

# The Differentiation and Cooperation of Joint Families: A Field Study Based on the Banana Market's Picker Families

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**Abstract:** *In traditional agricultural economies, Chinese family structures are typically centered around nuclear families with relatively fixed relationships, and economic activities mainly revolve around land and seasonal labor. However, with the rapid transformation of socio-economic conditions, especially the advancement of urbanization and industrialization, Chinese family structures have undergone significant changes. This paper examines the joint family model of laboring families in the banana industry of Natong Town, suggesting that this new type of family structure has shown great flexibility and adaptability in adapting to economic transformation and new agricultural development. Joint families, through the differentiation and cooperation among members, not only provide emotional support but also achieve resource sharing and risk sharing in the economy, significantly enhancing the family's overall competitiveness and economic adaptability.*

**Keywords:** *Joint Family; Family Structure Transformation; Differentiation and Cooperation; Economic Adaptability*

## 1. Introduction

With the acceleration of China's urbanization process and economic development and the transformation of economic structure, the family structure in Chinese society has also changed. The mainstream view is that the family structure in China will tend to be nuclear during the process of modernization, and urbanization and population mobility will accelerate the decomposition of large families. For example, Zhang Yi believes that with the industrialization, urbanization, and massive population mobility, the scale of Chinese family households continues to shrink, and the family structure further shows a trend of nuclear family. The most significant feature in the process of nuclear family is the empty-nesting of elderly families.<sup>[1]</sup> However, what contemporary China is experiencing is a "double-transformation" of population and family, and the rapid and intense population change has accelerated the process of household changes. Nuclear families mostly have their "form" but lack their "essence," so the transformation of Chinese family patterns cannot be simply summarized as "nuclear."<sup>[2]</sup> Urbanization has injected the developmentalist goals into families; families are not only required to complete simple family reproduction but also to pursue upward mobility development goals. A new joint family composed of the child's family as a public family connecting the male and female parents' family (or direct family) is an effective path to adapt to the development.<sup>[3]</sup> This paper hopes to put the change and continuation of family organization at the center of the study of urban-rural mobility, and strives to present the structural changes of the family through in-depth case studies. Therefore, I place the pick-up families in the banana industry in the context of agricultural reform and industrial development, explore the organizational structure, operation mechanism and role of the joint family, and understand how the traditional family structure in China changes in the context of the development of new agriculture, and how the form of joint family organization adapts to the development of new agriculture to survive.

## 2. Development of the Banana Industry in Natong

Natong Town, situated in the southeastern part of Long'an County within the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region's Nanning City, is recognized as a national key town. The town enjoys a unique geographical advantage with a well-developed transportation network of railways, highways, and waterways. Known as the "granary of Long'an County" and the "hometown of fruits," it is a significant

economic, agricultural, and cultural tourism hub of Long'an County and the cradle of rice farming culture. The development of banana agriculture in Natong Town has formed a large-scale "banana economy", and the rapid development of the banana industry has become a huge tension to attract labor to move in.

The development of the banana industry in Natong Town primarily relies on Guangxi Jinsui Agricultural Group Co., Ltd. Jinsui Company possesses ten major banana production bases within China, covering an area of 21,000 mu, and has adopted the "company + industry alliance + base" model, enlisting 7 franchisees to cultivate an additional 5,000 mu of banana plantations. Since the implementation of land transfer and agricultural cooperation in Natong Town, the majority of the land has been contracted to Guangxi Jinsui Company. Driven by the banana industry of Jinsui Company, the town annually provides stable employment for 525 farmers with an average annual income of 35,000 yuan per person and facilitates seasonal employment for 2,000 farmers, with an average labor income of 15,000 yuan per person. (Data obtained from a paper-based survey of Jinsui Company on July 19, 2021) According to the introduction of Jinsui Company's banana industry, the development of the company's banana industry has predominantly stimulated the employment of seasonal farmers, a group of migrant workers who move according to the growth and maturation of bananas, including Pickers. As a seasonal crop, the banana's requirements for natural conditions such as sunlight, temperature, and moisture determine the seasonality of banana production. The different maturation seasons of bananas planted in various locations, such as Guangdong, Hainan, Guangxi, Yunnan provinces (regions) in China, and Laos, complement each other, thus dictating the annual labor patterns. Due to climatic differences, the sales periods for bananas in Guangdong and Hainan are typically from May to July, in Guangxi from August to November, and in Yunnan from November to the following May. Consequently, the "banana Pickers" migrate among Guangxi, Hainan, Yunnan, Guangdong, and other provinces (regions) based on the seasonal production and sales times of the banana crop. Below is a snippet of the interview obtained in the field:

