

Childhood and rural to urban migration in China: A tale of three villages

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Abstract

This article examines how, for many in rural China, experiences of childhood are entangled within the complex processes of rural-to-urban internal migration. Drawing upon multi-generational life history data in three villages, it unpacks three common types of childhood experience. In Village A, where married men migrated but wives stayed behind, children grew up with ‘absent fathers’. In Village B, both parents migrated to cities for work, leaving their children predominantly cared for by grandmothers as a surrogate. In Village C, where parents often took their children to a city with them, the children and their family had to navigate a hostile urban environment that rendered those of rural origin second-class citizens. Whilst childhood experiences in each setting were distinctive and shaped by their geographies, they shared common features reflecting the urban–rural divide and social inequalities embedded in Chinese society. In the public discourse, institutionalized inequalities experienced by rural communities are often disguised and downplayed with the focus instead on parental separation and the impact on ‘left-behind’ children. This article reveals it is the stability and quality of care arrangements, rather than mere separation from parents, that is critical to the development of the emotional well-being of children. Theoretically, the

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analysis contributes to global scholarship on the dynamics between migration, inequalities and childhood experiences and calls for a broader framing of the debate beyond the dominant concern with physical separation.

KEYWORDS

childhood, China, gender, life history research, migration

INTRODUCTION

Migration, as a livelihood strategy for many families, is ‘inherently characterized by rupture—a break, change, distance, division’ in everyday life (Boehm et al., 2011:1). However, the experiences and responses of children affected by migration are often concealed within adult-centric literature despite the fact that children are generally at the heart of migration decisions (Lam & Yeoh, 2019). This article extends this discussion of children and migration by focusing on the experiences of Chinese children from rural families affected by internal rural–urban migration.

Internal migration within China, as in many parts of the world, is embedded in a global paradigm that has witnessed migration of young people against the backdrop of economic liberalization and implementation of neoliberal policies (Alipio et al., 2015). In Maoist China, urban-centred modernization was maintained through a strict household registration system (*hukou*) introduced in 1958, which divided the entire population into either urban or rural residents. This system effectively barred rural–urban migration in order to minimize consumption and finance capital-intensive heavy industrialization in urban centres. Subsequent economic reforms removed the state’s ban on rural–urban migration; however, segregation remains intact and the *hukou* functions as a means of managing access to resources (Zhang, 2001). Regardless of their actual place of residence, rural *hukou* holders are deprived of various benefits (including access to better jobs and admission to city schools) and welfare provisions (such as unemployment benefit) available to urban *hukou* holders. This discrimination against rural *hukou* holders and lack of state support for them in cities has compelled rural migrants to leave their children in the countryside, a predicament similar to that of families engaged in transnational migration elsewhere (Lam & Yeoh, 2019).

The population of migrants’ children is steadily increasing¹ and over the last two decades growing attention paid to them by journalists and researchers has given rise to the term *liushou ertong* (commonly translated as ‘left-behind’² children). The consensus view is that these children are adversely affected—both psychologically and cognitively—by their parents’ absence, making them victims of rural-to-urban migration (see Wen & Lin, 2012). However, the term itself potentially obscures the varied nature of rural children’s experiences. Through a comparison of three villages, this article highlights how rural children’s childhood experience in each setting was distinctive and shaped by their families’ migration trajectories. This article seeks to embed the analysis of micro-geographies of children’s everyday life within the wider structural processes that affect children across different settings, highlighting the dynamics between migration, inequalities and childhood experiences.

MIGRATION AND CHILDREN

Migration studies have witnessed two major changes in emphasis over the last 20 years. The first was a shift from a dominance of economic motivations and behaviour to a greater focus

on emotions and affective realities of the migration process (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). The second was a pivot away from being adult-centric, e.g. Dobson's (2009) observation that children and young people's voices had been largely excluded. As a consequence, research has increasingly focused upon children's emotional geographies.

This literature has examined how parental migration generates socio-emotional challenges for children, including a 'care crisis' and questions about the future of the family (Parreñas, 2005). Parreñas (2005) suggests that Filipino left-behind children suffer emotional distress and inadequacy of social networks. Left-behind children also have 'higher incidence of mental disorders, lower levels of school performance and impeded social and psychological development' (Whitehead & Hashim, 2005:14). Rather than depicting them as passive and compliant, scholars have begun to highlight the agency of children as children of migrants. Through resistance, resilience and adaptation, children are conscious social actors and agents of their own development (Hoang et al., 2015; Lam et al., 2013). However, there are limitations to children's power in shaping parental decision-making in transnational migration (Dreby, 2007). For example, while the desire to improve children's educational opportunities is often cited as a driving force of parental migration, children are often excluded from the migration decision-making process (Lam & Yeoh, 2019).

