Study and Schooling in the Lives of Children in Migrant Families: A View from Rural Jiangxi, China

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ABSTRACT

Millions of children in China have been ‘left behind’ in the countryside while their parents work in distant places to support the social reproduction of their families. This article examines the role of study and schooling in this process. The analysis shows that family strategies to pursue socio-economic mobility are intricately connected to state frameworks for providing support, and schools are central to this. This is because both family and state interests in the attributes and prospects of the next generation converge in schools. At the same time, on a day-to-day basis, the labour of children in schools and the labour of parents in the cities are intertwined. Specifically, by communicating with each other about study, and by focusing on the child’s educational future as the key purpose of their daily work, both children and parents carry out their obligations towards each other, while finding ways to cope with the emotional difficulties that protracted physical separation entails.

INTRODUCTION

Lingling was nine years-old. Her parents had been working in a clothes factory in the coastal city of Wenzhou for four years. ‘Home’ for Lingling was a village in Jiangxi province located in China’s rice-belt interior. There she lived with her *nainai* (paternal grandmother), *yeye* (paternal grandfather), 5-year-old cousin and 3-year-old brother. Lingling knew that the following term she, like many fourth graders, would stay at school during the week: her grandparents wanted her to benefit from evening homework supervision and they also wanted to be spared the additional burden of accompanying her to and from school each day.

First unnumbered footnote

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Lingling was not looking forward to boarding because she knew that the food was not as good as *nainai*'s cooking and that *nainai* would not be there to heat water on the stove for bathing.

Even so, Lingling would live at school without protest. She understood the importance of study. She was reminded of this when her parents visited each year for Spring Festival. Lingling's tears at the time of their departure would invariably bring forth words of comfort such as: 'Study hard. *Baba* and *mama* are working outside to raise you and support your studies'. Additionally, weekly phone calls between Lingling and her parents focused largely on school grades. Lingling's guardian also made her acutely aware of the life choices that faced those who did not study diligently. Lingling explained:

I will study hard because otherwise I will have to be a farmer when I grow up. Farmers have to do lots of housework like *nainai* does, such as planting vegetables, cooking and looking after younger brother and little sister. *Nainai* told me this.

In common with most children I met in Jiangxi, Lingling understood that it was necessary to *du chu qu*, literally to 'study ones way out' of the countryside.

The importance of children's education in families' migration strategies in developing countries has been well documented. Many studies investigate how migrant parents' investment in their children's education and their aspirations for their children's future impact on their academic performance. These studies present a mixed picture, showing that outcomes are affected by such factors as the age and gender of the child, the gender of the migrant parent(s), the school system and the socio-cultural setting (Arguillas and Williams, 2010; Asis, 2006; Chen et al., 2009; Jampaklay, 2006; Kandal and Kao, 2001; Kuhn, 2006). By contrast, the Chinese language literature presents a pessimistic picture of the potential benefits of migration to children. It stresses that despite parents' motivations for migrating (i.e. earning money to pay for their children's education), the left behind children exhibit poor academic performance (Gong, 2005; Tao and She, 2009; Tao, L., 2009; Wan, 2009; Xie, 2009; Ye et al., 2005), high rates of truancy (Gong, 2005; Li and Song, 2009; Wang and Dai, 2009; Yang and Zhu, 2006) and emotional and behavioural problems (Tan et al., 2009; Wan, 2009; Wang and Dai, 2009; Yang, 2009).

While the above studies highlight important dimensions of the complex nexus between migration and children's education, most of them sit within a 'left-behind' paradigm. The left-behind paradigm is common in studies of migration in developing countries where origin and destination binaries overlap with assumptions about the characteristics of 'rural' and 'urban' places and people. Within this paradigm the at-home family members are depicted as inhabiting a geographic and social space that is mostly separate from that of the migrants, while at the same time being subject to the impact of outflows of people and return flows of resources (see Archambault, 2010). Meanwhile, 'left-behind' people, and 'left-behind' children in particular, are treated as passive and are even depicted as problems (Toyota et al., 2007).

Research in the fields of both transnational family studies and childhood studies suggests that attention to children's voices, experiences and 'agency', that is, their capacity for intentional action, can generate new insights. Specifically, scholars of transnational families highlight that the children are not left behind in the sense of being abandoned. Rather they are raised from a distance by parents who send money and gifts, phone regularly and return occasionally. Crucially, these scholars demonstrate that through such actions the parents maintain ties that create single social fields within which both migrants and non-migrants, including children, think and act (Dreby, 2010; Horton, 2008; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Parreñas, 2005). As this article demonstrates, education is central to how the members of spatially divided families understand and practise their obligations towards each other within these single social fields.

The childhood studies literature also offers valuable perspectives through its emphasis on the importance of the experiences and agency of children (Dobson, 2009; Huijsmans, 2011; James et al., 1998; Prout and James, 1997). For instance, James et al. have pointed out that children's lives take place in several significant social spaces (James et al., 1998: 37–58). If we extrapolate, children who live in migrant families experience the 'home' or 'area of origin' not as one locality that exists in opposition to the destination area but rather as several places, including school, the guardian's house and sites of play, all of which they actively negotiate. Among these places, school merits special attention because as scholars of childhood have argued, 'family is what its members do, a constantly continuing and changing practice, and as children go to and through school, that practice is organised around their schooling' (Connell et al., 1981: 78). It follows that an interplay between school, family, and

class influences the kind of childhood that is available to a child and therefore his or her perceptions and choices (James et al., 1998; Connell et al., 1981; Field, 1995; Lareau, 2003; Stephens, 1995). Heeding the advice from transnational family studies and childhood studies, the present article explores how children, migrant parents and guardians arrange their families' practices through schooling and elucidates how these practices shape children's experiences and agency.

