

The Effects of Labor Migration on the Traditional Chinese Family Structure and the Role of Children

Anna Breigenzer

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Dr. Christopher Lupke

Department of Foreign Languages & Cultures

College of Arts and Sciences

Washington State University

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Précis

One of the largest migrations in human history is currently taking place. When I say large, I mean it involves over 200 million people. Each spring, after spending a few weeks at home for the Spring Festival, these millions of rural Chinese leave their villages and head for the cities. What really amazes me is that this migration of epic magnitude is happening annually and receiving virtually no attention from the global media.

Half of China's population lives in rural areas. Because there are so many people and because opportunities for farm work have declined drastically in the past few decades, these millions of people are forced to migrate to support themselves and their families. While in the cities, they work long hours, live in poor conditions, and face discrimination from urban residents. However, my specific interest is how this prolonged separation caused by migration is impacting the traditional family structure and negatively affecting millions of children.

The ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius, taught that the best way for a son to show reverence for his family is to care for, obey, and respect his parents; remember and respect his ancestors; and preserve the family line. Confucianism and many Chinese traditions are still maintained today, especially in rural areas. However, with China's booming economic progress, there are outside factors causing changes to traditional ways of life. Most migrants find themselves away from their home villages for 10 months each year, only returning home for the Spring Festival. This absence causes a disturbance to the family structure. Through my research on the subject, I found that separation due to migration has negative effects on children's educational progress, emotional state, and relationship with parents. It is also apparent that migrants are unable to fulfill obligations to their parents appropriately. It should be clear that

migrants are not intentionally dishonoring ancient traditions. Rather, they are forced to make a difficult decision: stay in the village and be very poor, or migrate and be able to support their families.

After much research, it seems that the only way the quality of life for rural Chinese people can be substantially improved is through changes to the household registration, or *hukou* 户口 system. The *hukou* system, which restricts where someone may legally live based on his or her birthplace, was put in place for a reason. Thus, it cannot simply be removed without consequence. I believe that the Chinese government needs to make amendments to this system with its rural citizens in mind in order to close the urban-rural gap and continue moving towards becoming a developed nation.

I became interested in researching the topic of rural China while studying abroad in Harbin, China during the 2011-2012 academic year. My own rural and agricultural background prompted me to take a one-on-one course learning about agriculture in China. I even had the opportunity to spend a weekend with a family in a farming village to see firsthand what life is like for them. During the course, I kept finding myself amazed at how disadvantaged rural Chinese are compared to their urban counterparts, largely due to government policy. Originally I focused on educational disadvantages of rural children, but the existing research on this topic is quite extensive. After taking a course at WSU on family reverence in Chinese culture, I realized that I could tie this together with my interests in rural China to produce some original literature. The topic I decided upon is the effects of labor migration on the traditional Chinese family structure and the role of children.

Introduction

In the past three decades, it has become increasingly common for rural Chinese residents to migrate to the cities for work. This occurs because of the limited amount of farmland allotted to each family which results in a low potential income (Zhao “Labor” 768). It is generally the middle generation of family members who migrate to the cities, while the older members stay home to care for the children and look after the farm. School-aged children are usually unable to accompany their parents to the city because they cannot attend school there (Wong 36). In order to attend a city public school, a child needs to possess a city *hukou* 户口, or a household registration permit. A person born in a rural area holds a rural *hukou* for his or her hometown. This restricts the person to only residing legally in that rural village. A person with a rural *hukou* can move to a city, but will be restricted from enjoying many amenities of city life, such as education, healthcare, and access to certain housing. For peasant migrant workers, a city *hukou* is nearly impossible to obtain. Thus, children are forced to stay in the village and live without their parents for the majority of the year. In 2009, there were 58 million children left behind by their labor migrant parents (Ye and Pan 357).

There has been extensive literature written in recent years regarding migration statistics, as well as some literature focusing on the education of children left behind by labor migrant parents. What has been less documented is the impact of migration on the family. As laid out in “Xiaojing” 孝经 (The classic of family reverence), the traditional Confucian Chinese family has a very strict structure with particular roles for sons and daughters (Rosemont and Ames). However, labor migration is causing the family structure to change, especially since traditional values are often best preserved in rural areas.

This paper aims to determine the effects of labor migration on the traditional¹ family structure and the role of children in rural China. It is my hypothesis that labor migration disturbs parent-child relationships through prolonged separation; disturbs the family structure by forcing grandparents to care for children and children to do more household chores; and has negative psychological and emotional effects on children. My research will be conducted by analyzing sociological and anthropological articles, literature, and film addressing different aspects of labor migration and family life in rural China. I will draw conclusions from these sources based on statistical data as well as cultural trends.

