

Education and Repertoires of Care in Migrant Families in Rural China

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This article explores the repertoires of care practiced by adults in two rural counties in China as they raised children in support of their families' education-oriented migration projects. Rural parents and grandparent-caregivers practiced the repertoires of "revalorized domesticity" and the "entrustment" of children's education to schools. Importantly, though, families' enactments of these repertoires varied by the adults' social locations as well as by the characteristics of the local schools, including whether schools provided accommodation and meals and whether there was a buoyant private school sector. Certainly, schools significantly supplemented rural families' child-raising, albeit differently across different families and localities, with rural teachers commonly perceiving that parental migration worsened rural adults' lack of involvement in their children's education, exacerbating their own professional burdens. However, contrary to the teachers' and the wider society's perceptions, rural adults were deeply committed to their children's education, with this commitment underlaying their repertoires of care.

Introduction

This article explores rural Chinese families' strategies to support the education of the children in their care when one or both parents had migrated, as well as how and why teachers did not recognize the rural adults' commitments to the children's education, which these strategies expressed. Research demonstrates that families' and schools' perspectives on their respective roles for supporting students' academic development can be discordant, with such discord impairing students' performance (Hill and Torres 2010; Kim 2018). Studies further indicate that the discord is most pronounced when families'

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repertoires of child-raising differ markedly from those of the urban middle class, the latter assuming a normative status.¹ Here, “repertoires” refers to individuals’ “beliefs, practices and resources” manifest in their “ways of speaking, thinking and feeling,” and acting (Coe 2014, 5).

In China, the incongruence between families’ and schools’ approaches to child-raising is often complicated by parents’ labor migration. According to the All-China Women’s Federation (2013), in 2010 over 61 million children in rural China had migrant parents, and of these 46.74 percent had two migrant parents, 36.39 percent had a lone migrant father, and 16.87 percent had a lone migrant mother. Moreover, Chan and Ren report little change in the overall number of “left-behind” children in China between 2010 and 2015 (2018, 139). When one or both parents migrate, either the at-home parent—usually the mother—grandparents, or occasionally relatives take on the child-raising.

Sociologists observe that educators in the Global South take a dim view of families in which parents migrate without their children (Parreñas 2005; Dreby 2010). Researchers similarly observe that in China, teachers criticize rural families’ commitment to their children’s education, especially when two parents migrate and leave their children with grandparents (Hansen 2015; Kim 2018). Studies from rural China provide some justification for these concerns. Even as a few studies find that parental migration has no significant impact on the educational, psychosocial, or physical well-being of left-behind children (e.g., Xu and Xie 2013; Yeung and Gu 2016), many other studies report adverse effects of two-parent migration and maternal migration on children’s school grades, school progression, psychosocial well-being, health, and later earnings, with some of these studies also noting adverse effects from lone paternal migration.²

In rural China, families increasingly rely on schools to supplement child-care because of the demands of work on parents’ time, resembling a phenomenon observed in industrialized societies (Kjørholt 2012). Schools are also significant as institutions where families’ aspirations for their children’s education may be realized (Kipnis 2011; Hansen 2015). The importance of schools in families’ intergenerational reproduction intersects with the caregivers’ social locations—their position in multiscalar crosscutting power relations reflective of their class, gender, rurality, education, age, and kin ties—to affect how they see their own and the schools’ respective responsibilities for the children’s education. Meanwhile, families’ perception of their responsibilities for their children’s education interacts with local school regime characteristics to influence their migration strategies and care repertoires.

¹ Lareau (2003); Hill and Torres (2010); Kim (2018); Lan (2018).

² See, e.g., Fan et al. (2010); Qin and Albin (2010); Hu (2012); Wang and Mesman (2015); On the Road to School (2017); Lyu and Chen (2019).

In this article, I draw on my interviews with caregivers and teachers in Eastern County in Anhui Province and Jade County in Jiangxi Province,³ two highly migratory counties in China's eastern interior, to explore the repertoires through which rural adults acted on their deep commitments to their children's education and how and why teachers did not *recognize* these commitments, believing instead that rural adults were not committed to the children's education. I do this by addressing the following smaller questions: How did rural caregivers see their role in supporting the education of children when at least one parent had migrated? How did schools influence at-home mothers' and grandparents' contributions to the care and education of children? How did teachers view rural migrant families' child-raising repertoires? Why were the views of rural adults and teachers discrepant, and what can be done?

