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“I Expect My Son to Grow as a Dragon and My Daughter as a Phoenix”: A Qualitative Study of Chinese Migrant Workers’ High Educational Expectations for Children

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“I Expect My Son to Grow as a Dragon and My Daughter as a Phoenix”: A Qualitative Study of Chinese Migrant Workers’ High Educational Expectations for Children

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Abstract: Since the economic reform of the 1970s, many internal Chinese migrants have streamed into cities in search of better educational resources for their school-aged children. Extant literature has reached a consensus that despite barriers to social integration, (im)migrant parents have high expectations for their children’s education. However, earlier studies have largely depicted a static picture of (im)migrant parents’ great ambitions for their children’s educational attainment, without examining the underlying reasons for these dynamics. Using data from in-depth interviews with 20 migrant workers, this paper attempts to investigate the specific mechanisms that underlie Chinese migrant worker parents’ high aspirations for their children’s schooling. Three types of motivation are found, including “getting a good job” and “having a nice marriage” for their children, and “providing old-age support” for parents. No matter which mechanism plays out at the forefront, academic achievement is regarded as shortcut to social and economic mobility, rather than as a key means of personal fulfillment. The utilitarianism has emerged as a dominant ideology that guides migrant workers parents’ attitudes toward education. Their high goals for their children’s educational futures has worked as a response to difficulties in acculturation in cities. Implications for programmatic initiatives and research are delineated.

Keywords: Migrant workers, Educational expectations, Qualitative method, China

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Chinese Migrant Workers' High Educational Expectations for Children: A Clear and Unclear Picture

Since the late 1970s, due to rapid urbanization, industrialization, and the implementation of a market economy and privatization in China, a substantial amount of rural laborers have streamed into cities (see Hu et al., 2014 for a review). These internal migrants are called "migrant workers"¹, who numbered 277 million in 2015 (National Statistical Bureau of China, 2016), and is estimated to increase to 350 million by 2050 (People's Daily, 2010). Undoubtedly, a primary reason for their migrating is to offer their school-age children better educational opportunities.

There is growing evidence that, despite various observable individual barriers (e.g., inadequate education and deficits in skills) or structural challenges (e.g., a lack of access to the state-tailored social security programs and benefits) facing Chinese migrant parents in the urban labor market, there is no shortage in their educational aspirations² for their children (Li, Liu, & Hu, 2013; Li, Wang, Chen, Yin, & Chen, 2015; Luo, 2015; Xu, 2012). Rather, they are characterized as having high aspirations for their children's educational attainment.

These dynamics are similarly playing out among international immigrants across the world, including Asian Americans (Zhou, 1992), African American (Beutel & Anderson, 2008), Latino (Goldenberg et al., 2001), Hispanic (Stevenson et al., 1990) in America, and among Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in the UK (Dale et al., 2002); they hold positive attitudes toward school, and tend to consistently express higher educational ambitions for their children, as compared to non-immigrant parents. Immigrant parents, regardless of their countries of origin, usually aspire to provide opportunities for high levels of education for their children (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). Raleigh and Kao's (2010) longitudinal study of the college aspirations of (im)migrant parents³ further suggest that the pattern of parents' high educational expectations for children persist over time.

¹ This particular group is unique to China, and is associated with the Chinese household registration system (hereafter "*hukou* system") (Goodkind & West, 2002). People who have "agricultural" registration status based on their place of birth (i.e., rural regions) but take jobs in cities constitute this group (Lu, 2004). They have emerged as a marginalized group in urban China, as they are inferior to their urban counterparts with "non-agricultural" registration status in all dimensions of lives, including access to education of their children (Wang, 2015).

