

## Chapter 1

# Can Subaltern Children Speak? What China's Children of Migrants Say About Mobility, Inequality and Agency

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### Abstract

In this chapter, rephrasing Spivak's question into 'can subaltern children speak?', I reorient the research on China's gigantic population of children and youths in rural migrant families towards a critical interpretative approach. Based on life history and longitudinal ethnographic interview gathered with three cases, I unpack the multiple meanings migrants' children attach to *mobility* in their childhood experiences. First, despite emotional difficulties, children see their parents' out-migration more as a 'mobility imperative' than their abandonment of parental responsibilities, which should be contextualized in China's long-term urban-biased social policies and the resultant development gaps in rural and urban societies. Second, the seemingly 'unstable' and 'flexible' mobility patterns observed in migrant families should be understood in relation to a long-term family social mobility strategy to promote children's educational achievement and future attainment. The combination of absent class politics in an illiberal society with an enduring ideology of education-based meritocracy in Confucianism makes this strategy a culturally legitimate channel of social struggle for recognition and respect for the subaltern. Last, children in migrant families are active contributors to their families' everyday organization amidst mobilities through sharing care and household responsibilities, and developing temporal and mobility strategies to keep alive intergenerational exchanges and family togetherness. The study uncovers coexisting resilience and vulnerabilities of migrants' children in their 'doing class' in contemporary China. It also contributes insights into our understanding of the diversity of childhoods in Asian societies at the intersection of familyhood, class dynamics and cultural politics.

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The Emerald Handbook of Childhood and Youth in Asian Societies, 25–42



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doi:10.1108/978-1-80382-283-920231003

*Keywords:* Childhood/youth; migration; China; ‘mobility imperative’; social class; emotional capital

## Introduction: Can Subaltern Children Speak?

In 1988, Gayatri Spivak posed an important question – ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ – to set a post-colonial feminist agenda of restoring and recentring *the voice and subjectivity*, or the ‘subjective sovereignty’, of the woman figure in Indian historiography. In raising this question, Spivak (1988) performed an incisive critique of the epistemic violence imposed by Indian patriarchy and colonial imperialism, represented by their respective scholarly agents in historical writing, in obliterating the role, the voice and hence the agency of women in history. By delving into the politics of representation to the deconstruction of the ‘transparent’ scholar/researcher assumption, she raised an epistemological-methodological question – how to properly study subaltern groups who often ‘cannot speak’ (p. 104) due to their vulnerabilities to epistemic violence by multiple powers? As far as I see it, her solution points to a critical interpretative approach that attempts to unveil ‘the notion of what the work cannot say’ (p. 28). In other words, the academic mission is to unveil the unspeakable, the invisible and the subterranean underlying the spoken words and narratives to unpack ‘hidden’ forces and powers at play in shaping the subaltern’s material as well as subjective worlds.

In this chapter, rephrasing Spivak’s question into ‘can subaltern children speak?’, I reorient the research on China’s gigantic population of children and youths in rural migrant families towards a critical interpretative approach, grounded in the young people’s own narratives and contextualized in the interplay of the broad political economy and intergenerational dynamics within families. As will be elaborated on later, this is a deliberate epistemological-methodological strategy based on a critique of the dominant academic and public discourses. For one thing, the dominant discourse portrays at best a reductionist, and often problematic, picture of the lives and experiences of migrants’ children (the subaltern in this case) in contemporary China. For another, it stops short of a deeper sociological analysis of interweaving structural, ideological and micro-interactional forces at play. In so doing, I advance existing scholarship on two fronts: bringing children/youth’s subjectivity and agency back in and presenting a dynamic and multi-level analytical framework.

In the exercise below, I examine how subaltern children speak through unpacking and deciphering their narratives about their life histories growing up in rural migrant families. In particular, I zoom in on the keyword of *mobility*, with its many endemic expressions in Chinese dialects, which weaves through the personal, the familial and the societal in these children’s lives to explore their engagement with two social orders. The first pertains to the class order of an urbanizing society with the migrant working class at the bottom, jointly produced by a powerful state-capital alliance (Gu, 2022b), which constitutes the political economy of migrants’ family life, and conditions their future aspirations and projections. And the other concerns the patriarchal generational order, which defines normative expectations and rules of behaviour in intergenerational

exchanges and interactions. As such, we gain a fuller picture of these youths' subjectivities and agency, and their manifestations, in their lived-in social and cultural context.

The chapter is structured as follows. I first introduce the research context of mass internal migration in post-reform China and then critically review literature on childhood and migration in this society, highlighting the need to transcend the dominant child-victim frame that insufficiently addresses children's subjectivity and agency. I then briefly describe the research methods and analytical strategy in this study. This is followed by main research findings with regards to the narratives of *mobility* by children of rural migrants, which delves deep into their meaning-making of and agentic responses to the impact of migration and mobilities in their growing up experiences. I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and social implications of this study.

