Chinese migrant parents' educational involvement: Shadow education for left-behind children

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ABSTRACT

As rural people keep migrating to cities in China over the past few decades, tens of millions of children have been left behind by their parents. In this study, I investigated how Chinese migrant parents involve in their left-behind children's education through the theoretical lens of concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth. I drew on qualitative data from left-behind children, migrant parents and teachers collected at a rural primary school in Sichuan Province. Most migrant parents involved in this study migrated to a less developed area in Tibet. Their voices are a valuable addition to the literature that has so far focused on those going to developed cities. It was found that shadow education is a major channel through which the parents involved in their left-behind children's education. The parents could 1) exercise concerted cultivation and variously use shadow education, 2) hope to meaningfully involve but were constrained by multiple barriers, or 3) exercise natural growth and leave their children to themselves. I interpreted these patterns with a view to China's evolving culture, ideology and social structures. I conclude by discussing sociological implications of these patterns, and theoretical contribution to the literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Rural-to-urban migration in China was largely prohibited during Mao's era (Teiwes, 1997) and remains limited today. The mechanism that worked and still works to control population mobility is *hukou*, or household registration system. It is rooted in a national developmental model that concentrated resources for development on urban areas and overlooked the rural side (Cheng & Selden, 1994). As *hukou* is hereditary, it is compared with apartheid, and some argue that China is one country divided into "two societies" (Whyte, 2010).

Hukou constraints have been loosened in the reform era in part as a response to the increasing demand for labor in cities.[1] Rural citizens have thus seized the opportunity and flooded into the cities for employment. Data from National Bureau of Statistics (2020) show that there were 290 million migrant workers in 2019. Earning money and paying for children's tuition fees are major motivations for the migration (Fang, Sun, & Yuen, 2017; Murphy, 2014).

Though recent policy developments expanded the access of migrant families to urban schooling, many migrant parents still choose to leave their children behind their rural hometowns. Research shows that in 2010, there were 69.72 million left-behind children across the country (Duan, Lv, Guo, & Wang, 2013).[2] Migrant parents do so because 1) they, as non-urban *hukou* holders, cannot afford fees imposed on them for urban school admission (Dong, 2018), 2) they are too busy with work and have little time for caregiving, and 3) they are aware of discrimination their children might face in urban schools (Lan, 2014), 4) they are aware that their children will have to go back to their rural hometowns and sit *gaokao* (Entrance Examination to Colleges) there understand problems concerning school transfer (Koo, Ming, & Tsang, 2014).

Grandparents and staying parents (usually the mother) are primary caregivers of left-behind children (Duan et al., 2013). Face-to-face parenting is replaced/supplemented by remote communication exercised through communication applications (e.g. Wechat) and phone calls (Hu, 2018; D. Zhang, 2015). Remittances become a major expression of migrant parents' obligation to and care for their children (Lu, Yeung, Liu, & Treiman, 2019; Murphy, 2014). The children are vulnerable to psychological problems such as depression and loneliness (Su, Li, Lin, Xu, & Zhu, 2013; Zhao, Liu, &, Wang, 2015), and school teachers might consider the parents as uninvolving (Kim, 2019). Despite the knowledge, migrant parents' involvement in their left-behind children's education is under-researched.

To fill the gap, in the present study, I drew on the theory of concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth (hereafter "natural growth", Lareau, 2011) and investigated migrant parents' involvement in the education of their left-behind children, with qualitative data from migrant parents, left-behind children and rural teachers collected at a rural primary school in Sichuan Province. Most migrant parents involved in this study migrated to a less developed area in Tibet. Their voices are a valuable addition to the literature that has so far focused on

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[1]One example is Provisional Regulations on Residence Permit issued in 2016 that requires local governments to provide basic public services to non-local *hukou* holders, including compulsory education (i.e. Grade 1–9), employment, health and birth control, cultural and sports activities, legal assistance and other legal services and other basic services required by the state.

