The Children of China’s Great Migration

In China in 2018, there were over 280 million rural off-farm and migrant workers, approximately 173 million of whom moved beyond the borders of their registered hometowns, fuelling the country’s rapid economic boom. In the 2010s over 61 million rural children had at least one parent who had migrated without them, while nearly half had been left behind by both parents. Rachel Murphy draws on her longitudinal fieldwork in two landlocked provinces to explore the experiences of these left-behind children and to examine the impact of this great migration on childhood and family relationships in China. Using children’s voices, Murphy provides a multifaceted insight into experiences of parental migration, education, study pressures, poverty, institutional discrimination, patrilineal family culture and refigured gendered and intergenerational relationships.

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I have accumulated many debts of gratitude in writing this book, and other debts of gratitude in the years before starting this project. The book was made possible by support from the British Academy and grants from the University of Oxford. In 2010 a British Academy Career Development Grant enabled Ran Tao, Professor of Economics at Renmin University, and me to carry out a joint survey-based project on the impact of parental migration on the educational well-being of children left behind in rural China. A John Fell Fund Grant from the University of Oxford also supported us in this project. Then in 2013 a British Academy Mid-Career Award enabled me to conduct fieldwork. This built on my two earlier rounds of qualitative fieldwork in 2010 and 2011, supported by my research allowance from the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies. The British Academy Mid-Career Award also gave me time to transcribe and analyse the interviews, and to write four draft chapters of this book, while a Returning Carer’s grant from the Social Sciences Division at the University of Oxford permitted me to undertake two further rounds of fieldwork in 2014 and 2015.

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Map 1 Map of China