The Children of China's Great Migration

A Conversation with Rachel Murphy

Nicholas LOUBERE

The Children of China's Great Migration (Cambridge University Press 2020).

In recent decades, China has witnessed the largest movement of people in world history, with hundreds of millions of rural migrants floating between the cities where they work and the countryside where they make their homes. This has had dramatic implications for family life in rural China, and in the 2010s more than 61 million rural children had at least one parent who was a rural–urban migrant worker. In *The Children of China's Great Migration* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), Rachel Murphy draws on long-term fieldwork in China's eastern interior to examine how this mass movement of people has impacted the left-behind children.

Nicholas Loubere: I would like to start by looking back to your first book, *How Migrant Labor is Changing Rural China* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), which was published at the turn of the millennium. What are the major changes in domestic migration dynamics and their impacts on rural lives that you have witnessed over the past two decades?

Rachel Murphy: When doing fieldwork in Jiangxi Province in the mid to late 1990s, everyone I met assumed that after several years of working in the cities, migrants would return to their home villages and use their savings to build a house and help their sons with the costs of marriage. Villagers' attitude towards their children's education was also fatalistic. Rural parents often thought that because their offspring's chances to enter university were limited, if their children did not want to study then it was best that they left junior high school and went to work in the newly opening urban labour markets. Simultaneously, though, marketisation was increasing returns on education while migration was heightening rural people's awareness of the utility of learning; young migrants would tell their family members on the phone and during return visits: 'Let younger brother or younger sister study. Life outside is bitter for those without education.' But the increase in migration notwithstanding, most rural children still lived with one or both parents in their villages. Rural families would spend their evenings watching television together and cracking

melon seeds. Children's play also linked them to the village environment—for instance, they would hunt for small fish in the paddy fields.

By the 2010s, though, most rural adults longed to help their children secure a decent off-farm life and thought that migrating to earn money for their children's education and later urban housing costs was the way for them to do this. Rural people's hopes for their children's education were shaped not only by the expansion of labour markets, but also by the legacy of the nine years of mass compulsory education that had been rolled out in China's interior in the 1990s, as well as the post-2000s expansion of the country's higher education sector. Although rural students seldom gained places at reputable universities, anecdotes of some rural children's successes still circulated. When a child was in primary school and their skill at sitting exams had yet to reveal itself, rural parents dared to dream that their child might be one of the lucky few to study their way out of drudgery. But the intensification of educational aspirations also generated immense pressure on children. At the same time, parental migration depleted the practical and emotional support available to many children, derailing their efforts to study. The 2010s also saw ever more children living away from both their parents and their villages. For instance, in some rural regions in Jiangxi, children boarded at township-based schools from Sunday afternoon to Friday afternoon, starting at grade four or five, while over half of children lived separated from either one or both of their parents.

The development of phone technologies is a further significant change, though the effects on farmer–migrant worker families have been less than anticipated. In the 1990s, young migrants would return to their villages at Chinese New Year with pagers prominently attached to their hips. If a pager beeped, they would use a landline phone outside the village shop. But by the 2010s, most rural households had at least one mobile phone and, after the mid-2010s, these phones had video applications. Even so, because children and migrant workers studied or worked for long hours and most schools forbade students from owning mobiles, calls between migrants and at-home family members remained limited to several minutes on the weekends. Rural families' access to valued information, such as about decent vocational training possibilities for their children, also remained limited.

NL: This book represents a shift of perspective in the literature on livelihood migration from the migrants themselves to the children who have been left behind. What new insights does this give us into the social impacts of the mass movement of people in China, and beyond, in our contemporary era?

RM: In the 1990s, literature on internal migration in the Global South was dominated by themes of the 'migration–development nexus', remittances, and rural livelihood diversification. My first book drew on and contributed to this literature, exploring the linkages that labour migrants retained with their villages, return flows of resources to the villages, and returnee business creation. This research found that migration was not external to the villages. Rather migration and return were extensions of villagers' existing livelihood diversification strategies, underpinned by values of loyalty to the family and the native place—values that rural people adapted in response to the vulnerabilities that they faced both in agriculture and in urban labour markets.

By the twenty-first century, though, scholars increasingly recognised migration as a relational process. My new book builds on this insight, exploring how labour migration and people's social reproduction arrangements blended imperceptibly with deeply felt obligations to family, underpinned by cherished ideals about gender, motherhood, fatherhood, filial piety, and morality. It examines children's experiences of daily routines of care in their families and in and around schools—these being the routines through which family and national strategies for capital accumulation cohered. Through these routines, children were subjected to their families' and schools' efforts to inculcate in them a sense of intergenerational debt that they needed to repay by studying diligently and behaving well. In this way, children and adults were bound to each other in 'multilocal striving teams'.

