1 Understanding the Lives of Left-Behind Children in Rural China

Imagine as we live our comfortable lives in affluent societies that children elsewhere live separated from their parents because the parents feel compelled to migrate so that their children might live a decent life and ‘get ahead’ through education. In the 2010s, hundreds of millions of children from across developing countries – or the ‘majority world’ – and tens of millions of children in China lived separated from parents who worked in faraway places. Of course, non-migrant parents also worked long hours, locally in fields and factories or on construction sites, and they too wanted their children to thrive. But children whose parents had migrated without them were noteworthy because they only saw their parents once or twice a year, if that.

Zhangyong was one of these ‘left-behind’ children. I first met him in 2011 when he was eleven years old. He lived in one of a row of dilapidated single-storey red-brick houses in a village in Eastern County, Anhui province, in inland east China. Zhangyong was cared for by his Yeye or grandfather, a seventy-four-year-old with large gaps in his broad smile. At that time, Zhangyong and Yeye both complained that the roof of the house leaked when it rained, but they thought that life was otherwise ‘okay’. During the week Zhangyong ate his meals with Yeye, cycling home from school for lunch at 11:20 a.m. and dinner at 4:20 p.m. Yeye would often ask Zhangyong whether he had done his home-work, and Zhangyong would say ‘yes’ with such an impish grin that Yeye could never quite know if he was telling the truth or tricking him. In any event, they both knew that as an illiterate person, Yeye had no way of checking.

Zhangyong told me that as much as he liked to visit his parents in Kunshan during the summer holidays, he preferred to stay in the countryside. This was not only because he felt closer to Yeye who had ‘raised’ him since he was a baby but also because his mother would lose her temper at his incorrectly written characters and beat him. Even so, Zhangyong appreciated that she cared about his studies and that she entrusted migrant relatives to bring him presents such as pens and books on their visits back to the countryside. He was also grateful that his parents ‘supported’ him economically. Zhangyong expressed the idea of being ‘raised’ and ‘supported’ with the Chinese word ‘yang’, which refers to one person’s material and practical nurturing of another person.
I met Zhangyong and Yeye again two and a half years later. The day was hot. Grain, soya bean branches and corn dried in the sun while harvested fields smouldered. Yeye was wearing a blue Mao jacket and had just returned from a half-hour cycle ride to the township on his trailered tricycle to deliver his grain to the purchasing depot. Zhangyong now spent hardly any time at home with Yeye. The boy had just entered first grade at one of the several private boarding junior high schools that had sprung up in the county seat during the late 2000s. Zhangyong’s school consisted of rows of red six-storey buildings. On Saturday mornings before 7:30 Zhangyong was met at the school gates by Yeye because the teachers allowed students to leave the premises only if an adult came to collect them. The pair took three buses to get back to the village. Zhangyong then returned to school by 4:00 p.m. on Sundays.

At this second visit, Zhangyong was wearing a fluorescent pink top with a silhouetted dance figure superimposed on the front, which contrasted with his quiet demeanour. He had chosen the top himself, buying it from a stall near to the school with money sent by his parents. When I asked him about his new school, he told us that he had implored his parents to come to this private school after hearing about it from others. His parents had agreed, telling him: ‘We are seldom at home so we will feel more at ease with you at that school.’ Just like at our meeting in 2011, Zhangyong again told us that his biggest wish in life was to get into university because that would help him to earn ‘big money’ by, for instance, becoming a company boss. Meanwhile, his second and third wishes in life were to live in a good house and to live happily with all his family, including his parents and Yeye.

