the priority of the migrant women at the moment. The cultivation of the child not only stems from maternal instincts, but it is also a rational and strategic action to invest in the family’s future because the child is the future of the family, not just the nuclear family, but also the extended family. Therefore, the migrant mothers choose to stay in Beijing and keep the child with them to do motherhood ‘locally’ while doing filial piety ‘translocally’. As the child grows up, they may gradually shift their priority to the filial piety project and do filial piety ‘locally’ while doing motherhood ‘translocally’. However, ‘local’ is also subjectively constructed based on the specific context, and it does not always mean ‘co-residence’. In some cases, living in the same household can be local; in some cases, living in the same city can be local; and in other cases, living ‘close enough’ can also be local. For example, even if most young women do not aspire to live with
in-laws now, many say that they are willing to bring their in-laws or parents to live with them in the future if they are sick or need care in the future. Thus, different from Murphy (2020) who defines multi-local families as a natural consequence of migration, the women’s experience in this study suggests that the multi-local family work is strategically constructed and sustained based on their perceived capabilities to actualise their aspirations.

While migrant women are mostly likely to be portrayed as deprived mothers (Song & Li, 2012; Liang, Dai & Ma, 2017), in this study, they attain a great sense of autonomy by constructing and maintaining a multi-local family network. While in most studies about female migration, the women are often described as the ‘associate migrants’, the ‘tied migrants’ or the ‘followers’, and Fei (2018c) even proposes that women will forever be followers. In this study, it suggests that when it comes to deciding whether to keep the child in Beijing or return home with the child, it is always the women who lead the decision-making process. However, this does not mean that the migrant women are completely free from constraints. They are migrants, but they are female migrants. A closer look at the experiences of the migrant mothers suggest that their opportunities and difficulties in life are not only influenced by their migrant status, but also by their gender identity. Being a migrant and being a woman does not mean that the migrant women have to navigate two parallel challenges in their life, but it means that all the opportunities and difficulties are multiplied as they negotiate their multi-local capabilities, aspirations and familial relationships.

8.5 Understanding gender from a multi-local perspective

As Christou and Kofman (2022) argues, migration is both a gendered and gendering process. Many studies have shown that despite all the constraints, female migrants are capable of re-interpreting and re-structure their aspired gendered self through migration (Li, 2005; Zhu, 2008; Ma, 2009; Chen, Chen & Pu, 2016; Wu, 2018; Huang & Ni, 2020). In most studies, rural-urban migration is also conceptualised as a process of ‘urbanisation’, ‘modernisation’ and ‘de-ruralisation’. It is often assumed that as rural migrants become more ‘urban’, they will naturally become less ‘rural’ (Yang & Tang, 2017). However, it is also widely accepted that rural migrants are not capable of completely becoming ‘urban’ due to the Hukou restrictions. Therefore, as many have argued, rural migrants are stuck in-between two worlds. Some suggest that rural migrants are semi-urbanised (Wang & Yan, 2011), or have a hybrid identity (Zhu, 2008; Wang & Yang, 2011; Huang & Ni, 2020). Yet, the young migrant women’s experiences suggest that being a migrant is not only about being rural or being urban, but it is about being rural and urban at the same time. In some aspects, they are more ‘urban’, but in other aspects, they are more ‘rural’. It is not just a result of their Hukou status, but it is also about their construction of gender identity based on their perceived capabilities and aspirations.
The data of this study shows that there are various intersecting factors that altogether shape the migrant women’s experience of identity. However, it also suggests that the intersectionality theory itself does not suffice to unravel how gender plays out in the migration process. As Anthias (2012c) states, intersectionality, then what? We know that the women in this study are rural, are migrants, are mothers, are working-class, are less educated, are from a low socio-economic status… The sentence can go on forever, but how will it help us understand the experience of female migration? It is only creating more categories and stereotypes. In response to the limitations of intersectionality theory, Anthias (2008, 2009, 2012a) proposes the concept of ‘translocal positionality’ which helps understand how the experience of identity can transcend the geographical boundaries with the development of translocal reference groups that span across multiple locations. Similarly, Rye (2019) has introduced the concept of ‘transnational spaces of class’ to explain how migrants tend to develop a ‘dual frame of reference’ that spans across home and destination.

From the translocal perspective, the two sets of evaluation systems exist separately in spatially segregated contexts, and the migrants refer to a certain reference group in a certain context. However, the findings in this study show that the migrant women have constructed a multi-local evaluation system that incorporates multiple local hierarchies of class, and their identity is constructed via the strategy of multi-local positionality. Multi-local positionality connects the rural with the urban, and challenges the conventional rural-urban dualism. For example, in this study, most young women position themselves as inferior to local urban mothers, but superior to most rural mothers and migrant mothers. In some aspects, they even see themselves as better than the local urban mothers. The multi-local evaluation system not only blurs the geographical boundaries, but it also integrates multiple timelines. For example, the migrant women may choose to return home for marriage so that it will not bring shame to their families in the future; the migrant mothers may also strive to be a good mother so that they will be respected after they return home in the future. The migrant women are capable of flexibly moving across different hierarchies to modify their aspirations or keep motivating themselves to build up their capabilities to realise their aspirations.

As Brettell (2015, p.165) suggests, ‘identities are not only blurred but also negotiated or constructed.’ By incorporating a multi-local perspective, we can see that in this study, the migrant women’s gender identity is fluid, flexible and multi-local. It is not a pre-designed category that one has to fit in, but it is a construct that is subjectively, relationally and intersectionally crafted as one positions herself in different contexts in different localities. Even if gender norms still largely constrain the migrant women’s agency, they are capable of restructuring their gender relations to actualise their aspirations. This does not imply that the migrant women can be whoever they want to be because their capabilities are still constrained.
and limited as a rural migrant. Yet, this reminds us that the migrant women shall not be defined merely by their constraints and limitations.

Understanding migration as a multi-local phenomenon acknowledges that boundaries still exist, but they are blurred via the migrant women’s active performance of migratory agency. Even if we use the category of ‘migrant mothers’ to refer to the women who are rural migrants and also mothers, the migrant women in this study explicitly claim that they are different from other migrant mothers and they do not want to be seen as a ‘rural migrant mother’. The migrant women’s stories in this study show that they are not simply members of an abstract category, but they are agentic individuals with actual capabilities and aspirations. Or, as the migrant women themselves have said, they are just a mother who wants the best for the child.