Labor Migration

Labor migration began in the early 1980s as a result of policy changes. The Period of Reform and Opening Up² that accompanied these changes brought the decollectivization of agriculture through *Jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi* 家庭联产承包责任制 the “Household Responsibility System”. Before the Household Responsibility System was implemented, a village operated like a commune where everyone worked together and all goods were rationed. Productivity was low and farmers had no way to supplement their incomes. This new decollectivization meant that villagers transitioned towards farming their own individual plots of land; this change gave farmers incentive to increase productivity, as they were allowed to keep

¹ The word *traditional* can be quite controversial. What is meant by the use of the term *traditional China* in this paper is the period of imperial rule (ending in 1911), before many cultural changes in Republican China (1911-1949) and the People’s Republic of China (1949-present) took place, including the Cultural Revolution. It would be naïve to say that all aspects of Chinese traditions remained static throughout China’s imperial period up until 1911. Thus, this paper focuses on the teachings of Confucianism and how they were lived out by average families before 1911. Tan comments, “Confucius is often viewed as a traditionalist: someone who values something simply because it has been passed on for generations” (24).

² In 1978, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 started a movement within the Chinese Communist Party, which is today known as 改革开放 the Period of Reform and Opening Up. This movement involved reforming China’s internal policy to become socialism with Chinese characteristics, while opening up China’s economy to initiate trade with the outside world and invite foreign investment (Brandt 11).

their excess product after paying some to the government (Brandt 9). According to Zhao, these changes reduced barriers to migration in two ways: rural Chinese could now buy food in the city without an urban *hukou*; and rural laborers could now allocate their time as they chose (“Labor” 768). Even though there was more freedom after the Household Responsibility System went into effect, that didn’t solve all the problems. In 1986, the average household of four people was allocated 7 *mu*, which is only a little more than an acre (Pai 4). With such little land available, many families were doomed to poverty, as it was difficult to support a family with such little means. This is an obvious explanation of why many peasants started to migrate. Additional factors resulting in fewer agricultural jobs include increased productivity after the implementation of the Household Responsibility System, increased access to fertilizer and pesticides, and advances in technology (W. Zhang 195).

In a 1995 study of migrant laborers conducted by Zhao, 8.4% of all sampled rural laborers did some migratory work (“Labor” 770). A separate study conducted in 1993 found that 92% of women and 20% of men reported their primary job to be farm or housework (W. Zhang 194). The Chinese government encourages rural residents to seek out nonfarm work to supplement their incomes. However, opportunities for nonfarm work in rural areas have declined over time, leaving labor migration as the only option for some (Zhao “Labor” 769). Today, there are an estimated 200 million migrant laborers, or roughly 25% of the rural population, proving that lack of work in the place of origin is an issue that affects many (Pai 2). Out-migration can have both positive and negative effects on a village. The inflow of remittances from migrant laborers can boost a village economically, but at the same time migration depletes a village of its young, dynamic, educated people, as those are the ones who are best fit for life in the city (Davin 230).

Money is a primary motive behind labor migration. Not because migrants are greedy, but simply because they want to improve their families' prospects and ensure well-being. In 2011, Ye and Pan found that saving money for a child's education is the main reason that many choose to migrate (368). In "Guitu lieche" 归途列车 (Last train home), a documentary following the story of a family from Sichuan province, the parents of the family feel they have no choice but to migrate because they cannot support their family on farm income alone. Facing the choice of whether or not to migrate puts parents in a difficult situation. Migration can bring more money, but it also often means family separation and unfavorable living conditions. The following is an excerpt from an interview with the mother in *Last Train Home*, as she talks about her decision to migrate.

90年的时候，经济还是有点紧张。第一次出去的时候，那时候我的孩子一岁。掉着眼泪出去的，也是不想走。那是没办法的情况下，也还是走了。。。意思就是身不由己，生活所迫。

In 1990 our family was not well-off economically. The first time I left, my baby was one year old. I could not stop crying and I didn't want to leave. But there was no way out of the situation. So I left. ... That's how life goes, sometimes you just have to do things you don't want to do (Fan).

In many cases, as long as there is a grandparent or other family member or neighbor to look after children, the parents will choose to migrate (Fan). The number of school-age children in a family actually has positive effects on labor migration. This may seem counter-intuitive, but as researched by Zhao, the reason is because the children can stay home to guard a family's land rights while also comprising the necessary labor force to farm the land ("Leaving" 284).

Migrant Laborers in the City

Between the 1990s and 2000s, all subgroups of the Chinese population benefitted roughly the same amount from China's economic progress that followed the Reform and Opening Up, but there still remains a significant gap between those who hold an urban *hukou* and those who do not (Treiman 45). Since the economic boom has been happening in the cities, that is where the majority of the investment and government support has flowed to; China's rural areas are existing in the shadow of this growth and are only receiving the overflow of the benefit. In order for China to successfully grow, equality is the key (H. Wang 231)

China's *hukou* system, also called the household registration system, was put in place to prevent overcrowding and rapid growth that could harm the environment and infrastructure of cities (Roberts). In order to receive the social benefits of living in a city, such as healthcare, education, and subsidized housing, one must possess a city *hukou* (Wong 35). The main ways a city *hukou* can be obtained by a rural citizen is by being accepted to university, marrying an urban resident, or getting a job that can offer a city *hukou*, generally a government or other high paying, white collar job. Both of these scenarios have a low likelihood of occurring for a rural person because of barriers to higher education. Thus, many labor migrants choose to live in the cities under the harsh conditions that are a result of not having a city *hukou*. According to economist Xin Meng, abolishing the household registration system will not only pave the road to equality nationwide, but also solve the problem of the labor shortage in coastal cities (Pai XV). In June 2013, the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission announced that it will gradually weaken the *hukou* policies to allow the orderly migration from rural to urban areas (Roberts). Only time can tell how this will be carried out and how effective it will be. However, acknowledgement of the problem by the government is a good first step.