*Jinsui Company began engaging in agriculture in 1996 and has experienced a glorious 25-year history. The "Banana King" of China is the company's General Manager, Lu Yizhen, who initiated the introduction of bananas to Guangxi, propelling the development of the entire banana industry. The majority of bananas in Guangxi are concentrated in our local Long'an County and Pingguo in Baise. After decades of development, the company now cultivates more than just bananas. Initially known for bananas, over the past 4 to 5 years, the company has vigorously expanded into the cultivation of dragon fruits and has developed its primary, secondary, and tertiary industries, continuously broadening its business sectors and driving significant local employment annually. (Interview with Jinsui Company Manager Liang Yong (a pseudonym) on July 20, 2021)*

### 3. Joint Family: An Economic Organization and Outbound Unit

"Picker" refers to a person who helps others pick things for a living, also known as a burdenman, and the history book said "specializing in the market, picking up goods and all luggage baskets for guests, in order to Bo micro capital, the so-called coolie is also".<sup>[4]</sup> The primitive freight mode of pickers transportation has spread all over the north and south of the river for thousands of years, and has played a positive role in promoting the social and economic development of a specific historical period. The profession of Pickers in Guangxi has a long history. Hou Xuanjie, in his exploration of modern Guangxi Pickers, believes that against the backdrop of the disintegration of the smallholder economy and the expansion of capitalist economic elements, the natural geographical conditions in Guangxi cannot meet the development of the agricultural economy. In this case, Pickers played an important role, and the manual transportation of Pickers flourished.<sup>[5]</sup> Now, with the large-scale operation of the banana industry in that village, the profession of Pickers has once again entered the picture of agricultural development and played an important role.

The pick-up families in the project go out as a whole as a joint family community, forming a kind of family economic organization that is "divided" but not "separated" and "united" but not "unified". The joint family referred to in the project is the field research object Yin Duiwen (pseudonym)'s family, which is actually a practice of going out to work in the form of a joint family. Their family includes Yin Duiwen's core family, Yin Duiwen's eldest brother Yin Duiwu's core family, and Yin Duiwen's eldest sister Yin Xiaoling's core family. The three core families are linked together to form a joint joint family, and they achieve economic adaptation through the form of family employment.

The Yin family comes from Wenshan County, Yunnan Province. Yin Duiwen was born in 1996, is

25 years old this year, and is the youngest son in the family, but he already has two children, who are 6 and 7 years old. After graduating from junior high school, Yin Duiwen started to work outside, first going to a factory in Guangdong to be an assembly line worker, but the assembly line life was too monotonous for the young Yin Duiwen, and the income he got from working in the factory at that time could not satisfy him, *"I got too little money when I worked in the factory, so I didn't want to do it anymore"* (Yin Duiwen's words), so after a few twists and turns, introduced by relatives, Yin Duiwen came into contact with banana agriculture and started working in the Picker industry from 2016. His wife, Wu Xiaohua (pseudonym), also started to follow him from his hometown to Guangxi, Hainan, Yunnan, and other places at this time, responsible for hanging ropes in the Picker team. In 2017, Yin Duiwen's brother Yin Duiwu and sister Yin Xiaoling started to follow Yin Duiwen to work in the Picker industry, and for the brothers and sisters to work together as a team, Yin Duiwen explained: *"It was me who started doing this first, and I found that I got much more money than doing odd jobs at home, so I called my sister and my brother"* (interview content on July 21, 2021). Based on economic needs and a rational mindset, Yin Duiwen thought that it was better to *"run around and make money"* rather than stay in the *"backward Wenshan"* he mentioned (Yin Duiwen's words). The three core families are independent and cooperative, differentiated and integrated, forming a specific family community. "In the interview, Yin Duiwen's wife, Wu Xiaohua, even joked with the author, saying: *"Don't go to university, your university is not as promising as ours, you can't earn much money from university, but we can earn ten thousand yuan in a month, come and be a Picker with us, follow this team leader, make a lot of money, we all eat with him, he goes where we go, he is the boss."* (Wu Xiaohua's words, interview content on July 21, 2021)