8.6 Blurred boundaries: Beyond borderism and groupism

8.6.1 Beyond the rural-urban dichotomy: The multiple *rurals* and multiple *urbans*

The rural-urban dichotomy is rooted in modernisation theories that treat the city as modern and the countryside as traditional (Lucas, 2004). With the development of world system theory, modernisation theory and globalisation theory, the divide between the centre and the peripheral, the developed and the developing and the rural and the urban is further deepened (Heisler, 2008; Bretell, 2008). However, from a multi-local perspective, the rural and the urban should not be conceptualised as two opposite concepts, but two ends of a continuum (Lapintie, 2022). There is not a definite ‘rural’ or a definite ‘urban’. The migrant women do not just leave the rural and get to the urban, but they are constantly moving along the spectrum passing through multiple *rurals* and multiple *urbans*. By adopting a more dynamic point of view, we will be able to see how a migrant village in Beijing can be experienced as ‘more rural’ than an actual rural village, and a small city is ‘more urban’ than a village but ‘more rural’ than Beijing. Most importantly, the women’s experiences of migration suggest that the urban is not always better, and the rural is not always worse. The rural and the urban should not be conceptualised as a hierarchy, but a matrix that spans across multiple aspects and dimensions. Thanks to the culture of migration and the rapid urbanisation in rural China, the attributes that used to define rurality and urbanity are no longer tied to specific geographical areas. New-type urbanisation creates the emerging cities and towns in the rural areas that provides the rural citizens alternatives to actualise their aspirations for an urban life without giving up their rural status. Therefore, in order to have a better understanding of rural-urban migration, we need to re-conceptualise the rural and the urban, or maybe it is better to deconceptualise the rural and the urban to aim for a more contextualised understanding of how rural and urban is experienced and re-interpreted by the migrants themselves.
8.6.2 Beyond victimhood: Recognising the everydayness of micro-agency

The findings in this study suggest that agency does not only refer to the effort to resist the bigger structural forces, but it also lies in the small actions to navigate the daily challenges. Clegg (2005) has emphasised the importance of the study of the mundane, and this study echoes the view. As Sinke (2006, p. 98) has argued, migration can be driven by ‘‘cataclysmic events’’, but it can also be motivated by incidents or changes of circumstance that may seem to be trivial by an external observer (Sinke, 2006). Therefore, it is important that we move beyond the quantitative perspective and approach women’s migration as a part of the lived experience of everyday life (Munkejord, 2006).

Locating the individual in the immediate radius of everyday life can help capture the elements of micro-agency, which might otherwise be overlooked. The overall disadvantages of being a rural migrant in Beijing is experienced as smaller incidents of difficulties in their everyday, and although the migrant women are not capable of completely breaking free from the stigma and inferiority as a rural migrant, they are capable of actively exercising their agency to overcome the small challenges and accomplish the small tasks in their everyday life. Heisler (2008) once highlights the potential danger of blindly adopting existing concepts and theories created in one cultural context to explain a phenomenon in a different context. For example, the economic, social, cultural and political structure of a western country can be different from that of China, and the structural elements that shape the experience of migration and how different structural elements contribute to the experience of migration can vary. There is also the risk of seeing one specific model as the ‘‘ideal type’’ (Heisler, 2008, pp. 100) and anything that does not match will be regarded as wrong or abnormal. If we compare the women’s performance and understanding of agency in this study to the established concept of agency in the western context, we may easily come to the conclusion that these women are devoid of agency, but a closer look will reveal that they are agentic but they are being agentic in a different way, and it is this ‘‘different way’’ that should inspire the researchers to come up with different methods, ideas and perspectives for future research.

As a group, the rural migrants can be defined as more disadvantaged than the urban citizens, but as an individual, each rural migrant is agentic in their own life in their own way. This study is able to discover the small actions of agency thanks to the adoption of a narrative approach and grounded theory methodology, which helps the analysis to be open, flexible and reflexive, while giving credit to the research participants as the co-authors of the study. This means that not only do we need to discover the struggles of the women, but we also need to recognise their efforts to improve their life situations on a daily basis. This does not mean that macro studies are meaningless, but it suggests that exploration of the experiences of the migrants can bring more
life to the study of migration by respecting migrants as capable and aspirational actors in their own life.

8.7 Summary
Conventionally, migration is portrayed as a border-crossing activity. One moves from one locality to another. In recent decades, the theory of transnationalism has gained great prevalence because it recognises migration as a process that transcends boundaries, rather than crosses boundaries. The conceptualisation of migration as a process rather than a one-off life event greatly advances migration theorisation. Building on the concept of transnationalism, this study aims to further develop the understanding of the experience of migration as a multi-local human activity. This means that not only can boundaries be transcended, but they can also be constructed, modified and mobilised to create the space for agency. Grounded in the experience of the young migrant mothers in this study, informed by transnationalism theories and de Haas’s (2021) Aspirations-Capabilities Approach, I argue that female rural-urban migration can be experienced as a process of navigating multi-locality. In this context, the young migrant women perform their adaptive agency to construct a multi-local space via multi-directional flows of capabilities and aspirations in order to maintain multi-local familial relationships. While their performance of agency is constrained by family obligations and gender norms, as they construct and reconstruct the multi-local life worlds, they simultaneously restructure the construct of family and gender, which in turn reshapes the multi-local space. As Grzymala-Kazlowska and Ryan (2022, p.2) have suggested, “Beyond a simple dichotomy of continual mobility, on the one hand, and permanent settlement on the other hand, it is necessary to understand the complexity, messiness, multi-dimensionality and diversity of migration experiences and changing processes over time.” The multi-locality framework moves beyond the dichotomous conceptualisation of rural-urban migration, and it questions the taken-for-granted understanding of return migration in the Chinese context. It aims to provide a new perspective to understand migration as a grounded human activity that is rooted in the specific social, economic and cultural environment as well as the specific life stage that one is at.

This study is based on the experience of young migrant mothers in China. It is possible that in the context of internal migration, multi-locality is easier to achieve and manage due to the less administrative barriers and travel restrictions as well as the tradition of return migration, whereas international migrants may find settlement in the destination more desirable. Therefore, some migratory pathways can be more linear than multi-local. Moreover, as the follow-up interviews have shown, things can change relatively quickly in a short period of time. Therefore, the multi-locality framework only provides a specified and contextualised understanding of female rural-urban migration in this specific context. Nevertheless, hopefully,
this study can offer a new perspective to migration research and expand our understanding of female rural-urban migration.
9. Conclusion
9.1 Review of research questions and the research process
During the past decades, China has witnessed one of the biggest waves of rural-urban migration in human history. Despite the ever-rising prevalence in reality, the theorisation of rural-urban migration still largely lacks specification and contextualisation. Most understanding of rural-urban migration still falls under the umbrella of labour migration. Since labour migration is often regarded as an integral part of modernisation, most studies are conducted on a macro level and the agency and individuality of the migrants who are involved in the process is largely absent. They are often portrayed as deprived and disadvantaged, and their struggles are taken for granted as an inevitable ‘by-product’ of socio-economic development (Amare et al., 2012) or as pure misfortune (Lucas, 2004). Conceptualising rural-urban migration as labour migration overlooks the diversity within the migrant population, and women are especially marginalised. Even if in recent decades, more and more scholars have paid attention to female migration in China, sometimes it only reinforces the victimisation and homogenisation of female migrants.

While contemporary feminist scholars and migration scholars have emphasised the gender differences and highlight the diversity and heterogeneity of female migrants (Ma, 2009; Huang & Ni, 2020), in China, there is still a vacuum in our understanding of female rural-urban migration. Most of our understanding of female rural-urban migration in China is built on the experience of unmarried female migrants. Due to the Hukou restrictions and the family culture, rural-urban migration in China is taken for granted to be temporary. It seems that as soon as the women get married, they will return ‘home’ and then they ‘disappear’ from the public sphere. Married women are largely missing in migration research and even if they are included in the discussion, the focus is on their experience of marriage and motherhood, rather than migration (Wei & He, 2016).

