

Decision-Making Subject, Mobility Demand, and Chinese Labor's Transnational Mobility

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Abstract: With the implementation of the “Go Globally” Strategy and “The Belt and Road Initiative”, more and more labors go abroad to work. This study focuses on the first transnational mobility and repeated mobility of labors from two dimensions of mobility decision-making subject “individual-family” and mobility demand “economic demand-emotional responsibility demand”, exploring the influence of attention allocation on labor’s mobility behavior. The study finds that the dominant logic of the first mobility and repeated mobility is different. When the opinions of individuals and families are inconsistent, in the first transnational mobility, as long as one party holds the economic logic, the labor will go abroad to work, so the economic logic dominates, but in repeated mobility, the families’ decision dominates, and presents gender-based characteristics, families’ expectation for women is based on emotional responsibility needs, while expectation for men is based on economic needs, at this time, men are more likely than women to get a chance to work abroad again. Therefore, advancing “The Belt and Road Initiative” and expanding the export of labors need to strengthen the promotion of economic benefits in the first mobility and the publicity for men in repeated mobility.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of economic globalization has promoted the transnational mobility of population. As of the end of 2017, the total number of international migrants was approximately 258 million, which is expected to increase to 405 million in 2050. Among the many types of cross-border population movement, international contract labor movement is an important type. Under this mobility model, labor moves from developing countries to developed countries through the foreign labor export system to make up for the labor shortage in developed countries due to the aging population and low birth rate. As the largest developing country in the world, China has also entered this kind of globalization process. With the implementation of the “Going Globally” strategy and “The Belt and Road Initiative”, more and more Chinese labors are going abroad for work. As of December 2019, China had dispatched more than 10 million labors of various types ^[1]. Similar to other Asian countries, low-skilled and non-skilled contract labors dominate the Chinese labor force.

Theoretical studies on the first transnational labor mobility include neoclassical economics ^[2], new economics of labor migration ^[3], social network theory and cumulative causality theory ^[4], institutional theory ^[5], dual labor market theory ^[6], world system theory ^[7] and immigration system theory ^[8]. The neoclassical economics and new economics of labor migration mainly explain people’s motivations when responding to structural forces. The former considers individuals to be decision-making units of mobility and emphasizes that the purpose of mobility is to maximize individual economic income, while the latter regards families as decision-making units, emphasizing immigrants' pursuit of diversification of family income sources and risk dispersion. It has become a basic question that needs to be addressed in labor mobility research whether the decision is made by individuals or families. Also, here is a question, when individual labor and his/her families disagree about whether to go abroad for work or not, does the labor’s or the family's opinion plays a decisive role? That is, is it their own choice or a family decision for these labors to go abroad for work? Therefore, this study uses the decision-making subject “individual-family” as

the first analysis dimension. The economic motivation of migration in the theory of international migration has always been the focus of emphasis, while the social network theory believes that the social network of the outgoing place enables people to connect closely with the communities and families in the outgoing place, thereby enhancing the tendency of people not to migrate^[9]. Which is more important, the economic purpose of “making money”, or the emotional demand brought about by social networks? Which of these factors will have an important impact on the mobility? The economic attraction of the inflow area and the social network barrier of the outflow area constitute a pair of contradictory factors. Therefore, this study takes the mobility demand type “economic demand-emotional responsibility demand” as the second analysis dimension.

In terms of research issues, previous studies have focused more on the first cross-border migration of labor, that is, why the labors went abroad for work in the first place, and less attention is paid to the repeated mobility of labor. Questions like whether the labors will go abroad for work again after returning to the country, and which labors will go abroad for work again, have not received sufficient attention^[10]. There is a lack of comparative research on the first and repeated labor mobility. In terms of the factors affecting the first labor mobility, previous studies have mostly separated the individual from the family and economic needs from emotional responsibility needs, and did not conduct a comprehensive and specific analysis of these two dimensions. In fact, it is necessary to comprehensively consider these influential factors in many cases. The transnational movement of labor is not only a classic theoretical issue in the study of international migration, but also has an important impact on the implementation and promotion of China's “The Belt and Road Initiative”. In view of the deficiencies of existing research, this study will study the repeated mobility of transnational labor and compare it with the first mobility, taking into account the impact of the two dimensions of individuals and families, economic needs and emotional responsibility needs.