FAMILY, EDUCATION AND MIGRATION

While recognizing that children's experiences and agency open up new avenues for inquiry, some scholars of childhood have cautioned against over-celebrating this agency. Specifically, they recommend that researchers remain mindful of how family regimes, education regimes, migration regimes, and children's age and gender intersect to circumscribe and influence this agency (Huijsmans, 2011). The present section follows this guidance by considering how features of family, schooling and migration at national and local levels converge to shape the context within which children experience and respond to family separation. In considering the ways in which family regimes in rural China affect the circumstances of children's agency, small family size and intergenerational relations mediated through an idiom of 'filial piety' stand out. Of course, these affect most rural Chinese families but they affect the members of migrant families in particular ways. Similarly, in considering the role of education regimes in shaping the circumstances of children's agency it is necessary to acknowledge that study-related pressures feature in the lives of all school-age children, regardless of their parents' migration status. However, crucially, children who grow up in migrant families, experience schooling and the associated pressures in relation to specific circumstances.

Studies on family regimes and parenting practices in modernized East Asian societies, including in China's cities, have shown how, in recent decades, children have benefited from increased parental investment in their education. On the one hand, smaller family size has enabled greater investment per child. On the other hand, mounting social pressure to produce successful offspring has itself inflated the time and resource costs of raising children, to the extent that parents limit themselves to one or two children, a dynamic that underpins record

levels of low fertility in East Asia (Anderson and Kohler, 2012; Caldwell and Caldwell, 2005). The social pressure to ensure that children attain high socio-economic status through education has been described by some commentators as ‘education fever’ (Anderson and Kohler, 2012; Kipnis, 2011). In education-fever societies, children are raised by parents who actively participate in school-based projects to discipline and prepare them for their future as productive workers and good citizens. Typically, the children attend after-school classes and study for long hours at the expense of rest and play (Field, 1995; Fong, 2004; Stephens, 1995; Milwertz, 1997). Norma Field (1995) even proposes that the children’s study in such intensified child-raising regimes amount to ‘labour’ in that it involves purposeful disciplined effort. Indeed, pertinent to this article is her suggestion that the parents and children toil as a team for the future of the child

Analogous trends in family formation and child-raising have appeared in China’s rural areas (Hannum et al., 2009). Scholars note that with the approval of their parents, primary school children stay in class till late or else they complete heavy loads of homework at home (Kipnis, 2011; Murphy, 2004). These study-focused childhoods have come about in China’s rural areas through intersecting trends. In 1979 the state began to enforce strict fertility control policies (Greenhalgh and Winkler, 2005). From the mid-1980s onwards, the state also implemented mass compulsory education, which created incentives for smaller families independently of population control policies. In this environment, instead of realizing family aspirations by having several children, parents realize them by having one or two children and investing more in their education (Murphy, 2004; Greenhalgh and Winkler, 2005; Kipnis 2011). Even though primary and junior high school education has been free since 2007, the annual fees for a senior high school student can amount to more than the annual income of a rural person, and these costs need to be borne for three years. Meanwhile, the expense of supporting a student through university is even more onerous.

For most rural parents, migrating to earn money for the children’s future has entailed leaving the children ‘behind’. For reference, the term ‘left-behind children’ has conventionally been defined in Chinese official surveys as those children who do not live with either one or both their parents because they work outside their county (Duan and Wu, 2009). Even though reports based on such data do not always specify a minimum duration of parental absence in order for a child to be classified as ‘left behind’, it is common for such surveys to regard those individuals who have been working away for at least six months as migrants (Xiang,

2007). According to a 2006 national population and fertility survey, nearly 44 million children aged between 6 and 14 were 'left behind' by their migrant parents, an increase of 47.5 per cent on the figure for 2000. Of these 'left-behind' children, half had a migrant father, fifteen per cent had a migrant mother, and thirty-five per cent had both parents working away (Duan and Wu, 2009).

Principal features of China's social welfare system which underpin the country's migration regime explain why most migrants leave their children in the countryside. Firstly, municipal governments commonly use the household registration or *hukou* system, a legacy from China's socialist planning past, to limit the provisioning of public goods and services to rural outsiders. Poorly paid rural migrants and their children thereby face on-going institutional exclusion from urban-based schooling, health care, housing and social security (Li and Li, 2010; Solinger, 1999). Secondly, the school curriculum varies from province to province and even within some provinces, and as students must sit examinations for senior high and university entrance at their registered place of origin, those who transfer across school systems at key stages incur disadvantages (Ye et al, 2005; Xiang, 2007). Lastly, migrants often stay in factory dormitories or on construction sites and work over ten hours per day, six days per week, so their living and working conditions are not conducive to family life.

Over time, as successive generations of rural people have migrated, education and migration have become increasingly intertwined with aspects of family social reproduction; with implications for how parents raise their children. This is illustrated by the Chinese sociologist Gong Honglian's study of a township in Jiangxi province, which also happens to be one of the field sites for the present study. Gong compares the educational attitudes of so-called first and second generation migrants. The first generation went to work in the Southern city of Shenzhen during the late 1980s when private labour and commodity markets had just re-emerged and *hukou* restrictions were easing. Gong notes that the parents of these migrants had little education and wanted their children to work to earn as much money as possible (Gong, 2005). However, Gong further observes that the second generation who had migrated during the late 1990s and early 2000s had a few more years of education and their own migration experience had taught them that even though uneducated people could earn money, those with more education could enjoy better quality lives and higher social status (Gong, 2005). Labour migration has, therefore, intensified the effect of intergenerational differences in propelling 'education fever' because, as has been observed in other East Asian societies,

parents want for their children what they never had for themselves (Anderson and Kohler, 2012).