[2]However, a recent official report shows that in 2018 there were only 6.97 million left-behind children nationwide (Chinese Central Government, 2018). The differences are attributed to differing definitions. The recent report defines left-behind children as people under the age of 16 whose both parents migrate; on the other hand, the earlier study's definition is broader - people under the age of 18 and with at least one migrant parent. I adopted the latter, as it is more inclusive.

those going to developed cities. Comparisons between the two groups shed light on the influence of migration destinations on migrant parents' attitudes to education.

The role of shadow education in the parents' educational involvement was highlighted as it was prominent in the data and new to the literature. I explored how the parents understood and used shadow education. Various patterns emerged and I interpreted these patterns with a view to China's evolving culture, ideology and social structures. Lastly, I discussed the prospects of rural-to-urban migrants in a nation that increasingly rewards educational success.

In the following sections, I first reviewed developments of the theory of concerted cultivation and natural growth, and then highlighted that concerted cultivation, a theoretical tool that has rarely been applied in East Asian contexts, is a useful tool to understand intensive parenting in contemporary China, and more broadly, East Asia. The next section reviewed various changes associated with culture, ideology, education and social structures in China, especially during its contemporary era, thereby setting the scene for interpreting Chinese migrant parents' educational involvement. It is followed by a focused review of parental educational involvement in today's China. Findings were presented in three sub-sections, including concerted cultivation, natural growth, and mixing zones, that addressed different parenting logics and practices. In the conclusion, besides parents' educational involvement, I focused on sociological implications of the findings and then discussed theoretical contribution to the literature.

CONCERTED CULTIVATION AND NATURAL GROWTH

Concerted cultivation and natural growth refer to a set of logics of parenting first observed in the US (Lareau, 2011) and then echoed across Western societies (Carolan, 2016; Irwin & Elley, 2011; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Specifically, concerted cultivation refers to a logic of interventionist parenting exercised by middle-class families. It features organized participation in extracurricular activities (e.g. music, sports, chess), parent-child discussions, and close parent-school relations. Through these, middle-class parents solicit their children's opinions, broaden their horizons, and cultivate in them a strong sense of self-worth, or in Lareau's term, "a sense of entitlement," that enables them to approach adults (and authorities in a broader sense) confidently.

On the other hand, working-class and poor parents[3] adopt the logics of natural growth. At first glance, the term seems to suggest that these parents are uninvolving and neglectful (see Wheeler, 2018); however, as Lareau (2011) herself pointed out, what she meant by the term was that parents (especially mothers) "carried out their chores, drew boundaries and restrictions around their children, and then, within these limits, allowed their children to carry out their lives" (p. 385). In other words, the model of natural growth is rooted in a non-interventionist parenting logic that parental responsibilities lie in providing necessities for the children and ensuring safety, and further development (e.g. leisure, education) depends largely on the

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[3]Although Lareau (2011) categorized her samples into three classes – middle-class, working class and poor class – in data collection, she considered working and poor class parents as one unit in her analysis, as they demonstrated similar orientations towards parenting.

children themselves. This model develops "a sense of constraint" in children that holds back progress towards confidence in approaching authorities and gaining agency.

The two models are rooted in Bourdieu's signature theories on capital, field and habitus (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990); therefore, deep down, they feature class dominance and repro- duction through culture reproduction. This is evident in the binary distinction between concerted cultivation and natural growth, two distinct parenting logics belonging to two social classes, as far as Lareau is concerned. Also, they seem to borrow elements from Karl Marx's binary social class structure wherein class conflicts are inevitable (Feinberg & Soltis, 2009; Grabb, 2007).

The two terms inspired an array of studies across Western societies on class-based parenting and attendant consequences (particularly inequalities). These studies provided much more nuanced interpretation of the two parenting models along the line of race, ethnicity and gender (Bodovski, 2010; Cheadle, 2008; Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Vincent, Rollock, Ball, & Gillborn, 2012). Importantly, they offered insights that amplified and sometimes negated Lareau's original conceptualization.