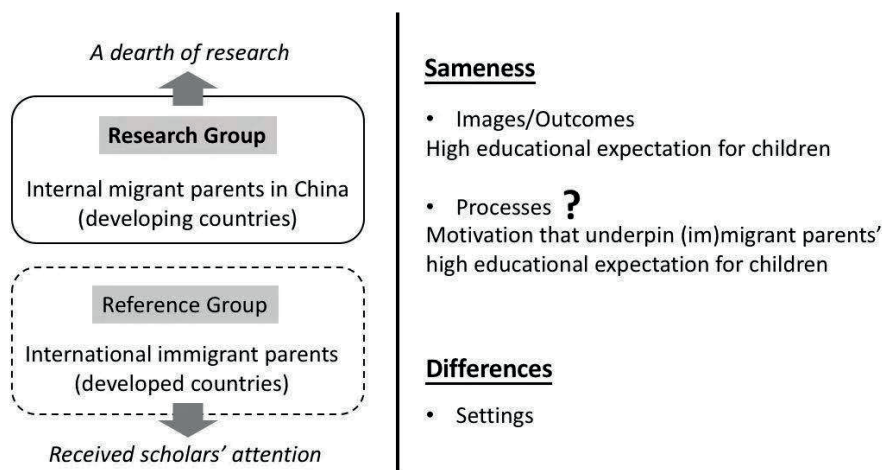
² In this paper, the definition of "aspirations" is relatively broad, and possibly blurs the semantic distinctions between the term "expectations" and "aspirations." The former represents beliefs about future outcomes given realistic constraints (realistic goals), and the latter refers to what an individual ideally would like to achieve in the future (idealist goals) (Wood et al., 2011).

³ In this paper, the use of the term "(im)migrant" encompasses both those who migrate across state borders and those who move cities or regions within a state.

Most of these earlier studies (on both national migrants and international immigrants) drawing on quantitative methods⁴, have simply depicted the images of (im)migrants' high educational expectations for their children as the outcomes, and seldom examined the complex processes in which these (im) migrants aspire for their children to attain the highest level possible. Moreover, existing relevant empirical studies are rooted in the developed contexts to which most international immigrants migrate. Considering that parental orientations, beliefs, attitudes, and aspirations for children are structured and influenced by social contexts (Wentzel, 1998), and that there is a dearth of educational expectation research about immigrant parents in developing countries compared to that in developed countries, it is still important to see if there are culturally distinctive yet fundamentally common characteristics among Chinese internal migrant workers.

Accordingly, this paper will use in-depth interviews with 20 migrant workers to explore the mechanisms with Chinese characteristics that underpin migrant workers' expectations for their children's educational attainment in Chinese societies. Based on our discussion in this section, the structure of analysis through which to approach this research question is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Theoretical and analytical framework for Chinese internal migrant parents' educational expectation for their children



⁴ Extant literature has mostly drawn on large-scale data sets to quantitatively explore factors that shape parental educational expectations in immigrant families, or compare parental educational aspirations across racial and ethnic groups (Spera et al., 2009).

In-depth Interviews

To provide insight into how Chinese migrant worker parents⁵ form ambitions or firm beliefs about their children's educational attainment, a qualitative research methodology, which is exploratory in nature, was determined to be the most appropriate tool. It is known to serve well in investigating processes and mechanisms (Penner & Saperstein 2013). We decided on a semi-structured interview format to both allow their own response categories and their authentic voices of migrant worker parents, and to keep focus on our central research questions. Additionally, detailed observation during interviews and reflection notes after interviews were both taken in order to help us better understand the context of these migrant worker parents' narratives.

A number of the interview questions were asked about migrant worker parents' assessments of how far they believe their children will progress in school, taking into account realistic constraints. In some cases, we asked probing questions to draw out more details. Interviews were accompanied by a verbal or written response to a brief demographic questionnaire, which was translated into Chinese (Mandarin).

We chose to study migrant workers who were working in Xi'an city⁶ and had school-aged children during our interview period (between February and March, 2018). To ensure diversity in these migrant workers' narratives concerning educational aspirations for children, the sample for this paper was built by purposive snowball sampling (Roubeni et al., 2015). Our participants cover a wide spectrum of demographic factors, including employment (e.g., occupation, income), education, age, sex, place of birth, family makeup (e.g., children's age, sex, number, academic record) (Behnke et al., 2004), etc. The final sample consisted of 20 migrant workers.

Before the interviews occurred, four volunteer migrant worker parents were recruited in pilot interviews to help us refine the interview schedule. All interviews were held at locations of participants' choice, most lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and all were taped and transcribed based on consent. Participants' names were replaced by pseudonyms, and other identifying information was removed, to maintain confidentiality. To guarantee that

⁵ With reference with Meyerhoefer and Chen (2011), migrant parents in this paper are defined as internal rural-to-urban labor migrants who have school-aged children, and simultaneously reported having worked in cities for at least six months.