In the first two decades after the commencement of economic reforms, the Chinese media mainly focused on adult rural migrants, albeit depicting them as a source of 'problems' in cities requiring strict regulation (Zhang, 2001). Attention on migrants' children has surged in recent years, reflected in sensational reports and alarming scholarly articles. For example, rural left-behind children have been reported to suffer from low self-esteem, depression, lack of motivation at school and, without proper adult supervision, they are also more likely to become victims of sexual and physical abuse (Zheng & Wu, 2014). While the urban one child generation are depicted as spoiled 'little emperors', rural migrant children are pitied.

Most existing studies on children in rural China are survey-based quantitative assessments of children's physical health, mental and psychological well-being, and cognitive and educational development. Only a very limited number of studies draw on children's own perspectives. An exception is Murphy (2020) which focuses on daily care routines in the family and school life, to reveal the impact of both parent-child separation and study pressures on children's emotions and aspirations. Whilst Murphy examines left-behind children's short-term visits and stays in cities (during summer holidays), her sample is sourced in two neighbouring provinces and predominantly formed of children whose parents either both migrated or one parent migrated. By contrast, this article builds upon ethnographic fieldwork of three rural villages in three sparsely located provinces (over 1000 km apart) and with different migration trajectories. Through a multi-sited perspective on the family dynamics of migration, this article seeks to enrich and extend our understanding of rural children's experiences and how these are shaped in a variety of settings.

In theoretical terms, the article contributes to the ongoing debate about the impact of parental migration on children. Through new perspectives on the different ways in which children are caught up in multiple streams of human mobilities, it questions some generalized statements about children's circumstances contained in current scholarship. Furthermore, following the 'current turn to emotions and affect' to capture children's experience and perspectives, it also seeks to highlight the importance of local social and cultural structures in conditioning children's circumstances (Ansell, 2009). By embedding the analysis of micro-geographies of children's everyday life within the wider structural processes that affect rural children across different settings, the analysis reveals how rural childhoods are profoundly shaped by a multi-layered process of institutionalized inequalities, including the urban-rural divide and patrilineal gender ideology.

METHODOLOGY

A life history approach helps to establish a connection between the past and present and weaves individual lives and wider social processes together. In family research, the life history approach is particularly useful where an individual's biography overlaps with other family members' trajectories, thereby offering helpful insights into how family members interact with each other over a life course. This article draws upon multi-generational life history interviews collected over two periods of fieldwork in China in relation to two research projects.³ In 2011, 60 life history interviews were collected in Village A and Village B. In 2018, a further 70 life history interviews⁴ were collected in Village A and Village C.

In each village, a high proportion of households (over 70 percent) had experienced migration. At the same time, each village possessed its own distinctive migration history and trajectory (see below). Purposive non-random sampling techniques were utilized to recruit interviewees (Mason, 2002). This sampling approach specifically accounted for age, gender and social hierarchy, embracing a mixed gender distribution and socioeconomic background within each generation. One-to-one interviews were conducted with at least two (sometimes three) generations in each family unit. The older generation was born between the early 1930s and early 1950s, with the majority in the 1940s. The middle generation was mostly born in the 1960s and the early 1970s. The younger generation was born between the mid-1980s and 2000s, with the majority in the 1990s. The life history interview approach was complemented by in-depth ethnographic observation to document the activities and interactions of the families.

Each interviewee was first asked to recall his/her childhood and then encouraged to take the lead in telling his/her life story. If not covered during the natural course of the subsequent conversation, specific questions relating to migration and family relations were raised. Each transcript was then analysed chronologically, i.e. childhood/early life, migration phase, present circumstances, future plans. A thematic analysis was applied to each transcript to identify common themes from different transcripts in each generation. A further in-depth analysis of intergenerational relations was carried out for each household. The analysis that follows mainly draws upon the younger generation's recollections of their childhood,⁵ supplemented by other family members' perspectives on migration and childcare. By drawing upon young adults' memories of their childhood, this article offers to the research on children additional perspectives afforded by the passage of time. All names and any identifying characteristics have been altered to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

CHILDHOOD

Village A—Absent fathers

Village A was located in the inland region of Shandong province, East China. Since the early 1990s, male villagers had migrated to the cities for work but the number was initially very small. Having seen early pioneers earn considerably higher wages, others followed and migration increased markedly from 2000 onwards. The gender composition of migrants aged between 16 and 25 was balanced. This cohort mainly comprised those who migrated to work in a factory after completing/dropping out of school. After returning to the village to marry, the majority of husbands continued to migrate, leaving their wives behind in the village. As a result, the majority of village residents were older people, married women and children. Grandparents were

responsible for farm work while left-behind daughters-in-law and/or married daughters generally commuted to nearby villages/towns where they engaged in non-agricultural work. Grandchildren lived with their mothers but were looked after by the older generation during the day when their mothers were at work.