In most Chinese literature, migrant mothers usually refer to the women who migrate while leaving the child behind. The few studies that look at the migrant mothers who raise the child in the destination city tend to portray them as a homogeneous group of mothers who are incompetent, irresponsible and ignorant because of their low socio-economic status, which fails to capture the diversity within the group, such as variations in age, employment status and educational level. Having a migrant background myself and having worked with rural migrants in Beijing, I wonder whether there might be more complexity and nuance in terms of how the young migrant mothers actually experience migration, which is a topic that is rarely explored.

This study starts with asking one big question, ‘What is it like to be a young migrant mother in Beijing?’ It aims to understand the experiences of rural-urban migration from the perspective of
the young migrant mothers in China. Most of the existing studies explore rural-urban migration from a ‘top-down’ perspective, and the actual experience of migration of the migrants is largely missing. Moreover, most of the existing migration theories are developed by the western scholars based on their research of migration within the western context, and many of these theories are not able to capture the ‘multifaceted logic’ behind the actions of the rural migrants in the Chinese context. Even when a study is specifically focused on rural-urban migration in China, usually, an established theoretical model is directly borrowed and applied with little attention paid to how migration is a ‘localised’ experience that can be better understood from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective.

Being aware of the gaps in the literature and my own positionality, I choose to adopt Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods, which is interactive, abductive and reflexive, with the aim to generate rich empirical data to establish a grounded theory to expand our understanding of rural-urban migration as a lived human experience that is embedded in the wider structural environment as well as the radius of everyday life. Rather than develop a completely new theory to reconceptualise rural-urban migration, this study aims to provide a more contextualised and specified understanding of the experience of rural-urban migration, which is informed by existing knowledge, grounded in the empirical data and constructed via my analysis and interpretation.

9.2 Findings and contributions

To generate a more specified and contextualised understanding of female rural-urban migration in contemporary China and capture its complexity this study adopts a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach, which is interactive, abductive and reflexive. It generates rich empirical data of young mothers’ rural-urban migration as a lived experience embedded in the wider structural, cultural environment of contemporary Beijing and lived out as everyday life as a basis from which to propose a grounded theorisation of this process. This study starts by asking one big question, ‘What is it like to be a young migrant mother in Beijing?’ It seeks to answer it based on qualitative, experience oriented interviews with twelve rural migrant mothers, aged 18-28, who were living with their child in a migrant village in peripheral Beijing including follow-up interviews with seven of the twelve one year later after their first interview.

The analysis portrays rural-urban migration and the aspiration for return migration as jointly creating a multi-local space spanning across multiple localities and multiple timelines. The migrant women in this study actively perform adaptive agency to navigate a multi-local life world via multi-directional flows of capabilities and aspirations to fulfil multi-local familial relationships. During the process, the migrant women are developing a multi-local identity, which in turn shapes their understanding and performance of agency. The multi-locality
framework is grounded in the empirical data of the study and builds on transnationalism theories and de Haas’ (2021) Aspirations-Capabilities Approach. It further develops the concept of multi-locality in livelihood research. It suggests that multi-locality can be understood as the lived experience of migration itself, rather than a mere livelihood strategy. This study also brings the Chinese context into the theoretical conversation by incorporating the Chinese construct of family, agency and gender in the process of data analysis and theory development to unravel how agency, family and gender interact and intersect in the migration process and further complicate the migration experience. This study proposes a new perspective for understanding female rural-urban migration and points out potential directions for future research, which will ultimately advance the theorisation of rural-urban migration.

As shown in the Figure 5 below, the multi-locality framework is made up of four categories: multi-local capabilities, multi-local aspirations, multi-local family network and multi-local identities.

![Figure 4 Multi-locality framework](image)

In this study, building on De Haas’ Aspirations and Capabilities Approach (2021), capabilities can be understood as a migrant’s access to economic, social, cultural and bodily capitals that are subject to the negative liberties that prevent movement and positive liberties that facilitate movement; and aspirations refer to people’s life aspirations in general as well as their “perceived geographical opportunities here and there” (p.2). De Haas (2021) defines migratory agency as a “function of capabilities and aspirations” (p.2). In this study, based on
the experiences of the young migrant mothers, I argue that migratory agency can be understood as multi-directional flows of capabilities and aspirations. This suggests that the migrant women’s migratory agency can be understood as a form of adaptive agency that is actualised by the mobilisation of capabilities and aspirations. Being aware of the institutional barriers, the migrant women in this study strategically distribute their capabilities to multiple localities, including Beijing, the woman’s home village, their husband’s home village and the future destination for return migration, in order to fulfil their aspirations to improve their current life situations as well as their future prospects. This finding further develops de Haas’s (2021) conceptualisation of migratory agency as a ‘function of capabilities and aspirations’ by demonstrating how capabilities and aspirations interact and shape the experiences of migration in reality and highlights the temporality, simultaneity and multiplicity of the experience of migration that complicates the transnationalism framework. The findings also shed light on how the conceptualisation of return migration can be problematic because return migration should be understood as an integral part of the migration process, which is also motivated by the migrant’s capabilities and aspirations.

It is also discovered that the migrant women’s capabilities and aspirations to migrate are closely related to their position in the family, not only the nuclear family, but also the expanded family network, which is specific to Chinese culture. This emphasises how migration can be a relational strategy not only to fulfil personal aspirations, but also relational aspirations for the family, most importantly for the child. Moving beyond the dichotomous view that sees family either as the facilitator or constraint of migration, this study finds that family can also be the mediator that assists the migrant women to navigate multiple opportunities and difficulties in life. The analysis of the findings further contextualises the understanding of the relationship between family and migration. It suggests that not only does rural-urban migration restructure the construct of family in rural China, but the aspirations to fulfil multiple family obligations may also trigger more migration across different localities. In this study, it can even be argued that the women’s aspirations for the family are what makes the experience of migration multi-local because the women have to move across multiple localities to fulfil different family obligations.

Finally, the findings show that the migrant women develop a multi-local identity that is constantly being constructed and reconstructed when they position themselves in different contexts and different localities, via multi-local positionality. By incorporating a multi-local perspective, we can see that in this study, the migrant women’s gender identity is fluid and flexible. It is not a pre-designed category that one has to fit in, but it is a construct that is subjectively, relationally and intersectionally crafted as one positions herself in different contexts in different localities. Even if gender norms still largely constrain the migrant women’s
agency, they are capable of restructuring their gender relations to actualise their aspirations. In turn, the process of constructing multi-local identities feedbacks to how the women perform their agency and mobilise their capabilities and aspirations.

Overall, the interaction of capabilities, aspirations, family and gender creates a multi-local space (as shown in Figure 6 below). This study suggests that multi-locality can be understood as the lived experience of migration itself, which connects multiple people, multiple localities and multiple timelines, and the migrant women are able to perform their constrained but real agency to adapt to the opportunities and difficulties in multiple contexts and strive for the life that they aspire to live for now and for the future. While conventionally, migration is understood as an experience of negotiating the decision to move or stay, this study expands our understanding of migration and invites us to rethink mobility as an experience of navigating multi-locality and to see migrants as active players in their own life.