On National Day 2013 I visited Zhangyong’s parents in their sparse grey flat on the outskirts of Kunshan city. They were both aged in their late thirties. His mother worked in a seat belt factory and his father worked in a factory using a spanner to bolt on screws. They put in ten-hour shifts at least six days per week. His mother confessed that when her son was younger, he used to be afraid of her because she had been extremely strict with him. But now she recognised that putting too much pressure on him could be harmful. ‘A boy in my sister’s village jumped into the river because he had too much pressure to study’, she explained. She also realised that if her son was to succeed in life he would need to exercise self-discipline, which she tried to foster in him. That summer Zhangyong visited Kunshan for two weeks. One morning before his mother went to work, she had left a note for him on the television set, which read: ‘Your parents won’t always be with you to guan you, so you need to proactively guan yourself.’ Guan is a Chinese word that means ‘to control’, ‘to govern’ and ‘to care for’ and often refers to parents’ or teachers’ guidance of children. Zhangyong’s mother was pleased to return home in the evening to find her son had drawn up a daily timetable that included study, limited television watching, housework and more study.
Zhangyong’s days in the boarding school in the county seat – beginning at 6:00 in the morning and ending at 8:00 in the evening – reassured his parents that he would make the best use of his time while affording him little opportunity to ‘waste’ his life or literally ‘turn fallow’ (huangdiao) by playing games in internet bars, as so many ‘left-behind’ children reputedly did. At the same time, by paying 16,000 yuan per year in private boarding school fees, they demonstrated their fulfilment of their parental obligations to him and compelled him to be diligent. ‘He can never say that we didn’t give him every opportunity to study his way out’, his mother claimed. For his part, Zhangyong understood that his parents were investing lots of money in his future.

This book explores the lives of children like Zhangyong, who lived in rural China separated from either one or both of their parents because of labour migration. It draws on the interviews I conducted in 2010 and 2011 in four counties located in Anhui and Jiangxi, two major labour-exporting provinces in China’s east and southeast interior. I carried out interviews with 109 children alongside separate matching interviews with the children’s at-home parents or grandparent caregivers. The children were aged nine to seventeen, with a median age of twelve. Seventy-nine of the children had at least one parent who was a migrant while ninety-three had at least one parent who was or who had been a migrant after they started school. The book also draws on my follow-up interviews with twenty-five of the children and their caregivers in 2013, 2014 and/or 2015. The first time I interviewed them, these children were in primary school (usually ages seven to eleven years), and by the time of my final interview with them they were in junior high school (usually by age fifteen) or else they had started senior high school or vocational school. My interviews with the migrant parents of twenty of the children and with twenty rural teachers provide further insights.

I conducted the interviews over the course of twenty-four weeks between 2010 and 2015. For all the interviews with the children and for most of the interviews with the adults, I was accompanied by a Chinese research assistant from a provincial tertiary institution. Different research assistants accompanied me to different interviews in different places at different points in time, with a total of seven people helping me over the course of five fieldwork trips. The purpose of the research assistants’ presence in the interviews was to help put the children at ease; to follow good practice when interviewing children by having two adults present; to facilitate my integration into the fieldwork sites; to smooth my communications with local officials and school officials; and to help me understand what I heard in the interviews, especially when people spoke in local dialect. In this book, I mostly use plural pronouns such as ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘us’ to signal the research assistants’ presence and help in the interviews. I discuss details of the data collection and data analysis in the research methods appendix at the end of the book. In several places in this book I also
refer to a survey conducted in two townships in each of the four fieldwork counties, two in Anhui and two in Jiangxi in 2010. Details of the stratified random sampling procedure and sample characteristics for this survey are available in Zhou, Murphy and Tao (2014). The survey, from hereon the ‘2010 Summer Survey’, had a final sample of 1,010 children in grades 4, 6 and 8 (typically aged ten, twelve and fourteen years) and was matched by a survey of 1,000 caregivers.

This book uses the fieldwork material to address several gaps in the literature on children and migration. Notably, as several scholars observe, across the ‘majority world’ children sit at the heart of their parents’ migration projects, but their viewpoints, experiences and agency – that is, their capacity to act and to make their own choices – have not been adequately researched (Dobson, 2009; Gardner, 2012; Zhang, 2015). The absence of children’s voices in research on migration reflects a wider absence of children from sociological scholarship that persisted into the 1980s and 1990s (Thorne, 1987; Milkie, Simon and Powell, 1997; Qvertrop, 2009). After the 2000s, though, social scientists increasingly recognised that, just as gender is a social category, so age is too, with people’s position in the life course influencing their viewpoints, aspirations and agency (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe, 2003; Thorne, 2004).