## **Research Context: Rural China on the Move**

Traditionally, rural China was a sedentary society. Unless threatened by disasters and absolute poverty that made survival impossible, people were rooted in their ancestor land and observed a patriarchal family system that cultivated mutual support and reliance among the family clan to ensure individual survival (Fei, 1992).

After a cascade of political turmoil, wars, famine and revolutions for a century, the newly founded People's Republic of China (1949), led by the ruling Communist Party (CCP) under the leadership of Mao Zedong, pursued a socialist development strategy modelled after the Soviet Union which prioritized heavy industry in urban settings. This gave rise to a series of policies, including the establishment of a *hukou* system (or household registration system) in 1958 which classified rural and urban populations as different categories subject to different welfare programmes and entitlement (Wang, 2005). These policies jointly segregated the rural from the urban, creating a situation of 'one country, two societies'. The *hukou* system, still in practice today albeit successive reforms, not only defined rural citizens' secondary status in the national social distribution scheme but also in effect demobilized the rural population from 'encroaching' on urban spaces, creating an extreme form of sedentarism in rural areas. For example, in the heyday of Maoism during the Cultural Revolution, to make a trip to neighbouring villages, not to mention cities, one would need a permit (in the form of an 'introduction letter') from cadres of the village where their *hukou* was registered.

However, since 1978, when the pragmatic leadership of Deng Xiaoping initiated the Reform and Opening up policy to liberalize the economy and reengage with the global capitalist system, rural China has entered a hyper-mobile era. Institutionally, the mobility control aspect of the *hukou* system has been relaxed, while its function as a local-level quasi-citizenship mechanism remains robust. This reconfiguration has not completely dismantled its discriminatory policies against rural citizens. Rather, it allows conditions for rural labourers to sell their cheap labour in the expanding market in urban boomtowns while restricting their claims for local social benefits and

services (Wang, 2005). This produces an ever-growing rural–urban migrant population as a cheap source of labour spurring up China’s rapid industrialization. Official records documented around 2 million migrants in 1983, and this number surged to 62 million a decade later (Cai et al., 2009). In 2019, rural migrants living away from their home villages reached 290.8 million (NBS, 2020).

Such unprecedented waves of migration have transformed the everyday life of all demographics in rural communities, especially under-aged children who are increasingly involved in a mobile life (voluntarily or otherwise). The inherently discriminatory migration regime in urban areas based on the *hukou* system generates formidable structural barriers for migrant families, making their productive and reproductive engagements uncompletable in space (Gu, 2022a). As a result, families either resort to flexible householding strategies of separating migrant labour and childrearing across spaces to allow for children’s access to public education in their *hukou* registration places, or keeping their families together in migration destination cities while making do with compromised opportunities in social entitlements for their children (e.g. access to public education) (Gu, under review). According to the 2010 census data, 58 million under-aged children lived in villages with at least one parent absent from home due to labour migration (referred to as ‘left-behind children’); and another 38 million accompanied their parents to cities (referred to as ‘migrant children’) but were systematically discriminated in accessing educational opportunities and other social services (ACWF, 2013).

## **Beyond the Child-Victim Paradigm: A Critique**

Since the early 2000s, the two groups of children in migrant families, i.e. ‘left-behind children’ and ‘migrant children’, have attracted enormous attention from the public and academia (see literature reviews in Chen et al., 2022; Tan, 2011; Zhou & Rong, 2011). Numerically, the corpus of academic literature is huge. According to China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the number of social science publications in Chinese on ‘left-behind children’ broke the threshold of 1000 in 2007 and reached 3101 in 2018 alone, and on ‘rural migrant children’ has been consistently over 350 per year since 2006. Similarly, the ProQuest Social Science Database recorded 1277 publications in English on ‘left-behind children’ and 2663 publications on ‘rural migrant children’ in the decade of 2000–2009, and these numbers have multiplied since. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a detailed review of this large corpus. I instead make a modest effort to sketch broad contours of a dominant research paradigm in this literature and critically examine its underlying ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. This should be contextualized in the dominance of a sociological school in China, heavily influenced by key scholars of Chinese origin based in the US institutions as a result of academic dependency (Alatas, 2003), that is predominantly quantitative in methodological approach, positivism-oriented and adult-centric in its research agenda. I argue that instead of an incremental approach to fill in research gaps in this literature, we need to make a

paradigm shift to break away from the ‘epistemic violence’ (Spivak, 1988) inherent in this dominant paradigm.