2. The Two Dimensions of “Attention Allocation” and Data Sources

Attention allocation has a multidisciplinary meaning. This study uses a sociological perspective to refer to the degree of attention to different tasks when faced with multiple tasks^[11]. According to the mobility of decision-making subjects and the types of needs, the two dimensions are operated as “individual attention allocation” and “family attention allocation”, pay attention to “economic needs” and attention to “emotional responsibility needs”. Family attention allocation and individual attention allocation are two concepts that need to be distinguished. Family attention allocation refers to the degree of attention that the family pays to different tasks when facing multiple tasks. Here, “family” refers to the majority of people in the family or the elders or peers who have greater decision-making power at home. The individual attention allocation is the degree of attention that labors pay to different tasks when faced with multiple tasks. Family attention allocation and individual attention allocation are not always consistent, and there may be differences in the first or repeated labor mobility. Repeated mobility refers to the participation of the same labor in circular mobility, which includes working for different employers in the same country, as well as re-employing for the same employer in the same country, as well as employment in different countries.

Japan, South Korea, and Singapore are among the top five countries in China's foreign labor export, and Chinese labors also occupy a pivotal position among foreign labors in these three countries. The number of labors dispatched abroad in Shandong Province ranked first in China for 9 consecutive years from 2008 to 2016 and about 100,000 labors were dispatched each year. It is an important part of Chinese labors in Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. Therefore, this study takes Beixian County, Shandong Province (the surveyed county, which is anonymously processed according to academic standards) as an example, and adopts a case study under a qualitative research paradigm. The specific investigation method is in-depth interview method. The study deeply interviewed 37 transnational labors and 39 family members, and brief interviewed 10 transnational labors. A total of 86 people were interviewed. Among them, 47 transnational labors were interviewed, 20 were men, and 27 were women. 19 were unmarried (during the last

transnational mobility), and 28 were married. 37 went to Japan, 3 went to South Korea, and 7 went to Singapore (during the last transnational mobility). Most labors were 18-35 years old, and a few were over 35 years old. 43 labors had junior high school education (including those who have not graduated from junior high school), and 2 labors had high school education, 1 had college degree and 1 had undergraduate education background. A total of 7 labors had repeated mobility (renewing contracts and working in different countries), most of whom worked in the secondary labor market.

Tab.1 Basic information on the cross-border mobility of the labors interviewed

Interviewee code	Gender	Working country	Case number	Repeated mobility number
C1-C20	male	Japan, South Korea, Singapore	20	6
C21-C47	female	Japan, Singapore	27	1

3. The First Labor Mobility Led by Economic Logic

In most cases, when the labor makes a decision to go abroad for work for the first time, the importance of economy overrides the importance of emotional responsibility. Therefore, the family issues of married people or marriage pressure of unmarried people both not become the stumbling block of labor transnational mobility. Under the normal pattern, the family and the individual have the same attention allocation in the first mobility of labor, that is, both family and labor allocate attention to economic needs, while family emotions and responsibilities (such as married life, caring for children, marriage and childbirth) are regarded as secondary factor. However, there may also be differences in the allocation of attention between the individual and the family, when the labor seeks economic benefits but the family fancy emotional needs, or the labor seeks emotional satisfaction but the family pursues economic benefits. Under this circumstance, is it decided by the labor or the family to go abroad to work? Among the interviewees, married women such as C21, C22, and C23 (using the sequential codes of the case to refer to the interviewees) planned to go abroad to work, but because their children needed to be taken care of, they were hindered by their families. They used “going abroad to make money” and “for the sake of the family and children” to persuade their family and finally convinced the family. C1 (unmarried, male) planned to work abroad. Although his parents were not willing to say yes, the family did not have the financial means to help him get married and start a family, so they had to agree. C30 (unmarried, female) did not want to work abroad because of her love for her family, but she still has younger siblings. The parents hoped that she would go abroad to earn money to relieve the family financial pressure caused by the children. In the end, she agreed with her parents' decision. Like C30, labors such as C7, C33 and C34 did not want to work abroad, but they went abroad to work for the sake of their families. In the first mobility, it is not the individual labor or family that decides whether to go abroad for work, but the economic demand. As long as the labor and the family pursue the economic benefits of going abroad to work, the labor will eventually go abroad for work, that is, economic logic governs the first mobility of labor.