⁶ Xi'an is a mid-sized provincial capital in central China. Since 2013 when President Xi Jinping proposed "the Belt and Road initiative," the role of Xi'an as the hub of development in Chinese economy has become more prominent. Due to its emerging vital economic market, an increased number of migrant workers have streamed into Xi'an for job opportunities. This obviously allowed us to easily access a great number of migrant workers (especially those with children).

the data is a pure and accurate representation of our participants, findings of the research were presented in original narrative form. Some demographic background information is included to ease comprehension.

Three Types of Mechanism Underlying Chinese Migrant Workers' High Educational Expectations for Children

Our interviews with participants highlighted a number of interesting themes. We organized them into three overarching themes, which respond to three divergent paths of high Chinese migrant worker parental educational aspirations for children. One caveat is that this attempt only works as ideal types construction (Wang, 2015); in reality, these three paths might be mutually exclusive or not. It is sometimes very difficult, if not completely impossible, to distinguish between them. Additionally, they are not necessarily exhaustive of possible scenarios intertwined with Chinese migrant worker parent's educational aspirations for their children.

Nevertheless, these three paths, respectively and simultaneously, shed light on the dominant beliefs about the value of education among Chinese migrant worker parents. One of our participants, Xiang, who migrated to Xi'an almost 10 years ago and worked as an expressman, has representative high parental expectations. In his words, "I expect my son to grow as a dragon, and expect my daughter to grow as a phoenix (望子成龙, 望女成凤)"⁷. The disposition toward academic achievement is part of the family and cultural values shared by many Confucian heritage culture (CHC) countries, such as Singapore, Japan, and Korea (Tan & Yates, 2011; Sue & Okazaki, 1990)⁸. In fact, nearly all of the migrant workers we interviewed expressed a desire for their children to finish college at the very least, irrespective of their individual characteristics and personal experiences. They maintained that college is not only an essential channel for their children's upward mobility, but also for their own benefits.

⁷ This is a Chinese proverb. In Chinese traditional culture, dragon stands for peace and power, and it is the ultimate king of all animals. The phoenix represents beauty and sacredness, and it is also the queen of all birds. This proverb indicates that mostly Chinese parents hold quite high levels of ambition for sons' or daughters' achievement.

⁸ This disposition is also informed by the onerous expectations set by China's state-run education system. Students must attend school for a minimum of nine years between the ages of 6 and 15. Once they finish their schooling, students are rigorously tested in the "Senior High School Entrance Exam," the scores of which determine their senior middle school admission. After their graduation from senior middle school, students can enroll in college (college admission is also dependent on their scores on a highly competitive standardized test called the National Higher Education Entrance Examination). If they choose not to attend a middle school, they can pursue vocational training in secondary schools or enter the workforce immediately. The education system is designed to emphasize tests and exams as markers of student performance – a feature that is often criticized.

Getting a good job

“I told my daughter, ‘don’t be like your dad and me”

It was found in the interviews that migrant worker parents often hoped that their children would make it to higher education. This desire, “was often tied into parents’ own biographies, including regrets or mistakes they felt had been made in their own lives” (Napolitano et al., 2014, p.1210). Illustrating this point, Ling, aged 29, who worked at a street-corner grocery store, described what she instilled in her daughter:

I always told my daughter, ‘don’t be like your father and me. You don’t want to study? Okay, you’ll end up with bad jobs in cities like your parents are now doing – sleep four or five hours per day, and work overtime with very low income.... Working for others (*dagong*), that’s your parents’ only option, as they had no access to education in countryside back then and were not educated. ... Oh, yes, there’s another way out for you, kid: going back to our hometown in the countryside and working in a local restaurant as a waitress.... Why did I talk to my daughter about this cruel reality? I don’t want her to suffer the same hardships that we had. As her mum, I want her to be looked up to in cities! ... Yes, “getting ahead” (*churen toudi*)!