Yuan⁶ (born in 1983, two younger sisters), whose father was among the first generation of migrants, recalled:

I grew up with my mother as my father was a migrant worker. I was close to my mother and often told her what happened at school when I got home.

Q: *Did you spend any time with your grandparents?*

A: *My paternal grandfather was already dead. My paternal grandmother didn't like me from a very young age as she preferred grandsons. My mother had three girls so she didn't care about us at all. When I was very little, I was sent to live with my maternal grandmother for a while as my family was harassed by the family planning office of the village because my mother had a third child. But after I went to primary school, I hardly visited them, only occasionally during the weekends.*

As Yuan struggled academically, she decided to migrate to work in a coastal factory at the age of 17. Yuan sent 80 per cent of her income back home to support her family, in particular the education of her second sister. She explained: *'I wasn't good at studying. If rural children like us are not good at studying, the only other option is to migrate to a city for work. It has become a trend, so I followed the trend. My sister was good at studying. I felt that if she managed to enter college, our whole family would be very proud so I was happy to send money back so that she could continue her education'*.

Yuan met her husband (who was born in a neighbouring village, but worked as a migrant) at the age of 22 when her parents arranged a date for them in the village. After marriage, she initially joined her husband in the city for work but then returned home to give birth to her first child (daughter) in 2007. When her daughter was one, she left the baby with her in-laws and own parents and returned to the city for 3 years: *'I often called home and also went back every three or four months to see my daughter. I asked my parents to take her to their home as well. So basically four grandparents concentrated on bringing up one child. I felt more reassured.* When her daughter was four, Yuan's husband brother had a son so her in-laws were expected to look after the other grandchild as well. Concerned that her daughter might not have sufficient care, Yuan decided to return to the village and work nearby.

At the time of interview (2018), Yuan had recently given birth to a second child (son); this ruled out any further possibility of migration: *'I need to look after the baby. My elder child is nearly ready for junior middle school and now that I need to pay close attention to her education I won't migrate again. If my husband stays behind, village wages are too low so he has to remain in the city. We have no other option. He comes back to visit us every 6 months and we video call almost every night, although sometimes only for two or three minutes. He just checks if everybody is okay and that's it'*. Yuan's husband commented of the physical separation: *'I was forced to go. Although my daughter was only in primary school,⁷ there were all kinds of charges we needed to pay every term. Now we have the second child. I have to keep working to support my family'*.

Yuan's daughter recalled:

'when I was little, my parents both migrated away. I vaguely remember alternating between living with my paternal grandparents and maternal grandparents. I liked going to my maternal grandparents' place more as they cared about me and always

bought spare ribs for me to eat. My paternal grandparents did also care about me but after my uncle had a son, I feel my paternal grandparents' attitudes towards me were not as good as before; they became more intimate with my cousin.

Q: In what ways?

A: For example, when we are eating together, they would save better food for him.

Q: How did you feel about being left behind when both of your parents migrated?

A: I felt fine. The reason they migrated to work was for me. At home there were four grandparents. They all cared about me.

Q: Nowadays, what is your interaction with your mother like?

A: I often confide in her what happens at school.

Q: Does she hit you?

A: Yes, very often, but not in a particularly painful way. I still feel intimate towards her. She hits me because she wants me to get rid of bad habits and do better in my studies.'

There are several layers of analysis in Yuan's family life history interviews. First, gendered childrearing persisted across generations. In the upbringing of both Yuan and her daughter, the fathers contributed to the household financially but with limited practical input. This gendered narrative mirrors the account of Yuan's own mother (born in 1959, with five elder sisters and a father who lived in the village): *My mother died when I was only six years old. ...My father was a party member, so he was at production team meetings most of the time, hardly at home at all. My two elder sisters got married when I was eight. For my everyday living, I completely relied upon my third sister. She was like a mother. My father did not pay attention to us. He spent most of his time with the production team.* Whether migrating or not, the father's involvement in childcare practices in rural households was minimal. This produced ambivalent feelings towards fathers; Yuan explained: *'I don't know how to say it [on relationship with father]. I feel closest to my mother as I spent the majority of my time with her. My memories of childhood are all events related to my time with her'*. This was similar to older generations; Ms Tai (born in 1946) said: *'I don't know how to answer. Men only cared about working outside and were not concerned with matters at home. My father paid little attention to me and my siblings'*. While gendered parenting may have limited the impact of a father's migration on the emotional well-being of a child, such gender norms and feminization of care work have been reinforced and reproduced through intergenerational transmissions.