In the late 1990s and 2000s, a ‘new social studies of childhood’ flourished. Drawing inspiration from Philippe Ariès’s (1965) landmark argument that childhood is a historical creation of fifteenth-century Europe, interdisciplinary studies emerged illustrating the heterogeneity of childhoods across different historical periods and cultural contexts, and demonstrating that children are social actors rather than just pre-social adults-in-the-making (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Katz, 2004; Tisdall and Punch, 2012). Concurrently, a burgeoning stream of research examined the interconnections between mobility and children’s everyday lives. In prioritising children’s viewpoints rather than adults’ viewpoints, these studies offer fresh perspectives on globalisation, migration and family reproduction (Katz, 2004; Dobson, 2009; Coe, 2012; Gardner, 2012; Punch, 2012; Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Coe, 2014).

Pioneering exceptions notwithstanding (e.g. Fog Olwig, 1999; Parreñas, 2005; Dreby, 2010; Ye, 2011; Ye and Pan, 2011; Coe, 2012; Coe, 2014; Hoang et al., 2015), though, most extant literature on children and migration focuses on the children who migrate, with few studies examining the experiences of left-behind children (Toyota, Yeoh and Nguyen, 2007; Nobles, 2011). When left-behind children do feature in migration studies research, they are seldom asked about their experiences (Graham and Jordan, 2011; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011). Moreover, research among children living in the ‘majority world’ concentrates on children in Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia, while children in China are largely overlooked (Zhang, 2015). Meanwhile, the experiences of children left behind in circumstances of internal migration
1.1 Striving in Context

receive much less attention than children whose parents migrate transnation-
ally, usually to more prosperous countries (Lu, 2012). China offers an es-
pecially illuminating case for studying children’s experiences of migration
because of the vast numbers of families affected, the pervasive influence of
an authoritarian Party-state on capital owners and the market, a precipitous fall
in family size over the past four decades and unique gender relations arising
from the intersection of a patrilineal family system, the Party-state and the
socialist market economy.

1.1 Striving in Context

In this book I use striving as the lens through which to interpret my observa-
tions about the lives of the left-behind children I met in four fieldwork counties
in Anhui and Jiangxi. I view children who had at least one migrant parent as the
members of multilocal families1 – families with members split across two or
more locations – with all the family members motivated by a striving ethos.
I see the migrants’ labour in the cities, the non-migrant family members’
domestic chores in the village and the children’s study all as types of work
underpinned by aspirations to bring about a better life for the family members,
with work plus aspiration constituting striving.

My approach heeds many scholars’ stance that children’s study constitutes
‘work’ in the sense of being purposeful activity that generates value (Field,
Concurrently, I recognise that families’ care practices – and the gendered and
generational relations these practices express – are not just shaped by but also
constitute wider political and economic forces (Katz, 2004). Indeed, it is
through the different forms of work – labouring for income (production),
domestic care work (social reproduction) and study – that different family
members, including children, fulfil their relational obligations to each other. At
the same time, I note that conventional boundaries between production and
social reproduction dissolve because both types of work support the upbringing
and education of children (Locke, Seeley and Rao, 2013). Striving thereby
connects ‘work’ and ‘aspiration’ to family relationships.

In formulating a lens of ‘striving’ to orient the analysis, I knit together
selected strands from different literatures. Specifically, I cull from literature
on three broad topics, all of which highlight that human agency must be
interpreted within its historical, institutional, and sociocultural context, and in
relation to wider political and economic structures. I draw on subfields of

1 ‘Multilocal families’ includes ‘transnational families’ with families split across two or more
countries and ‘translocal families’ with families split across two or more locations within
a country.
literatures that cover (1) adult–child relationships; (2) international and internal migration and multilocal families; and (3) Bourdieusian analyses of human struggle with special reference to child-raising, ‘unequal childhoods’ and education.