In our interviews with migrant workers, including Ling, many parents connected their educational aspirations for daughters to their own positions on the lowest rungs of China’s urban labor market that result from poor schooling. Many reported to have withdrawn from school at very young ages. Ling, who has not finished primary school, was among those least educated. Ling was aware of the connection between poor schooling and bad jobs in cities (Qian & Huang, 2007), and clearly knew that it is her identity of rural *hukou* holder that accounts for her limited access to childhood education in rural regions⁹ (Wang et al., 2018).

Ling’s participation in the secondary rather than the primary urban labor market – the result itself of poor schooling – was a stark reminder of what her daughter’s future would be if she do not get a good education. Ling transferred her hope of finding good jobs and improving social status through education to the next generation’s education. Getting a good education, in Ling’s eyes, was very important for her daughter in that it was the main avenue for escaping a lifetime of hardship (Hannum et al., 2009). In essence, high parental educational expectations, here, works as “a protective factor for migrant children and enhance the resilience of migrant families”

⁹ Despite great strides in promoting basic education in China (Zhao & Glewwe, 2010), the *hukou* system has stunted investment in education in rural areas compared to urban regions (Inkeles et al., 1997), and rural children are systematically barred from access to and quality of education.

(Luo & Zhang, 2017, p.110-111). As Sue and Okazaki (1990) maintain in the “blocked opportunities” thesis, having realized the inequality of the receiving country, some immigrant (e.g., Asian American) parents tend to deep concerns about their children’s education and try to offer them a head start.

Ling’s strong desire for her daughter’s high education can be explained by her own marginalization from “bad jobs.” Historically, China has been organized by a deep-seated hierarchical social structure, and until recently, an individual’s occupation was one of the most significant factors that account for overall social status (Zhai, 2016). “To be looked up to in cities” and “getting ahead” suggested Ling’s eagerness to shape her daughter into a person with good jobs and high social status. The motivation behind her great parental educational aspirations was implicitly a challenge of the *hukou* system that rigidly distinguishes rural and urban residents, and of the notion of “every man in his place” (Lin, 1935, p.191)¹⁰. She ran up against them probably because she failed to realize the dream of “becoming somebody” (Crivello, 2011, p.395) that originally fueled her own motivation to migrate from the countryside to Xi’an. In response to her dashed dream, Ling worked hard, hoping to support her children’s success in school (Hannum et al., 2009). Indeed, for many (im)migrants, children’s successful education is seen as a reward for their own sacrifice and downward mobility (Louie, 2001).

“Finding jobs feels like fighting on the battlefield, and the education is the weapon!”

Pessimism and notion of “beating the odds” were not the only things that have underpinned migrant worker parents’ high parental educational aspirations. Instead, positivism was found to be held by some other migrant worker parents’ ambitious plans for their children’s education. Having witnessed so many opportunities for education and jobs in cities, Ming, a middle-aged expressman with a monthly salary of 6,000 RMB (approximately US\$900), believed that education was the shortcut to superior and promising jobs for his daughter.

“Good jobs” are not about money, but about social status. Only those “professional occupations” can bring you respect from others. ... After coming to cities, I got to know the competition in finding jobs here was so fierce that you have to prepare well, at least holding a college diploma. ... Finding jobs feels like fighting on the battlefield, and the education is the weapon! ... So I always tell my daughter, “Focus on your study, and as your dad, I’ll try my best to provide the fund-

¹⁰ This notion is from Confucian principles, and indicates that individuals have different positions, and should act accordingly. Otherwise, they are assumed to threaten the social order and then punished in some way (Wang, 2015).

ing needed to keep you at school, even give away all I have (*zaiguo maitie*)”

Ming's monthly salary of 6,000 RMB was the highest income among our participants. But Ming appeared not to be satisfied with his current job as an expressman because of its low social status. Obviously, his experience of migration has indeed enriched his vision of life. At the same time, his experience of migration has reinforced the value of education (Luo and Zhang, 2017); after moving to cities for work, he realized the importance of an education for a good job. Ming, therefore, aspired to support his son's pursuit of school as best as he could. Such a strong faith is shared by other groups of immigrants outside China (see Areepattamannil & Lee, 2014 for a review), and might help them form positive psychological adaptations to difficulties in the acculturation process and overcome barriers in the integration processes.