As explained by Wong, Chinese migrant laborers are marginalized with respect to social life, living conditions, and overall treatment and discrimination (33). This marginalization is largely a result of the *hukou* system. Migrants often work long hours in hazardous conditions doing physically demanding jobs that others refuse. Migrants receive no social security, health insurance, or other employment benefits that urban residents are entitled to (Wong 34-35). China's floating population, another term for migrant laborers, face discrimination from urban residents, the government, and the media (Zhao "Labor" 767). Murphy states the migrant-urbanite relationship quite well: "The attitude of urbanites towards migrants is one of economic acceptance coupled with social rejection" (42). Migrants are welcomed because they are willing to do the work that no one else wants to do that can help the city prosper; yet, simultaneously they are shunned. For example, migrants are often stereotyped as being ignorant and responsible for an increase of crime in the cities. Many migrants receive verbal abuse from urbanites (Wong 36). It is easy to see that city conditions are not ideal for rural migrants. Furthermore, migrants not only endure worse conditions than city people, but they also make less money.

An urban resident earns, on average, 1.3 times more than a rural migrant in a Chinese city, even though urban residents work an average of 44 hours per week, while migrants average 69 hours per week (Demurger 617). This earnings gap, while seemingly unfair, is attributed to differences in education and experience. In the city, migrant workers have a comparative advantage with respect to self-employment and the private sector (Demurger 620). In Chinese cities, it is common to see street vendors selling fruit, food, and clothing, among other items; this is one large employment opportunity for rural migrants because it is relatively easy to enter and one can be one's own boss. However, self-employed workers may face other challenges that factory workers do not, such as finding housing; dormitory housing is supplied for most factory

workers (Fan). It seems that migrants are constantly faced with choosing the better of two bad situations. A 2001 film called “Shiqisui de danche” 十七岁的单车 (Beijing bicycle), by director Wang Xiaoshuai, describes the life and challenges of migrants in Beijing.

Beijing Bicycle is the story of a rural migrant, Gui, who moves to Beijing with his father. They open a convenience store there, which also serves as their place of residence. Gui gets a job as a bicycle courier, delivering packages around the city. After he works for a certain period of time, the bicycle that the company supplied to Gui is his to keep. The way Gui treats his bike, it is apparent that it is more than just a bike to him; it is his livelihood, pride and joy, and a symbol that he has risen above his former peasant status. Shortly after Gui starts working, his father says to him, “Let me tell you, the people in this city are very terrible... You can’t let people find out you are an outsider, you know that, right?” 我跟你说，这成里头的人坏的很 ...你不能让人家看出你是个外地人来，知道吧? (X. Wang). He says this because Gui’s father has experienced discrimination for being an outsider, and he knows that Gui will be looked down upon if it is known that he is not from the city. As mentioned previously, discrimination is a daily problem that migrants face in the city. Yet, migrant laborers have more to fear than just discrimination, as the movie also illustrates.

A significant character in *Beijing Bicycle* is a young woman who comes to Gui’s father’s store each day. She is always made up and dressed very beautifully, but hardly speaks and acts a bit conceited. Towards the end of the film it is revealed that she is actually a peasant housekeeper who wears her employer’s clothes while the employer is at work each day. She is immediately fired when she is exposed. This incident serves as an example to Gui of just how disposable peasants are in the city. *Beijing Bicycle* depicts the conditions of migrant life that are

unimaginable to outsiders and helps to reiterate the point that migrants living in Beijing are not living the same life as Beijing residents.

The migrant population may have some urban advantages over rural non-migrants, such as higher wages, living in an economically booming city, and experiencing new culture. However, migrants cannot be assumed to be experiencing the same life as urbanites, since they are denied many benefits of city life (Treiman 38). The most significant barrier to equality for migrants in the city is the Chinese government's *hukou* policy (Zhao "Labor" 779).

Education

Going to college and getting a white collar job in the city is considered the ideal social mobility for one's child. In the movie *Last Train Home*, the migrant mother explains to her son why it is important to do well in school. She says, "The only way for rural children to get out of here is to study hard and do well in school. Otherwise, if you stay here you will end up like us, and that's not OK." 农村的孩子只有读书才行，才能走出去。在家的话，就只能像我们这样出去打工，那样不行 (Fan). From this scene it is easy to see that a child's education is extremely important to a migrant parent, because the parent does not want the child to go through the same hardships, but rather rise above them. Thus, saving money for a child's education is a main reason that parents are willing to migrate and endure harsh conditions. Ironically, a child's school performance generally declines when parents leave (Ye and Pan 368). Having a labor migrant parent negatively affects a child's high school attendance; however the parent's remittances can partially make up for this damage (Hu 409).