In study after study, scholars reiterated their motivation to understand how parental migration, hence absence, as a ‘non-normative’, or ‘problematic’ family structure might lead to children’s developmental problems as manifested in their educational underachievement, psychological fragility and social isolation (see reviews in Chen et al., 2022; Tan, 2011; Zhou & Rong, 2011). In other words, this research boom is sustained by a prevailing concern of a ‘family crisis’ in rural families, where children are regarded damaged products as a result of parental migration. Such a theoretical framing, in combination with a dominant methodological approach which I would characterize as ‘the tyranny of statistics’, gives rise to a research paradigm that essentializes children of migrants as victims, or as ‘social problems’ to be addressed (Gu, 2022b). Many studies in Chinese in an earlier period (prior to 2007), often based on poorly designed survey research without proper sampling processes, produced sensational, and exaggerated, data that portrayed these children in homogenous and reductionist negative stereotypes. In a review article, Tan Shen (2011) has noted the negative impact of such framing in the field: ‘because the “problem” frame was too entrenched and sensational, it set the tone for a period of time that left-behind children were “problem children”, even misleading later research and public opinion’ (p. 140).

This paradigm retains its dominance even in the higher end of the academic hierarchy. For instance, in a recent special issue published in a leading English-language sociology journal on Chinese society – *Chinese Sociological Review* – the guest-editors (two sociologists affiliated with reputable institutions in the United States and China, respectively) reiterated their concern of a family structure crisis among migrant families as a motivation for the project. They, therefore, put together six quantitative (and none qualitative!) studies that modelled the effects of parental migration on a range of child outcomes, including psychological and cognitive development, depression, victimhood to school bullying and behaviour problems (see the introduction in Liang & Li, 2021). One contribution in particular set out to estimate the impact of childhood left-behind experiences on youths’ behavioural patterns, measured by two indicators: (1) their likelihood to work overtime and (2) how much they spend on internet surfing. Based on Attachment Theory, the authors hypothesized that ‘childhood left-behind experiences would lead to unwillingness and inability to build social ties in adulthood through psychological and biological influences’ (Liu & Zhou, 2020, p. 444). Their methodologically advanced modelling (e.g. Propensity Score Matching) indeed revealed some significant correlation between the left-behind measures and the two outcomes. However, there were no measures of parent–child relational dynamics or respondents’ social skills in the models that could remotely link the theoretical assumptions to the empirical evidence! I add a caveat here: as a scholar advocating for methodological pluralism, I do not take a militant position against quantitative research and appreciate good quantitative studies that portray general trends of social phenomena under study. What I am critiquing here is the uncritical and unreflective use of statistics that gives credence to questionable theoretical assumptions.

Now a dissection of the underlying assumptions in the above paradigm is in order. I outline the following. First, the inherent assumption of parental migration as a family structure deficiency or ‘problem’ is empirically debatable. Several recent studies based on nationally representative data from China Family Panel Studies find weak support for a causal relationship between parents’ migration and children’s underachievement or emotional well-being (Ren & Treiman, 2016; Xu & Xie, 2015; Yeung & Gu, 2016), which challenges the assumption that parental migration equals to their abandonment of parenting duties. This assumption is also theoretically questionable. For one thing, the equation of parental migration to a complete cut-off of parent–child relations is a flawed position derived from a ‘deficit thinking’ (Bühler-Niederberger, 2016), as ample research on internal or transnational migration documents various ways migrant families stay connected despite spatial and temporal challenges (see Chen et al., 2022). For another, it reveals an implicit bias towards the nuclear family as the only legitimate family structure for childrearing, ignoring a long history and the prevalence of alternative arrangements such as grandparents’ (co-)guardianship and multi-generational co-residence in China (Chen et al., 2011). This has an effect of othering or stigmatizing the childhood experiences of those in ‘non-normative’ families. Such a framing may also feed into a flawed public discourse based on a neoliberal logic that assigns blames to the family, especially the migrant mothers, for failing their parenting duties, while keeping the unjust social governance system shaping the political economic context of migrants’ family life under-scrutinized (Gu, 2022b).

Second, this paradigm builds on a conception of children as passive receptors of ‘problematic’ family structures, leaving their agency and subjectivities unaccounted for. This oversight is partly related to ‘the tyranny of statistics’ in the dominant paradigm where the survey data (either family based or school based) are mostly gathered from adults, rather than children themselves. In other words, such a methodological approach produces knowledge *about* children, rather than *of* children. From an institutional perspective, the lack of an established and autonomous subdiscipline of childhood sociology in the academic scene makes the idea of *children as subjects* a radical position. To redress these epistemological-methodological flaws, I advocate for a research agenda that recentres children’s subjectivity and agency in the picture, and adopts diverse methodological approaches that allow for insights into the complexities and dynamics of lived experiences, tensions, strategies and expectations of children under study.