Rural parents' perception that those who have more education enjoy more socioeconomic mobility is supported by scholarly evidence. For instance, Hannum et al. state that by 2000, one additional year of education resulted in an average wage increase of 6.4 per cent (Hannum et al., 2010, cited in Hansen 2013). Moreover, a World Bank study reports that having a senior high school graduate in a family virtually guarantees an escape from poverty for that family (World Bank, 2009). For many rural families, however, the ultimate purpose of a senior high school education is university entrance. Even though the prospects for rural students to gain admission to a first or second tier university are slim, the expansion of the higher education sector has nevertheless meant that most rural children can name either a fellow villager or an alumnus from their school who has realized this dream, making it appear in the realms of the possible.

The intertwining of education and migration in family social reproduction can also be seen in how intergenerational obligations within families are changing. 'Filial piety' has been widely invoked in literature and morality textbooks to advocate a sense of intergenerational obligation both within the family and beyond. Children are encouraged to reflect on what their parents and teachers have sacrificed for their education and to consider the appreciation and reciprocity that is required of them as sons and daughters as well as citizens (Kipnis, 2009; Milwertz, 1997). Yet, while filial piety is represented as a longstanding feature of Chinese familial culture, the content and expression of this ethic has been changing. As Kipnis (2011: 149) explains:

...the reduction in the number of children in conjunction with the expansion of the education system has encouraged parents to treat their children as 'projects' whose achievements are their own rather than solely as sinks of reciprocal gift giving who repay parents with respect and old-age care.

Migration has contributed to this changing family dynamic by reinforcing good parenthood norms that emphasize education and by constituting the parental 'sacrifice' that both parents and children acknowledge in their relationship with each other. Importantly, however, the use

of ‘sacrifice’ to give meaning to migration is not unique to China. Scholars writing about other cultural settings note that the lens of ‘sacrifice’ enables migrants to maintain their identities as caring parents despite being physically separated from their children (Carling et al., 2012; Dreby, 2010: 1–34; Horton, 2008). Moreover, as this article shows, in the Chinese setting, for their part, children’s awareness of their parents’ sacrifice is central to how they cope with separation, while study is integral to how they honour the sacrifice.

In many of China’s rural counties, a further way that education and migration have become intertwined is through the rise of rural boarding schools, a phenomenon which is also grounded in changes in family regimes. Specifically, the initial impetus for building the boarding schools was shrinking family size. By the mid-2000s the numbers of incoming students had declined to the point that villages were no longer able to support their own schools, so all but infant grades were discontinued and non-infant grades were transferred to larger schools located in townships. The amalgamation of students from higher grades enabled planners to consolidate resources and endow centralized schools with superior equipment. The process of school consolidation has meant, however, that large numbers of children must attend schools a distance from their villages (Kipnis, 2011; Murphy, 2004). Even though the boarding schools were not originally designed with the needs of migrant families in mind, once they were in place, pedagogues and policy makers were quick to see a role for them in dealing with the ‘problem’ of left-behind children (Gong, 2005; Tao et al., 2009; Wan, 2009; Zhou, 2007). Scholars, many based in government think tanks, urged officials and educators at different administrative levels to expand and improve schools’ boarding facilities (Hu et al., 2005; Tao B.F and She, 2009; Tao, L., 2009; Wu et al., 2009; Xie, 2009; Yao et al., 2009; Zhang, 2009). Such recommendations have corresponded with practice. In several provinces, authorities have expanded and ‘humanized’ boarding facilities. Additionally, in 2007 and 2009 state subsidies were introduced to reduce and then eliminate boarding costs for rural families. Inevitably, though, regardless of whether or not the children board during the week, school occupies a big part of their lives.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHOD

Jiangxi

This article draws on qualitative data collected in 2010 and 2011 in Jiangxi, an agricultural province located in China's rice-belt interior. Out of all China's provinces, Jiangxi has the highest proportion of children that are 'left behind'. According to figures from the 2006 national population and fertility survey, that year, 34.7 per cent of children in Jiangxi province aged 0–14 years were left behind, a proportion higher than the national average of 16.5 per cent (Duan and Wu, 2009). Meanwhile, according to the Jiangxi Education Office, in June 2007, 26 per cent of the province's primary school students and 23 per cent of middle school students were 'left behind' (Chen, 2007).

The fieldwork for this article was carried out in the primary and junior high schools of four townships located in two counties. In these schools the proportion of children labelled as 'left behind' was much higher than for the province's school-age population: fifty to seventy per cent of students were classified as 'left behind'. According to a 2010 multi-stage randomized survey carried out in the fieldwork schools among 479 children in grades 4, 6 and 8 (mostly with children aged 9–14) nearly 23 per cent (n=110) had non-migrant parents while close to a further 10 per cent (n=46) had at least one parent who was a returned migrant. The remaining 67.43 per cent of the children were 'left behind'. Of these 'left behind' children, approximately three quarters (n=242) had two migrant parents, a proportion considerably higher than the fifty per cent for Jiangxi province overall (Chen, 2007). Meanwhile, approximately 18 per cent (n=59) lived in families where only the father had migrated and 6.8 per cent (n=22) lived in families where only the mother had migrated. The higher proportion of left behind children in the fieldwork counties and the higher proportion of children in families where both parents were migrants may reflect the four year gap between the fieldwork counties' figures and the national and provincial figures. The higher proportions also reflect the highly migratory character of the fieldwork counties.