Repertoires of Child-Raising, Schools, and Migration

Class-based comparisons of child-raising in the United States, the United Kingdom, Ghana, and Taiwan confirm that families' child-raising repertoires are both stratified and stratifying.⁴ As mentioned above, teachers commonly see the child-raising practices of rural families negatively, especially when parents have migrated. Teachers' disapproval of families may have an impact on their expectations for the students and the caregivers' engagement with the children's education (Lareau 2003; Hill and Torres 2010; Kim 2018). Importantly, though, the teachers' negative perceptions of these families' educational commitments conflict with findings that globally parents migrate for their children's education (Parreñas 2005; Dreby 2010) and that rural Chinese families hold high aspirations for their children's education (Kipnis 2011; Obendiek 2016; Kim 2018). This suggests a need to examine rural caregivers' repertoires of care when parents migrate to better understand their assumptions about families' and schools' respective responsibilities for the children's education and how these compare with teachers' perspectives.

The literature indicates that "migration is often initiated as a social reproduction strategy geared explicitly toward improving children's lives through the symbolic value of schooling, paid for with migrant remittances," but this strategy also entails the "meaningful absence of an adult who is both a parent to a small child and a child of aging parents," creating "care slots" (Leinaweaver 2010, 75). In China, care slots arise in rural families because several institutional structures combine to compel the members to live apart. Notably, China's household registration, or *hukou*, system ties migrants' entitlements to public services to places of origin rather than destination, excluding most rural migrants from access to urban schools, health care, housing, and social insurance

³ Jade County and Eastern County are pseudonyms.

⁴ Reay (1998); Lareau (2003); Coe (2014); Lan (2018).

(Chan and Ren 2018). Migrants' long shifts and low wages further prevent most of them from raising their children near where they work. Institutional structures thereby sustain a labor migration system in which profits accrue to locations where production occurs, while places of origin bear the costs of social reproduction, depressing labor costs in a globalizing market (Chuang 2016).

In China, as in many countries, middle-aged and elderly women disproportionately fill the care slots. As mentioned, schools are also crucial to how families cope with childcare. Meanwhile, schools' roles and influences intersect with gender beliefs to affect local ideas about who should provide childcare and rural families' strategies for pursuing intergenerational reproduction. In China, custom has long stipulated that fathers should earn for their families and ensure that the children understand the importance of study, while mothers provide their children with food and emotional nurturing (Jankowiak 2011). In the twenty-first century, the growing significance of education in child-raising has intensified an expectation that women's domesticity will support the migration of other family members. This is because an emphasis on education makes women's care of school-age children even more important to the family's prospects, and it increases pressure on women to support others in migrating to earn money for education costs (Chuang 2016). The rise of education-focused domesticity thereby overlaps with wider institutional structures that compel rural families to reconfigure their gendered and intergenerational divisions of labor across space.

Feminist scholars observe that lower status women often derive a sense of value from their caregiving (Skeggs 2014; Raffety 2017). For instance, Raffety (2017) discusses how in China poor elderly female foster caregivers of disabled children interpreted their care as a "contribution" to society, helping them to combat their insecurity and to assert respectable identities even as middle-class social workers denigrated them as "low quality," with "quality" (*suzhi*) widely used in China to signal differences in the worth of individuals and social groups (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2011). The caregivers I met likewise saw themselves as contributing to a greater good—namely, the next generation's education—while lamenting their own limited abilities. However, even as the literature demonstrates that migration is oriented toward children's education and that low-status women and at-home women in migrant families derive a sense of value from childcare (Dreby 2010; Leinaweaver 2010; Chuang 2016), caregivers' child-raising repertoires in rural migrant families have yet to be explored.

Research Method

This article draws on data that I collected for a wider project investigating rural Chinese children's experiences when at least one parent has migrated without them (see Murphy 2020). This project was based on my

recorded interviews with 109 children conducted in schools, and my matched interviews with the children's caregivers carried out in their village homes in 2010 and 2011. The median age of the 109 children was 12 years. I also conducted follow-up interviews with 25 of the children and their caregivers in 2013, 2014, and 2015, with case selection determined by who could be contacted by the county bureaus of education or by local teachers, leading to a bias in selecting children who progressed to senior high school. The research occurred in four counties in Anhui and Jiangxi, both provinces where in 2010 over half of rural children had at least one migrant parent (Duan et al. 2013, 42). The research participants were recruited through the primary and junior high schools in two rural townships in each county. After obtaining permission from the caregivers, the teachers introduced me to boys and girls from grades 4, 6, and 8 (typically ages 10–14) from differently configured families. Then I branched out into the villages to interview the caregivers and I also interviewed the migrant parents of 20 children.