## A Life History Approach

As described above, underlying the dominant research paradigm on China’s children in migrant families is a set of debatable, yet uncritically accepted, and morally charged assumptions about *how migration might break family and damage children*. Ironically, children’s voices and subjectivities are largely absent. In this study, to bring back children’s voices and subjectivities, I examine the narratives

of childhood and youth experiences by three youths from migrant families to understand *what migration means for them*, situated in their negotiation of mobility, inequality and agency as children of China's subaltern migrant working class.

The strengths of life history analysis lie in the rich and nuanced information about individuals' lived experiences as captured in personal accounts of human agency vis-à-vis structural and historical contexts (Wengraf et al., 2002). It thus provides a compelling tool to unleash the analytical reach into children's subjectivities, meaning-making, emotions and agency in this study. I draw data from a larger longitudinal qualitative study about migration and children's lives in China. In 2014–2015 and 2018, respectively, I conducted two rounds of ethnographic interview research on migration, education and family life in Hunan (a migrant-sending province in central China) and Shenzhen (a major migrant-receiving destination city along the southern coast, also China's first Special Economic Zone). The original sample included 38 adolescents, specifically 15 left-behind children from a rural school in Hunan, eight migrants in a county town in Hunan and 15 migrants from a migrant school in Shenzhen. All were registered under the agriculture-*hukou*, with at least one parent being defined administratively as a migrant in line with policies in host cities. In 2014–2015, their mean age was 13 years and their gender distribution was even, 18 girls and 17 boys, due to the purposive sampling strategy I used. Most families were dual-income families with parents working in factories, construction crew, service industry and self-employment (e.g. running food stalls). In 2018, I followed up with 16 of them in a new round of fieldwork to understand their transition to post-middle-school life (see Fieldwork and Data Section in Gu, 2022a for details). The research was approved each time by the Institutional Ethics Review board at the National University of Singapore to protect youths' well-being during fieldwork. In all publications including this one, pseudonyms are also used to protect the youths' privacy.

## **Analysis**

In this analysis, I focus on three youths who have participated in both rounds of fieldwork. They are selected following a 'diverse case' strategy (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) which aims to achieve maximum variance along relevant dimensions (i.e. gender, life history and migration trajectory). While the selection of the cases does not follow the logic of representativeness in a statistical sense, narratives in the cases resonate with many other cases in the larger sample. Data of each case included narrative interviews with the focal adolescent, supplemented by formal or informal conversations with at least one of their adult guardians. Also included are ethnographic observation data to add contextual information for each case, which were gathered during my home and school visits, and my involvement in the focal adolescents' social activities and social media exchanges. The data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I first performed open coding by reading line by line all of the interview

transcripts to allow major themes to emerge from the data, while making constant comparisons between cases to uncover the similarities and differences. I then identified a code ‘mobility’ in the interview data, in various local expressions associated with movements of positions (physical or social) such as ‘*chuqu*’ ‘*chulu*’ ‘*waichu*’ ‘*liudong*’. This code prompted me to conduct a further in-depth analysis on the life histories of each case. By cross-reading the interviews with each informant while keeping in mind Spivak’s (1988) insightful admonition of penetrating the ‘unspeakable’ in narratives, I unpack three profound and interrelated meanings attached to ‘mobility’ by children of migrants in telling their stories of growing up as children of migrants in post-reform China.

### *The ‘Mobility Imperative’*

I first met Liu Jia in 2014. A 14-year-old 6th Grader in a migrant school in Shenzhen, she was shy and tall, designated the class monitor by homeroom teacher Tang. The eldest of three children at home, Jia was about 2 years older than most of her classmates, because her parents waited until her younger sister reached school age (6) to bring both along to Shenzhen, and the youngest brother two years later. Prior to their moves to Shenzhen, the siblings lived in their home village in Hunan under the care of their widowed paternal grandmother. When Jia was four, her mother became officially the first migrant in the family who started ‘going out’ (*waichu*) to a big city as a shoe shiner in front of shopping malls, while her father took on odd jobs in construction sites in the county during non-agricultural seasons. In the years leading to their joint work in running a fish stall in a wet market in Shenzhen, they had moved in between boom towns in coastal Guangdong, wherever available jobs took them. Jia recalled tearful memories in her early childhood as a ‘left-behind child’, especially when she received her mother’s phone calls or letters. However, these tough episodes did not translate into hard feelings about their absent parents: “*I did not think too much about mother’s going out, since many families were like that in our village. They had to earn money and pay for our living*”. Since young, Jia always had a clear sense of her family’s financial stress: money was always short for a big rural family. Though the parents’ migration labour did not pay well and was unstable, it provided a more predictable source of income than farming alone which villagers regard as a risky livelihood of ‘eating depending on the heaven’s whims’ (*kan tian chifan*).