In the fieldwork schools, the incidence of boarding was also higher than both the national and Jiangxi average. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, in 2011, nationwide 21.82 per cent of students in compulsory education (typically aged 6–15) boarded, 10.89 per cent of primary school students boarded and 43.34 per cent of junior high school students boarded (MOE, 2012). I could not find directly comparable figures for Jiangxi. However, according to a Jiangxi Provincial Education Office report, in 2007 30.66 per cent of left behind children aged 6–15 boarded (Chen, 2007). By contrast, in the primary schools that I visited 30–65 per cent of students boarded, with over half the boarders being 'left behinds'. Moreover, in the

junior high schools the proportion of boarders was more than 70 per cent of the student body, again with over half the boarders being ‘left behinds’.

The higher proportion of boarders was due to a mix of the political, demographic and geographical characteristics of the counties and townships. At the county level, an example of a political factor was the priority of governments. Du (2009) identifies Jiangxi, Inner Mongolia, Sichuan, Shanxi and Henan as provinces where many county-level governments have been especially active in promoting boarding. Moreover, in the case of Jiangxi, the Provincial Education Office report already mentioned argued that there was an urgent need for counties to expand boarding facilities to meet the needs of growing numbers of left behind children (Chen, 2007). At the township level, the pace of school consolidation and local geography were further factors affecting the prevalence of boarding. In one township the higher grade classes in the village primary schools were closed, while in another, mountainous terrain and a dam created transportation difficulties.

Interviews

The data on which this article is based was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Owing to the significance of adults in shaping the social worlds in which children live (Toren, 1993), background interviews were carried out with twelve teachers, while the main interviews were carried out in matched sets with guardians as well as with the principal informants, the children. One matched set comprised interviews with twenty-four ‘left-behind’ children and their guardians, producing forty-eight separate interviews. An additional interview was conducted with one ‘left-behind’ child who lived alone. A further matched set comprised interviews with eight children and their returnee parents, producing sixteen separate interviews. An additional twenty ‘left behind’ children, one child of returnee parents, and eight guardians were interviewed, but not in matched sets. The breakdown of the different kinds of migrant families from which the interviewed children came is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 here

In total, therefore, fifty-four children whose mothers and/or fathers with either current or previous migrants were interviewed. Most interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed in whole or part in English by the author.

Of the children interviewed, just over 40 per cent of parents worked in factories making items such as toys, clothes, electronics and plastics. A similar proportion was employed in informal sector activities including cooking, cleaning and serving in restaurants, giving massages, mending clothes, repairing cars, driving trucks and taxis, and working as security guards. Approximately 8 per cent of migrant parents ran stalls. The remainder worked in construction. Prior to migrating, many parents earned their living by combining farming with local off-farm work. The principal farming activities were double rice cropping, growing rape, tobacco and vegetables, and raising pigs and chickens. The principal off-farm activities included working on construction sites, in quarries, and in factories producing bricks, cement, fertilizer, wooden products, canned food, fireworks and other items.

When interviewing the children, it was necessary to help them feel at ease and several factors assisted with this. Importantly, I was accompanied by one of two female Chinese college students who were education majors aged in their early twenties. They introduced themselves to the children as ‘big sister’. For some interviews I was instead accompanied by an older woman from the provincial academy of social science who introduced herself to the children as ‘auntie’. The presence of the research assistants, the big sisters in particular, was valuable in bridging the distance that existed between me as a mature-aged foreign researcher and the children as interviewees. Creating a relaxed atmosphere was also helped along by the flaws in my Chinese. These were commented on and joked about by some children and went some way towards levelling status inequalities. Finally, through playing ‘Simon Says’ and other games with groups of children in the classrooms and playground, I was seen to be approachable.

Yet, even though efforts were made to ensure that the interview was a comfortable experience, interviewing the children nevertheless presented ethical considerations (Woodhead and Faulkner, 1999). How to practice informed consent was a particular challenge. Specifically, as the research was facilitated by the schools, some children may have felt unable to decline interview requests, so we consciously gave them the latitude to manage their participation in the interviews. Answers that seemed to be purposefully evasive

or incomplete were not pursued. For instance, we interviewed a 12-year-old boy whose grandfather had explained that the boy knew about his parents' divorce. Yet when the boy himself was interviewed, he spoke as though his parents were together. Therefore, we at no point alluded to his parents' separation. Also, even though the purpose of the interview was explained to each child, they were likely to have varied in their capacity to understand this. In fact, several children thought that I was a journalist.

The use of an iterative process of inductive and deductive coding to examine key themes in the individuals' accounts of their actions, feelings and experiences is well suited to exploring how they give meaning to their lives (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The initial analysis of the interview transcripts was motivated by the research question: how do the children of migrants perceive and experience their lives as 'non-migrants'? Yet, as the coding progressed, it was study and school that recurred as the salient theme in the children's accounts of how they understood the purpose of their parents' migration and how, on a day-to-day basis, they experienced life 'at home'. For this reason, the research question was revised to focus on how study and schooling shape the practices of migrant families and mediate children's experiences of and responses to growing up in them. While it cannot be ruled out that the school setting of the interviews may have affected the content of the children's replies and therefore the analysis, it is likely that interviewing the children at home would have yielded a similar emphasis on study. Study arose in response to questions that were about daily life and migration rather than about education. Additionally, the influence of 'education fever' has been documented for other rural communities in China (Kipnis, 2011).

The data analysis that follows has been structured along three overlapping dimensions. These are (1) children's understanding of the purpose of parental migration; (2) children's understanding of migrants' work as 'bitter'; and (3) children's understanding of school as the place where they work to fulfil their obligations to their parents but also find relief from life's pressures. Cumulatively these themes elucidate the centrality of study and schooling in how children and parents affirm their relationship with each other and how, through a concern with study, they give meaning to the emotional difficulties that long-term physical separation involves.