I conducted the interviews in Mandarin, accompanied by a Chinese research assistant. The research assistant reassured the teachers about my presence; ensured good practice in research with the children by having two adults present; and in some interviews with grandparents, the research assistant interpreted between local dialect and Mandarin. Questions to adults covered their biographies; their families' migration histories; children's responses to their parents' migration; their own and the children's contact with the migrants; daily life; interactions with the schools; children's and caregivers' relationships with the migrants; hardships and joys; and aspirations for the future. Adult respondents were paid 30 yuan and told that they could stop the interview at any point while retaining payment.

The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 2 hours with an average of 55 minutes. I transcribed the audio recordings directly from Chinese into English. In this article, I draw only on my interviews with adults from 23 families in Jade County and 31 families in Eastern County. I also refer to my interviews with teachers, five in Eastern County and six in Jade County. Below, I introduce each county then discuss the research participants' characteristics and the two dominant repertoires of care to emerge from the analysis.

Field Research

Research Contexts

I compare Jade County and Eastern County because they resemble each other socioeconomically while differing with regard to aspects of their school regimes and migration patterns. In 2015, the annual per capita rural incomes for Jade County and Eastern County were approximately 14,000 yuan and 15,000 yuan, nearly 3,000 yuan and 4,000 yuan above their provincial averages, respectively. For reference, in 2015, the average disposable income for urban

residents in both provinces exceeded 26,000 yuan, while the figure for urban residents nationally was 31,195 yuan.

One set of differences between the two counties stems from the local implementation of a national program to merge rural schools (Mei et al. 2015). During 2001–12, over 200,000 village-based schools were closed nationwide because of the declining numbers of incoming students caused by falling birth rates and urbanization; funding pressures on county governments; and planners' desires to consolidate resources to improve educational quality. Students in grades 4 and above transferred from schools in villages to larger better-equipped schools in townships, often widening distances between home and school (Mei et al. 2015). Families' daily care routines were further affected by whether schools provided meals and accommodation for the students.

In Jade County, the children ate lunch in the school's canteen, then napped with their heads on their desks under the watch of a teacher. Boarders stayed at school from Sunday night to Friday afternoon. After dinner the boarders did homework till 8:00 p.m. then went to bed, with a "life teacher" checking that they were tucked in. Boarding costs were heavily subsidized by the government.

In 2010 in the two townships I visited in Jade County, approximately half of children in year 4 and 70 percent of children in years 6 and 8 boarded.⁵ For reference, in 2011, nationwide, 10.89 percent of primary school students and 43.34 percent of junior high school students boarded, with proportions highest in the rural interior (Ministry of Education 2012). In Jade County, the schools' provision of meals and accommodation alleviated some families' care strains to the extent that they felt more able to sustain two-parent migration, this being the most prevalent migration strategy, as shown in table 1. Nevertheless, families' migration strategies mostly responded to local connections to urban labor markets, with many men and women from Jade County working in low-end manufacturing and service sector jobs in Pearl River Delta cities, even as they noted that boarding could supplement the family's childcare. In 2016, China's State Council called for the construction of more boarding schools to help care for left-behind children (*China Daily* 2016), Jade County's boarding situation thereby representing a broader trend.

By contrast, schools in Eastern County did not provide meals or supervision at midday. Dormitory facilities in rural township schools were also limited. Most caregivers escorted the children to and from school on mopeds or paid for a seat on a village-hired van. The children arrived at school at 8:00 a.m., returned home at 11:20 a.m., went back to school at 2:30 p.m., then returned home at 4:20 p.m. The scarce provision of dormitory facilities in primary and junior high schools in Eastern County's rural townships may

⁵ Based on responses to a 2010 survey of students in years 4, 6, and 8 in two townships, corroborated by teachers' estimates.

TABLE 1
DOMINANT PATTERNS OF PARENTAL MIGRATION IN JADE COUNTY AND EASTERN COUNTY

	Jade County	Eastern County
Children with two migrant parents (%)	61.3	32.8
Children with a lone migrant father (%)	9.2	45.6

NOTE.—Based on a 2010 survey in the schools in two townships in each county in years 4, 6, and 8.

reflect local policy preferences: Du (2009) identifies Jiangxi as one of several provinces where many county governments were especially active in building dormitories, but not Anhui. Another factor could be the larger decline in student numbers in rural schools in Eastern County compared with Jade County: Eastern County's county seat borders the provincial capital of Hefei and expanded rapidly in the twenty-first century, with many rural families and children relocating.