Jia’s life history points to the importance of the political economic context in understanding migrant families’ productive and reproductive arrangements. What



emerges from her narrative about her parents' migration, and hence family 'instability', is a sense of 'mobility imperative' which encourages or mandates mobility as an inevitable pathway to modernity or 'a better life' (Farrugia, 2016). This should be contextualized in the decades-long urban-biased social policies in contemporary China: during the Mao era, the socialist command economy was pursued to prioritize heavy industry in selected urban sites, and concomitantly the welfare of urban residents; and after 1978, the informalization of rural migrant labour has been adopted to facilitate China's expedient, and cost-effective, urbanization (Gu, 2017, pp. 22–28; Gu, 2020). The result of such sustained urban-biased development is the formation of a two-tiered society with the rural at the bottom, which is empirically supported by ample sociological research. For example, after comparing a range of social indicators (education, occupational position, earnings, family income, material well-being and life satisfaction) between rural and urban citizens in China, Treiman (2012) concludes that 'China built an urban welfare state on the backs of the peasants' (p. 33). In this sense, the unprecedented rural–urban migration since the 1980s could be regarded as peasants' 'voting with their foot' to escape poverty and improve their family prospects; subsistence agriculture, traditionally the main livelihood in rural areas, is no longer regarded a viable choice. In this context, the urban becomes the aspirational space for a better and more 'modern' life, despite steep institutional and socioeconomic hurdles against rural people. Jia's narrative tells us that children in rural families know well that their parents have out-migrated (or been/gone 'out') not out of selfish reasons, but the contrary, 'to earn money and pay for our living'. The family income from the parents' toiling labour in the cities, meagre by urban standards, is indispensable to pay for daily expenses, children's education and her grandmother's medicine.

Jia also tells us that her childhood with absent parents is nothing but normal in her village community. In other words, migration seems to be such a prevalent and naturalized part of life in rural areas that children tend to normalize it, as Jia put it, 'I did not think too much about mother's going out, since many families were like that in our village'. While cultural and political elites are ready to project their sympathies towards and anxieties over the 'pitiful left-behind children' (see an analysis of such discourses in Gu, 2022b), children consider their own classmates, playmates and neighbours in their local communities as reference groups where migration and mobility become normal aspects of everyday life that one copes with. In other words, for the large population of rural children, a 'stable' and nuclear family structure, a normative ideal in Western societies and urban China, does not define a childhood.

Nonetheless, we should also recognize that this childhood is a demanding one that asks children to perform 'emotional labour' to manage their multitudes of emotions and needs in the absence of one or both parents. In Jia's case, she described 'tearful memories' in early years, but tried to downplay the challenges. Instead, by normalizing parental absence and linking parents' absence to their provision of family finance, she basically reframed the meaning of parents' out-migration as a form of intergenerational support characterized by *parents'*

*sacrifice and children's indebtedness*, which was explored in an earlier article of mine (Gu, 2022a).

### ***Education and Social Mobility as Discourse***

Although mobility has become an 'imperative' that motivates rural families' search for a living beyond their villages, there exists a hierarchy of mobilities, as Jian's story below will illustrate.

Jian was a 15-year-old high-schooler in 2014. He showed a genuine interest in my research project on the migrant population and their childrearing behaviours/strategies and agreed to participate after an introduction by his former teacher who worked in the school where I conducted fieldwork. He believed that his story could count as a 'representative case' of migrant children who experienced 'multiple constraints and losses of opportunities' in Shenzhen where he had lived since 6 years old. His family's migration history could trace back to the parents' early adulthood. Like many other migrants, Jian's parents took on various jobs over the years, factory assembly lines, construction, plumbing, street vending, before opening a grocery store in 2004 in a migrant enclave in western Shenzhen. Once settled, they began to move their four children (aged 3–10) along, together with their paternal grandmother to assist housework, which was motivated largely by their concern for children's education.

"My mom only attended Primary 3 before dropping out, since her parents were too poor to support her. She wants us to have the opportunities she never had in education. Our village school was not good enough for her. She hopes for university education for us, that for her means a carefree and stable life ahead (laugh)!"