How Study Shapes Children's Lives in Translocal Families

The Purpose of Parental Migration

Most children I met in rural Jiangxi explained to me that their parents had migrated for their education. In Chinese, the colloquial term for 'working outside' is *dagong*, which suggests the commodification of labour. *Dagong* stands in contrast to another word for work, *gongzuo*, which implies respectability and entitlements to social security. Regardless of whether one or both parents had migrated, all the children I interviewed had been told repeatedly by the migrants and other family members that their parents had gone to *dagong* so that they could study and later find *gongzuo* or 'proper work'.

Parents' initial departure was the first time that many children received a clear message that their studies were of such vital importance that their parents were migrating. One third of the children were old enough at the time of their parents' first departure to recall this event. Of these children, over half remembered that their parents had referred to their studies in their parting words. The account of Ouyang, a 12-year-old boy echoes a common experience. He explained:

I was in first grade and getting ready to go to school. I saw that they were packing things and asked them what they were doing. They said that they were preparing to *dagong*. I asked them, 'What about me when you are gone?' They said: 'We will send you to your [maternal] grandmother's house to study'. I was very sad and said "don't go". They said: 'We are going out to earn money for you to let you study'. I thought: 'They are doing this all for me'. I cried.

Even in situations where parents avoided directly telling their children that they were migrating, study was nevertheless inferred by the children to be the principal reason for their parents' departure. For instance, 13-year-old Shenyi recalled that his mother, a widow, had tricked him at the time of her departure by saying that she was going to his maternal grandmother's, a memory that even now caused him to cry. Even so, Shenyi consoled himself that his mother remitted money for his school fees and that his diligence in studying made her happy.

Another occasion on which the importance of study was emphasized to children was when their parents were preparing to return to the city after brief visits home, usually at Chinese

New Year. Most children said that their parting conversations with parents referred to study. For example, 11-year-old Hongli explained that at her mother's most recent departure:

I said: '*Mama*, I will study hard but you must promise to come back soon'. Then *mama* said: 'I will come back soon but you must promise to study hard'.

Study also featured when other family members comforted the children upon the departure of their parents. Guardians would say: 'Don't cry. Your parents are out earning money for you so you can study'. Some children explained that their guardians thought that their parents earning money for their future was so obviously good that their crying was unjustified. For instance, 11-year-old Jinhong said that if *nainai* saw her cry she would scold her saying: 'Your parents are out earning money for you. There is nothing for you to cry about'.

Yet another occasion when children were reminded about the centrality of their studies to their parent's migration was when guardians or siblings tried to ease their sadness at missing their parents. For instance, Cuili, a 12-year-old girl explained:

It is not good at all that my parents are outside because there is no one to take care of me. Sometimes I say to my older sister: 'Why have they still not returned? I really miss them'. Then my sister says: 'Don't worry. Study hard. They are earning money. Don't disappoint them'. My parents really endure hardship. I will study hard.

Further reminders to children about the centrality of study came with weekly or fortnightly phone calls. In the survey of 323 'left-behind children' in the fieldwork schools, 'study' ranked top with 269 identifying this as the main topic that they talked about with migrant parents on the phone.¹ In the interviews, some children offered more detail about how they experienced their parents' care through phone conversations. For instance, Lixing, a 13-year-old girl said:

They call once a week. They tell me to finish my homework and study hard. I say 'I know' ... My mother tells me not to watch television. I obey her because I know that my mother is working outside for money to support my studies.

Zhangting, a 13-year-old girl likewise explained:

¹ The breakdown of other responses to the survey question about the main topic of phone conversations is: other family members – 210; health – 186; parents' life outside- 54; local happenings – 26; feelings – 30; future plans – 10; other – 2. Multiple responses were permitted.

When my parents were at home they could help me with washing clothes and homework. I was happy when they were with me. They cared for me every day. Now they care for me by telephone. They tell me to study hard. They say study hard and find a good job, and in the future look after *baba* and *mama*.

Cuili's experience was similar. She told me that her parents had cared for her when she had visited them in Shenzhen but that after her return to the countryside they could no longer care for her directly. She said:

Now they can only call me. They ask about exams and tell me to be sure not to catch cold, study hard and do not miss us all the time when you are at school. They fear this will influence my studies.

Parents also referred to study when their children said on the phone that they missed them. For example, Lingling told me: 'I miss *baba* and *mama* a lot. I phone them when I miss them. I say: "*Baba* is your health good?" They say to me "study hard"'. Zhanglin, a 13-year-old boy similarly explained: 'When I miss them I send text messages saying "I miss you". I use *yeye*'s mobile. They reply saying "study hard". Yet for some children who felt that their grades were inadequate, the emphasis on study actually made them reluctant to talk with their parents. Some guardians recounted how children had thrown down the phone or hidden when called to speak with their migrant parents. Meanwhile, some children explained that conversations with their parents about study intensified their feelings of unhappiness.

Phone calls were especially important for maintaining the parent–child relationship in families where the parents had been physically absent ever since the child was small. The role of study in maintaining the parent–child relationship on the phone could be seen in a 58-year-old grandmother's account of how she coaxed her 10-year-old grandson:

When he was little he was unfamiliar with them and unwilling to talk with them on the phone. But now that he is older and a little more obedient I told him that when his parents phone he is to receive the call. I told him that if he doesn't receive the call then they won't give him the money that they earn outside. Then when he is older he won't have money to study... Now he understands and will receive their calls.... Now he asks, '*Baba*, when will you return? Will you buy me this or that?'