Second, institutionalized urban-rural segregation and inequality are key drivers of rural-to-urban migration. In 2012, 128 million Chinese people, mostly rural residents, were still living in poverty with an annual per capita income of less than 2300 Yuan (c. 1.6 USD per day) (China Academy of Sciences, 2012). Migration has become the means for rural households to improve their livelihood while suffering and family separation as a result of migration is borne

by individual families. While Yuan did not like being physically separated from her husband, she felt *'we have no other option'* since the equivalent pay in rural enterprises was much lower.

Third, children's education has become an intense familial project for rural households. Some scholars interpret this as evolving from filial piety since academic success brings honour to the family (Yan, 2021). This interpretation may partly account for the emphasis on children's education, but more fundamentally rural families' efforts in pushing children to do well academically are driven by, or constitute a strategy to escape from, institutionalized urban–rural inequality in China. To fulfil this project, all family members make sacrifices: parents migrate to the cities for work to pay for the children's education, mothers and grandparents are carers and children themselves are expected to study hard (see also Murphy, 2020). This sacrificial discourse has become a dominant feature in justifying their suffering. Yuan's 11-year-old daughter's comments on her parents' absence, and tolerance of her mother's corporal punishment, reflect the way in which she had been socialized into this adult discourse.

Fourth, rural girls are subject to the patrilineal preference of boys over girls. As guardians of patrilineal lineage, paternal grandparents demonstrated stronger preference for grandsons over granddaughters. However, simultaneously there is a degree of ambiguity over the extent to which parents prefer boys over girls. On the one hand, interviewees in Yuan's generation and her daughter's generation received more educational support than Yuan's mother's generation. On the other hand, among rural households, in all three villages, sibling structure was predominantly characterized by elder sisters and a younger brother, revealing the persistent and widespread attempts to have a son.

Village B—Left behind children

Village B was located in an inland region of Hunan province, Southwest China. Since the 1980s, it was common for young male villagers to go to coastal cities to work (mostly as construction workers). Many of these men returned to their villages to marry; but after marriage they re-migrated leaving their wives at home until their children reached primary or middle-school age, when the women followed their husbands to the city to work. Since 2000, the length of time a wife stayed at home following childbirth had decreased to several months. As a result, Village B households mostly constituted older people and their grandchildren.

Granddaughter Wang (born in 1985) grew up in a skipped-generation household and recalled:

My parents migrated to the city for work (her father when she was three and her mother when she was seven). So I grew up with my paternal grandparents. I have three younger siblings. As I am the oldest, I did a lot of physical work during my childhood. For example, I raised pigs, did housework, almost everything at home. I also went to the fields to help with agricultural work. The childhood experiences of my generation, who grew up in the countryside, were quite similar as we all did these kinds of jobs. But the burden was particularly heavy for the oldest child, and particularly girls. For example, as junior middle schools were normally far away, I got up around 5am to cook breakfast. At that time of day, adults were not yet up. I ate my food and left for school myself.

Q: *How did your grandparents treat you three girls vis-à-vis your brother?*

A: *Very differently. My grandparents were affected by the ideology of preference of boys over girls. Since my brother was the only boy, they spoiled him. Sometimes when he did something*

bad, I scolded him but if this was heard by my grandmother, she would scold me; on most occasions, she would stand by my brother. My brother hardly did any housework as he had three elder sisters who dealt with almost all the housework.

Q: *What about your parents?*

A: *The difference was much less. They wanted all of us to do well academically....My mother emphasized that for us children in the countryside, the only way to leave the village (to achieve upward social mobility) was by studying hard.*

Q: *How did you feel about your parents being away?*

A: *My parents were hardly there as we grew up. When I was little, I often cried. But now I am older, I feel such a separation is quite normal. Nowadays when my parents (still migrants) came back for the Spring Festival, I feel they look older with every year that passes. Sometimes I feel heartache as they still work so hard for us children despite being in their late 40s (as her two younger siblings were still in full time education). Their hard work also spurred me on to take on more responsibilities and earn more money for the family.*

Granddaughter Li (born in 1989, one elder sister, a younger sister and a younger brother) offered a slightly different account:

I was a drifter when I was a child. Because my parents migrated to the city, they couldn't look after us. I was left with my maternal grandparents from the age of one and I stayed there until I was ten. Then I was sent to live with my aunt as she lived closer to better schools. After two years, I was sent for one year to the city where my parents migrated and then sent back to live with my aunt again. At the age of fifteen, I joined my parents in the city permanently.