As the 'smart kid' in the family, Jian knew the family held high expectations for him to achieve. However, due to his non-local hukou status, his educational experience in Shenzhen was riddled with hurdles: his parents had to pay hefty 'sponsor fees (*zanzhufei*)<sup>1</sup> all the way up', usually two-to-three-folds of the tuition fees for local students; he was stripped of the chance to test into resourceful

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<sup>1</sup>Up until the recent decade, the general attitude towards migrant children's education in cities was exclusionary. In indigenous terms, migrants and their children were subject to 'strict prevention and steadfast defence' (*yanfang sishou*) against their 'encroaching' on urban benefits. For migrant children to be admitted in public schools, various types of extra fees were charged, including 'borrowed placement' fees (*jiedu fei*), and 'school sponsor' fees (*zexiao fei*), which were exorbitant compared with the household income in migrant families.

and well-facilitated key schools when transitioning to junior middle school; he could not get admitted to his ideal high school which had a higher standard in test scores (by roughly 10% of the full mark) for non-local students.

When I followed Jian up in 2018, he was a university sophomore in Guangzhou, an accounting major. He showed some ambivalence towards his educational experience. On the one hand, he felt that he had failed his parents' expectations, because he only got admitted to a 2nd-tier university, 'not good!' He felt guilty that he slacked off in the last year of high school. On the other hand, he expressed a sense of relief in being the first university student in the family clan, because '*you know, education is the biggest factor for moving up social strata (jieceng liudong)!*' With all four siblings on the track of receiving or graduating tertiary education, Jian believed that his parents could retire with their heads held high after decades of hard labour in Shenzhen.

Though Jian's family is an exceptional 'success story' in terms of children's educational achievement, the narrative of children's education being pursued as a family social mobility project resonates in many families in my study (Gu & Yeung, 2020; Gu, 2022a) and others (Hu, 2019). There are several messages to unpack here. First, with China's increasing integration into the global capitalist economy in the past four decades, the modernization of childhood in the country (especially in urban centres) converges with a global middle-class parenting ideology that heavily invests in 'children as an accumulation strategy' (Katz, 2008) against insecurities and anxieties about the future. Empirical evidence suggests that Chinese parents of different backgrounds unanimously value a child figure who is 'emotionally priceless and educationally achieving' (Gu, 2021, p. 555), though resourceful urban parents are more likely to be directly involved in choreographing, monitoring and controlling their only child's everyday activities towards academic excellence (Liu, 2022).

Second, such relentless pursuit of children's educational achievement among the migrant working class is further motivated by a built-in mechanism of using education as a criterion for discrimination in the evolving urban migration regime. Up until the 2000s, China's bifurcated urban governance regime defined transience/permanence based on migrants' education categories, with highly educated professionals being categorized as 'talents' to be integrated as locals (Fan, 2002). More recently, the education-based discrimination retains, despite that a more fine-tuned point-system has been widely practiced to link one's 'human capital' to their social entitlements (Zhang, 2012). As Jian recalled, his mother has been keenly aware of her status as the low educated, hence less 'deserving', migrant in Shenzhen, which she determines to change in her children's generation. Indeed, policy changes in the past decade make it easier for Jian to convert his *hukou* to Shenzhen upon university graduation and become a local citizen after living in the city throughout his childhood and adolescence as an

'illegal' child deprived of equal opportunities. Local informants told me that university graduates or higher degree holders, described as 'high-level talents' in policy documents, face little barrier in converting their *hukou* since the early 2010s.

Last, we should interpret Jian's narrative in the broader socio-political context in China today, where ironically the discourse on class disappears when the country has seen the most blatant forms of class exploitation by a powerful state-capital alliance. Tracing the history of the discourse on class, Wang (2017) noted that the over-generalized and over-politicized usage of class as an ideological tool in political movements during the Mao era made the term tainted and politically scarred in official discourse afterwards, leading to a conscientious effort by the authority to suppress the term. In its stead, the term 'social strata' (*shehui jieceng*), a more gradational rather than categorical concept, is used to describe different socioeconomic groups. The past decade has seen an escalating suppression of any healthy public debates on redistributive justice and social policies and the authoritarian state's mastery of technologies for censorship, which makes any rhetoric about class politics extremely difficult. It's worth noting that Jian described his early educational experience full of 'constraints and losses of opportunities' with a shrug and a smile of resignation. Yet he was able to tap on the discourse on education and 'moving up the *social strata*' in describing his family's struggle to win back their over-due dignity and social respect. The discursive legitimacy of education as a means of achieving social mobility has a long history in Confucianism, which has been kept alive despite the political vicissitudes in the twentieth century China. Well into the second decade of the twenty-first century when class politics became a 'dangerous' topic again, sub-altern youths such as Jian resort to the education-mobility discourse as a tool to talk about inequality, discrimination and struggle for social justice.

### ***'Doing Family' on the Move***

Now I turn the attention to children's role and strategies in maintaining mobile relationships across spatial and temporal distances, which the case of Duan Xiang below illustrates.