A major insight concerns variations *within* as well as across classes (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016); it thus disproves Lareau's (and some following studies') argument for within-class homogeneity. Research shows that middle class parents might have different ori- entations to education and exercise various levels of parental intervention (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Wheeler, 2018). On the other hand, concerted cultivation practices could also be observed in working class families, though sometimes they are merely "inexpensive adaptations" (Verduzco- Baker, 2017, p. 1010) of middle-class practices, since the parents are constrained by "complex contextual factors" (Verduzco-Baker, 2017, p. 493, also see; Bennett, Lutz, & Jayaram, 2012). The literature, thereby, demonstrates that the two parenting models are not based on class cultures and that both classes of parents are subject to processes of parental responsibilization (Beck, 1992) under neoliberalization (Harvey 2007; W. Zhang & Bray 2017).

SHADOW EDUCATION AND CONCERTED CULTIVATION

Despite developments in Lareau's (2011) parenting models, the two terms have little presence in research in East Asian contexts. Existing research (Cho, 2015; Shih & Yi, 2014) identified class- based patterns on participation in non-academic extracurricular activities in South Korea and Taiwan respectively which are in line with research findings of the West.

Matsuoka (2019) identified a Japanese version of concerted cultivation whereby well- educated parents prioritize academic extracurricular activities and downplay the importance of non-academic ones (i.e. for subjects such as sports, music), as transition to lower-secondary school for their children approaches. The strategy reflects Japan's (and more broadly East Asia's) examination-oriented educational system.

Contribution of that study partly lies in the fact that it conceptualized the use of academic extracurricular activities as a *distinct* form of concerted cultivation from the use of non-aca- demic ones. It thus introduced an essential element of East Asian education to a widely applied Western-originated notion.

Academic extracurricular activities are more commonly called shadow education in the literature. It is a term coined by Stevenson and Baker (1992) and was later developed by Bray (1999). It was the latter conceptualization that was commonly adopted by following researchers

(e.g. W. Zhang & Bray, 2017, 2018). Shadow education, as Bray (1999) proposed, takes place outside of formal schooling, at private cost and serving to give students a competitive edge in high-stake (transitional) *academic* examinations. It is "shadow" because it mimics formal schooling, reflecting its requirements, standards and processes.[4] It is prevalent in East Asian societies primarily because, as is often argued, East Asia features an educational culture that emphasizes social mobility through examination-oriented education (Seth, 2002), or as Kipnis (2011, pp. 117–121) noted, "literary masculinity"; secondly higher educational institutions there which direct students into hierarchical life paths are highly stratified (Lee & Müller, 2019; Yang & Wang, 2020). Regarding the second point, Aurini and Davies (2013) argued that a major reason shadow education, though popular among Canadian parents, still takes a "peripheral position" (p. 156) in Canadian education is that higher education there is relatively egalitarian (also see Aurini, Missaghian, & Milian, 2020).

Despite the contribution, Matsuoka (2019) overlooked diverse reasons behind the use of shadow education. Some parents might use the the fee-paying courses as a means of improving their children's examination scores; as such, the use of such courses is a form of concerted cultivation. However, parents could also use the courses for child-minding purposes, if their children are very young (Bray & Kwok, 2003). This motivation does not align with the logics of concerted cultivation, as it is more concerned with the children's safety than educational success. In addition, some parents might be pressed by school teachers to pay for the courses (see W. Zhang, 2014); in another instance, they could opt in the courses due to peer pressure. Under these circumstances, the parents' use of the courses signals a passive parental role and thus does not precisely reflect an orientation towards concerted cultivation that features a (pro)actively interventionist parenting role.