![Figure 5 The Multi-local space](image)

9.3 Quality of the study
According to Charmaz and Thorberg (2021), in a Constructivist Grounded Theory study, the quality should be considered based on credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. This section will reflect on the overall research process of this study based on these four criteria. In Chapter 3.5.4, I have already reflected on how this study meets the criteria of credibility and originality, and in this final section, I will reflect on how this study meets the criteria of resonance and usefulness.
**Resonance**

According to Charmaz and Thorberg (2021), resonance refers to the researcher’s capability, not just to describe the research process, but also to develop concepts comprehensive enough to capture the complexity of the researched process. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 3.2, many studies that claim to be a Grounded Theory study only produce a ‘theory’ that describes the researched experience rather than conceptualises the researched experience. Many of these ‘grounded theories’ have very weak conceptual values. The grounded theory ‘multi-locality’ in this study, on the one hand, captures the complexity of the physical, social, emotional and aspirational experience of migration, and on the other hand, it demonstrates the temporality, simultaneity and relationality of the nature of migration in this specific context. It further develops the concept of ‘multi-locality’ in livelihood studies, the understanding of agency in the migration context and the application of intersectionality in the Chinese context. The rich data that is collected and analysed with the Grounded Theory approach in this study opens up possibilities to pursue various lines of research. I chose the focus of this study based on my research interests, research capabilities and the scale of the research project, but it shall not be understood that there is only one angel to look at these data and come up with one single explanation.

**Usefulness**

According to Charmaz and Thorberg (2021), usefulness is related to how the insights of the study can inform policy changes and inspire future research. On the empirical level, the women’s stories suggest that access to support, such as childcare services, educational programmes and training opportunities, can be beneficial. Housing support can also be helpful. Additionally, while most policies in China are concerned about the integration of rural migrants in the city, the women’s experiences show they also need support to re-integrate into their home society after return, including access to public education for the child, re-entry into the labour market, and support for starting their own business. On the conceptual level, this study is carried out in one migrant village in Beijing, and the findings may not be applicable to other contexts. Therefore, more studies can be conducted to explore the experience of female migration in other regions or cities to capture the dynamics of the interaction between individual and society. Longitudinal studies can also be helpful to obtain a more holistic understanding of migration. The follow-up interviews in this study have shown how things can change in a relatively short period of time, and by adopting a life course or a biographical approach, we will see migration as an on-going process in life that is embedded in the specific time both in history and in the individual’s life course.
9.4 Reflexivity: my positionality as a Chinese researcher

Since the early 20th century, many Chinese scholars have tried to advocate for a more ‘localised’ research approach to understand Chinese society, but it has not been easy to achieve. Some attempts have been made to identify the gaps and limitations of the existing social theories that are based on western society, but a substantive theory or concept that can overcome the gaps is rarely developed. To contextualise the theorisation of rural-urban migration is not just to point out the gaps and the unique characteristics of the structural, cultural and demographic background of the study. It has to incorporate the uniqueness in the development of a theory that is grounded in the specific context but also comprehensive enough to improve our understanding of the experience of migration and inspire future research. On the one hand, to build up a grounded theory requires rich and good quality data, which depends on the raw data that is provided by the research participants as well as the researcher’s interpretation of the data. On the other hand, the researcher has to be familiar with both the international and Chinese literature. This can be especially challenging because of the language barriers and the lack of communication in knowledge production between different socio-cultural contexts. It is also time-consuming to interrogate the empirical data while exploring the literature widely with the aim to come up with the most plausible theoretical explanation of the researched process. It might take multiple rounds of analysis before the researcher can confidently make an argument. However, it is also in this process of exploration that different ideas converse and new ideas emerge, which is made possible in this study by using Constructivist Grounded Theory.

Based on the experience of the young migrant mothers in this study, I develop a grounded theory, ‘multi-locality’. In a way, as a Chinese PhD student in a western country, I am also navigating a multi-local life world, both as a young Chinese woman and as a non-English speaking researcher. Sometimes, I also experience confusion and frustration. For example, when I read some studies about rural-urban migration in China by western scholars, I can feel that something is missing. There are definitely more nuances in terms of how rural migrants live their life in the city which cannot be easily captured by someone who is not from the same culture. Meanwhile, many great studies in Chinese are not able to reach the international audiences, which is also a pity. For this study, I reviewed both the English and the Chinese literature, and it greatly helped me with analysis and theory development. On the one hand, it is easier for me to understand the experiences of my research participants because of my familiarity with Chinese culture, and on the other hand, I get to stay curious and challenge the ‘taken-for-granted’ from an outsider’s perspective. Sometimes, I also feel that I am so familiar with the English environment that I am not able to articulate my ideas in Chinese. Even now, as I write up my final draft, I still do not know how the concept ‘multi-locality’ should be
translated into Chinese. Maybe there is already a Chinese word for that. Maybe someone in China has already promoted a similar concept. It is just that we are not aware of it, but I think this is why we need to keep exploring and engaging in conversations with different languages, disciplines and cultures, and one day, we will find each other.
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Appendix A: Outlined interview schedule

Drawing on Riemann (2006) and Riessman (2008), the narrative interviews in this study consisted of:

a) A generative opening question-
Can you give a brief introduction of yourself, such as where you are from and what you do for a living?

b) The main narrative phase-
At this stage, the participant were fully respected for her agency and creativity as the storyteller or the narrator. They were given enough time to think about their stories and they could decide what stories to tell and how the stories were told, but I would interrupt when the narration went off trail or when more information related to the topic was needed.

The narrative interviews were mainly about two topics: the ‘migration stories’ and the ‘motherhood stories’:

I. Migration Stories
I’d like you to tell me your story about migration, whatever you remember, big or small. You can start with the time when you first thought about migration.

II. Motherhood Stories
I’d like you to tell me your story about being a mother, whatever you remember, big or small. You can start with the time when you first found out about your pregnancy.