According to Yi, an estimated 23% of students in China's rural areas drop out of school before the end of grade 9, the end of China's compulsory education (559). Poverty is a main reason for students dropping out: either they cannot afford the costs that accompany attending school or they need to work to contribute to their families' incomes (Yi 560). It is unfortunate that in many cases labor migration hinders a child's educational attainment because the parents are working hard for their families. Furthermore, if a child drops out of school early, he or she is likely to repeat the same situation as the parents rather than overcome it. Some migrants have learned the importance of an education the hard way, by struggling to read instructions or fill out job applications (Murphy 97). Murphy also reports cases of employers who use written examinations as a hiring method. Such exams may include material like the English alphabet, translating basic factory operation words, calculating fractions and basic reading comprehension (99). Migrants who encounter this type of situation can attest to the importance of education to their friends and families back home. However, even if one cannot pass a basic exam, there are plenty of employment opportunities at other factories, so it is likely that students will continue to drop out of school to head for the cities (Murphy 102).

Despite educational opportunity expansion in the 1990s, family background is still a determining factor of a child's school enrollment status. Junior high children in rural China have gained educational opportunities, yet at the same time, the urban-rural gap in high school attendance has increased (Wu 106). According to research by Treiman, from 1996 to 2008, the total number of years of education has increased for all population subgroups, but the gap between urban and rural citizens remains the same (39). This statistic supports the overall trend in China's urban-rural development gap: conditions are improving for rural citizens, but they are improving more rapidly for city dwellers, making equality across the country a difficult goal.

In addition to employment benefits, migrants are also denied access to compulsory education for their children. According to Wong, if children accompany their migrant parents to the city, their options are to pay tuition at a public school (tuition can be more than a parent's annual salary); obtain four certificates, costing over 200 *yuan* 元 each, from the local government documenting that the child may attend school (which is only attainable by 20-30 percent of the migrant population); pay tuition at a private school (it is often more affordable, but conditions are usually poor); or not attend school (36). In 2003, the Chinese government issued a document to expand school access for migrants. However, there is still no data available on effectiveness of this measure. Wong reports that the order has thus far been ineffective due to lack of enforcement by local governments (36).

If the children of migrant laborers accompany their parents to the city, they are affected equally by the *hukou* policy, as reinforced in the research of Liang and Chen. These researchers found that permanent migrant children (those with a city *hukou*) have the highest school enrollment rate of all children in China (96.56%); temporary migrants (those without a city *hukou*) who have lived in the city for less than one year have the lowest school enrollment rate (60%). Temporary migrants are only able to reach an enrollment rate equivalent to local city children after living in the city for four years (39). By the time enrollment rate reaches this level, there has likely been some lag in knowledge in the previous four years. These statistics show how devastating it is educationally to lack a city *hukou*. In addition, migrant children without an urban *hukou* have a lower school enrollment rate than their non-migrant counterparts (Liang and Chen 41). Since there is evidence that left behind children are academically disadvantaged and migrant children in cities have low enrollment, this shows that on the basis of education alone, labor migration has negative effects on children.

A 2010 study by Meyerhoefer and Chen found that having grandparents in the household lowers the educational attainment of children in general. This is attributed to the fact that children are more likely to be doing chores, especially girls; thus girls are more affected by the grandparent factor (390). Furthermore, the aforementioned researchers calculated and advised that reducing the annual cost of attendance by 168 *yuan* would completely offset the lag in girls' educational progress due to labor migration (393). However, it cannot simply be done, because many rural schools lack funding as it is. Lack of school funding seems to be at the center of multiple issues; costs of running a school are high and teachers' wages are often low, causing rural teachers to move to higher paying jobs, which all results in a low quality education for children (W. Zhang 206).

According to Astone and McLanahan, growing up in a single parent home has negative effects on a child's grade point average, school attendance, and educational attainment (316). Furthermore, children not living with both parents are more likely to disengage from school early (317). This study was conducted independently of Chinese labor migration, and found that in general, when children grow up without both parents for any reason there are negative consequences. However it is still accurate for left behind children. This point is reinforced by the character Qin's behavior in the documentary *Last Train Home*, which will later be discussed in detail.

Psychological Side Effects

As studied by Zhao, when migrant workers leave their family members behind, the emotional cost of labor migration increases because the comforts of family life are lost; regardless, many migrants persevere because they need the money earned in the city ("Labor"

778). However, for those who do not persevere, one main cause of return migration is the psychological costs of family separation. It was found that return migrants tend to be older, married, and have a non-migrant spouse (Zhao “Causes” 384). These cases of return migration show that kinship ties are still very important in Chinese rural society and are not forgotten after migration.

In 2009, a survey was conducted by Knight and Gunatilaka asking rural Chinese and rural migrants about their happiness. The results showed that migrants have 2.39 times more income, but are less happy than their rural counterparts (114). Reasons for unhappiness of non-migrants include low income and uncertainty about the future. However, contrary to the results, 56% of migrant respondents say that living in the city makes them happier (114). This shows the psychological conflict of perceived happiness. Researchers determined that migrants are less happy than they expected after migration because they were unable to form rational expectations about their urban life, mainly because they lacked necessary information (114). Factors preventing increased happiness for migrants include leaving children behind in the village, living away from their families, poor living conditions, and discrimination (Knight and Gunatilaka 122). While it is not a simple choice for most families, research suggests that all members would be happier if families could remain living together. Of migrants who have permanently returned to their home villages and been reunited with family members, some still express frustration over their inability to afford certain material goods. These returnees say that living in the city raised expectations of material goods and living standards, but failed to provide the money and resources to attain them (Murphy 219).