Duan Xiang was a round-faced girl with a friendly smile when we met in 2014 in her middle school in rural Hunan. She looked more mature than her age (13 then), as the 'sister boss' of five children in a skip-generation household, which comprised of her maternal grandparents, her two younger siblings, and two cousins (her uncle's children). She bore the responsibilities of caring for and disciplining the younger ones when her grandparents were busy, and sometimes felt burdened by these responsibilities. She spent the first two years in her father's hometown in a neighbouring county, when her parents were trying to make a living locally: the father worked as a truck driver transporting construction material

across townships, the mother farmed fruits and crops in their allotted land as a supplementary source of income, and Grandma took care of housework and childcare. This changed as the paternal grandmother got seriously ill and then her mother gave birth to a younger sister. The young couple decided that migration was a necessity and arranged for the children to live with their maternal grandparents with a monthly monetary compensation at ¥1,500 (about €210). Over the years, Xiang's parents moved around a few places, but each maintained a steady job profile: her mother serving customers in Hong Kong style diners (or 'tea restaurants') and her father remaining a truck driver across cities. The family kept a phone-call routine: the mother would call the family after dinner on Saturday when all children would stay at home and her shift ended earlier than the rest of the week. Conversations were often curt and predictable, mostly about children's performance at home and in school, checking the remittance account and telling the children to behave with grandparents. As a child of migrants, Xiang stuck to the rule of communication that she had learnt by heart from young: selectively reporting good over bad news (*baoxi bubaoyou*) so as not to add to her parents' burdens.

In the summer of 2018 when we met again, Xiang was in her last year of vocational school in Shenzhen. To reunite with her, the mother found a job in a 'tea restaurant' in the city and the father relocated as well, renting a small room in a migrant enclave. Every weekend, Xiang took the subway for two hours across the megacity to her parents' place and helped cooking and doing laundry, enjoying a day together. While many of her peers at school spent the weekend on 'modern' social activities in commercial spaces, she stayed with her parents to compensate for the lost time in childhood. For her, all the travels, plans, added labour were worth it, 'after all, family is family!'

Xiang's case illuminates several aspects of children's role in maintaining distant and mobile family relationships. First, rather than being 'the enfranchised individualists and vulnerable dependants' often described in the Global North (Gu, 2022c) and assumed in the dominant paradigm as critiqued before, China's children of migrants are active contributors to their family's everyday organization amidst mobilities. Their responsibilities are defined in relation to their gender and birth order. When being 'left-behind' as the eldest sister in their skip-generation household, Xiang shared caring responsibilities towards younger kids. As a migrant student in Shenzhen, she paid weekly visit to her parents, cooked meals and did housework to care for her working parents, i.e. playing her role as a filial daughter. Second, together with migrant parents, children develop routine and rhythmic communications to keep their family together. For example,

when separated in different locations, Xiang's parents and the siblings kept a regular routine of telephone communications, a 'temporal strategy' (Acedera & Yeoh, 2019), to update each other about recent happenings. Whenever possible, families also resorted to what I call 'mobility strategies' to create opportunities of staying together, such as short visits and reunion trips. Prior to the pandemic, for several times, I found myself in a carriage of the high-speed train full of young children on their way to visit or return from their migrant parents in Guangdong during summer vacations. Xiang's weekly subway travel to her parents' rental room also counted as such a mobility strategy. Despite the extra efforts involved, she felt a sense of satisfaction for making her family work in this otherwise daunting megacity.

However, I caution against an overly optimistic narrative of the 'mobile' relationships between parents and their children in these families. Communicative barriers could arise due to lengthy separation in children's early years; even when reunited, family members find it challenging to spend quality time together due to disjunctions in their respective working and school schedules (Gu & Yeung, 2020; Gu, *under review*). Moreover, the generational hierarchy rooted in the filial piety norms, together with the 'emotional rule' that encourages children's appreciation of parental sacrifices (Gu, 2022a), serves as disincentives for children to fully disclose information and share their life with their parents, hence developing intimacy. Like many adolescents in migrant families, Xiang followed a policy of 'selective reporting' in communications with her parents to preserve a façade of 'everything goes well and no need to worry'. Deep down she was very anxious about her future career – a few months of a meaningless, tedious and repetitive internship with a factory assigned by her vocational school dampened her spirit for her career prospect. However, she was convinced that sharing such a negative side of her life could not help, but may increase her parents' psychological burdens considering the already generous investment they made to support her vocational education.