4. Repeated Mobility Led by Multiple Logics

4.1 Mobility Termination under the Logic of Dual Emotional Responsibility

In most cases, going abroad to work has already met the financial needs of the family or individual to a certain extent. Therefore, after returning, labors and families will follow the logic of emotional responsibility and pay more attention to the needs of marriage and childbirth, child care, and normal life of the couple. This is the same idea that labors had when they first went abroad. They wanted to strive to make money within the limited contract period, and distribute their leisure time more evenly after returning home. The dominance of the economic logic in the first mobility gradually became the dominance of the emotional responsibility logic after the economic needs were met. Therefore, most of the labors do not go abroad to work again after coming back. First, get married and have children. Most married labors such as C21, C22 and C23 already have had a child at the time of their first mobility, and they plan to have a second child after coming back after the

contract ends. Among the 15 unmarried labors, 10 are over 24 years old after coming back when the contract expired. There are a few labors who are over 26 years old and are in the stage of late marriage, or even become older youths, facing life events such as getting married and having children. Second, take care of the children. The emotional and time costs brought about by the first mobility have made many married labors, especially women, feel guilty. They hope to compensate their children and give them more love and care after returning to China. Third, the husband and wife live normally. C24, C25, C27, C28, etc. all had more or less quarrels with their domestic husbands. This was not only because limited communication could not accurately convey information and emotions, but also because they crossed national borders and caused mistrust between husbands and wives.

4.2 The Repeated Mobility of Men Led by Family Economic Logic

The traditional gender role division of labor is impacted by the first cross-border mobility, and more and more female labors realize cross-border mobility and become the main contributors to the family economy. In the first mobility, women have almost the same decision-making power as men, especially under the dominance of economic logic. However, in the case of inconsistent allocation of attention between individuals and families during repeated mobility, there are obvious gender differences in the allocation of family attention, that is, the division of gender roles plays a role again, and the role held by the family is expected to be that men are contributors to the family economy, while women are financial supplements. So even if some men do not plan to go abroad to work again, they will eventually choose to repeat mobility due to the economic needs of the family. C2 and C3 both went to work in Singapore, and later went to work in Japan. After they returned to China, they bought a house and started a family. They didn't want to go abroad to work again. But because they got married and bought a house, they not only had no savings, but also had to pay off their mortgage every month. The needs of the economy made them choose repeated mobility.

4.3 The Termination of Female Mobility Led by the Logic of Family Emotional Responsibility

Different from the family's economic logic for male labors in repeated mobility, the family follows the logic of emotional responsibility for female labors. Labors such as C21, C24, C27, C28 and C29 still had the idea of going abroad to work when been interviewed. Especially C24, C28 and C29, they made an appointment with their employers before coming back. Once the Japanese foreign labor system allows them and their families allow them, they'd like to continue to return to Japan to work for one to two years. However, in the end, the repeated movements of these married female labors were hindered by their families. Women's decision-making power in repeated mobility is very limited. Even if many married female labors plan to go abroad again, they will eventually give up. Taking C24 as an example. When she proposed to renew the contract with a foreign employer, she met with unanimous opposition from her family. C24's mother-in-law and husband gave two reasons: first, she needs to take care of the children and take them to school. Second, she needs to return to China to have a second child. These two things are the embodiment and requirements of family emotion and responsibility. These married women use economic logic to let their families allow them to temporarily leave the family and make money abroad. Once the family's financial needs are met to a certain extent, the family will shift their attention to the needs of emotional responsibility. Therefore, women have different decision-making powers in the first and repeated mobility, and this difference essentially reflects the difference in dominance logic, that is, the transition from economic needs to family emotional responsibility needs.

5. Conclusion

Studies have shown that when the allocation of attention between labors and families is inconsistent during the first mobility, whether it is labor or family decision-making, whenever one party has economic needs, economic logic will dominate and promote labor cross-border mobility. In repeated mobility, when the individual and the family's attention allocation diverge, the family attention allocation often dominates, and the family attention allocation is affected by traditional

gender norms and role division, that is, the family's expectations of women are based on the needs of emotional responsibility. For men, it is based on economic needs. Therefore, men may be forced to work abroad again in order to take family financial responsibilities, while women may not be able to work abroad again because of family responsibilities. The dominance logic of the first mobility and repeated mobility is different. Generally speaking, the economic logic dominates the first mobility, and the emotional responsibility logic dominates the repeated mobility. Therefore, most labors will go abroad to work but will not go abroad again. In other cases, when individuals and families disagree, no matter whether the decision-making subject is an individual or a family in the first mobility, economic logic still dominates, while repeated mobility is different. In repeated mobility, the individual's mobility decision-making power is very limited. The family has a lot of power, and family decisions are gendered, which meets the expectations of gender roles. Therefore, from the perspective of decision-making subjects and mobility needs, economic needs are crucial in the first mobility, while family decisions and gender norms are very important in repeated mobility. This discovery has important reference significance for China's "The Belt and Road Initiative" and "going Globally" strategy. For those who have no working experience abroad, we can strengthen the publicity of the economic benefits of working abroad and attract them to join. For those who have the experience of working abroad, in addition to strengthening the promotion of economic benefits, we should also focus on publicity and recruitment of men to encourage people to go abroad to work and continuously improve the level of China's foreign economic cooperation.

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