c) Additional questions
**Appendix B: An example of the process of theoretical sampling regarding the code ‘imagining return’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Imagining return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What is in the data | - Whether to return  
- Why to return  
- Obstacles to stay  
- When to return  
- Where to return  
- Whom to return with  
- Plan after return  
- Experiences of return |
| What is missing/not enough in the data | - When did they first think about return seriously  
- Experiences of ‘temporary’ return (for example, return to visit during holidays, return for childbirth, return for marriage  
- The perceived opportunities back home  
- Housing  
- Understanding of ‘hometown’  
- How does the idea of return impact their current life in Beijing?  
Based on the framework that de Haas has proposed, return migration should also be understood based on people’s capabilities and aspirations. Capabilities include both their incapability to stay and the capability to return. Currently, the data is more focused on their incapability to return. Aspirations include their general life aspirations (for themselves and for their children) as well as their perceived opportunities after return. Currently, the data is more focused on their general life aspirations. |
| What is missing in the literature | - Conceptualisation of return:  
What can be defined as ‘return migration’? What are the different forms of return (temporary/permanent/in terms of destination…)?  
- Gender & Life course & Migration:  
How return has become an integral part of migrant women’s life course. What role does motherhood play in shaping their migration plan?  
- Circularity and temporality of migration:  
Will their return be permanent? Is it possible that they might migrate again in the future?  
Many studies have suggested that mothers are less mobile, but in reality, it may not be the case. Mothers may choose to return for their child’s education, and it is possible that they will migrate again if their income back home is not enough to support the family [as Kai’s case has suggested]. Or, even if they decide to stay in Beijing and send their child back to the countryside, it does not mean that they will stay in Beijing permanently. They may choose to return to company their child in the future [as Hui Min’s case has suggested].  
- Voluntariness of return:  
To what extent can their return be categorised as voluntary or involuntary?  
- Young migrant women and the Chinese contexts: |
The young migrant women have witnessed the rapid development of the Chinese society, and therefore, their life aspirations as well as their understanding of womanhood, motherhood and family can be quite different from the older migrants.

| What data do I need | Since the idea and experience of return involves two places, Beijing and their ‘hometown’, it is not enough to only focus on their experiences in Beijing at the moment. Their experiences of ‘temporary’ return, their perception and imagination of their ‘hometown’, the available resources and perceived opportunities back home are also very important in order to have a holistic understanding of return migration. These experiences also shape women’s capability to return and perception of the opportunities back home. Many women have identified motherhood as the moment when they started to ‘feel defeated by reality’. Whether to stay or to return is the big choice they have to make in reality. Almost all the women mentioned that they had never aspired to settle in Beijing because they were fully aware of the institutional barriers and their own incapability, they were still hopeful to work hard in Beijing in order to live the life that they wanted. The birth of their child dragged them back to ‘reality’. Their migrant status and their social capital have remained unchanged, and what has changed is their capability to dream and to aspire. In a way, motherhood is not just a new chapter in their life, but it also initiates a new migratory journey. However, how does motherhood shape and impact their life aspirations and their intention to return in particular and how the idea of return shapes their current life in Beijing needs to be studied more carefully. Intention does not always lead action, and intention is subject to constant changes. Some women may plan to return at certain time, but in the end decides to stay for a few more years [as Bo’s case has suggested], or some women may not think about returning, but something happens and then they have to return sooner than expected [as Jun’s case has suggested]. Therefore, if it is possible to have a second of interview with some women, it will be helpful to capture the subjectivity and fluidity of people’s migration intentions and gain a better understanding of the decision-making process of migration. If return migration is seen as a process, it is consisted of several phases. When they first think about return, how they plan and prepare for their return, the actual return (the physical move), and the adaptation and integration after return. Sometimes, they may plan to migrate again after return. The current data is mostly about the ‘thinking about’ and the ‘planning’ phase, or the decision-making process, and therefore, it is only possible to understand the intention of return migration. If it is possible to have an interview with the women who returned after the first interview, it will be helpful to understand the whole process of return migration. |

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Appendix C: Memo-Code ‘feeling trapped’

**Feeling trapped:**

Their social life is hugely impacted after childbirth. Because they are migrants, they do not have many friends in the city in the beginning. They do have colleagues, but they do not tend to develop a deep connection with their colleagues. After becoming a mother, they do not have the chance to reconnect with old friends or to make new friends. Their social life is limited in the migrant village and all the people they interact with are other mothers in the village. Many feel that they are trapped at home and do not have any personal time.

Even when they return to work and get to meet and socialise with other people, they are still constantly thinking about their children and they will give up the opportunities to socialise in order to fulfil their responsibilities as a mother. Bo recalled that once her mother offered to help her with her daughter so she could go shopping with her sister. She was excited at first, but as soon as she got to the mall, she started to miss her daughter. She just grabbed what she needed and rushed back home immediately. Nan Nan also feels guilty whenever she went out to meet friends. ‘When I saw anyone with a baby, I thought about my daughter. I would think about whether she was fed, whether felt cold and whether her grandma was taking good care of her’, said Nan Nan.

Therefore, although many women were complaining about being physically trapped at home and not being able to go out to meet people, the attachment to their child is what ties them home. However, most women are still positive because they know that they will be able to go out and work after their child starts school, and therefore, they are willing to spend the first three years at home so that their child can have the best environment to grow.
Appendix D: Memo-Process ‘aspiring for migration’

In order to realise a project, one has to have both the aspiration and the capacity to realise. Aspirations are also constructed based on one’s perceived capacity to realise. But people may not always be rational and logical. They may become too ambitious or too pessimistic. Timing and positioning of the action also plays a role.

Aspirations are not fixed, but fluid. People can adjust their aspirations (orientation, priority, target, degree, aspects). Aspirations are always subject to changes. People adjust their aspirations when they are not able to realise their aspirations, when an unexpected event happens which ‘forces’ them to change their aspirations, or as they experience life. Aspirations motivate and guide people to perform their agency. They may work on their capabilities to realise their aspirations. They may make certain choice because it matches/des not match their aspirations. They may give up choosing when they feel that their aspirations can never be realised. When people enjoy more agency, they may have more aspirations or higher aspirations.

Whether aspirations are realised is evaluated subjectively. There might be a mismatch between aspirations and reality. The mismatch can be either positive (better than expected) or negative (worse than expected).

Realisation of aspirations can lead to satisfaction, and failure to realise aspirations can lead to fatalism. People may choose to lower their aspirations deliberately to avoid disappointment. Life is not always predictable. There are unexpected events. How people make sense of the unexpected events is related to the timing of the occurrence and their positioning at the time, as well as the ‘hidden’ aspirations. An unexpected event may require one to change aspirations or form new aspirations.

Overall:
Aspiration as a construct, both as fluid and embedded.
- Aspirations are subjective, temporal, relative, relational.
- Aspirations are embedded in the specific context (timing, positioning, culture, environment…)
- Aspirations can be deliberately constructed, and emerge in social interaction.
- Aspirations are multi-layered. (significance, necessity, urgency, priority)
  • Aspiration as a capacity.
  • Aspiration as a motivational capacity.
  • Aspiration as a navigational capacity.
  • Aspiration as a well-being enhancing capacity.
Appendix E: Memo-Analysis of de Haas’ Aspirations-Capabilities Approach

De Haas (2021) has reconceptualised as ‘a function of aspirations and capabilities to migrate within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures’. While migration aspirations represent people’s notions of the ‘good life’ and the opportunities that they perceive will be available to them in the destination, capabilities include both the objective resources that they are able to access and make use of (the positive liberty) and the barriers that prevent them from moving (the negative liberty). As de Haas (2021) has argued, one’s capabilities and aspirations simultaneously shape the patterns and experiences of migration. The rapid development of rural education and infrastructure, along with the established migrant network in the cities, not only increases young women’s capabilities to migrate, but it also exposes them to the urban culture, which gradually changes their life preferences and aspirations.