Parents' proactive use of shadow education for academic purposes, as a form of concerted cultivation, has a distinct identity from the use of non-academic activities. A major difference lies in the "visibility" of pursued advantages. While the use of non-academic activities primarily concerns all-round development (which largely corresponds to *suzhi* educational discourse in China; see Binah-Pollak, 2014), emphasizing exposure to culture conducive to cognitive development, shadow education serves for more "visible" (Sriprakash, Proctor, & Hu, 2016) and immediate purposes of improving examination results. In other words, non-academic activities transfer middle-class (i.e. dominant) dispositions from generation to generation, as a marker of distinctive high-brow culture (Bourdieu, 1984); on the other hand, more pragmatically, shadow education delivers tangible advantages in gatekeeping processes.

Yet, logics of the two sides converge, as both emphasize parental agency and purpose. The review above has attested to parental initiative through non-academic activities. Shadow education literature emphasizes the role of parents, too. For example, Liu and Bray (2018) found that Chinese parents recalibrated their demand for shadow education to respond to their emerging needs and circumstances. In another study, Liu (2019) found that parents' self-perceived responsibilities towards their children (i.e. parental role construction) influence their use of shadow education. While the role of parents might dwindle as their children grow older

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[4]In fact, recent studies have found that the informal education has expanded its territory, causing backwash on formal schooling (Bhorkar & Bray, 2018; W. Zhang, 2014) to the point where some argued that it has come "out of the shadow" (Aurini, Dierkes, & Davies, 2013). This implies that "shadow" may not correspond to changes and developments in the industry. I decided to keep using the term for consistency with the literature. What I emphasize in this paper is its *academically* supplementary nature, as well as its implications and consequences for formal schooling and further, educational equality.

(Lee & Shouse, 2011), it is prominent on lower educational levels. In terms of purpose, both aim to accumulate human capital in their children that translates into other advantages, despite varying levels of "visibility".

CULTURE, IDEOLOGY AND EDUCATION IN A CHANGING CHINESE CONTEXT

Influence of Confucianism on education in China is significant. It shaped how people understood education in ancient times. Confucianism dictates that good learners should participate in politics (*xueeryou zeshi*); and that the highest aspiration of a person should be to govern the society (*daze jianji tianxia*). Education was a selective mechanism in which high achievers (i.e. those ranked high in Imperial Examination, or *keju*) became government officials, with the rank of their positions depending on their Examination grades. The education-based official ranking reflected meritocracy that Confucianism endorsed (i.e. "choosing the best people," *xuanxian juneng*). The importance of education attached to one's career is also manifested through proverbs such as "learning is a prestigious undertaking, while others are of poor reputation" (*wanban jie xiaping, weiyou dushugao*). Accordingly, teachers enjoyed high social status at the time (*zunshi zhongjiao*).

In the meantime, however, anti-intellectualism was also present in ancient China. It argued that human intellect (*zhixing*) developed through education is detrimental to nation building (Hao, 2009; Yu, 2014). Taoism was a major contributor to that theory (Yu, 2014), as exemplified by two quotations from *Tao Te Ching* "people can get great rewards if they give up upon intelligence" (*juesheng qiqiao minli baibei*) and "if people have wisdom, terrible things might happen" (*minduozhihui er xieshiziqi*).

China's culture has evolved over the centuries and major changes took place in the recent decades. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when anti-intellectualism peaked, traditional culture was demonized and intellectuals were disgraced, sentenced to jail and even murdered. "The more knowledgeable, the more rebellious" (*zhishiyueduo yuefandong*) was a popular slogan at the time. Similarly, in the early stage of economic reforms in the 1980s, with the rise of bureaucratic capitalism, a class of new rich emerged and intellectuals became disadvantaged due to their lower economic status. "The reversal of brain and body" (*naotidaogua*) was used to describe the situation where knowledge workers (i.e. the "brain") earned less than manual workers (i.e. the "body") (Deng, 2017; Fan, 2011). Intellectuals were mocked for their relatively low salary, as shown by proverbs such as "missile makers are not as good as egg sellers" (*zaodaodande burumai chayedande*) and literary works in Chinese (see a review by Fan, 2011). Economic returns on education declined, so did the value of education. Accordingly, teachers did not enjoy high social status as before (Fan, 2011).