From the beginning of doing Pickers, in 2017, Yin Duiwen became the head of the Pickers, and everyone outside called him Captain Yin. From Pickers to team leaders, from riding a motorcycle to work to later buying a car and building a house in his hometown, Yin Duiwen completed the transformation from a migrant worker to a foreman. His brother Yin Duiwu and sister Yin Xiaoling have been in Yin Duiwen's Picker team since 2016, from being just a member of the team at the beginning to later becoming a small team leader, and both are very satisfied with the current life of Pickers. During the investigation, I asked the Yin family if they had ever considered other occupations or contracting land for banana cultivation, and the answers were all negative.

*Author: Have you ever thought about being a contracting farmer?*

*Yin Duiwen: I've never thought about it. Since I've been in charge of bananas for three years, I've never thought about it. That would require at least 20 days a month in the field, and it's very tiring. At least with this, you can work when you want to, and rest when you want to, it's much more free than that.*

*Author: Being a Picker must be very hard, how do you endure it?*

*Yin Duiwen: Yes, it's very hard in the first two days, even a week. Ah, if there's no money, you endure it, if there's money, I definitely won't do it if I'm tired, it's all forced by money. I've been doing it for so long that I don't know how to be tired now. Now we carry it back and forth, and the shoulders feel like dead flesh, and they won't hurt. The people here are basically all family members, all relatives, and they bring their children, which would be difficult if they went to the factory, and how can the factory live in the past two years? How can you live with only two or three thousand yuan a month? (Interview content on July 22, 2021)*

For this joint family of Pickers, the family is not only an emotional community but also an economic organization and an outbound unit. Shortly after Yin Duiwen started working as a Picker, his wife Wu Xiaohua left Wenshan, Yunnan, and since then, he has worked in the city with the family instead of as an individual. Yin Duiwen has always regarded the Picker industry with a "family-oriented" attitude, as mentioned in the interview content, the whole family works together as Pickers, and the husband and wife can also bring their children with them, *"so we can go wherever we go,"* (Yin Duiwen's words, interview content on July 22, 2021). The reasons for Yin Duiwu's wife and Yin Xiaoling's husband to follow and work as Pickers are also the same, Yin Duiwu said: *"My brother is doing well in Pickers, and he called us to come, and we came to make money, and my family followed me, it's better for the whole family to come out together."* (Yin Duiwu's interview content on July 22, 2021).

The form of work for Pickers is based on the team, with a team of about 9 people. Since the banana planting area is generally equipped with a cableway for convenient long-distance transportation of bananas, there are generally 2-3 women in a Picker team responsible for hanging ropes, and the rest are responsible for "carrying" bananas, that is, manual transportation. Team work emphasizes teamwork

and efficiency, so there is often a need for a leader or supervisor. Yin Duiwen, as the team leader, plays the role of assigning tasks and supervising, and with family members as a team, there is a lot of trouble saved in supervision and motivation. Yin Duiwen called all the family members to work in the Picker industry, and often can also reflect the advantage of labor in a team, *"As the team leader, I can sometimes not work, just supervise them, but if my brother, sister, brother-in-law, and sister-in-law need help, I will also help, the whole family, there is no need to care so much, and it can also let everyone rest earlier"* (Yin Duiwen's words, interview content on July 24, 2021). This full use of labor is also a special advantage of the family as an economic organization.

Weber once put forward the idea that with the process of rationalization, business management will be separated from the family community. In his view, the original integration of family members' pocket money with the business organization will evolve into a separate "occupation" within an "enterprise", which will disintegrate the original trinity of family, workshop and account, and the decisive factor is the separation of the family and the enterprise in terms of "bookkeeping" and law.<sup>[6]</sup> In contrast, in the process of urban-rural mobility, there is no separation between the family and the business in Yins family, and there is no clear division of funds and finances between business activities and household consumption, and between different business areas within the family. All investment and consumption, profits and losses, are ultimately unified in the family.

#### 4. Differentiation and Cooperation of Each Core Family

The joint family's joint outing is an economic community and an outbound unit, but this does not mean that its structure will remain stable in the process of urban and rural mobility. Since 2019, Yin Duiwu's brother has also begun to try to serve as the head of the Pickers, changing the state of always working with him, and as the head of the Pickers, he also has his own small business. As the head of the Pickers, he is also a captain with the same status as Yin Duiwu, and his family structure has also begun to differentiate.