In Eastern County, rural families' need to provide cooked meals and after-school care for children interacted with prevailing local gendered migration patterns in shaping deliberations about family reproduction. In the early 1980s, some men from Eastern County worked in construction, their numbers increasing after the mid-1990s. By 2008, Eastern County had 114 construction companies, with projects in 21 provinces. Thereafter, since the late 2000s, several thousand male construction workers went each year to work on 2-year contracts in sub-Saharan Africa, earning at least double the average wage of an internal migrant worker. Also, migrants of both genders worked in the manufacturing and service sectors of cities such as Shanghai and Kunshan. As table 1 shows, lone father migration was most common in the Eastern County townships, followed by two-parent migration.

In Eastern County another feature of the local school regime was a flourishing private school sector. By the mid-2000s the county seat hosted at least five private boarding schools, which combined junior and senior high school. In 2013, the annual fee to attend one of these schools was approximately 16,000 yuan. These schools forbade children from leaving the premises except when a guardian collected them fortnightly. Although the private schools were not as prestigious as the county's public senior high school, they nevertheless provided plausible opportunities for rural children to progress academically, with some parents pursuing migration in order to send their children to these schools.

Research Respondents

The principal respondents for this study were rural women ages 33–83. These women had grown up when their families' distribution of limited educational resources had favored males. Mothers I interviewed had on average 5 years of education, compared with the fathers' 7 years, while many grandparents—especially grandmothers—were barely literate. By the 2010s, though, because of shrinking family size, a rise in the emotional “scarcity value” of children in rural

and urban families (Liu 2015), 3 decades of mass compulsory education, the twenty-first-century expansion of higher education, and rapid urbanization, rural families' aspirations for their children's education rose (Kipnis 2011). Moreover, increasingly, rural families' investments favored academically promising children irrespective of their gender (Obendiek 2016). Rural families' aspirations for children's education persisted even as the few rural students who reached university disproportionately graduated from low-tier institutions (Obendiek 2016). Nevertheless, because a few rural people succeeded, education still offered hope to rural families, especially when children's academic potential had yet to reveal itself (Obendiek 2016; Murphy 2020).

I focus on women interviewees because in most families I visited women were responsible for childcare. Women whose husbands had migrated said that they were at home to "raise their studying children" (*dai haizi dushu*) (Murphy 2020, 147). In skipped generation families, both grandmothers and grandfathers contributed to childcare, but echoing other scholars' observations, grandmothers did most domestic and childcare work (Chen et al. 2011; Santos 2017), while grandfathers did more "male" tasks like transporting children to and from school on mopeds. Only when grandmothers were unavailable did grandfathers do these chores. Meanwhile, in the few families I visited where mothers had migrated alone, paternal grandmothers did the domestic chores.

While my respondents shared similar social locations, the configurations of their families varied within and across the two counties. In Jade County, just over half ($n = 12$) of the families I visited contained two migrant parents: my respondents included seven grandmothers, five grandfathers, and three visiting migrant mothers. In two other families, I interviewed returnee wives whose husbands were migrants, while another six families contained couples who had returned home within 3 years of our interview. My respondents from Jade County also included two returnee men whose wives continued to work away and one widowed returnee father.

In Eastern County, 13 of the 31 families consisted of an at-home mother and a lone migrant father: my respondents in 12 of these families were at-home mothers, while in one family I interviewed the grandmother because the mother was mute. One-third of the mothers had previous migration experience before or after motherhood. In the other 12 families, both parents had migrated, with my respondents including seven grandmothers and five grandfathers; and in 2013 I also visited three migrant couples in Kunshan and Shanghai. Six nonmigrant families were tangential to the analysis.

The families additionally varied by whether children boarded. In Jade County, in 12 families, a child boarded at a township school. In Eastern County in 2010–11, no child boarded. But by the follow-up interviews, one child boarded at a township junior high school, while two children boarded at a private school in the county seat.

Findings

I call the two dominant repertoires of care to emerge from the analysis *revalorized domesticity*, oriented toward supporting the children's education, and *entrustment* of the children's education to schools. In this context, "education" refers to the children's engagement with schoolwork, with the children's educational performance indicated by their test results, and their success in education understood as their progression to reputable higher-level institutions (Kipnis 2011). Strikingly, revalorized domesticity and entrustment prevailed in both counties. This reflected, on the one hand, similarities across these sites in the rural caregivers' disadvantaged social locations and resource constraints and, on the other hand, the influences of mainstream development discourses that devalued rurality as the country urbanized and of meritocratic discourses that naturalized the attribution of individuals' success or failure to their "quality," ability, and effort as social relations marketized (Kipnis 2011; Hansen 2015). Below I discuss how precise practices of "revalorized domesticity" and "entrustment" unfolded in different families given local school regime characteristics, local gender divisions of labor, and the families' circumstances.