In 1990s, processes of higher education massification started and this provided opportunities for those previously excluded from universities. Higher education gross enrollment ratio[5] increased from 1.55% (1978), to 10.5% (1999), to 26.5% (2010) and to 51.6% (2019) (Education Bureau, 2000, 2012, 2020; Gao, 2017). Accordingly, the number of university graduates skyrocketed especially in the last two decades, from 2.80 million (2004) to 6.30 million (2010) and to 8.74 million (2020) (Chinanews, 2020; Netease, 2012). In respond to the increasing number of university graduates, the job market has set higher requirements for job hunters.

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[5]The ratio of university students to people aged 18–22.

First, it requires higher educational degrees (e.g. bachelor's degree or above); as a result, credentialism began to take hold in China. Second, degrees from leading universities (e.g. those enlisted in "211" or "985" projects) are usually required for white-collar and high-status jobs (e.g. managers, professionals). Official data show that in 2017 China has 2,914 higher education institutions (Education Bureau, 2017) and only around 100 of them are labeled as "leading." On the other hand, degrees from obscure universities that host a huge number of students might not help with job hunting. A proverbial term, "graduation is unemployment" (*biye ji shiye*), reflects the declined value of degrees from average universities.

As a corollary, the belief that "education is useless" (*dushu wuyonglun*), as a modern version of anti-intellectualism, has received currency especially in rural China, home to the majority of university students studying at obscure universities (Hao, 2009). As wages for blue-collar jobs have increased, decisions to drop out of school, quit *gaokao* (Takungpao, 2013) and as an alternative, join the work force right after secondary school (and even earlier) might replace an attempt at higher education.

As admission to leading universities has become highly competitive, parentocracy (Brown, 1990) started to take shape, especially in urban China, as parents realized they could play an active role in the competition for (prestigious) educational degrees for their children.

The rise of parentocracy could be subject to the influence of neoliberalism that emphasizes freedom and individual agency (Harvey, 2007). W. Zhang and Bray's (2017) research shows that macro neoliberal policies have micro-level manifestations. Specifically, they coined the term "micro-neoliberalism" to refer to processes whereby notions of freedom, choice and agency have become rooted on individual levels in today's China. As Ball (2006) argued, "the epidemic of [neoliberal] reform does not simply change what we . . . do, it changes who we are." (p. 143).

In sum, structural changes and ideological shifts over the past few decades have led to China's evolving educational landscape that differs significantly from an ancient model where education served primarily as a mechanism for government official selection. In today's China, educational system has been Westernized (Baker, 2014) and re-branded as a selective mechanism similar to Western ones. It bears characteristics of Confucianism, but the traditional has mingled with emergent influences in a highly complex manner.

CHINESE PARENTS' EDUCATIONAL INVOLVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

In urban China, a strong sense of parental responsibility translates into attempts to capitalize on available resources and provide/create educational opportunities for one's children. An exemplar could be the booming *xuequfang* (flats near schools) market. Given nearby allocation policy (see W. Zhang & Bray, 2017), school places are distributed among owners of flats near the schools. As a result, prices of flats near quality schools skyrocket. In addition, W. Zhang and Bray (2017) documented that parents in Shanghai circumvented equalizing school admission policies by paying private companies that collaborated with key schools for admission. Besides, the increasing number of international and private schools (with expensive fees) in major cities, along with the prevalence of shadow education (Liu & Bray, 2017), also signals urban parents' emphasis on quality and customized education.

In rural China, parents diverge on their attitudes towards education. As mentioned earlier, some parents believe that education is useless, as they are aware that even a university degree might not help with job hunting. Therefore, they would ignore teachers' requests, have their children help

with housework/farm work and neglect studies and even encourage their children to drop out of schools (see a review by Wang & Zhao, 2011). They believe that their children would be "tamed" in schools and they would rather teach their children how the world works themselves (Sina, 2015).