‘The culture of migration’ also makes them realise that they can also go to the city to try. Although people’s aspirations and perceptions of the opportunity structures back home and in the destination city are subjective, it does not mean that they are irrational or illusionary. As de Haas (2021) has argued, aspirations can be dependent on capabilities. This can explain that why young people are still determined to migrate despite the rapid development of their rural hometown. Although the quality of life back home has improved greatly, the young women are still reluctant to stay home because their life aspirations has increased as well. They are no longer content with what they can have in the rural villages.

Although most women arrived in the city confident and determined, they were also aware of the limitations of their capabilities. They were very clear about what they would be capable of achieving as a migrant and what they would not even dare to achieve as a migrant. Many young women deliberately lowered their standards because they had internalised the view that they were ‘inferior’ as a migrant. They were capable of changing their jobs whenever they wanted, but the jobs that were available to them were limited because of their migrant status and educational level. They were capable of dating and marry the man they loved, but they did not even imagine marrying a local man because they believed that they were not good enough. They were capable of living in Beijing and work, but they would never plan to stay permanently or integrate because they would never be able to purchase a house here and their child would not be qualified to study in a public school here.

As a result, for many women, the thought of even thinking about settling in Beijing is already a luxury. As Mei said, ‘Settling in Beijing is a dream that is out of reach. Beijing is only a place for us to work and make a living. The houses are too expensive, and we do not even dare to think about buying a house here. If we can buy a house in a city close to our hometown and settle there, I will be very happy.’
Appendix F-Case Summary

F1. Bo
Bo was born in 1994 (26 years old at the time of the first interview) and she is a mother of a three-year-old girl. She is originally from a rural village in Henan Province and she first migrated to the city after she graduated from senior high school when she was 19 years old. Bo failed her college entrance examination and was invited to migrate to Guangzhou City by an old schoolmate who had been working in Guangzhou for a few years. Even if Bo’s parents were willing to support her to repeat one year and take the college entrance examination again, Bo was very determined to migrate to the city to explore and prove herself as a capable young woman who could make a living in the city. After she migrated to Guangzhou, she worked in a restaurant as a waitress. One year later, Bo’s mother migrated from the village to Beijing and therefore, Bo moved to Beijing to join her mother. In the beginning, she still worked as a waitress in a restaurant, but she soon got tired of the job and was introduced to work in a cosmetics shop by a friend. As a sales assistant, Bo sometimes had to work night shifts and she found it difficult to commute by public transport. Since she had already had some savings, Bo decided to apply for a driving license and buy a car. While she was learning driving, she fell in love with her driving coach. A few months later, Bo became pregnant, and the young couple decided to keep the child and get married. Bo was 23 years old and Bo’s husband was 20 years old. Bo’s husband is from Anhui Province and his family bought an apartment in the city close to the village as soon as they found out about the pregnancy to make sure that the child would have access to a good school in the future. Bo gave birth to her daughter in her husband’s hometown and moved back to Beijing with her daughter shortly after childbirth.

In the first interview, Bo’s daughter has just started kindergarten. Bo has not been working since she got pregnant with her daughter and she was thinking about getting a job soon. However, she felt that it might be difficult for her to secure a full-time job because of the childcare responsibilities. Her husband was working as a construction worker and he lived on the construction site in a different region in Beijing. He only came back home once a month. Even if Bo’s mother and mother-in-law both lived in Beijing, Bo did not want to depend on them and she insisted taking care of her daughter by herself.

In the second interview, Bo had started working again. She was working as a waitress in a restaurant close to the migrant village. Bo and her husband had also bought an apartment in the city close to her home village. She planned to move back to her husband’s hometown with her daughter when he daughter starts elementary school. She hopes that her husband will return with them, but she is also afraid that he will have to stay in Beijing to provide for the family.
**F2. Chen Xi**

Chen Xi was born in 1993 (26 years old at the time of the first interview) and she is a mother of a three-year-old daughter. At the time of the first interview, she just got pregnant with her second child. Chen Xi is from a rural village in Sichuan Province and she first migrated to the capital city of her province, Chengdu, when she was 19 years old after she graduated from senior high school, to study in a vocational college where she studied logistics management. After she graduated from a vocational college, she moved to Suzhou City to participate in an internship programme and later started working for the customs there, when she was 21 years old. While she was working in Suzhou, her relatives and friends started to arrange dates for her. That was when she was introduced to her husband. Her husband was working in Beijing at that time, and he was reluctant to move to Suzhou. Therefore, Chen Xi decided to migrate to Beijing to join him when she was 24 years old. Her husband had already been living in the migrant village at that time, and the young couple have been living here since then. When she first arrived in Beijing, she got a job in a kindergarten, and shortly, she found that she was pregnant and she quit her job. She married her husband the same year and her daughter was born in the following year when she was 25 years old.

Chen Xi’s husband is from Anhui Province and shortly after the child was born, the young couple bought an apartment in the city in the husband’s hometown. Chen Xi’s husband worked on the construction site and only came home once a month. Just before the first interview, Chen Xi found out that she was pregnant again and she decided to keep the child. Chen Xi’s daughter had not started kindergarten yet, and she found it very difficult to take care of her daughter while being pregnant herself, so she decided to move back to her mother’s place with her daughter soon while her husband stayed in Beijing to work.

In the second interview, Chen Xi had been back in her mother’s village with her daughter. Her older daughter was studying in a kindergarten in the village. She had also given birth to her second child, which was also a girl. Chen Xi and her husband had just bought an apartment in the town close to Chen Xi’s home village, and Chen Xi was considering moving to the town with her older daughter so that she could study in a kindergarten in the town. She also planned to get a part-time job soon since her mother could help her with childcare. She also aspired to study for a university diploma in the future and participate in training to become a family education consultant.
F3. Dan Dan
Dan Dan was born in 1996 (23 years old at the time of the first interview) and she is a mother a three-year-old boy. She is from a rural village in Hebei Province. She first migrated to the city when she was 17 years old. She studied early education in a junior college in her hometown and she was provided with the opportunity to work in a kindergarten in Beijing after she graduated. She worked for the kindergarten for a bit over a year and she decided to quit her job because she did not like it. She then returned home to help her mother care for her younger sisters. Two months later, Dan Dan came back to Beijing and she started working in a restaurant. She quit her job again shortly because she got into a fight with a colleague. She then got a job in a financing organisation and she quitted one month later because she suspected that the organisation was not qualified. Then she started working in an Italian restaurant where she met her husband, who was the chef of the restaurant. A few months later, she was pregnant, when she was 20 years old, and she decided to keep the child and marry her husband.

Dan Dan’s husband is originally from Anhui Province and he is a second-generation rural migrant in Beijing. Her husband had migrated to Beijing with his parents at an early age and his parents were still working and living in Beijing at the time of the study. Dan Dan was also living with her in-laws at the time of the study. Dan Dan’s hometown is very close to Beijing, and therefore, Dan Dan visited her families very frequently. Since her son had not yet started kindergarten at the time of the first interview, Dan Dan would take her son back to her home village and spend months there with her families. Although Dan Dan did not have a full-time job, she was actively learning about E-commerce and was able to have a small amount of income every month.