Underlying Ming's positivism about the future of their daughter was his implicit belief in the importance of being academically successful and in the equality of life chances in cities, where children from a less advantaged social background are able to move upward as long as they succeed in schooling. In a similar vein, in Asian-American families, academic achievement was considered as an outcome of hard work rather than predestined (Goyette & Xie, 1999); despite difficulties in adjustment to the U.S., they did not envision a future where their children would face blocked mobility (Raleigh & Kao, 2010). For these (im)migrants, both in China and America, ambitious plans for their children's education and employment have revealed their hopes for upward mobility in their destinations.

To “give away all [a parent may] have” in order to afford their children's education suggested a notable feature of family culture of China and many other Asian countries (e.g., Japan) (Lee, 2010), which often gives priority to children (Gofen, 2009), attaches high value to education, sets high academic standards for children, and provides financial support to children's education for as long as possible. This scene also applies to the Chinese migrant worker families, which is similar to Kao's (1995) observation of parents' duty in Asian American families to finance their children's education.

Ming described the processes of recruitment as a “battlefield” and education as a “weapon,” which reflected an increased demand for a diploma in China's urban labor market. Fundamental to his narrative is an observation that most employment opportunities in urban labor market required a high education (at least a college diploma), and only a university degree (and above) could confer promising jobs¹¹. Due to the popularity of higher

¹¹ With the implementation of the economic reform and industrialization, an individual's social standing in China has gradually shifted from being rooted in ascribed characteristics

education in China, a growing proportion of parents in China, including migrant workers, have shared aspirations that their children will graduate with college degrees and acquire urban job skills, thereby adapting themselves to the intensified competition in the urban labor market. The significant role played by education in individuals' labor market success and in socioeconomic mobility has been found not only in China (Shu & Bian, 2002) and other developing countries (Kandel & Kao, 2001), such as India (Rao, 2010) and Peru (Crivello, 2011), but also in some developed countries, such as the United Kingdom (Crozier, 2009) and America (Louie, 2001). All parents from these immigrant groups recognized that education was a significant channel to better occupational and economic opportunities.

Having a nice marriage

"If you are not highly educated, which girl will want to marry you?"

Educational attainment not only plays a key role in determining individuals' labor market successes, but also serves as a strong predictor of other outcomes in life, including marriage. Ping, aged 48, was a mother of two sons and worked as a street cleaner. Reflecting on her own marginalization in the urban labor market that could offer very little to the family, she expressed strong desires for sons' education. In her words:

I don't know how to express my thoughts, as I'm uneducated. ... But I do hope that my two sons will finish their university. ... The reasons? Probably, I feel that obtaining a college education will promise my son to marry a good girl. ... "If you are not highly educated, which girl will want to marry you?" I asked my sons. A boy, holding a diploma, like college diploma, means he'll be able to afford the whole family with stable source of income and promising future in a career. ... Thinking from the side of a girl's parents, I mean, if I were a mom and had a daughter, I'd absolutely oppose my daughter marrying a young guy who helps his mom clean the street or helps his dad in food stalls in the market place.

In Ping's eyes, a good education guarantees a good marriage, as academic achievement in China is the clearest path to later financial security that guarantees a good quality of life for families. Like many other migrant worker parents, Hong knew full well the benefits of education, and thus wanted her two sons to make it until university.

In her interview, Hong admitted that, despite her inadequate education, she was strict with two sons' academic performances: "I expect and require them to obtain and maintain good grades at school." A persistent pursuit

to being rooted in achievements (e.g., education).

of academic excellence in examinations was expressed by many migrant worker parents, which may have represented their desire to be integrated and acculturated into the city. Like their urban counterparts facing intensive examination pressures¹², they hoped their children would obtain a place in the top streams of education. As a migrant worker father expressed, "I believe in my son's learning ability, and expect him to excel urban-born kids, leaving them far behind. ... That's the only way he can live well in the city." Such a "social Darwinism" notion of survival of the fittest can be seen as an evolutionary strategy taken by migrant worker parents to meet the selective pressures of competition in the cities.