Besides unhappiness, living a marginalized life in the city can have other psychological side effects on migrant laborers including anxiety and depression (Wong 37). Yet the

psychological effects of migration not only affect the migrants themselves, but also their family members. In a study of left behind children, symptoms of depression and anxiety increased as the age at separation from parents decreased (Liu et al 2051). Male left behind children are more likely to smoke tobacco, consider suicide, and be overweight than their non-left behind counterparts in a rural township of Guangdong. Female left behind children are more likely to smoke tobacco, drink alcohol, be unhappy, think of planning suicide, and consider leaving home than their counterparts (Gao et al). Once again, in *Last Train Home*, Qin exhibited some of these psychological side effects of growing up without her parents.

It is evident that money is not the only factor that plays into the decision to migrate for work. For many migrants, the hardest part is being away from children and family members. Yet, even for those unmarried migrants and those without children, factors such as happiness and living conditions in the city can make migration difficult.

Parent-child Relationships

While it may seem intuitive that children would affect a parent's migration, Zhao found that the number of children in a family did not have significant negative impact on parents' initial migration decision ("Labor" 773). As explained previously, many parents migrate in order to make money to support their children. There is no doubt that it is difficult for parents to leave their children at home, but in many cases the parents feel that they have no choice, as is the case in *Last Train Home*, explained below. Although children may not affect a parent's outward labor migration, it has been found that children and family are a main factor that cause many migrants return home (Murphy 166). One returnee who became an entrepreneur in his home village shared with Murphy his realization on the subject of migration and family by posing the question, what

is the use of all the years spent working in the city if the next generation is not being nurtured? (169).

The film *Last Train Home* follows the true story of a family from Sichuan province whose parents migrate to Guangdong for work. The parents chose to migrate because they could not earn enough money to support their family by working only on the farm. They migrated before their daughter Qin even started school. At the time of filming, the family has two children who stay in the village with their grandmother. All three of them work on the farm. Many of Qin's high school classmates have already dropped out of school to go to work in the cities. The mother says that her only wish is that her children study hard so that they can make something of themselves when they grow up. Qin starts rebelling against her parents; she thinks that all they care about is money. Qin drops out of high school and heads to Guangdong to work in a separate factory from her parents. She says it is better than school because of the freedom. Her parents repeatedly urge her to go back to school. Qin later gets a job as a waitress in a nightclub in Shenzhen. Her parents are very worried about her, but they recognize that she is almost grown up and they can't do anything to force her to go back home. In the end, the mother decides to quit work and go back home to live with her son so that he won't drop out and turn out to resent his parents like Qin did. This case of return migration for the well-being of a child reinforces Murphy's research, as explained previously.

It is very clear that Qin is unhappy and becomes irreverent of her parents because she neither obeys nor respects her parents. Her situation is not unique. According to research on left behind children conducted by Ye and Pan, after a child's father migrates, the child tends to have a diminished impression of him, and therefore becomes less respectful (371). This point is perfectly illustrated in "Xiang Ri Kui" 向日葵 (Sunflower), described below. In Western society,

children are often separated from their fathers because of divorce. In China, child-parent separation in recent history has often been from causes other than divorce. The two stories below give examples of parent-child separation in China. They both involve re-education through labor³.

In the film *Sunflower*, the father is sent to re-education through labor when his son is just a toddler (Y. Zhang). Upon the father's return, the boy is nearly 10 years old. The father expects his son to treat him with respect, but since the son feels like he is a stranger, he won't respect him. Throughout the whole film, the father and son have strong disagreements and the father never figures out how to gain the son's respect. This story is an important example of the devastation that separation can have on a parent-child relationship. The son was never filial to his father because they did not have a proper father-son bond and the father did not act in a deserving way. The term *xiao* 孝 "filiality" is commonly used in the context of Confucianism to describe family relationships. A filial son respects and obeys his parents as well as all elder relatives. There are also unfilial children, including Qin in *Last Train Home*. A poor parent-child relationship can often cause a child to become unfilial.

"Guilai de Moshengren" 归来的陌生人 (The homecoming stranger), a short story written by Bei Dao, is another strong example of how separation can destroy a parent-child relationship and drive children to become unfilial. In this short story, the father is wrongly accused of a crime and is sent to re-education through labor (Bei Dao). When the mother tells Lanlan, the daughter who is in her twenties, that her father is about to return, they have the following conversation.

³ Re-education through labor, or reform through labor, was a correctional labor camp system intended for minor offenders that was established in 1957 (Beech).

“他？”

“明天到，下午四点五十。”

我转向自己的房间，“我不去。”

“兰兰，”妈妈提高了声调，“他毕竟是你的父亲啊！”

“父亲？”我猛地转过身，喃喃自语，仿佛被这个词的含义吓坏了。随着一阵不规则的心跳，我明白，是旧日伤口上的肠线一一绷断了。

“Him?”