My understanding of adult–child relationships adopts the view from the life-course literature that lives are lived interdependently, and that children’s agency and subjective well-being are relational – that is, they are realised through relationships. Meanwhile, adult–child ‘linked lives’ unfold within certain historical and institutional contexts, with subjective life accounts in turn elucidating these wider contexts (Elder, 1985, 1998; King and Elder, 1995; Punch, 2002a, 2002b; Locke and Lloyd-Sherlock, 2011). I also consult an ecological literature on child development, which overlaps with ‘linked lives’ research (also Elder, 1974, and Elder and Rockwell, 1978 cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 226–291; Booth, 2003). An ecological approach situates dyadic or triadic adult–child relationship within a matrix of inter-relations that radiate outwards ‘like a set of Russian dolls’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 3). These inter-relations extend from the dyads or triads out to ever looser institutional arenas including networks of kin, friendship groups, schools, hospitals and the media; outwards to macro-settings that a child may never enter but that may still influence their life; and outwards still to a ‘macro-system’, which is ‘an overarching pattern of ideology or organisation of social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 8). In this approach, the interplay between agency and structure/context involves a ‘person’s evolving conception of their . . . environment and their relationship to it as well as their growing capacity to discover, sustain or alter its properties’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 9). This resonates with some sociologists’ observation.

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Figure 1.1 The concept of ‘striving’
that children’s agency is ‘thicker’ in some arenas and ‘thinner’ in others (Klocker, 2007 and Robson, Bell and Klocker, 2007 cited in Tisdall and Punch, 2012: 255).

In understanding left-behind children’s linked lives I also draw from scholarship on transnational and domestic migration and multilocal families. This literature demonstrates that people’s migration projects are motivated largely by their aspirations for their families’ reproduction. It further reveals that gendered and generational relations within families mediate different family members’ ‘work’ contributions as they strive for a better life for the family (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Orellana, Thorne, and Chee et al., 2001; Schmalzbauer, 2004; Parreñas, 2005; Schamlzbauer, 2005; Schmalzbauer, 2008; Boehm, Hess and Coe et al., 2011; Fan, 2008; Dreby, 2010; Hoang and Yeoh, 2011; Nobels, 2011; Locke, Seeley and Rao, 2013; Montes, 2013; Choi and Peng, 2016; Jacka, 2018). Concurrently, this literature shows that social constructions of motherhood and fatherhood profoundly shape all family members’ experiences of migration, including the children’s experiences (Schamlzbauer, 2005: 3), but as mentioned, children’s experiences await a fuller exploration in the literature.

A stream of this migration studies literature uses the sociologist Mike Douglass’s concept of ‘global house-holding’. Research applying this concept highlights how in different cultural, social and institutional contexts, households respond to structural pressures arising from globalisation by flexibly reconfiguring their members’ different work and care contributions across space, adapting their gendered and generational relationships in the process (Douglass, 2006; Jacka, 2012; Douglass, 2014; Nguyen and Locke, 2014). Locke, Seeley and Rao (2013) recommend that researchers combine a house-holding approach with a life-course perspective, noting that the latter’s attention to ‘linked lives’ fits well with the relational motivations of migrants and their families. Meanwhile, Jacka (2018) observes that along with changes in political economy and culture – including changes driven by migration and changes concurrent with but independent of migration – aspirations for family reproduction, mobility and ‘distinction’ change too, continually reconfiguring multilocal family relations and aspirations.