*We are a family, as the captain of the team, there are more than 100 workers, I can arrange tasks at will. I will share resource to my brother, so that we can make money together, we don't need to worry about whether he is better than me, and we can also introduce work to each other, which is also a good thing, so the pressure on my brother's family can also be reduced a bit.* (Yin Duiwen's interview content on July 25, 2021)

In this way, two of the three siblings have their own careers, and they are basically independent. In addition to avoiding conflicts due to disagreements, differentiation may also integrate more resources. As Yin Xiaoling's daughter said: *"My uncle took my parents and my uncle out, and now my uncle can also be a captain, which is my uncle's help. It's good for the family to be in a team, but even if it's not a team, our hearts are together, and we can make more money when we are separated."* (Yin Xiaoling's daughter's interview content on July 25, 2021). Independence is not isolation, differentiation does not mean division, they are still an internally closely connected organism. The bond of blood and kinship is still very strong, and they still have very close connections and mutual assistance in labor and life. Yin Duiwen said: *"In fact, now our family is mainly depend by me, although I am the youngest, I have more energy to work, and I arrange all the big and small things in the family, and my brother and sister don't have to worry, they are very relaxed, and the pressure is on my side."* (Yin Duiwen's words, interview content on July 26, 2021). From Yin Duiwen's words, it can be known that in the process of economic change and family mobility, the traditional family structure model is actually to some extent dissolved, and the mode of respecting the elderly does not necessarily still apply to the current family structure.

In addition to the mutual assistance in work, the closely connected family has a natural emotional connection and also takes care of each other in daily life. Just as Yin Xiaoling's daughter also joined the Picker team, it was with the help of Yin Duiwen that she chose to take a break during the school year. Yin Xiaoling's daughter was born in 2004 and is 17 years old this year. In 2020, when she graduated from junior high school, she originally planned to continue her studies at a vocational school, but she was dissatisfied with the school she registered for due to improper consideration, so she chose to drop out. The issue of Yin Xiaoling's daughter's studies was finally resolved by Yin Duiwen, who helped her contact the school to return her student status and planned to register her for a nursing school, hoping that she would become a nurse in the future. However, due to the slow handling of the procedures, Yin Xiaoling's daughter had to take a year off from school, and during the break, she chose to follow her uncle and parents to work in the Picker industry to earn some pocket money. Here's what she talked about:

*"My job on the team is to hang the ropeway rope, it's good for me, and it's not tiring, I have been here for 28 days and I have made 10,000 yuan. In the past, when my parents came out to work, I felt a little strange to them when they went home occasionally, but now that I have followed, I have experienced their difficulties. I can better understand that their lives are not easy." (Yin Xiaoling's daughter's interview content on July 28, 2021)*

From the interview content of Yin Xiaoling's daughter, it is known that even though the three families work together, there is still a division of labor, and the work is still managed by Yin Duiwen, but family life is not completely integrated, there is also a certain boundary and differentiation, but it is still a large family model.

## 5. Conclusion

As Huang Zongzhi said, the family is still an important economic organization in contemporary China.<sup>[7]</sup> For those who leave their hometown to work as Pickers, the family is not only a place for emotional sustenance and motivation, but also bears an important economic function. The joint family goes out as a joint family community, and in the process of working, it is independent and cooperative, differentiated and integrated, forming a "divided" but not "separated," "unified" but not "unified" joint family. In the process of starting a business in the city, the structural changes of the economic organization of the Picker's joint family do not conform to modernization theory and research on family businesses, and it is also difficult to explain with the relationship network theory commonly used in the study of mobile populations. The joint family's economic organization has obvious dynamics, diversity, and rights, and it is quite different from the familiar family types and economic organization types: as a family form, it is different from both the traditional large family and the modern core family; as an economic organization form, the way it bears economic functions is different from both the traditional family workshops and family businesses with traditional colors, and it is more different from the modern enterprise organizations with a higher degree of standardization; in the types of mobile population families, the structure of this family and the way of combining family and economy it embodies are also different from the types mentioned in previous studies. Therefore, in the process of continuous economic development and change, understanding the economic changes of Chinese family structures requires going beyond the traditional perspective and considering the multiple roles and functions of families in the transformation of socio-economic development.

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