## Conclusion

Hidden behind a grand narrative of China's post-reform 'economic miracle' is a large population of children of rural–urban labour migrants, as many as 100 million in 2010, who have attracted enormous attention from the public and the academia as vulnerable groups for policy intervention. As such, a voluminous body of literature since the early 2000s, in Chinese and in English, has been produced to understand the implications of parental migration on child well-being. The dominant paradigm, i.e. the child-victim paradigm as critiqued earlier, often frames the challenges these children face as a family structure problem. Several major flaws are inherent in this paradigm that prohibits critical and in-depth reflections on the topic: first, the inadequate attention to children's role and agency in negotiating opportunities and challenges in their everyday lives. This constitutes a major epistemic flaw in existing paradigms in social sciences which are often adult-centric, as childhood sociologists have rightfully

pointed out (Alanen, 1988; Thorne, 1987). In the case of Chinese academia which will be elaborated on in the section Introduction Chapter (Gu, this volume), the fact that childhood/youth studies have yet to achieve an autonomous status reinforces adult-centrism in the discipline of sociology. Second, there is a need to recognize the diversity and complexity of childhood experiences in specific context, without privileging one over another. Last, ‘the tyranny of statistics’, i.e. the excessive and non-reflective use of quantitative techniques, often leads to rather reductionist knowledge production and restricts deeper engagement in the topics. These combined, I argue, constitute epistemic flaws in the numerically impressive existing literature.

To redress the flaws, I advocate for a new research agenda that brings children’s voices and agency back in the picture and uses methodological approaches conducive to insights into children’s lived experiences, meaning-making and everyday practices in context. As an illustration, I have analyzed the life histories of three young people from rural migrant families to understand *what migration mobility means for them*. I show that despite emotional difficulties, children see their parents’ out-migration more as a ‘mobility imperative’ which is necessitated by the country’s long-term underdevelopment of rural areas and deprived opportunities in these regions, rather than their abandonment of parental responsibilities. In addition, the seemingly ‘unstable’ and ‘flexible’ mobility patterns observed in migrant families should be understood as a long-term family social mobility strategy to advance children’s educational achievement and opportunities. The combination of absent class politics in an illiberal society with an enduring ideology of education-based meritocracy in Confucianism makes this strategy a culturally legitimate, and almost glorified, channel of social struggle for recognition and respect for the subaltern. In everyday lives, children in these families act upon their roles in accordance with social expectations related to their age, gender and birth order to maintain ‘mobile’ family relationships, such as sharing care duties and developing temporal and mobility strategies to keep alive intergenerational exchanges and togetherness.

The study bears multiple implications for childhood studies in non-Western contexts. First, the three cases point to the enormous strengths and agency of migrants’ children in responding to structural challenges that make their childhood life less stable and sheltered. They instead rise up to the challenge by shouldering responsibilities as carers for younger siblings, as filial children to reciprocate parental care and provision and as diligent students to climb up the educational ladder. As the cases show, their agency and its manifestation in each case are shaped by a host of factors, including their gender, birth order and generational position vis-à-vis their migrant parents. And their agency is without ramifications. As is described here and elsewhere (Gu, 2022a), to exercise their agency to cope with challenges with strengths, many have to perform additional ‘emotional labor’, which is likely to have long-term consequences for their psychological well-being. Second, the experiences of the three cases in this chapter illustrate the diversity of childhood experiences beyond the Northern norm characterized by economic security, social enfranchisement and emotional vulnerability (Gu, 2022c). In a sense, this study enriches our understanding of the

diversity of childhoods in a hyper-mobile society at the intersection of familyhood, class dynamics and cultural politics. The findings could also help illuminate situations of children in transnational migrant families in sending countries in Southeast Asia such as the Philippines and Indonesia.

While recognizing the resilience of children and their migrant families at large in constructing their everyday coping mechanisms and long-term strategic plans to overcome structural challenges, I do not invite overly romantic interpretations of the findings in this study, as noted elsewhere (Gu, 2022a). Instead, I attend to the often ‘invisible’ and ‘unspeakable’ dimensions of informants’ narratives as advised by Gayatri Spivak (1988), which reveals bigger questions about China’s future development and the general well-being of youths in rural families. The findings suggest that migrants’ children carry tremendous emotional baggage and often silently endure hardships in their experiences growing up in the margin of society: they perform ‘emotional labor’ in order to discipline themselves into naturalizing their parents’ absence, exert cruel educational effort to live up to their parents’ social mobility aspirations, and selectively withhold negative issues for their personal processing to avoid burdening their parents. I argue that all these ‘unspeakable’ tactics and strategies constitute their practices of ‘doing class’ in an increasingly stratified, and illiberal, society. By laying bare the coexisting resilience and vulnerabilities of migrants’ children in their ‘doing class’ in contemporary China, I uncover the inequalities and injustices current social policies produce, and reproduce, and call for concerted efforts by the government and the general society to address structural issues such as rural–urban inequalities and social exclusion and provide equal opportunities for the migrant working class to realize their long pent-up social mobility aspirations.

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