Even though the boys and girls I interviewed both saw study to be the main purpose of their parents' migration, there were nevertheless some gender differences in how they related to their parents through study. More girls than boys interpreted parents' phone inquiries and advice about study to be a form of parental care. This may reflect the tendency in rural Chinese society to socialize girls to be dependent, relationally-oriented and focused on family life and to socialize boys to be independent (Chen and Liu, 2012). By contrast, guardians'

and children's accounts of an unwillingness to receive phone calls pertained more to boys than to girls. This may be because, as has been noted for other cultural contexts and other types of family separation, boys are more inclined than girls to express their emotional hurt in overt ways (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). A final difference pertains to the unequal status of sons and daughters in rural Chinese society. Several girls observed that parents or grandparents gave their brothers or male cousins a larger share of food treats and sided with them in quarrels. These girls explained that they would study hard, get good jobs and bring credit to their families. For some girls, therefore, a resolve to study diligently may have been influenced by their perception that they needed to work hard to earn the adults' respect.

Children's Understanding of 'Dagong'

The Bitterness of Dagong

It was not only the children's understanding of the purpose of their parents' migration, but also their understanding of their parents' experience of labour migration that had implications for how they viewed study in their daily life. The children learned from listening to adults, seeing their parents on return visits, or observing their parents' lives when they visited them during school holidays that *dagong* was bitter and that they needed to study to avoid this fate themselves. These children's understanding of their migrant parents' lives differed from those that scholars have observed of children living in transnational families. Specifically, scholars have noted that children living in transnational families often have only a faint understanding of their migrant parents' living and working conditions and mistakenly think that their lives are comfortable (Dreby, 2010: 11, 156), even luxurious — a circumstance that can enhance their sense of abandonment (Schmalzbauer, 2008; Schiller and Fouron, 2001 cited in Carling et al., 2012: 203).

Owing at least in part to their perception that their migrant parents' lives are difficult, most children I met in rural Jiangxi had clear alternatives to *dagong* in mind. This was the case for Ouyang whose father made baseball bats and whose mother made water bottles. He explained:

'I don't want to *dagong* because it is bitterly exhausting. I want to be a software engineer. There is a computer at home. Uncle arranged it when he returned last year'. Ouyang was

typical in that his alternatives to *dagong* were shaped by influences from school, television and returned migrants.

A further way that the older children came to understand that *dagong* was bitter was from perceiving that their migrant parents' health was ailing. Some children talked about hearing the tiredness in their parents' voices on the telephone. Other children learned about the ill health of their parents from events recounted to them by telephone. For instance, 14-year-old Heqin explained:

When *baba* was working he had to be rushed to the hospital and they found that his kidneys were not good.... keep working makes it worse [her eyes fill with tears]. This summer my older cousin will take me to visit them. I will take stinky tofu, peanuts and medicine for kidney stones.

Q: What do you think *dagong* is like?

I think a boss is there dry while *baba* and *mama*'s sweat drips non-stop.

Another way that children learned about the harshness of *dagong* was by noticing the physical deterioration of their parents on their return visits. Shenyi, the boy whose father had died, said:

Dagong is bitterly exhausting. The last time my mother returned she was very thin and her complexion was dark and rough. She didn't look well. Her appearance had changed a lot. [Then he cries].

Wangdie, a 12-year-old girl whose mother had recently returned, said:

If I can get into university then I won't *dagong*. *Dagong* is exhausting. *Mama* told me this. When *baba* returned, my mother cooked eggs for him, then he gave them to us, but *mama* said to us: 'Don't eat them. Leave them for *Baba*. He is bitterly tired from working outside'.

For some older children, visits to see their parents during the school holidays was yet another time when they perceived the austerity of their parents' lives as migrant workers. For instance, Cuili said:

Their life out is not good...I know this because the last time I visited, each time my mother would not take much food herself and would give extra to us.

She continued:

I will not *dagong* because I've already told my parents that I will pass the exam for university. They told me: 'Your study is not for us, it is for you. You do not want to be like us, *dagong* is tiring, *dagong* is exhausting.'

14-year-old Meilin similarly explained:

My parents said that they *dagong* to let me study. *Dagong* is exhausting. Every day there is overtime till late. When they come back to the room their eyes are red.

The Bitterness of Dagong in One-Parent Migrant Families

For children whose fathers had migrated, awareness of a further dimension of the bitterness wrought by *dagong* was their observation that their mothers' lives at home were also bitter. For instance, 12-year-old Wang Bin told me that his mother experienced even more hardship than his father who was a construction worker. During the busy farming season, Wang Bin's mother typically rose at 3 am to farm 5 *mu* of land and then transplanted seedlings for other families till 8 or 9 pm.² Even though children such as Wang Bin appreciated their father's work, witnessing their mother's daily hardship strengthened their affection for them as well as a sense of obligation to be good and study hard.

However, among the children who were from mother-only migrant households a similar dynamic was not observed. These children's focus was only on the bitterness endured by the migrant mother. The fathers of two interviewed children had physical disabilities which prevented them from undertaking heavy labour. Their circumstances resonate with a more general observation that in rural China mother-only migrant households tend to have inherent vulnerabilities that cause them to pursue labour allocation strategies which run counter to traditional gender roles (Duan and Wu, 2009; Wen and Lin, 2012). In a third case, the father

² 1 *mu* = 0.667 hectares

was a village accountant who engaged in small-scale trading. According to his 11-year-old daughter, her mother sacrificed much for her and her sister while her father enjoyed an easy life.

Inner Conflicts

Even though the children who talked with me generally accepted the work-study logic of the parent-child ren toiling team and felt that the hardships incurred by their parents required diligent study on their part, some were conflicted about aspects of this arrangement. For several children, the torn feelings arose on account of tensions between their recognition of the importance of *dagong* for their educational aspirations on the one hand and the deep effect that separation from their parents had on them on the other. For instance, 13-year-old Zhanglin said that he missed his parents and wanted them to return but then he later said that he would prefer them stay out because he was better able to concentrate on his studies when they were not around. 11-year-old Zhaobin said that he felt sad when his parents went back to the city after visits home and he would often ask them on the phone to return. Yet when they did eventually return, he told them to go out again to continue earning money for his future university fees.