Revalorized Domesticity

As mentioned, it was mostly women who provided childcare, engaging in a repertoire of *revalorized domesticity*. These women perceived that by ensuring that the children in their care were nourished, clean, and warm, had a routine, and were protected from doing chores, they created the conditions in which the children could concentrate on their studies and ideally achieve educational mobility, thereby making the migrant workers' sacrifices worthwhile. At the same time, these women's precise practices of revalorized domesticity varied by both family and local circumstances.

In Eastern County, 12 of the at-home women whose husbands had migrated said that they needed to stay at home because someone had to cook lunch for the children and look after them outside of school hours. But in five of these families, the paternal grandmothers cooked the meals. In two of the five families, the at-home mothers had poor health, while in three families the mothers said that even as their mothers-in-law helped them, they still could not migrate, because otherwise the overall burden on their mothers-in-law would be too heavy. One of these mothers also said that she looked after her younger son, who attended a township school, while her 80-year-old mother-in-law cooked for her older son, who attended the public senior high school in the county seat, and ensured that he did not frequent internet bars and become addicted to online gaming. A sixth mother noted that her mother-in-law was blind and needed care. These women stressed that in overseeing childcare, including cooking, they complemented their husbands' work "outside" to support the children's education.

In Jade County, two women whose husbands had migrated likewise talked about their domestic contributions to their children's education, even as their children boarded. These women highlighted that when their children returned home on Friday afternoons, they compensated them for the living conditions at school. One mother explained: "I cook extra good food for her on the weekend because the food at school is not good. . . . There is not enough oil or meat. She became thinner after she started boarding. When she comes home, she tells me about what happened with this classmate and that classmate. . . . It is better for children when their mother is at home. It is good that I am home while she is studying." These mothers also talked about heating water on weekends so that their children could bathe, because school had only cold water.

Grandparents likewise talked about caring for children so that the migrants could concentrate on earning for the children's future senior high school and university fees without worrying. However, like some of the at-home mothers discussed above, their domestic work varied, even among grandparents in families that shared the same local school regime and postmigration configuration. This can be seen in variations in the care arrangements in skipped generation families in Jade County, where some grandparents had grandchildren living with them, while other grandparents' young charges boarded.

When grandparents looked after children at home, as was the case in five families whom I visited in Jade County, they explained that the dormitories were too crowded, noisy, and damp, which would harm the children's studies. In three of the families, the grandparents lived close to school so the children could walk to school. But in two families, the villages were far from school, so the grandmothers rented rooms in the township near the school and lived there with the children on weekdays, returning to the village on weekends. One grandmother explained: "My son is in Guangzhou. He needs to work to educate the two children and support the old people. I returned from Guangdong where I looked after the grandchildren because they needed to study. . . . I rent this room to look after the children. But I am not there in the village to cook for my husband. I look after four grandchildren. My husband says to me, 'It's for the children after all.' He also endures hardship for the sake of the grandchildren." In the two fieldwork townships in Eastern County, several tens of grandmothers similarly "accompanied" their "studying" (*peidu*) grandchildren, thereby engaging in semi-migration to accommodate childcare.

In the other six skipped generation families in Jade County whose children boarded, grandparents said that the children were safer boarding because they did not need to travel on the roads, and they could not disappear to internet bars. They also said that boarding enabled the children to more easily attend the teacher-supervised evening self-study classes, whereas otherwise the children would just watch television if they stayed at home, especially if the grandparents had to work late in the fields.

The grandparents acknowledged that boarding facilities alleviated their burdens, which could be especially onerous if they were widowed, infirm, had large land allocations, or looked after several grandchildren. But like the at-home mothers of boarders, these grandparents also highlighted the value of their weekend care in sustaining the family's education-oriented migration project. For instance, a 77-year-old grandfather said: "The children boarding reduces our burden somewhat. But I cook the food because my wife's health is not good. She's exhausted from washing all the clothes that the children bring home on the weekends. We've got to let the next generation study."

These grandparents further remarked that if they did not provide child-care, then one parent would need to return, reducing what they could earn for the children. These cases reveal that the next generation's education was so valued that sometimes other kin, including elderly men, also participated in revalorized domestic work. In summary, even as the rural caregivers' precise contributions to childcare differed, they all positively valorized their domesticity by highlighting its contribution to their families' education-oriented migration projects.

