

# *Being a Valuable Daughter in a Rural Family: The Relational Identity and Empowered Gender Subjectivities of Female Vocational College Students\**

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## *Abstract*

The rapid expansion of vocational higher education, the labor market, and the emergence of individualistic values have empowered the young generation of Chinese rural women, granting them more autonomy in planning their futures and constructing their identities. This article explores the motivation for vocational higher education and the meaning attached to education and employment among the female college students from rural households, primarily through in-depth interviews. While investigating the strategies young women employ for economic empowerment and self-development, we identify a new form of empowered gender subjectivity highly tied to their strong desire to become valuable daughters within their natal patrilineal families. They aim to transform the devalued role of daughters in the patriarchal system by aspiring to provide continuous financial, emotional, and physical support for their parents through a smooth school-to-work transition. This empowered agency, however, does not necessarily challenge the gender structure of the labor market and the primary

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caregiving role of women in families. This study also underscores the relational nature of individual identity in China and highlights the intricacies of educated young women's gendered subjectivities under the rapid social, cultural, and economic transitions in Chinese rural communities.

The transition from a socialist state to a market economy in China created both structural and cultural changes that have various mixed and complicated impacts on women's roles and experiences.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, rapid economic growth and the expansion of the labor market appear to offer individuals, regardless of their gender, abundant employment opportunities and social mobility chances. They increase the chance for female labor participation, economic independence, self-worth, and more life options.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the declining influence of the socialist ideology in terms of gender equality, along with the retreat of state support for social reproduction, results in the re-emergence of patriarchal values and a resurgence of a more traditional gender division of labor in households and workplaces.<sup>3</sup> In rural China, the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy has created unprecedented non-agricultural employment opportunities for women, who have voluntarily or involuntarily migrated to work in cities before or after their marriage.<sup>4</sup> With low educational attainment, most of these migrant workers engage in the low-skilled and low-paying jobs that urban dwellers refuse to take up and face various forms of discrimination in cities.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, their new earning power and the financial contribution to their rural families have subtly changed the subordinate status of women in rural communities, even though they are primarily defined by their domestic and caregiving role at home under the continuous influence of deep-rooted gender ideology.<sup>6</sup> The intersectionality of gender, socioeconomic status, and Chinese household registration system is key to comprehending the shifting experiences of rural women and their subject formation.

Entering the new millennium, China's education reform has further changed the condition facing the new generation of young women of rural background. A series of expansions in higher education, especially in the vocational track, have enabled an increasing number of rural young people, including women, to pursue more education and training than their parents before seeking non-agricultural employment. The increased opportunities and advancement in educational attainment are expected to complicate the system of social mobilization, work opportunities and