Q: *How did you feel about this?*

A: *At that time, I felt the concept of home was very ambiguous, I didn't have a fixed abode. Also, as I changed schools frequently, I needed to learn how to assimilate into a new environment every few years. I wasn't very good at this but unfortunately I was forced into it. When I was a child, I always wondered why my parents made me live like this.*

Q: *Did you ask them when you were little?*

A: *No. But when I grew up, I joked with them about it. Then my mother said that she felt sorry for us and wanted to make it up to us. But I feel these experiences did affect my personality.*

Q: *In what ways?*

A: *They left me without a sense of security. I found the process of adjusting to new environments very exhausting and challenging. When I was little, I lived with my maternal grandparents. I was extremely close to them and didn't feel at all close to my parents. It was when I grew up that I began to understand my parents' difficulties and slowly grew closer to them. When I was living with my maternal grandparents, every time my parents came, I didn't want to see them as I felt that their visit was a disruption to my life. I often ran to a friend's house. When they left, I didn't have any feeling of separation. I felt closest towards my grandmother. I regarded my grandmother as my mother.*

Q: *How did you feel when you were sent to live with your aunt?*

A: *I was the only grandchild living with my grandparents so I was the centre of attention. But when I lived with my aunt, things were different. She has her own son, and my elder sister had been living with her since she was little, so my aunt treated her like her own daughter. I just felt that I was the least favoured in that environment. I missed my grandparents very much; especially at the beginning of our separation I often cried in the evenings.*

Q: *After you joined your parents at the age of 15, how did you interact with them?*

A: *I only became close to my parents after I entered university. During my middle school years, my parents were very strict in making me concentrate on my academic study. As they didn't have much education, they felt their four children should all study hard.*

Wang and Li's accounts highlight similar structural processes to Yuan's family in Village A—rural–urban inequality, a familial education project, and patrilineal gender inequality. However, as both parents were away while Wang and Li grew up, disruption and displacement was prominent in their narratives. For example, while Wang expressed her experience more as a matter of 'choiceless' sacrifice, there were many moments of silence and crying as Li recalled her adolescence.

Wang's experience was more common in Village B than Li's. Li's extended family included relatives with better social and economic resources to draw upon (for example, her maternal aunt was a deputy headmistress and her maternal uncle worked in the city as a white-collar professional). Yet Wang and Li's experiences provide settings in which to assess the impact of migration on a child's well-being and reflect on whether the extent to which it has a detrimental impact depends less upon *who* provides the care and more upon the *quality* of care received. Unlike Wang, whose mother migrated when she was seven and who lived with her grandparents and three younger siblings, Li was put into the sole care of her maternal grandparents from the age of one. From Li's perspective, the person to whom she felt closest was her *maternal grandmother* rather than her own mother. She was the only child in the care of her grandparents and so—in contrast to the rationed care from her aunt and from her own parents—received all their attention and care. Her subsequent unhappiness was not due to separation from her migrating parents but a result of arrangements her parents made to provide for her education (changing schools, dislocation, and being forced to leave her grandparents). While Li may exhibit Katz's (2004) concept of 'resilience'—rationalizing her circumstances and adapting to new environments, she felt she was *'forced into it'*—demonstrating a 'diminished form of agency' since she had little say over her parents' decision-making (Collins & Tymko, 2015: 77). Li's mother said: *'we had no choice. The county middle school was the best in the area so I thought by transferring her to a primary school in my sister's place, she would later be able to attend the middle school without having to be a boarder'*.

All three villages experienced a process of school consolidation over the last 20 years prior to interview, whereby the number of schools reduced dramatically in order to reallocate resources from failing village schools to 'central schools' (Xu, 2013). This meant village children either had to walk a very long distance to school (like Wang, who needed to get up at 5 am) or board. Despite it being more expensive, and so putting a greater drain on family finances, almost all village children became boarders at senior middle school (age 13–16) due to the distance from their home to school. Notwithstanding her good intentions, Li's mother's failed to sufficiently account for the close relationship her daughter had formed with her own mother and the impact of dislocation upon her daughter's emotional well-being. Li's story highlights the structural inequality in education between urban and rural China and the suffering rural families endured to adapt to these institutionalized inequalities.