Bourdieu’s analysis of human struggle and class reproduction proves instructive for understanding both migration and striving (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2000; Bourdieu, 2010). Bourdieu explains that what people aspire to most in life is recognition, so they struggle to be seen as more worthy than others by trying to obtain and command certain capacities and properties or ‘capitals’ (Atkinson, 2015). The struggle for recognition entails work. Meanwhile, reflecting influences from Marx, work is integral to Bourdieu’s idea of capital in the sense that ‘capital is labor accumulated’, and when capital is possessed ‘by . . . [private agents it] enables them to appropriate social energy
in the form of reified or living labor’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 241). In Bourdieu’s framework, capital refers to: economic capital – money and property; cultural capital – including embodied capital such as knowledge and refinement, cultural property such as books and artefacts, and institutionalised cultural capital such as credentials; and social capital – or social contacts. Concurrently, Bourdieu notes that under certain conditions, one form of capital can be converted into another (Bourdieu, 1986; Atkinson, 2015).

A Bourdieusian approach sees people as struggling for recognition within overlapping ‘social fields’ of unequal power relations that include economic fields (e.g. labour markets), cultural fields (e.g. the education system) and local fields (e.g. dense intimate social networks such as families), all of which influence what forms of capital people deem to be valuable and desirable, as well as how these forms of capital are distributed. Meanwhile, different scales of value coalesce, with schools being an instance of an institution in which systems of value operating on global, national and family scales intersect (Kipnis, 2009). Bourdieu’s concept of habitus offers particular insight into ‘striving’ by bridging agency and structure/context in understanding what individuals struggle for, why and how. Habitus refers to individuals’ durable dispositions, inclinations, lifestyles and expectations arising from their adaptations to their circumstances, such that their social position within overlapping fields of unequal power relations become internalised and embodied, influencing how they perceive and act in and on the world (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2000; Bourdieu, 2010; Atkinson, 2015).

Some scholars use the idea of ‘cultural repertoires’ to reconcile structure/context and agency slightly differently (e.g. Lareau, 2003; Coe, 2014; Lan, 2018). Inspired by Swidler (1986) among others, Coe defines ‘cultural repertoire’ as ‘a body or collection of practices, knowledges and beliefs that allows people to imagine what is possible, expect certain things and value certain goals’ (Coe, 2014: 15–16). The idea of ‘repertoires’ resembles ‘habitus’ in that it refers to a set of perceptions, dispositions and actions that predisposes a person to act in certain ways. But ‘repertoires’ differs from ‘habitus’ in highlighting the multiple cultural resources and options that individuals can discuss and choose from as they pursue their ‘strategies’ (Coe, 2014: 36). Swidler defines ‘strategies’ as ‘a general way of organising action’ or as the ‘larger assemblages’ to which action belongs, referencing Bourdieu’s observation that ‘the habitus provides resources for constructing diverse lines of action’ (Swidler, 1986: 276–277). Coe’s (2014) use of ‘repertoires’ enables her to reveal the malleability of people’s ideas about parental love and care in ‘scattered’ Ghanaian families.

Literature on child-raising, socialisation and education also uses Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, capital and social fields, as well as the idea of cultural repertoires, to cast light on class dynamics and on how people’s
struggle for intergenerational mobility is both stratified and stratifying. For instance, several studies reveal that adults’ habitus or their ‘innate feel’ for how to raise their children and how to interact with school authorities on behalf of their children embodies and reproduces their learned class positions within given social fields (Reay, 1998; Reay, 2001; Lareau, 2003; Alanen, Brooker and Mayall, 2015; Lan, 2018), leading them to adopt distinct cultural repertoires of child-raising (Lareau, 2003: 4–8; Lan, 2018). Meanwhile, some research also observes that children are compelled to produce themselves as a form of capital, honouring their families’ investments in them and realising their value over time, with their possibilities to do so influenced by their class background (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998: 118; Morrow and Vennam, 2015).