Entrustment

While the rural adults regarded the family as responsible for provisioning to support the children's education, when it came to the children's learning and discipline, they practiced entrustment. Entrustment refers to the parents' reasoned decision to leave the education of their children to the experts. Families' entrustment was a response both to the intensification of education-focused child-raising goals and to the rural adults' view of their own limited "ability," which they understood in relation to the aforementioned discourses that devalued rurality and promoted meritocratic ideas. A cultural reverence for teachers also fed into rural adults' assumptions that children's education should be wholly entrusted to teachers. As I discuss in the next section, though, what the rural parents understood as entrustment, the teachers saw as a *lack of parental involvement*, that is, as the parents not knowing or caring enough about the children's education to be engaged. Like revalorized domesticity, rural adults' precise practices of entrustment varied by both family and local circumstances.

Rural adults in the fieldwork counties regularly told the children in their care that because of their low quality, the children needed to listen to their teachers and rely on their own effort to escape poverty and drudgery. For instance, a mother in Eastern County reflected a wider sentiment when she said: "I'm illiterate. All I can do is tell them to do their homework, so they won't let their [migrant] father down. I can't do more than that." Some caregivers tried to give more directed input into homework, for instance, by watching the children study or requiring them to rewrite messy characters. Nonetheless, caregivers' heavy farming and domestic burdens, exacerbated by the migration

of other family members, constrained how much time they could give to such supervision.

The caregivers' view that they lacked ability also caused them to curtail their interactions with the teachers. For instance, one mother in Eastern County said: "I never go to find the teachers because I fear it will harm their impression of my son." Meanwhile, in Jade County the only mother I met who said that she ever sought out her child's teacher remarked: "My son begs me not to go and see his teacher because it embarrasses him." Additionally, whenever caregivers attended parent-teacher meetings, they invariably listened to the teachers' advice rather than initiated topics.

Parents and grandparents also perceived the teachers to be the adults best placed to guide their children in daily life. If a teacher ever phoned a parent or grandparent about a child's learning or behavioral problems, they usually entreated the teacher to *guan* the child more. *Guan*, a term frequently used in reference to child-raising, means "to control," "to govern," and "to care for" and involves an exercise of discipline both buttressed and softened by mutual parent-child understanding built through regular in-person interaction (Chao 1994). The parents felt unable to *guan* their children because they thought that they lacked the skills to discipline them over their studies, or else because they were physically absent. For instance, a partially sighted at-home mother in Eastern County whose migrant husband gambled said: "When the homeroom teacher phoned me, I told her, 'Please *guan* my daughter more. We have no ability.'" Migrant parents also urged their children to turn to their teachers. For example, a visiting migrant mother from Jade County said of her 11-year-old son: "Once a larger child bullied him at school... I told him, 'Don't fight, study hard, and if there is a problem tell the teacher because we are not by your side.'"

As noted, though, families' entrustment practices varied across counties. One reason is that the local school regime affected the frequency of caregivers' visits to school. For instance, when caregivers in Eastern County collected children from school, they occasionally bumped into the teachers so could ask them about their child. But when children boarded, the caregivers seldom saw the teachers, partly because the teachers discouraged them from visiting, fearing that they would unsettle the children.

Boarding additionally affected how much of their children's development they entrusted to schools. When children boarded, families entrusted schools not only with the children's education but also with their daily life, personal habits, and social competencies. Adults noted approvingly that the teachers instructed the children in self-care tasks such as folding quilts and rinsing toothbrushes, which they saw as especially necessary for left-behind children. Moreover, some migrant parents and grandparents thought that the teachers' supervision of boarders on weekdays would compensate the children for the lower "quality" of elderly caregivers' supervision on weekends.

The two counties also differed in the possibilities that they offered to rural families to pay privately to support their children's education. Several parents from Eastern County said that they planned to send their children to a private boarding school in the county seat. They found these schools attractive because of their reputed higher standards, with parents' impressions influenced by the schools' exam-based admissions policies, hearsay from students about the teachers' strictness, and the schools' successes in sending some students to decent universities each year. A woman whose son was in the final year of primary school explained: "My husband is out. He tells me, 'You do a good job of raising the children for me at home.' But we are still thinking of sending him to a boarding school when he is a bit older. The boarding schools do a good job to *guan* the children. We parents don't have the heart to *guan* our only son so strictly."

However, even as the burgeoning of private schools affected local ideas about good parenthood, the effects of the rise of these schools and of shifting ideas about good parenthood on families' migration and entrustment strategies varied. For instance, a woman whose husband worked in Algeria said: "I wanted him to go out so we can put the children in the enclosed boarding school because my children are not obedient." Another woman whose husband worked in Angola said: "Everyone else puts their children in the private boarding schools, so it would be humiliating if we didn't let our children study." Meanwhile, two women said that once their children had mastered self-care and could board, they would join their husbands in the city to help earn for the children's private school fees. Additionally, the couples I met in Kunshan said that privately educating a child would compensate that child for parental absence. However, some at-home mothers lamented that they were too poor to ever think of sending their child to a private school, reinforcing their view that they lacked "ability."