Village C—Migrant children in the city

Village C was located in the southern inland province of Fujian, Southeast China. Being close to Nan'an, a city with a manufacturing base focussed on plumbing appliances, the village had an established trend of outward migration from the 1980s onwards. However, unlike Village B, migrating male villagers generally started as self-employed traders: buying appliances/parts from Nan'an factories and selling them in big cities in western China. As in Village B, male migrants returned to their village to marry. After marriage, wives followed husbands to the cities to support their business and domestic needs. When pregnant, the wives went back to the village to give birth, but several months after childbirth they returned to the city with their babies. Since they were not engaged in formal employment (such as factory work), it was taken for granted that it was the mothers' obligation to bring up the child. As part of this migration trajectory, many children born in Village C grew up in a city.

Granddaughter Jing (born in 1992, with younger brother born in 1995) recalled:

I was taken to Chongqing by my parents when I was only four months old. My brother and I were brought up by my mother as my father was busy with his business. My mother only started her own business (street vending) when my brother entered primary school. We spent most of the time with our mother. Whether in terms of our everyday living or educational and emotional support, my mother assumed the greatest responsibility.

Q: Please recall any details of your interactions with your mother?

A: *I remember vividly how my mother taught us to write our names. Then at primary school, my mother always did dictation homework with me. But after starting middle school, she didn't have the ability to help us with our homework so we had to do it ourselves. My parents' education level was low but they hoped that through university education, we would settle in stable and well-paid jobs in state-owned companies or institutions.... Compared with my brother, I was more conscientious so didn't get many beating from my mother because of any shortcomings in my academic studies. But if I quarrelled or fought with my brother, she would always scold or beat me by saying that since I am the elder sister, I should've behaved better and I should've given in to my brother's demands.*

Q: What was the role of your father as you grew up?

A: *My father took on more of an economic role. I had more interactions with him after I went to a boarding school from 14. He often drove me to school when he made deliveries. On these trips, he always said to me that I needed to study hard and mustn't fail to live up to their expectations.*

Q: What was like growing up in the city?

A: *The most defining memory was moving home more than 10 times. In order to save money, sometimes we co-rented with other migrants' families; sometimes we moved into a building while it was still under decoration. Because of these frequent moves, I always longed to have a home that belonged to us. We were quite poor when I was little. I remember when I was 10, and my father's business wasn't doing very well, he ran up a high-interest debt to sustain our livelihood. Also, due to our rural household status, my parents needed to pay significant additional charges every term in order for us to enter city schools. Money was a key issue that worried my parents. My mother thought about sending me back to the village to study so their financial pressure could be eased, but she didn't want me to be neglected at home so decided to keep me with her,*

for which I feel extremely grateful. Only when I was 14 did we have the first flat of our own in the suburbs of the city (but this was too far away from her school so she had to board). Before that, there was no sense of belonging or of security.

Q: *What was it like interacting with urban children?*

A: *There was no discrimination from urban children as I lived in the city from four months old so I grew up with a local dialect. Except for my close friends, who knew I was born in Fujian, other classmates considered me local. But I did feel I was different from urban children. For example, urban families could afford to buy books and toys. But I never had these. When I was 10, I told my mother that I wanted to buy a book on composition to read. But my mother explained that it would cost 12 yuan; and since 12 yuan would cover the cost of food for several meals she was unwilling to buy it. I know they basically had no option.*

Although Jing grew up with her parents in the city, her account was filled with disruptions and dislocations similar to the children of migrant families in Village B. The key theme arising from her account is that of poverty and its impact upon her upbringing. Jing family's poverty was closely related to the multi-layered discrimination and exclusion they were—and other migrant families still are—subject to in the city. First, migrants' children are institutionally excluded from urban schools unless their parents are able to pay additional charges imposed on them because they do not have a city *hukou*. The interview with Jing's parents revealed this to have been the biggest family expenditure. Second, as self-employed small business owners, Jing's parents were on the margin of the urban labour market and unable to seek formal legal protection (if urban customers failed to pay for the products) or support (such as bank loans). Instead, they largely relied upon informal networks of migrants from Fujian province and borrowed money at high interest rates from those in their circle to make ends meet.

Third, although Jing's parents pushed their children to excel academically they faced limitations in terms of both economic resources and cultural capital. Book purchases were a luxury and they lacked the ability to help with the children's homework beyond asking them to study hard. Fourthly, family life was significantly different to that of urban residents. According to the childhood recollections of urban interviewees born in the 1990s (see Liu, 2022a), improved material living standards among these families meant the family leisure time was a feature of the one child generation's adolescence. However, for Jing's family, life was predominantly characterized by her parents navigating their busy livelihood in order to pay school expenses and make ends meet and the first family holiday was not until she was 19. In short, although Jing could pass as a local to her classmates, she was well aware that her migrant family would never be taken as a local urban family.

