

Family Strategy on Childcare: Return Migration in Two Generations of Rural-Urban Migrant Families in China — from a Life-course Approach

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Along with initiation of economic reforms in China, the dramatically increased labor demand in urban industries attracted large numbers of rural laborers began their rural-urban migration in the late 1980s. Following the steps of the first wave of migrants, the second wave of rural-urban migrant workers started their migration journey in the 2000s. Rural-urban migration as an ongoing social phenomenon sustained for generations in China, geographic mobility and related family separation have become common memories for two generations in many rural migrant families. However, after increased migration over four decades, many studies have observed the return migration phenomenon among older migrant grandparents and young migrant mothers. Many studies have showed that rather than viewing return migration merely as a passive response to economic or urbanization failure of migrant workers from an economically success-failure dichotomy perspective, it is considered as family strategy on childcare due to both migrant grandparents and migrant mothers can make use of limited family resource to proactively arrange their return migration in sequence in response to economic changes, structural constraints and caregiving demands of children. Although return migration is considered as family strategy for childcare across time, space and generations in migrant families, little is known about detailed decision-making process regarding when and who should return, and how return decisions are developed through intergenerational negotiation within the family. To enrich this discussion, I record voices of both migrant grandparents and migrant mothers to address three specific research questions from life course approach in current study: (1) Why and when do rural-urban migrant grandparents and migrant mothers return or plan to return to rural hometowns, where they encounter structural constraints? (2) How do they arrange and perform return migration through intergenerational negotiation within family? (3) what are the intergenerational differences in timing and sequence of return migration, especially between migrant mothers and migrant grandmothers?

The life story of 27 paired grandparents-mother dyads and 4 unpaired grandparents from 31 two-generation migrant families through separate semi-structured interviews were collected during two fieldwork trips. The field sites included 11 villages in ST town (11/19), Anhui Province which is one of the main labor-exporting areas in China. The interview covered questions on three themes: (1) the timing and sequence of life events in migration-return trajectory, (2) how grandparents and migrant mothers negotiate and perform childcare duties through intergenerational collaboration, and (3) how intergenerational relationship changes during childcare collaboration.

Three models of intergenerational negotiation in return migration are observed: relay return migration, migrant mother-dominated return migration and grandparent-dominated return migration. The findings of the study highlight that return migration, as a family strategy for taking care of left-behind children in the Chinese context, involves a complex decision-making process that considers a set of individual, familial and institutional factors. Although the unequal rural-urban divide governance system has been somehow flattened, *Hukou* as main governance tool of dual system continues to influence migrant worker's basic social rights in city and forced them to undertake return migration. Besides, the son's academic and career failure in grandparents' early parenthood trajectory and painful memory of being left-behind children in migrant mothers' childhood are important factors that motivate migrant grandparents and migrant mothers to return home village to provide compensatory labor for next generation. However, as migrant worker with low socioeconomic status, they are often compelled to consistently delay return plans under intersectional structural oppression from economic downturn after pandemic and lay-off risk from construction industry adjustment. In contrast, while migrant grandmothers typically initiate their return after marriage or childbirth, young migrant mothers often conduct their first return during important education periods of their left-behind children or following conflict with grandparents that arise from different childcare ideologies during childcare collaboration from afar.

Key words: rural-urban migration, childcare strategy, life course approach