Teachers' Perceptions of Rural Families' Care and Entrustment

Confirming Hansen's (2015) and Kim's (2018) observations, and as noted previously, teachers in Jade County and Eastern County disapproved of rural families' child-raising repertoires, especially when parents had migrated. They said that rural parents and especially grandparents "emphasize life [food, clothing, and warmth] but don't emphasize the children's study" (*zhongyang bu zhong jiao*). They also perceived that rural adults' preoccupation with provisioning led them to neglect direct engagement with their children, increasing the teachers' workloads. For instance, the male headteacher of a junior high school in Jade County explained: "Most household heads do not maintain communication with the teachers so the demands on teachers are heavy. We tell the students, 'I am your mother and father, if you have a problem then let me know.' And before the parents migrate, they say: 'Please, you teachers, *guan* this child well.'"

Teachers' frustrations were compounded by what they saw as the rural families' abdication of their responsibilities for their children's education. For instance, a female primary school teacher in Jade County said: "As the homeroom teacher we need the parents to work with us in discipline, but the parents are not there." Teachers further felt that the grandparents were inadequate parent substitutes, noting that many could not speak Mandarin or understand communications from school such as the reports sent home for them to sign. Teachers said that grandparents sometimes failed to *guan* the children because of the generation gap while several home-alone mothers struggled to discipline boys. Teachers additionally complained that even as parents shirked their own child-raising responsibilities, they held the teachers responsible for their children's test scores (see also Kim 2018).

Teachers' accounts further revealed geographic variation in how and how much schools supplemented rural families' care work. Teachers in Jade County boarding schools described especially heavy work burdens. For instance, a female primary school teacher explained: "The homeroom teacher is like their parents. I am with them breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Parents don't educate them. If parents do phone, they say, 'How are their grades and please *guan* them more, we're outside so we cannot *guan*.' They just send money." By contrast, in Eastern County, teachers said that they wanted to help left-behind children more but were constrained because the children spent only a few hours each day at school, with implications for some students' learning progress and well-being.

Teachers' concerns about the quality of child-raising in rural families and the adverse effects of parental migration on child development certainly reflected real disadvantages that they witnessed among some students. Furthermore, as alluded to previously, rural teachers incurred heavy work burdens and professional pressures, while as observed in other contexts, school criteria deemed "good parents" to be parents who "reduce the teachers' burden of heavy academic load" (Kim 2009, 85). However, teachers' negative appraisals of rural families also reflected "boundary work," which is defined as behavior that "people typically do not know they produce, although they do so constantly (when describing who they are similar to and different from, respect or look down upon, etc.)" (Lamont and Swidler 2014, 161). Teachers did not see the support that disadvantaged families tried to provide for their children's education. They saw only what these families failed to provide. The teachers' perceptions reveal how structures that induce certain family choices and practices become obscured by powerful discourses.

The teachers I met all hailed from the fieldwork counties or from neighboring counties, and nearly half had grown up in the countryside, while the others had grown up in townships or the county seat. But as teachers in township-based public schools they were incorporated into the *bianzhi*, meaning that like civil servants they were on the state payroll, itself a status symbol. With one

exception, the teachers were married, owned apartments in the county seat, and sent their children to schools in the county seat. Most teachers wished to eventually transfer to jobs in the county seat, with the likelihood depending on their classes' aggregate performance in regional exams. When teachers criticized their students' families, they identified with middle-class norms about family-school interactions and involved parental supervision (Kim 2018), thereby engaging in the boundary work that constituted the symbolic distance between themselves and a generic "lower quality" rural other (Anagnost 2004).

Conclusion

Most rural caregivers in the fieldwork counties imbued their domestic work with value by linking it to their fulfillment of their relational obligations, marital and/or intergenerational, which centered on their families' investments in the children's education. In this, they exemplified Skeggs's observation that "for those without access to traditional sources of value such as paid work and cultural capital, caring for others often provides the main demonstration of a woman's worth" (2014, 12). Simultaneously, though, these caregivers felt that their quality was too low for them to take responsibility for the children's education, so they entrusted this to schools.

However, even as farmer-migrant families in both counties engaged in "revalorized domesticity and "entrustment," localized differences existed in precise family-school divisions of responsibility. Schools' contributions to families' daily care were the most extensive in Jade County because they provided dormitory facilities. Worryingly, though, research finds that in rural China, primary school boarders exhibit significantly worse educational, psychosocial, and nutritional well-being than nonboarders (Du 2009; Mei et al. 2015; Wang and Mao 2018). Nevertheless, a school routine where children remain unsupervised for two hours at midday—as in Eastern County—could also compromise some left-behind children's well-being.