A further theme adapts Bourdieusian ideas to explore why individuals differ in their aspirations or their ‘reference points for navigating life’ (Appadurai, 2004; Hart, 2012). These scholars observe that different temporal influences are simultaneously manifest in individuals’ aspirations (Hart, 2012; Barbalet, 2014; Lan, 2018). The past exists in individuals’ habitus or dispositions, incorporating their capital endowments and their prior socialisation in their families (Hart, 2012). The present is manifest in individuals’ class positions in a given structural context (Lan, 2018). The future is manifest in individuals’ visions of their future selves, with these visions reflecting a habitus that is shaped and reshaped by the education system (Corbett, 2007), cultures of migration (Kandel and Massey, 2002; Coe, 2012; Gardner, 2012; Zeitlyn and Mand, 2012; Xiang, 2014), and the institutions of the market economy (Barbalet, 2014; Xiang, 2014). The market economy is especially significant because it is the ‘social field’ where future income, success and status may be obtained (Barbalet, 2014), but also where a person may fail or ‘fall behind’ – fear being the underbelly of aspiration.

The threads provided in these various literatures supplement each other well. Notably, the migration studies literature’s analysis of intersecting gendered and generational relations redresses a neglect of gender and emotions in Bourdieusian analyses of human struggle and class reproduction (Atkinson, 2015). Admittedly, though, twenty-first-century research on child-raising and education has done much to remedy this neglect by investigating class-based differences in mothers’ and fathers’ contributions to their families’ cultural capital accumulation strategies (Reay, 2001; Lareau, 2003; O’Brien, 2007; Lan, 2018). Meanwhile, Bourdieusian analyses of people’s aspirations for their children’s cultural capital accumulation and social mobility help in explaining the centrality of education in family migration projects.

In this book I offer fresh perspectives on families’ capital accumulation strategies by exploring children’s experiences of daily life and family relationships when the children and parents do not live together because of at least one parent’s migration. In doing so, I adapt Norma Field’s (1995) idea of ‘parent–
child toiling teams’ to see ‘left-behind’ children as the members of spatially dispersed parent–child striving teams. Field (1995) initially proposed her idea of ‘parent–child toiling teams’ to critique the ethos of ceaseless production, which she saw to be eroding the quality of childhood in urban middle-class Japan in the 1990s. She observed that owing to the intense normative pressure on parents to raise children who achieved upward social mobility through education, Japanese mothers toiled by supervising their children’s homework, ferrying them to and from extracurricular activities, and taking care of all their needs so that they could concentrate on study. Sociologists describe similar repertoires of intensive child-raising among urban middle-class parents in twenty-first-century mainland China and Taiwan (e.g. Fong, 2004; Liu, 2015; Naftali, 2016; Lan, 2018), with their repertoires in turn resembling the ‘concerted cultivation’ that Lareau (2003) describes among middle-class parents in the United States. Indeed, in this book I see the work of China’s rural families as analogous to the toil of the country’s urban middle-class families because in both contexts, ‘toil’ gains meaning from powerful shared parent–child aspirations for the children’s educational mobility and intergenerational socio-economic mobility.

While later chapters of this book draw on ‘left-behind’ children’s voices to explore their agency, including the ‘situated’ (Choi, Yeoh and Lam, 2018) ‘relational’ (Locke and Lloyd-Sherlock, 2011) and multi-layered or multi-scalar ‘contextualised’ dimensions of this agency, in the next section I turn to discuss the historical and institutional context within which rural Chinese families strive in order to explain why so many children have been left behind. Thereafter, I review evidence and debates about the well-being of ‘left-behind’ children in twenty-first-century rural China. Then I position the children of multilocal striving families within the sociocultural context of rural China. Finally, I preview the book’s chapters.

1.2 Historical and Institutional Context of Striving

To chart the historical and institutional context in which tens of millions of rural Chinese children live separated from at least one parent, below I discuss how rural–urban inequalities and regulatory mechanisms bequeathed by state socialism have compelled so many rural families to strive for intergenerational social mobility by means of migration. I show that even as rural–urban inequalities and regulatory mechanisms have morphed over time, they continue to impel rural people to live and work while separated from their family members.

1.2.1 Parental Migration and Rural Children

During China’s state socialist period from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, the macro-institutional configuration of the countryside and the national economy