“He arrives tomorrow at 4:50 in the afternoon.”

I turned towards my room. “I shan’t go.”

“Lanlan,” Mama raised her voice, “He is your father, after all!”

“Father?” I muttered, turning away fiercely, as if overcome with fear at the meaning of this word. From an irregular spasm in my heart, I realized it was stitches from the old wound splitting open one by one (Bei Dao).

This dialogue shows not only that a parent’s absence can cause permanent damage to a child, but also that children can lose respect for an absent parent. In Lanlan’s case, she doesn’t even want to call him ‘father’. Lanlan grows to resent her father and when he returns she sees him as an intruder in her home. After her father returns, Lanlan starts making excuses so she can leave the house early and return late so as to avoid being around her father. Eventually they talk and reach a mutual understanding, but it seems there will always be distance between them.

As portrayed in *Last Train Home*, “The Homecoming Stranger”, and *Sunflower*, disruption of the family structure has negative effects on parenting practices as well as on behavior (Astone and McLanahan 317). These stories give the reader/viewer a special insight because they are shown from the point of view of the child. Similarly, Ye and Pan conducted a study of 400 children who live separately from their migrant parents, which includes data as well as interviews. They found that when parents are away at work, parent-child contact is sparse.

Roughly 50% of parents only come home once every 10-12 months. (369). When they have opportunities to talk on the phone, parents generally only ask about a child's school work and rarely ask about their feelings (Ye and Pan 371). Hence, many parents are ignorant of the child's emotional needs. Interviewed children say they feel lonely, sad, and as if their parents don't care (Ye and Pan 372). Below are some of their stories:

I'm not as happy as before [my parents' migration]. I don't want to talk with them when I'm in trouble and that makes me even lonelier. I don't even want to speak to them because it seems that they won't care about my troubles or feelings (371).

[My migrant parents and I] we have little emotional communication. I don't dare to or even want to talk to them about what happened to me. Gradually we don't understand each other and that's how our emotional gap appeared (371).

I'm always wondering why my other classmates can have parental love while I can't. This question drove me mad and I feel so bored with life. My parents have been working in the city for 11 years and they only came back during Spring Festival. Sometimes I think my dad won't want me anymore (373).

These are only the stories of a few left behind children in rural China, and undoubtedly there are many more just like them. Just as in the films discussed above, the children become unfilial and resent their parents. When children grow up away from their parents, it is hard for them to have a good relationship and stable family structure. In the case where children are the migrants and parents stay behind, Murphy suggests that after children return home their relationships with parents will change (211). This is often because children are exposed to more independence in the city and also because children who have migrated for work are less dependent on parental income and the family's farmland. It was a common viewpoint of elderly villagers interviewed by Murphy that in the first year children are away from home they still keep ties and consider the village home; but by the third year children have lived in the city they

don't recognize their parents anymore (213). Obviously this is a figurative remark made about young migrants, but looking at it through the lens of filiality, it can be interpreted very literally. The longer children are away from their parents, the less involved they become in caring for their parents, causing them to become less filial. Regardless of the reason for separation, it is obvious that extended time apart causes changes, usually negative, in a parent-child relationship.

Marriage

In a traditional Chinese family, since the household was male-dominated, the primary relationship in the family was between the father and son. However, in the past few decades women have increased their labor contribution, both on the farm and by migrating, which has in turn increased their negotiating power on household matters (W. Zhang 198). This has caused the husband-wife relationship to take over as the primary household relationship. It has also been found that social and economic factors have stronger effects on gender relationships than tradition does (W. Zhang 209). Women holding more dominant positions than previously has caused changes in the way marriages are arranged.

The traditional Chinese family structure is patrilocal, meaning it was customary for a daughter to marry out to a nearby village and become part of her husband's family, thus continuing the male family line within the village (H. Zhang 640). Hence, it used to be common to have single surname villages, where everyone was related. In addition, traditional marriages⁴ were usually arranged by parents and other family members, giving the bride and groom little to no choice in the matter. This structure is clearly illustrated within the novel *Baotown*; this story

⁴ *Traditional marriage* refers to a marriage that was arranged by parents and family members, in which the bride and groom usually had no input. In planning a wedding, everything was very auspicious. The marriage involved a dowry and bride price (W. Zhang 200-203). After being married, the bride went to live in her husband's home and became a part of his family, essentially no longer a part of her parent's family.

also shows that when a woman married into a village, she often gave up her name and was simply referred to by her relations (A. Wang). Since it was assumed that all daughters would marry out, daughters were often not viewed as permanent family members. For this reason, some families saw education costs spent on daughters as a waste of money, since their family would never reap the benefits of a daughter's education (Bossen 104). This could be one attributing factor to girls' lagging educational progress.