The entrustment of children to schools was the rural adults' response to their disadvantaged social locations mediated by local circumstances. Many parents reasoned that, given their own low quality, the best they could do for their children was to send them to board under the supervision of teachers while migrating to earn money, with the local school regime influencing how and why they did this. For instance, some parents from Jade County felt more reassured about two-parent migration because their children boarded, whereas in Eastern County, some parents migrated internally—and some fathers migrated internationally—so that they could afford to send their children to private boarding schools.

Rural caregivers' emphasis on provisioning and their deference to schools' authority in matters about the children's education resemble aspects of Lareau's (2003) observations of poor and working-class parents in the United States.

These cross-national similarities indicate that lower-class parents' lack of involvement in schools is structurally produced, with teachers' beliefs about lower-class parents' attitudinal deficiencies and lack of competencies revealing the extent of their marginalization (Kim 2009). There is, though, a difference in the actions of adults in rural China and those of lower-class minority parents discussed in research on the United States. Chiefly, adults in rural China used entrustment to rationalize a family-school division of labor whereby they actively prioritized other activities to support their children's education. By contrast, lower-class minority parents featured in research in the United States avoided schools even as they wanted to be involved in their children's lives not just because of structural barriers like long working hours but also because they had learned to expect that they would not be heard by teachers and administrators (Kim 2009).

In China, teachers' criticisms of rural families' child-raising reflected a combination of their experiences of working in rural schools and the symbolic distance through which they interpreted these experiences. Certainly, many teachers contributed significantly to the intergenerational reproduction of families whose members participated in a labor migration system that consigned care to the countryside. But the teachers' increased workloads and professional challenges were not—as they perceived—because of rural migrant families' lack of commitment to their children's education. This commitment was present, but the teachers did not recognize it; they saw only the rural adults' deficiencies.

What are the implications of these findings? First, this research confirms a need to contest discourses implying that some children's lesser life chances are attributable to the adults' innate deficiencies. These discourses appear in many forms. One example is the emergence of a Chinese urban middle-class claim that rural people think “study is useless.” Another is a discourse among municipal officials and urban teachers, which contends that migrant parents whose children accompany them to the city are less successful than local urban parents in raising high-quality children because, typically, migrant parents have more children, discriminate against daughters, and are preoccupied with earning money (Ling 2019). Such discourses obscure the structures behind rural family strategies, including *hukou* barriers (Ling 2019), the rural-urban gap in school quality (Hao et al. 2014), and the precarious low-paid jobs facing many rural university graduates (Obendiek 2016).

Second, like “middle-class state representatives” in other contexts, such as the social workers discussed by Raffety (2017), the teachers whom I met in Jade County and Eastern County overlooked the rural adults' commitments to care and “the respectability” that marginalized “women [and some men] forged through caring” (Skeggs 2014, 13). This resonates with Lamont's analysis of cultural repertoires. She argues that repertoires are integral to how higher status groups maintain symbolic boundaries because they “contain narratives

about the relative worth and positioning of various groups” (Lamont 2018, 427). She further argues that symbolic boundaries sustain recognition gaps, defined as “disparit[y] in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society” (421), and observes that when the social order holds individuals and families responsible for their own success or failure, recognition gaps grow because “worth and cultural membership” become increasingly associated with “middle-class identity, occupation, lifestyle and attributes” out of the reach of others (424). Pertinently, she proposes that because recognition gaps are reproduced through institutions like schools, such institutions could help in “crafting messages about worth that can . . . extend” recognition “to the largest number” (427).

Following Kim (2018), an intervention toward this end in schools in rural China could be to revise teachers’ preservice training and in-service training to incorporate content about rural and migrant families and about the class-based contingencies of child-raising. A further measure could be to develop approaches to family-school engagement that recognize caregivers’ commitments to the children’s education by empowering them to better support the children’s education in ways that treat them as partners rather than as subjects in need of remedial intervention. This resonates with Hill and Torres’s (2010) analysis. Of teachers’ perceptions of marginalized families in another context, they state: if families’ “invisible strategies” to support their children’s education could be “recognize[d] and validate[d],” their commitments to the children’s education could be harnessed by schools in creative ways (104). Finally, and much more broadly, if disadvantaged peoples’ commitments to their children’s education and to each other were to be widely recognized then their rights to fair treatment would be harder to deny.

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