Conflicting feelings were less pronounced in three girls' attitude towards their fathers' migration. The girls' mothers had been migrants themselves for several years before returning from the city without their husbands. These girls all stressed the material benefits of their fathers' migration while being emphatic that they wanted their mothers to stay at home. For instance, 10-year-old Fengmai said that she missed her father but she did not feel sad when he had gone back to the city because: 'only if he earns money do we have food, and if he does not *dagong* then we have no food'. As another example, Wangdie's father had returned at Spring Festival but by June had still not re-migrated. Both Wangdie and her mother wanted him to go out again as soon as possible. Wangdie said:

It is better that he is out so that he can earn money. When I was young *nainai* raised me. *Mama* returned a few years ago. Being at home alone is not good. If a parent is home the child receives more love. But I think that one parent should be out to earn money.

The girls' positive evaluations of their fathers' migration echoes research findings from other societies, namely, that even though children may feel distanced from their migrant fathers they nevertheless see them as reliably fulfilling their role as breadwinner. At the same time, the mothers sustain the routine aspects of the children's life and both the mother and other relatives provide sufficient emotional support to compensate for the fathers' absence (Asis, 2003; Dreby, 2010: 80; Parreñas, 2005).

For some older children, conflicting feelings arose because even though they accepted the importance of study, they had come to doubt that their own grades would be good enough for them to avoid *dagong*. For instance, 13-year-old Xiaorong explained that when she told her parents about her low class ranking she felt as though she was 'useless'. She said that she would have no choice but to follow her parents to Shenzhen to *dagong*. 13-year-old Junbin similarly explained that his grades were not good. He said that he was waiting for a year when he would be old enough to migrate. He said that school now held little interest for him and that only the internet café alleviated his boredom. These teenagers felt much regret that the study route was closed to them. The few whose grades were poor but who nevertheless felt optimistic were those whose parents either worked in a trade or were self-employed and who had reassured them that learning a skill such as mechanics or computers would still enable them to find a job. Such optimistic teenagers were, however, rare. As Hansen explains: 'The job would be less secure than the jobs one could get with an academic education; it would probably pay less; and it would not bring "face" or social status to the family' (Hansen, 2013: 172). Moreover, the quality of vocational training available to rural students is mostly inadequate (Hansen, 2013; Kipnis 2011).

School in Children's Life at 'Home'

Even though school gives structure to the week for all in-school children (James et al., 1998: 41), it was particularly significant in the lives of the children whose parents had migrated. These children had to shoulder school-based problems such as performing badly in tests or quarrelling with classmates without a parent nearby to turn to for comfort or guidance. A few children said that they contacted their migrant parents at such times. For instance, 14-year-old Meilin said that she wrote to her mother when poor grades caused her to feel 'hopeless'. A

few other children phoned their parents when they encountered problems. For instance, one 10-year-old boy who had been bullied by an older boy at school had told his mother who then asked his aunt and cousin to keep an eye on him. However, many children did not talk with either parents or guardians about problems — they either felt distanced from them or did not want to worry them. An exception was children who were at home with their mothers. These children said that they liked being able to talk with their mothers, though even these children were concerned not to add too much to their mothers' worries.

School also underpinned children's feelings of attachment to the rural home. This was because schools were familiar environments that had routines, and classmates provided companionship. The value that a few older children found in 'staying at home' despite missing their parents could be seen in their decision to remain in the countryside, even though their parents had suggested that they finish their studies in the city. 12-year-old Yuquan's account resembled that of several other older children. She explained:

I visited my parents' place when I was in fourth grade...and went last year for one month. My parents worked all day and they came back when I was already asleep. I was in the room by myself watching television, reading and sleeping. Sometimes they took me to the supermarket...I didn't want to leave them because we had some happy times together. But I am unfamiliar with that place. It is better for me to study here so that I am freer. I can play with my classmates and hang out with family members. My parents asked me if I wanted to study in the city. I said that I didn't because my parents are at work all day and also the city school fees are expensive. I cried when my parents went out again after Spring Festival, I was broken-hearted. My grandparents comforted me saying: 'Study hard, your parents have to go out for your future studies'.

School also offered children time out from certain challenging home situations that had arisen through the outmigration of parents. For instance, for some children school provided reprieve from living with an elderly person who was a generation removed and who in many cases needed help in daily life. 14-year-old Heqin explained:

Living with yeye I am independent and look after myself. Yeye is in poor health, he is 88. My parents are not here to look after me. I cook, wash clothes, clean and buy medicine for yeye. I have lived at school for two years. In the beginning it was unfamiliar. I like living at school but I also like to return home. Yeye loves me and I like to see what he is doing. But then I like to go back to school again. I miss my classmates and games, especially jump rope.

For a minority of children, school also provided some relief from the monotony of living alone. This was the case for Yingtong. He talked about how after the death of his grandfather his life at the weekend had no pattern to it. This was similarly true for 11-year-old Meiying who lived in a mud house next door to her step-mother. Meiying's teacher said that at home Meiying washed her own clothes, and cooked and ate alone. Meiying was reluctant to talk about life at home. However, she said that she looked forward to school because she liked the lessons and her teachers sometimes praised her.