When our discussion went further to the relationship between education and marriage, Ping quickly added the issue of bride price:

Boys from a poor rural family have to face reality! If you don't study well and get a decent job, how will you pay the huge bride price to the family of the woman you will marry? Plan to stretch your hand and ask parents for money to get married? Shamed, right? ... "So you don't have any other choices but study well and fight to be the top ones," I told my sons.

The "bride price" is a traditional marriage custom in China. As a dowry paid by prospective groom to the family of the bride, it mainly involves gifts and cash payments; the cost has recently skyrocketed, especially in rural China, amounting to the equivalent of many thousands of US dollars (Parish & Willis, 1993). Ping's emphasis on the function of education to pay the costs of bride price at the time of marriage suggested the importance of the material benefits a good education could bring to her sons.

"Education? A stepping-stone to a nice marriage"

There were also some migrant worker parents who did not care much about their children's studies. But a few of them maintained high educational aspirations for children and emphasized the importance of obtaining a university college in marrying well. This recalls a Chinese saying: "it's better to marry a nice guy than to study well" (*xuedehao buru jiadehao*). The following discussion came from Hao, a father of three daughters, who expressed optimism towards the effects of education on marriage:

Education? It's a stepping-stone (*qiaomenzhuan*) to a nice marriage. ... Marriage is the only way out for us (rural migrants) to integrate into the cities. ... I want them to marry perfect city boys, but they need to prepare well before meeting these city boys. How? Getting a good education. A good education will offer them a high platform. That's

¹² Under China's examination-driven education system, all Chinese students are evaluated by their examination grades. This is especially the case in big cities (e.g., Xi'an city), where academic competitions often exist.

why I still want to support my three daughters until [they achieve the] highest [level] they can, though they are not intellectually smart and their academic records are average.

But when asked the highest education level did he expected his three daughters to attain, Hao replied without hesitation:

Actually, I don't aspire them to attain the highest level. Is it called "PhD"? Whatever it is called, no, I don't want to put my daughters on the shelf. A good marriage is the most important thing in a woman's life.

Unexpectedly, Hao modified his aspiration for his daughters' educational attainment, revealing it to be quite moderate. He expected his three daughters to succeed in school, but did not expect them to pursue their education to the highest level. This reaction may come from fear of his three daughters remaining single throughout their lives due to the high degree (PhD). This data ran counter to findings about the majority of immigrant Latino parents, who expected their children to attain the highest level possible (see Goldenberg et al., 2001 for a review). The difference between these two groups of (im)migrants pointed to a striking feature of culture that was pervasive in Chinese and other Asian societies but not in South America. For example, in India, it was found that "perceptions of the ideal age of marriage significantly constrain the education that parents aspire to have for their daughter" (Maertens, 2013, p.1). In Japan, the prospects for over-educated women to marry are constrained because there are fewer men who want to marry highly-educated women available to marry (Ono, 2005). Both of these social norms were rooted in a culture of patriarchy, in which a woman should follow a traditional role of good wife and wise mother; women who do not follow this pattern, including highly educated women, may be treated as a threat to the existing social order (Wang, 2015).

Education, in Hao's eyes, had a function of empowering women by, for instance, expanding their frames of references— in his words, "offer them a high platform." However, his ultimate purpose of providing some amount of education for his three daughters was merely enhancing their marriage prospects. Therefore, in Hao's case, education functioned only to "provide the tools necessary to succeed later in life" (Schoepfer & Piquero, 2006, p. 231).

Hao's relentless pursuit of a good education implicitly suggested his optimistic view that for migrants, upward mobility or social integration could be achieved through a nice marriage ("marry city boys") as long as their daughters did well in education. Marriage, in his eyes, was the best and only way to "join local peers in exploring urban ways of living" (Ling, 2015, p.128), a strategy to maximize the benefits associated with rural-to-urban migration.

Providing old-age support

In our interviews, we found compelling evidence that an emphasis on education was not only a consideration for children, but also for parents' own sake. For these migrant worker parents, children's educational attainment was heralded as the vehicle for prosperous economic futures for their children and their entire migrant families.