Traditional marriage customs remained in many rural areas even after the Cultural Revolution. However, once labor migration became widespread in the 1990s, it had a noticeable impact on the marriage and family structures of villages (Murphy 205). Since young migrants are able to earn more money in the city, this can give them leverage against their parents on issues involving personal choice, freedoms, and marriage (Murphy 205). In some situations, this allows young people to opt out of a traditional arranged marriage. Working and living in a city allows some young people to search for and find their own spouses; furthermore, being far from home and one's parents can make a traditional marriage less plausible (H. Zhang 639). Even though there is more freedom, many have realized it can be difficult for a migrant worker to find a spouse in the city because many jobs are segregated by gender (Murphy 204). Yet despite all the evidence of freedom and socialization in new circles while in the city, some scholars argue that the *hukou* system eventually forces young people to return to their villages and carry out a traditional marriage (Murphy 204). This adds to the list of ways that a rural *hukou* can restrict someone.

Family Structure

As explained in *The Classic of Family Reverence*, filiality is at the center of the traditional Confucian family structure. It explains how each member of society should act in order to be most filial. A son should be a respectful, obedient and loyal servant to his parent, elder siblings, and elder family members (Rosemont and Ames). The following is an excerpt from *The Classic of Family Reverence* dictating how filial sons should act towards their parents:

子曰：“孝子之事亲也，居则致其敬，养则致其乐，病则致其忧，丧则致其哀，祭则致其严”

The Master said, “Filial children in serving parents in their daily lives show them real respect, in tending to their needs and wants strive to bring them enjoyment, in caring for them in sickness reveal their apprehension, in mourning for them express their grief, and in sacrificing to them show true veneration” (Rosemont and Ames).

After parents pass away, children should observe an extensive mourning period, some historical records say 3 years (Brown 24). A filial son should remember and worship ancestors by burning incense and preserving rituals. Confucius taught that treating ancestors well is imperative because they are the only connection between those on Earth and the gods. If one’s ancestors are angered, they will not communicate well wishes to the gods and the descendant on Earth will suffer misfortunes. Thus, one of the most important aspects of filiality is to have many sons so that the family line can be carried on and there will always be someone to care for the ancestors (Rosemont and Ames).

When family members migrate, it changes the lives of all other family members. When the middle generation migrates, grandparents are often left to look after children. Ye and Pan report that parental migration results in an increased work load for children including farm work, household chores, and caring for the elderly who are not in good health (361). This results in less time spent on school work, as well as not having a tutor because most grandparents have very

low education level. The story below of Chen Yan, a 13-year-old girl in Daidian Village, Gushi County of Henan Province, is just one example, but surely it is not unique.

Her parents took her little brother to Shanghai where they had been working for years, leaving her living with her grandma. Grandma was 74 years old and her health was not good. She had weak eyesight and her low blood pressure always made her dizzy when doing any farm work. As a result, Chen Yan took on most of the housework and the care of her grandma. She had to balance housework and schoolwork so that in many cases she took a leave in PE lessons and rushed home to wash clothes. She spent lots of time on housework after school every day and could only have time to rest and study after herding, cleaning, carrying water, and cooking (Ye and Pan 366).

As we have seen, migration may bring money, but it also creates troubles for all involved. Whether or not children accompany their parents, they face obstacles. The rural governments support migration because it boosts their economies, but this is without consideration of other factors. Migrating while leaving one's family behind is costly to Chinese society because marriages are less stable under separation and children's welfare and educational status suffer (Zhao "Labor" 780). These points have been reiterated in each film and case discussed.

While filiality is generally considered as respect towards one's parents, it also extends to respecting all family members. In the novel *Baotown*, one of the main characters is Dregs, a young boy. Bao Fifth Grandfather is an elder family member who has no direct descendants and is in very poor health, so he relies on a small stipend from the government to survive. In one excerpt, Dregs proves his filiality:

“来俺家吃吧！”

鲍五爷也不推了。吃长了，他大就都逗捞渣：“你老叫五爷来家吃，俺家粮食不够吃，咋办？”

捞渣认认真真地回答,“我少吃一张煎饼、少喝一碗稀饭, 可管?”(A. Wang 287)
“Come eat at our house!”

Bao Fifth Grandfather did not refuse. After he had eaten many meals there, Dregs' father said to Dregs, “Your grandfather has been eating here often, what will we do if we don't have enough food to feed ourselves?”

Dregs answered earnestly, “I will eat one less flatbread and one less bowl of porridge if Fifth Grandfather can continue eating here” (A. Wang 67-68).

Dregs is showing selflessness by considering his grandfather's needs above his own, even when the rest of the family doesn't care much about the grandfather.

The film “Xizao” 洗澡 (Shower), directed by Zhang Yang, also shows a strong case of filiality. The eldest son, Daming, returns home to Beijing to visit his father and younger brother, Erming, who run a bathhouse (Y. Zhang). After realizing that his father and brother may need him for longer than a few days, Daming takes an extended leave from his business job in the southern city of Shenzhen. Daming's father passes away unexpectedly, leaving Daming to decide how to care for Erming, who has a mental handicap and is unable to live alone. Daming realizes that it is his filial duty to take care of Erming, even if his wife doesn't agree. Thus, by putting his brother's wellbeing above his wife and career, Daming proves that he is a filial son, because he is caring for his brother and fulfilling his father's wishes.