In the second interview, Dan Dan said that shortly after the first interview, her son started kindergarten, and she got an office job. She worked for two months and then she quit. She then worked as a receptionist at a dancing school but she found it difficult to handle the work, so she quit again. At the time of the second interview, Dan Dan was working as a waitress in a restaurant, and she was thinking about quitting again. She aspired to start her own business and buy a piece of land to build her own house in her hometown. She also registered her son in her hometown so that she would not have to move to her husband’s hometown in the future.
F4. Fen
Fen was born in 1995 (25 years old at the time of the interview) and she is a mother of a five-year old boy and a two-year old boy. She is from a rural village in Henan Province. She first migrated to the city when she was 17 years old before she finished the last term of junior high school. She was introduced to work in a factory in Jinzhou City, which was close to her home village. She had been working in the factory for six months before she moved back home. She then went to Tianjin City for a job interview, but she did not get the job, so she went back to work in the factory in Jinzhou. When she was 18 years old, she was introduced to her husband who was from a nearby village. In the beginning, they were just talking online because they were living in different places. One year later, Fen decided to move back home from Jinzhou, and that was when they officially started dating. After having dated for one year, Fen married her husband, when she was 20 years old. After getting married, Fen moved to live with her husband’s family, including her mother-in-law, her father-in-law and her sister-in-law. She was a full-time mom while her husband worked in the town. She once tried to work in a kindergarten, but very soon, she found out that she was pregnant again, so she had to quit her job. Shortly after her second child was born, her husband decided to migrate to Beijing to work, and after her husband settled in Beijing, Fen migrated to Beijing with her two children to join her husband. She has not been working at all since she came to Beijing. At the time of the first interview, her older son was already in kindergarten, but she still had to care for her younger son. She was planning to study for a teaching certificate and get a full-time job once her younger son started kindergarten. She was also planning to return home when her older son started elementary school.
F5. Guo Ying

Guo Ying was born in 1995 (25 years old at the time of the first interview) and she is a mother of a four-year-old boy. She is originally from a rural village in Henan Province and she first migrated to the city when she was 17 years old after dropping out of junior high school. Guo Ying’s relatives were running a small shop in Guangzhou City, so she decided to migrate to Guangzhou to help with the business. Six months later, she got bored and she moved back home. Shortly after that, she migrated to Hangzhou City to work for another relative in the shop. She had been working in Hangzhou for three years before her aunt invited her to come to Beijing for a job interview in the company which she was working for. With her aunt’s help, Guo Ying got the job in the warehouse and she met her husband who was also working there. A few months after they started dating, Guo Ying found that she become pregnant, when she was 20 years old, and she decided to marry her husband. She applied for maternity leave before she returned home for childbirth. However, after childbirth, she realised that she had to quit her job because she wanted to care for her son by herself. When her son was four-month old, she moved back to Beijing with her husband and her son. When her son was two years old, she became aware of the early childhood programme in the centre, and she became devoted to participating in the activities. After her son started kindergarten, Guo Ying decided to become an intern at the centre as a teaching assistant.

In the first interview, Guo Ying was very passionate about her job, and she aspired to build up her skills and work in a kindergarten or early education centre after returning home when her son started kindergarten. In the second year, when talking about her work, she was less enthusiastic. She was considering changing her job, but she had no idea what she wanted to do. She wanted to go a university or get a teaching certificate so that she could get a job in a kindergarten after returning home.

At the time of the first interview, Guo Ying and her husband had not yet purchased a house in their hometown. Guo Ying was still not sure where they should settle in the future. Her husband is from Shandong Province, which is far away from Guo Ying’s hometown. In the second interview, Guo Ying was still uncertain where they should go after Beijing. She wanted to settle in a city but she also wanted to be close to her in-laws’ village. However, Guo Ying also felt that because they had a tight budget, they could rent an apartment in the city in the beginning so that her son could go to a school in the city and then they could decide whether they wanted to buy a house there.
F6. Hui Min

Hui Min was born in 1992 (28 years old at the time of the interview) and she is a mother of a four-year-old girl and a two-year-old girl. She is from a rural village in Sichuan Province. She first left home for the city when she was 16 years old. She dropped out of senior school and migrated to Guangzhou City to work to support the education of her younger siblings. She first worked in a factory. When she was 20 years old, her parents migrated to Beijing and she moved to Beijing, too. She started working in a beauty salon and later became a trainer. She would travel to different cities to organise workshops and trainings. She was tired of travelling and wanted to get married and settle down. That was when she was introduced to her husband by a friend. Her husband is from the same region as her, and Hui Min thought that she would be able to rest and rely on her husband after getting marriage. She was 23 years old and she decided to quit her job and marry her husband. Shortly after the wedding, she became pregnant. She gave birth to her first child when she was 24 years old, and shortly after that, she was pregnant again. She thought about having an abortion but she did not have the courage.

At the time of the interview, Hui Min’s older daughter had started kindergarten, and her mother-in-law had moved to Beijing to help her care for her younger daughter. Therefore, Hui Min was able to get a full-time job in a shop close to the migrant village. She wanted to care for her daughters by herself because she felt that her mother-in-law was not taking a good care of her daughters, but she also needed the money to give her children a good life. When she thought about the future, she wanted to keep her children in Beijing, but she had to send them back home to live with her in-laws for elementary school. She and her husband had to stay in Beijing to work, but she also felt that she might need to return home to care for her daughters by herself when they were a bit older.
F7. Jun

Jun was born in 1994 (26 years old at the time of the interview) and she is a mother of a two-year old girl. She is from a rural village in Henan Province and she first migrated to the city in her province when she was 18 years old, after graduating from senior high school. She had the chance to study in a vocational college, but she refused because she wanted to work in the city and become financially independent. She first worked in a factory and soon she realised that working in the factory would not help her have a promising future. Therefore, with the support of her parents, Jun returned home and passed the exam for a teacher’s college where she majored early education. After completing her studies in the college, she was offered the chance to work in a kindergarten in Beijing, when she was 21 years old. After she came to Beijing, she was introduced to her husband who was from the same region and was also working in Beijing at that time. They got married when Jun was 24 years old. Jun soon got pregnant and gave birth to her daughter. After the child was born, Jun quit her job and became a full-time mother. However, after a few months, Jun felt that she still wanted to work, so she sent her daughter back to her mother while she stayed in Beijing to look for a job. She felt so guilty and she missed her daughter so much that only after one month, she decided to bring her daughter to Beijing again.