The book emphasises that even as the spatial separation of rural families is portrayed in China's policy discourse as incidental to modernisation, it is integral to a national strategy of development. The structures that prevent children from accompanying their migrant parents to the cities depress employers' and municipal governments' costs in competitive globalising markets. Meanwhile, inequalities in the education system reproduce class inequalities and the stratification of labour markets. The book's privileging of children's experiences highlights the emotional costs of both entrenched inequalities and a social and political preoccupation with capital accumulation. The voices of children, with their intuitive emphasis on interdependence and affection, if heard, could help to inspire alternative values by which to organise society. This observation applies not only to China's eastern interior, but to all contexts where the state subordinates humans' affective wellbeing and rights to family life to other agendas, and to all contexts where children are separated from their

parents because of the latter's inhospitable living and working conditions, primarily due to restrictions on certain people's movement and access to public goods and services.

NL: Can you tell us a bit about what it is like to do research with left-behind children over longer periods? Did you notice them changing the ways in which they perceive or articulate their experiences at different ages?

RM: Of the 109 children I interviewed, I followed 25 for five years, which permitted me to discern changes in their sentiments and perceptions. The first time I met most of these children, they were in primary school, the next time they were in junior high school, and by our third meeting several had reached the final year of junior high school while others had started either senior high school or vocational school. Two factors appeared to affect the evolution of their perceptions. First, as they grew older, they adopted more of the norms and repertoires of adults. Specifically, teenagers internalised an expectation that they needed to demonstrate their maturity, which in Chinese is expressed with the term *dongshi* [懂事] or 'understand things'. For instance, several teenagers laughed at the wretchedness of their younger selves when they had felt distraught at missing their migrant parents. Some teenagers also tried to deal with the accumulated resentment that they felt for being 'dumped' [丢] by endeavouring to understand their parents better.

Importantly, though, teenagers' capacity to overcome or reduce their resentment towards their migrant parents was mediated by a second factor: the teenagers' view of their prospects. Indeed, by the final year of junior high school, children's understanding of their prospects was crystallising. When teenagers could see a way out of drudgery, they were better able to accept that their parents' migration had been 'worth it'. For instance, some teenagers who made it to a coveted senior high school felt that their parents' sacrifice had given them their opportunity, which enhanced their emotional capacity to reconcile themselves to their left-behind pasts. But when promises of the parent–child striving team seemed elusive, teenagers sometimes identified parental migration as a significant factor behind their bleak prospects. Of course, teenagers who lived with both their parents could also feel estranged from them, usually because of resentments arising from strict study-related discipline. However, when parents and children were separated from each other because of migration, teenagers and parents interpreted tensions in their relationship with reference to this history of separation.

NL: The book examines the different ways children experience out-migration if they are raised by a single left-behind parent—mother or father—or their grandparents. Can you outline the ways in which these different familial configurations were experienced and the implications for the socioeconomic impact of rural–urban migration in contemporary China?

RM: Who migrates and who provides care, and the implications for children's lives, has received little scholarly attention. This is surprising because parental migration leads to a significant reconfiguration of families along gendered and intergenerational lines while local gender norms and familial culture mediate children's interpretations of their circumstances. In the 2010s in villages in Jiangxi and Anhui, strong patrilineal familial culture prevailed alongside rigid gender roles. 'Nurturer mother and breadwinner father' sat at the top of a notional hierarchy of family arrangements such that children were less accepting of a mother's migration than a father's migration, even as they may have longed for greater interaction with their fathers. By contrast, 'lone-migrant mother and at-home father' configurations so contravened local gender norms that this relatively rare situation usually indicated family vulnerability—for instance, a father's poor health or the parents' marital discord. Hence, children of lone-migrant mothers had to manage relationships in families that were deemed anomalous by both family insiders and family outsiders. This could help to explain some studies' findings of worse self-reported wellbeing among the children of lone-migrant mothers even than among children left behind by two migrant parents.

In the early 2010s, approximately 47 per cent of China's 61 million left-behind rural children had two migrant parents, and most lived with their grandparents. These children's circumstances differed, affected by factors such as the age at which they had been left with grandparents, the grandparents' age, whether the grandparents were paternal or maternal, whether a grandparent was widowed, the relationship between the middle generation and the grandparent caregivers, and the families' socioeconomic status. But these differences notwithstanding, children from skipped-generation families all actively tried to sustain meaningful relationships with both their grandparents and their migrant parents. They helped their grandparents in daily life even as they relied on them practically and emotionally as parent substitutes. The children also studied as best they could, seeking to win approval from their migrant parents. Meanwhile, children who visited their migrant parents in the cities during the summer holidays often helped them with chores; many of these children spent long days confined in a room with a television set and homework books until their migrant parents returned from their work shifts.

The book demonstrates that many children in rural China were profoundly affected by the migration of either one or both of their parents and by the intense pressures on them and their families to toil ceaselessly for dreams that all too often proved unreachable. As yet, though, we know little about the implications of this generation's childhoods for their relationships with their ageing parents, their attachments to their own future children, and the kind of life that they will forge as China's next generation of migrant workers and urban residents. ∎