"The more promising their prospects will be, the better off I'll be in my old age"

After our formal interview finished and the tape recorder was turned off, Feng, who migrated to Xi'an almost 10 years ago and worked in a street-corner hair salon as a stylist, started to talk about the hidden reason behind his high educational aspirations for two sons:

I think every parent is keen for their children to get on, because education is good for everyone in our family, both children and parents. ... Actually, I afford their (two sons') education for my own sake. I'll be at the age of 80 or 90, you know, too old to walk. Who'll provide basic life support to me by then? Of course it's the responsibility of my two sons, as I raised them. All my relatives and friends think they are sensible and clever, and they ought to turn out well. Yes, the more promising their prospects will be, the better off I'll be in my old age! That's why I said to you children's good education promised me everything.

It seemed that the experience of migration may have helped Feng to expand his vision and emphasize his sons' education (Luo & Zhang, 2017). Education was seen to be conducive to his financial conditions in the form of old-age care. Such a faith in the instrumental value of schooling of his two sons led Feng to maintain high educational aspirations for them. Such features of being practical, individualistic and materialistic matched Lu's observation about Chinese character (Lu, 1998).

Feng attributed his high expectations for his sons' future academic achievements to his heavy reliance upon them for old-age security. This accorded with Gofen (2009, p.115) who argued that parents "want their children to have a better future, and they are aware of the fact that education, which is a long-term investment, is the key to that future". Feng's high educational aspirations for his sons were, in essence, a result of weighing the expected returns against the costs of education (Glewwe, 2002). He appeared to be optimistic about his old-age care, as he believed that his sons would support him. Such an expected reciprocal relationship between his children and him ("it's the responsibility of my children, as I raised them up") originates from Confucianism, which advocates the concept of "filial piety" (Tan & Yates, 2011). This was also a representation of expressive ties (Hwang, 1987): Chinese parents are assumed to nurture children when they

are young, and children should do the same for parents in return when they grow up (Scofield & Sun, 1960).

“Nobody in cities cared about me, so I have to rely on my son!”

Relative to the optimism held by Feng, Yuan, a female migrant worker, aged 43, was pessimistic about her future, and expressed strong uncertainty about her future when she became old¹³:

I dread to think what kind of bad jobs I will end up with when I'm old, like at the age of 50 or 60. I sacrifice all [I have] but get nothing from this city. ... By then, I will probably have to go back home to the countryside.

At the end of our meeting, Yuan emphasized, “I do have aspirations for my son! It'll be good if he could make it (university). ... I don't need him to help me with anything, but focus on his studies and perform well. Nobody in cities cared about me, so I have to rely on my son.”

When asked about her educational aspirations for her son, Yuan connected them to her own past experiences. Equally relevant and evident, she saw her son's academic achievement as a means of her own future support. Her concern about the support she would receive in her later years was rooted in the reality of marginalization suffered by many migrant worker parents in the city. In reality, most live with few public welfare benefits (Parish & Willis, 1993), and their agricultural (rural) migrant *hukou* status deters them from accessing the rights and privileges (e.g., medical/health care, unemployment and retirement benefits) offered to their urban local peers (Zhang & Treiman, 2013).

A sense of powerless, either generated from the past or from the future, implicitly indicated that trying to fit into the city was a struggle for most migrant worker parents. The perception of discrimination against rural migrants in cities led them to envision a future where their whole families would not face barriers as long as their children achieved academic excellence.

Only Face Value of Education in the Eyes: Adaptations to Difficulties in Acculturation and the Ideology of Utilitarianism

Internal migration is a complicated decision that involves non-economic factors (Rerat, 2014). For a large number of Chinese migrants who move from rural regions to cities, finding good jobs is no longer the only purpose. Among those who are parents of school-aged children, considerations for

¹³ This interview episode was included in the first author's published paper (Wang et al., 2018).

migration extend to their children's schooling beyond what they themselves have achieved; opportunities for growth, advancement, and prosperity have become a significant reason behind Chinese migrant workers' migration. This objectives of this internal migration are quite similar to those of international migration from developing countries to developed countries (Roubeni et al., 2015).