Yet even though the children found value in many aspects of school, most of those who boarded at school during the week were happy to return to the guardian's home for the weekend. The guardian's home offered better living conditions and a sense of family warmth that softened the more austere and isolating dimensions of a work-centred childhood. For 10-year-old Wujun, the care of his grandparents helped him cope with school. He explained:

The food at school is not good. And there is no hot water so I go home to wash...My dorm mates sometimes fight. Then I stand outside and tell the teacher. I look forward to returning home on the weekend. *Yeye* and *nainai* care for me. They give me good food.

For Ouyang school and grandparents both contributed to a meaningful life at home. He explained:

With time I got used to my parents being out. Living with my grandparents is nearly the same as living with my parents. I have lived at school for almost a year now. In the beginning I was not used to it because my grandmother was not there to look after me. I like collective living and having many companions. But sometimes I miss home and then I hide under my quilt.

Two girls were fortunate that their mothers had returned from the cities for the explicit purpose of caring for them on the weekends. For instance, Wangdie's mother said:

Nainai is no longer here so I must stay ... I cook good food for her at home and give her dried food to take to school because sometimes she is not full. The teachers cannot care for so many students properly.

Wangdie for her part liked to go home on the weekend to sleep in her own room in their newly built house and tell her mother about the week's events.

CONCLUSION

A transnational family literature has shown that children whose parents have migrated are not 'left behind' in a figurative sense because they hold pivotal positions in their spatially dispersed families (Dreby, 2010; Parreñas 2005; Olwig, 1999). The present article has extended this insight by examining the role of study as a core domain of activity through which this pivotal position is expressed. Certainly, in many countries children's education is central to both migrants' endeavours and children's participation in the family's shared migration project. However, the ways in which this plays out in practice varies across socio-cultural and economic settings. The present article has examined how the interaction of family, education and migration regimes at translocal and local levels has shaped the ways in which people 'do family' in parts of rural China (Nelson, 2006 cited in Dreby, 2010: 146). It has shown that in rural counties in Jiangxi province, a dramatic fall in family size and migrants' experiences of urban labour markets have interacted with extant parenthood norms to intensify rural parents' aspirations for their children's educational success. Indeed, in many respects, these rural parents' hard work in urban labour markets approximates urban middle class parents' more personalized use of time and money to inculcate high educational aspirations in their children and to try to create the conditions conducive to their future educational success.

The children I met in rural Jiangxi had learnt through everyday communications that they were obligated to honour their parents' sacrifice of *dagong* by studying hard. For instance, the children were told repeatedly by their guardians, parents and siblings that education was the main reason for their parents' absence. They were reminded of the importance of study in phone conversations with migrant parents. Additionally, advice to study hard was the comfort that family members offered to children whenever they expressed sadness on account of their parents' absence. By this logic, the more bitter the parents' *dagong* experience, the greater their sacrifice, and the deeper the children's awareness of their parents' sacrifice, the greater their obligation to be filial. At the same time, the children's awareness of the bitterness of *dagong* fed into a strong desire to escape the drudgery of being a migrant worker, a desire which increased their appreciation of their parents' sacrifice and intensified an unwillingness to disappoint them. Hence, both parents and children internalized and reproduced the education fever that bound them in toiling teams and gave meaning to their toil.

School and study also provided the children with ways to cope with the pressures that parental absence and high academic expectations placed on them. Notably, in school, the children were able to use concrete actions to strive for good grades and thereby maintain a connection with their migrant parent whilst at the same time distracting themselves from feelings of loss. School life also gave children reprieve from difficult home situations that could arise because of their parents' outmigration, for instance, living with infirm grandparents. Yet for some children whose grades were poor, schools and study were less helpful in enabling them to live fulfilled lives within spatially dispersed families. Some of these children felt that they were failures and had let their parents down. Therefore, they avoided communication with their parents, disengaged from study and reconciled themselves to a future of *dagong*. The situation of these children suggests that even though parents' aspirations are beneficial for their children's educational success (Hannum et al., 2009), exceedingly high expectations can demotivate children, alienate them from their parents, and intensify the strains that parental absence already places on the parent-child bond.

A rich literature has long demonstrated that bargains underpin cooperation between migrants and other family members, with much of this research pertaining to the migrants' obligations to remit money in exchange for the rural families' prior provision of support and subsequent provision of a safety net (Stark, 1991). The present article affirms the importance of implicit contracts in underpinning how family members, both migrants and non-migrants, participate in labour migration. However, the analysis also joins that of others in demonstrating the value of moving beyond family economic bargaining models of migration. Specifically, this article has considered the ways in which migration contributes to reconfiguring the objectives and the cultural and social meanings of intergenerational bargains, its role in obligating children to honour their side of these bargains, and the profound implications that these bargains have for how the children of migrants live on a day-to-day basis.

The present article has tried to remedy a lack of research into how 'left-behind' children live active and meaningful lives 'at home'. At the same time, in teasing out how reciprocal influences among family, education and migration regimes have shaped the substance of both childhood and children's priorities in rural Jiangxi, the analysis has also cast light on the tremendous mental burdens that the children shouldered and the price that they had to pay both emotionally and in terms of life chances if they opted out of the parent-child team bargain. The article, therefore, affirms the empirical, analytical and ethical value of

examining the experiences and purposeful actions of ‘left-behind’ children. At the same time, it lends weight to the caution of some scholars to guard against an uncritical celebration of children’s agency and their argument that it needs to be tempered by analysis of the interacting dynamics that affect their relationships and the choices available to them.

Admittedly, the findings in this article are based on the situation in a particular socio-cultural, economic and political environment. They are also informed by a cross section of voices heard at a given point in time. There is, therefore, need for research in settings where different family, education and migration regimes prevail as well as for studies that follow children over time. Such studies would enable scholars to build up a textured mosaic of children’s lives in migrant families and would elucidate how the sentiments they articulate evolve.

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