Labor migration does not only occur within the borders of China. Many Chinese migrate, both legally and illegally, to Europe and the United States. According to Pai, those who go illegally must pay \$20,000-\$40,000 to a smuggler who arranges the journey (229). This money is generally borrowed and then repaid after working in the destination. However, just as in China, the working conditions for migrants are not always safe or ideal. In 2004, a young worker named

Zhifang died while working⁵ and left his parents with over \$31,000 in debt from the costs of his migration (Pai 253).

A more fortunate story is that of a migrant named Cai. After a lengthy migration process, Cai eventually arrived in London where he found work in the construction industry. He had been working there for seven years and earned enough money to have a three storey home built for his family back in China. The only problem is that since he migrated illegally, he cannot return to China. Thus, he was unable to attend his parents' funerals (Pai 267). It is easy to see how family relationships can struggle as a result of transnational migration, especially the illegal cases where families do not reunite for many years. This can cause troubles for married couples as well as parent-child relationships, as discussed earlier. In addition, when adult children are unable to attend their parents' funerals, this makes the traditional Confucian funeral rituals, including mourning and burning incense, impossible. But even worse, these migrants are not able to care for their parents in their old age preceding death. Caring for ones elderly parents is one of the important pillars of filiality.

Some desperate families believe that the only way for their children to have a better life is for them to migrate abroad alone. Smugglers arrange for the adolescents to travel to their destination, generally in the UK, with an adult, but once they arrive the adult disappears. This makes the child appear to be an orphan and thus he or she can claim asylum. All of these "orphans" end up getting taken into the social services system (Pai 270). Other families choose to arrange migration through a legal agent. For over \$15,000 the company will arrange for young people in their late teens to early twenties to study in Britain. This fee covers all travel expenses

⁵ In 2004, 22 Chinese migrants drowned while digging clams in England's Morecambe Bay because they were directed to work in unsafe conditions (Pai 247).

along with tuition and visa fees for the first year (Pai 257). In the case of educational migration, students have documents and thus are able to return to see their families, as well as obtain legal employment abroad. Some asylum seeking orphans are granted refugee status, but others eventually disappear from the welfare system and presumably seek undocumented employment. These people may never be able to see their families again, which obviously disrupts the family structure.

Conclusion

The present Chinese family structure has deviated from the traditional Confucian structure in multiple ways. When parents migrate to cities and leave children behind, children often resent parents and feel unloved. Upon parents' return to the village, children tend not to obey and not to respect their parents. This conclusion is supported by the children interviewed by Ye and Pan, and the children in *Last Train Home*, *Sunflower*, and "The Homecoming Stranger". Obedience and respect are two important filial qualities. Furthermore, when parents migrate they leave the grandparents to care for young children, which, for grandparents in poor health, may be difficult. Thus, it leaves the burden of caring for the elderly on the shoulders of young children who should be focusing on school, which in turn can hinder academic performance. Caring for elderly parents is an important filial duty. By leaving, migrants are forgoing this aspect of filiality. Through this process, not only has the family structure changed, but so has the role of children. Some children are forced to take on early workloads and are not allowed the proper time to devote to school. It should be emphasized that labor migrants are not bad people intentionally trying to destroy the traditional Confucian family structure. Rather, they are people trying to do the best thing for their families, given the situation they are in. Those faced with the

decision to migrate or live in severe poverty could just as easily have remained in their villages and preserved a traditional family structure. However, doing so would likely mean that they could not afford for their children to attend high school. Staying home would mean they could be present in their elderly parents' lives, but might also mean that they could not afford necessary care for their elderly parents. When deciding whether to migrate, it seems there is never an option that fully satisfies. Taking a different perspective, however, some might consider sacrificing the comforts of home life to go work in unfavorable conditions in order to support one's family to be a very filial act. Just as the mother in *Last Train Home* attests, deciding to leave family members behind is a difficult thing to do, but sometimes it feels like there is no other option.

It is not only internal migration that affects the family structure; transnational migration harms it just as much. For those who go illegally and without papers, they are not legally allowed to return to China. This causes them not only to be unable to take care of their elderly parents and unable to attend their parents' funerals, but also causes them to be absent from their own children's lives. Mourning the death of one's parents is a large part of being a filial son, and cannot be done properly in absentia. Some illegal migrants may never be reunited with their families again. This makes keeping a traditional family structure nearly impossible.

China's economic growth has brought development and prosperity to many, but also has neglected a large majority of the rural population. It has become increasingly popular for rural Chinese to take matters into their own hands and migrate to supplement their incomes. However, this has not come without large costs to the family structure, especially to parent-child relationships. Likely, the only way this problem will be resolved is through government policy changes. However, that is not to say that the government is at fault for the current situation.

China is currently stuck in transition, but also plagued by overpopulation, making the solution to this migrant labor issue an unclear one. One option would be granting urban household registrations to rural families so that all can migrate together. No one can easily predict if or when a policy change might happen. There have been recent changes to a few Chinese policies, such as the relaxation of the One Child Policy and the plans to abolish re-education through labor camps. If these small changes are any indication of a general shift towards more reasonable policy, then there may be a chance of eventual changes to the *hukou* regulations, or other policies, in favor of China's rural citizens.

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