'Parental absence and family separation' reconsidered

Examining the impact of parents' migration on the development of rural children has singled out two factors believed to lead long-term detrimental effects, i.e. 'poor or inadequate education—whether in the cities or in the countryside, and parental absence and family separation' (Chan & Ren, 2018: 135). On the issue of education, scholars have found that the low quality of rural provision and barriers in urban schooling for migrants' children contribute to poor educational attainment (Xiang, 2007). By contrast, the idea that parental absence and family separation is the main source of harm to children in migratory contexts is premised upon a naturalized notion that parents are the best carers for their children. Indeed, the 2016 Chinese State Council decree called upon 'at least one migrant parent to

return home to look after unaccompanied children' with the result that mothers were more likely to return (Murphy, 2020:136). This section summarizes the village case studies and discusses how framing the debate around parental absence is limiting and may obscure the empirical reality.

Yuan (Village A) planned the care for her daughter such that both sets of grandparents cared for the infant very well as she was their only grandchild. With both of her parents working in the city, and regularly sending money home, her daughter's material needs were comfortably met. This situation was similar to the one child generation's recollection of growing up in urban China (Liu, 2022a) and the paternal grandparents only started to reduce resources/support (e.g. better food for the boy) when Yuan's brother-in-law had a son. Despite being reunited with her mother, when Yuan gave birth to a son and remained in the village, the attention her daughter received was reduced. Yuan's daughter explained: *my mother placed all her attention on my brother, I do feel a bit left out but I think it is the right thing. When I was little, they devoted all their attention to me. So now it is normal for them to be devoted to him.* While the girl rationalized the reduction of parental attention in the presence of her little brother, she was unaware of the future implications this brother may have upon her development. With Yuan returning to the village, the family income reduced from CNY 6000 to CNY 4000 per month. Although rural families wanted their daughters to excel, with limited resources, parents tended to prioritize investment in their son—a pattern seen in rural families in all three sites. While the naturalized notion of parents/mother–child bond helped Yuan's daughter emotionally to adjust her to the reunion, her mother's presence was insufficient for her long-term development.

Wang and Li (Village B) were both 'left behind' children but expressed contrasting feelings: the former longed for reunion with her parents, but the latter loathed it. This finding concords with existing research of transnational families (see Parreñas, 2005) and on China (Murphy, 2020), i.e. that children's relationships with their grandparents and parents vary with the children's age and care histories. However, Li's life story reveals far more than the current narrow academic focus on parental separation. First, the quality of care matters. In contrast with the arrangement in which Wang and her three younger siblings were left in the care of their paternal grandparents, Li and her three younger siblings spread across four caring settings: Li with her maternal grandparents, Li's elder sister with her maternal aunt, Li's younger sister with her paternal grandparents, Li's youngest brother with her own parents. This use of surrogate carers is not a new phenomenon in Chinese families and the early urban generations' recollections of childhood also reveal parents often sent away one or two children for a number of years to live with relatives who had fewer children or who were financially better off (Liu, 2022a). Resorting to surrogate carers and a careful planning to ensure each of her daughters was the only one or the only girl in the care setting was Li's mother's strategy to maximize the well-being of her daughters despite her noticeable son preference. Although such an arrangement involved sibling separation, Li and her sisters gained far more attention and care as they grew up than Wang and her sisters.

Second, the frequent relocation and resettling was the fundamental cause of Li's emotional distress. Embedded in the familial education project, Li moved between her grandparents, aunt and her parents, frequently changing schools. These disruptions were central to her recollections of childhood and had impacted negatively upon her emotional well-being. Similarly, the theme of rupture arose in Jing's (Village C) narratives. Although she grew up with both parents, the poverty and the discrimination of city life for migrant workers forced them to constantly relocate and resettle, moving at least once every year as she grew up. Jing longed for the same 'sense of security' as Li. The key to migrants' children's well-being cannot simply be put down to parental presence as the 'left behind' children discourse implies. Instead, more attention should be focussed on how to tackle institutional inequalities and provide a supportive environment for rural children to form strong and stable relationships with their close carers.

CONCLUSION

Drawing upon experiences of three rural villages experiencing different migration trajectories, this article sheds new light on the different ways children are affected by human mobility. Caregiving arrangements in Village A families tended to remain fairly stable when breadwinning fathers migrated whilst mothers sustained their roles as caregivers with support from grandparents. Migrant children from Village C grew up with both their parents though their mothers remained the main carer in a way similar to the gender norm in Village A. Although these children did not endure family separation, as children in Villages A and B, they experienced an emotional rollercoaster as they negotiated poverty, poor living conditions and housing instability throughout their adolescence. Children in Village B were 'left-behind' children and this carried a heavy emotional toll as they navigated the restructuring of familial and intergenerational relationships as a consequence of their parents' migration. Yet this study reveals it is the stability and quality of care arrangements, rather than mere separation from parents, that causes the most severe dislocation and has the most adverse impact upon children's emotional well-being.