This paper draws on narratives of 20 migrant worker parents in Xi'an city with diverse characteristics and experiences to explore the specific mechanisms that underlie Chinese migrant worker parents' consistently high aspirations for their children's schooling. It was found that three types of mechanism work independently or dependently to support Chinese migrant workers' great ambitions for their children's educational attainment. The three mechanisms – getting a nice job, having a good marriage, and providing old-age support for parents themselves – demonstrate that parents often recognized the manifest function of children's formal education, and regarded education as a shortcut to upward economic and social mobility, without paying attention to its latent function as a means of personal fulfillment (Goldenberg et al., 2001), such as literacy, knowledge, skills, and liberal values (Hyman & Wright, 1979), all of which empower people.

Their focus on the instrumental value rather than the symbolic value of their children's education indicates that their social assimilation into mainstream urban society might proceed at a lower pace and be more difficult than expected. Moreover, their orientation toward self-interest rather than toward self-improvement fits into Lu's (1998) observation that, ever since the economic reforms, there has been a rapid transformation in Chinese people's life goals, from seeking spiritual improvements to looking for material benefits. Ideas like self-interest, practical benefits, or material aspirations have been replanted into the Chinese mind, and become encouraged, praised, and honored. In essence, the current pursuit of many Chinese people has reflected Chinese emerging cultural disposition toward pragmatism, utilitarianism, and *li* (利).

The issue of parental educational aspirations for their children among Chinese migrant workers bears theoretical significance. First, extant studies on both international or national (im)migrants have consistently found that being an (im)migrant *de facto* increases parents' educational expectations for children, yet the perspective taken by this available literature is normally static in nature, focusing on what the image of (im)migrant parents' educational aspirations for children looks like, rather than on what pathways and processes lead to these aspirations. To our knowledge, this paper represents the first attempt to examine the mechanisms that underlie widely observed (im)migrant parents' great ambition for their children's educational attainment. We expect that our findings will add insight into the very processes

by which high parental educational aspirations for children among Chinese migrant worker group are generated. Focusing on the formation and adoption of their goals for their children's educational futures more clearly demonstrates the difficulties in acculturation in cities, as well as the underlying cultural fundamentals and value systems of Chinese migrant worker parents. Second, by reporting on the parental educational aspirations in a group of migrants in China, a developing country, this paper has built on and expanded (im)migrant parents' expectations research that has long been dominated by developed country-based studies. Other studies should reflect that educational expectations are culturally specific and highly sensitive to social and cultural contexts (Kagitcibasi, 1982). In doing so, we would like to reinforce the notion that "concepts and assumptions developed in Western economics must be tested in other work environments to be validated globally" (Russ et al., 2014, p.255).

Practically, understanding how Chinese migrant worker parents form high educational aspirations for their children may inform policy recommendations for policy makers (the government), employers (the labor market), educators (the educational system), and migrant parents (the family). For instance, it would be urgent for the government to consider how to create a tolerant and friendly acculturation social environment for migrant worker parents. These associated social institutions and agents ought to work together to help this group maintain or even increase their parental educational aspirations to a high level, which will ultimately improve the educational attainment of their children in host cities. The logic behind this intervention is suggested by DeBacker and Routon (2017), "(...)an ability to increase educational attainment, not just through the access, but through perceptions of success."

There are some limitations to this paper. For example, due to the effect of social expectations (Fanelli, 2009), the accuracy of self-reports on parental educational aspirations might be biased. Therefore, readers should be aware of a discrepancy between what these migrant worker parents reported and what they actually expected when interpreting these migrant worker parents' subjective expressions. But this problem is unavoidable in any other educational expectation studies. Additionally, given the small size and the nature of the data collected, one cannot say the motivations of all Chinese internal migrant parents' educational ambitions for their children are the same, or that these three types of motivation uncovered in this research apply to all Chinese parents of internal migrants. In other words, Chinese internal migrant parents' educational expectation for their children may vary depending on many factors (e.g., original place, migrating destination, working history, current socioeconomic status). Thus, it is possible that the patterns observed in this current study may be unique to the sample rather than

true of a larger population. This point necessitates caution when interpreting this study's results. Findings would well be placed on firmer ground if interviews were to be done with more migrant workers in many other cities/provinces in China. This observation points directions for further studies.

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