At the time of the interview, Jun was still a full-time mother. She was planning to move back to her husband’s village with her mother-in-law because her husband’s grandmother was very ill. She would move back to Beijing again when her daughter reached the age for kindergarten and she would be able to work again then. She also aspired to buy a house in the city in her hometown so that her daughter could have access to better education in the future.
F8. Kai
Kai was born in 1992 (28 years old at the time of the interview) and she is a mother of a seven-year-old boy and a one-year-old girl. She is from a rural village in Henan Province and she first migrated to Beijing when she was 16 years old after graduating from junior high school. She studied in a vocational school in Beijing to become a makeup artist. She then worked in a wedding studio where she met her husband when she was 17 years old. Her husband is from the same region as her and they got married when Kai was 20 years old. They settled in their home village after getting married. Kai’s husband was a photographer and they decided to open their own wedding studio in their hometown. However, the business was so bad and Kai got pregnant, so the couple decided to shut down the studio. Kai’s husband migrated to Beijing again while Kai stayed home for childbirth. When the child turned one year old, Kai stopped breastfeeding her son and migrated to Beijing to join her husband, and the child was left with the grandparents. Upon arrival in Beijing, Kai went back to work as a makeup artist in a wedding studio while her husband worked as a taxi driver. One year later, when the child reached the age for kindergarten, Kai brought the child to Beijing and enrolled him in a kindergarten in the migrant village. She also changed her job and started working in a teahouse. Kai and her husband had both been busy working and they found it difficult to take a good care of their son, and when their son reached the age for elementary school, they sent him back home to live with his grandparents. Shortly after Kai sent her son back home, she found out that she got pregnant and she moved back home when she was four-month pregnant. She wanted to have some rest while spending more time with her son.

At the time of the interview, Kai just moved back to Beijing with her daughter and her son to visit her husband. She would send her son back home when the school term started and she and her daughter would spend more time in Beijing to company her husband, but eventually she would settle back home and get a job in her hometown.
**F9. Mei**

Mei was born in 1993 (27 years old at the time of the first interview) and she is a mother of a one-year old boy. She is from a rural village in Anhui Province and she first migrated to the city to work when she was 14 years old. She was not doing well in school and followed a relative to learn dressmaking in the town. Later, she migrated to Nanjing City to work in a dressmaking factory. She had been working in Nanjing City for several years before she decided to return home for marriage when she was 24 years old. She was introduced to her husband by a relative and decided to marry him the same year. After the wedding, Mei followed her husband to Beijing. She got a job in a supermarket, but soon she had to quit her job because she got pregnant. She gave birth to her son when she was 25 years old.

At the time of the first interview, Mei’s husband had returned to the home village to start his own business. Mei was living with her in-laws and her son in the migrant village. She planned to move back home with her son if her husband’s business went well. She also wanted to buy a house in the city close to her home village so that her son could study in the city in the future.

At the time of the second interview, Mei had already moved back home. They had also bought a house in the city. However, her husband’s business did not go well, and Mei felt that they might need to move back to Beijing again because the income back home was not enough to support their life. She was also afraid that they might have to sell their house in the city and live their life in the village.
F10. Nan Nan

Nan Nan was born in 1997 (23 at the time of the interview) and she is a mother of a three-year-old girl. She is from a rural village in Henan Province and she first migrated to the city after she graduated from junior high school when she was 16 years old. Before she started senior high school, she went to Jiangsu Province to work because she was curious about what it was like to work in the city. She was planning to return home when the school term started. However, her father suggested that she should stay in the city to work and provide for the family so that her younger siblings could stay in school. Nan Nan decided to work in the city even if she wanted to go back to school. She worked in different factories and then she moved to Guangzhou City because her cousin was working there. She worked in the same factory with her cousin. She also had her first boyfriend who also worked in the factory. However, her father found out and forced her to break up with her boyfriend. Later, Nan Nan’s cousin left and Nan Nan felt very lonely. At that time, Nan Nan’s father had found a husband for her and asked her to return home for marriage. Nan Nan moved back home and married the man three months later, when she was 19 years old. Because her husband worked in Beijing, Nan Nan followed her husband to Beijing after they got married. The following year, she gave birth to her daughter.

At the time of the first interview, Nan Nan’s daughter had just started kindergarten, and Nan Nan was thinking about getting a job. She was also considering returning home with her husband next year. She also wanted to have a second child. Nan Nan and her husband did not own a house themselves and they would live with her husband’s family after moving back. Nan Nan had no plan to purchase any house either because she was not sure where her daughter would settle in the future. She thought she could rent an apartment in the place where her daughter studied and she would follow her daughter and care for her until she settled down in the future.
**F11. Ping**

Ping was born in 1995 (25 years old at the time of the first interview) and she is a mother of a one-year-old daughter. She is from a rural village in Sichuan Province and she first migrated to a nearby city in her province to work for her grandfather’s friend when she was 18 years old. She only worked there for a short time and she returned home because she did not like the job. Then she migrated to Beijing one year later after she failed her college entrance examination and she went to Beijing to learn bakery. Her parents wanted her to repeat one year and go to a university, but she insisted migrating to Beijing to prove herself that she could be able to make a living without a university degree. She first worked in a bakery factory and then she worked in a state-owned factory. While she was working in the factory, she was concerned about her future, so she started learning manicure when she had her day off. When she was 21 years old, she opened her own manicure studio in Beijing. She also brought her younger sister to Beijing to work with her. She was then introduced to her boyfriend by her neighbour in the migrant village and they got married when Ping was 23 years old. Shortly after Ping got married, she got pregnant and she shut down her manicure studio and then moved back to her husband’s hometown for childbirth. She moved back to Beijing when her daughter was one-month old.

At the time of the first interview, Ping’s husband had lost his job due to Covid and they were living on a tight budget. Ping was also very anxious herself and she worried about her daughter’s future. She was planning to return home when her daughter started kindergarten because they could not afford living in Beijing. She aspired to open a small shop after returning home.

At the time of the second interview, Ping became an intern at the centre. She had been working as a teaching assistant for a few months and she was very passionate about her work. She planned to stay in Beijing for a few more years so that she could learn more about early education to build up her skills. She also aspired to study for a university degree and get a teaching certificate.
F12. Qiu Xia
Qiu Xia was born in 1994 (26 years old at the time of the first interview) and she is a mother of a two-year-old boy. She is from a rural village in Sichuan Province and she first migrated to Chengdu City to study in a vocational college when she was 19 years old. She majored in catering management and she worked in high-end hotels in Chengdu as part of the internship programme. When Qiu Xia was 21 years old, she migrated to Beijing because her boyfriend was working in Beijing and she also wanted to see what it was like to live and work in Beijing. Upon arrival in Beijing, she got an office job in a real-estate agency. One year later, she got married. Shortly after, she became pregnant and she quit her job.

At the time of the first interview, Qiu Xia just had an abortion. Because she had some health conditions, and it was not safe for her to keep the child, so she decided to have an abortion. After the surgery, Qiu Xia’s father-in-law came to Beijing to help her care for her son. Qiu Xia thought that she could go back to work again, so she started an internship in a company in Beijing. However, she realised that her father-in-law was neglectful and he was not able to take good care of her son, so she quit her job again to care for her son by herself. Qiu Xia’s son would start kindergarten very soon and Qiu Xia planned to look for a job then. She was planning to return home when her son started elementary school.

At the time of the second interview, Qiu Xia and her husband had opened a restaurant in the migrant village. Her son had started kindergarten. Qiu Xia and her husband would be busy working, so both her in-laws had come to Beijing to help them care for her son. Qiu Xia was very guilty that she was not able to spend as much time with her son as before. While she used to plan to return home when her son started elementary school, she now felt that she wanted to stay in Beijing for as long as possible. She wanted to send her son to a private school in Beijing and she could study for a university degree.