By highlighting the varied experiences of children of migrants, this article raises questions over generalizations about children's circumstances that have been advanced in existing scholarship. Parreñas (2005) argued the migration of Filipino mothers led to emotional distancing from and neglect of children who were 'left behind'. By contrast, McKay (2007) found the children in her study of the Philippines were well cared for and better off emotionally as a result of their parents' migration. Yet as McKay (2007) herself pointed out, conditions are not the same in all sending communities nor even within a single country; if migrant workers and their communities are more exposed to vulnerabilities, family or community members providing care for stay-behind children may be left with limited resources to provide for a child's wellness and protection.

This article echoes McKay's observations and calls for a broader framing of the debate beyond the dominant concern with children's physical separation from their migrating parents. Indeed, early generations rural interviewees indicate that when growing up with multiple siblings and a strong son preference, child neglect was common because their parents' were preoccupied with their livelihood despite being locally based. In such circumstances, it was the elder children who acted as surrogate parents and looked after the younger siblings. By contrast, in migrants' families where grandparents exclusively looked after one grandchild, children felt well looked after, emotionally secure and protected. Rather than using an umbrella term 'left-behind children', it is therefore important for government agencies and other stakeholders to understand migrants' communities in order to identify vulnerable groups of rural children and their needs.

Whilst the childhood experiences in each setting were distinctive and shaped by their embodied geographies, they shared common features reflecting multi-layered processes of inequalities including the rural–urban divide and patrilineal gender ideology. This finding is in line with existing scholarship on China (see Murphy, 2020; Xiang, 2007). The urban–rural divide has produced a series of discriminatory policies which disadvantage rural children. While rural and urban children share a pressure to study hard (see Liu, 2022a), the need to excel academically is far more acute and desperate for rural children since a college or university education is the only route available to them if they are to avoid repeating their parents' life trajectory as low-paid migrants.

Rural girls must in addition navigate the patrilineal preference of boys over girls. Across all three sites, investment in girls' education had undoubtedly increased compared to earlier rural generations. However, the parents still shared the same persistent goal of producing a son. As a result of the birth order and their gender, girls are required and expected to make more sacrifices as they grow up, such as taking on housework and making concessions to their younger brother.

Thus, rural daughters have gradually been socialized into a secondary position in the extended family through everyday family routines and internalized a much stronger sense of self-sacrifice when compared with urban daughters who grew up as a single child (see Liu, 2007; Liu, 2016b; Liu, 2017). From this and other perspectives considered in this article, rural young adults' narratives of their childhoods offer unique insights into the microcosm of migratory processes in China and demonstrate that the adolescence of rural children is profoundly shaped by the inequalities embedded in Chinese culture and society.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ According to census and national survey data, in 2015 left-behind children comprised 66.7% (68.8 million) of the children of migrants while the remaining 33.3% (34.3 million) were 'migrant children' who moved away from rural villages (Chan and Ren, 2018).
- ² Xiang (2007:439) reveals the nuance between the English term 'left-behind' and the Chinese term '*liushou*': the former is 'oriented towards those who move (migrants), with the connotation that the left-behind could have been brought along during migration' while the latter is the opposite, implying those who stay behind waiting for migrants to return.
- ³ The first project examined the impact of migration upon rural old age familial support system (see Liu, 2016a; Liu, 2017; Liu & Cook, 2020). The second project examined how various aspects of family life shifted across generations in multiple sites in China (including both urban and rural locations) (see Liu, 2021; Liu, 2022a; Liu, 2022b).
- ⁴ In this article, data on Village A and C are drawn from the 2018 fieldwork while data on Village B are drawn from the 2011 fieldwork.
- ⁵ At the time of interview, most of the younger generation were in their mid-20s and so childhood experiences were a less distant memory.

- ⁶ The village case studies were selected because the childcare support arrangement was *indicative* of the pattern among the majority of the families in the specific village. Rather than repeating similar quotes, a detailed description of these cases is included to contextualize the lived experiences and family setting.
- ⁷ In principle, the Chinese state offers nine years of free education (i.e. primary school and junior middle school) to children. However, there are various unavoidable charges such as textbook fees, uniform fees, activities fees, and school meals.

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