On the other hand, some rural parents attempt to provide quality education for their children (e.g. Kong, 2016; Xie & Postiglione, 2016). To help their children "walk out" (of the countryside) is a major motivation for these parents (Kong, 2016). Kong's (2016) ethnographic work documented strategies that rural parents employed for the purpose, including taking extra jobs, exempting children from housework, utilizing social capital to glean information and as a common practice, migrating to major cities for employment. Xie and Postiglione (2016) explored how rural parents utilize *guanxi* (i.e. social connections) to help their children succeed in schools. Besides, Hansen (2017) added another batch of practices to the list, including "sending children to boarding school or to live in a teacher's home, prioritizing one child's education while letting siblings drop out earlier, or bringing offers to temples or consulting fortune tellers" (p. 187). These strategies represent rural parents' desires for their children to socially move up and signals the presence of parentocracy in rural China.

While the literature has documented strategies of Chinese parents in both urban and rural contexts, educational involvement of those who migrate domestically from rural China to other localities (mostly developed cities), i.e. migrant parents, remains under-researched.

As migrant parents can have their children live with them in the cities (i.e. migrant children) and/or left behind their rural hometowns (i.e. left-behind children), their educational strategies differ along this line.[6]

For the former case, Fang et al. (2017) found that migrant parents prioritize their children's education by intensive home and school involvement; particularly, they reiterate the importance of education at home (i.e. in the authors' words, "academic socialization"; also see Koo, 2012). Besides, Peng (2019) focused on migrant parents' attempts to enroll their children into urban schools and recognized them as active social agents who "use strategies and actions to adapt to, maneuver within or circumvent the structural constraints to augment urban education resources for their migrant children" (p. 172).

The literature documents less knowledge on the parents' involvement in the education of their left-behind children. A major practice for migrant parents is to make phones calls and video chats with their children and a central topic of the conversations is education. Specifically, migrant parents require their children to work hard on learning (Murphy, 2014; Hu, 2018; D. Zhang, 2015). Murphy (2014) understood education as a social field where migrant parents and their left-behind children act-parents migrate to earn money to afford tuition fees for their children and the children are obliged to work hard on learning and achieve social mobility (i.e. "to walk out" in Kong, 2016). Therefore, Murphy continued, education bound migrant parents and their left-behind children "in toiling teams and gave meaning to their toil" (p. 47).

The review above demonstrates that urban Chinese parents could (pro)actively involve in their children's education and exercise various levels of intensive parenting. In rural China,

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[6]This means migrant parents may simultaneously be parents of left-behind children and migrant children. Indeed, a few parents in my study were of this type. What I focused on was how they involved in their left-behind children's education and did not pay much attention to how they interacted with their migrant children since the situation for migrant children is very different from that for left-behind children. Comparison of these two is worth exploring and actually deserves another study.

while interventionist (and intensive) parenting practices are observed, a neglectful orientation towards education is also evident. The latter stems from structural and ideological changes over the past few decades. Notwithstanding, educational involvement of migrant parents, particularly for their left-behind children, is under-researched.

DATA AND METHODS

Data collection

I collected data at a rural primary school in Sichuan Province at two points of time during 2018. Sichuan Province is home to 6.92 million left-behind children, outstripping all other provinces (Duan et al., 2013); therefore, it is a resourceful site for the research purpose. The school was in Dongchang County, around 50 km away from Chengdu, the provincial capital. Dongchang was not as backward as research sites of other studies; instead, it fits Lu's (2010) description of small towns (*xiaozhen*). I visited the school for the first time in late May when I conducted initial interviews with teachers and students. Unfortunately, I was not able to interview parents at the time. I kept in touch with the teachers and managed to go back for another batch of interviews in late December that year when migrant parents came back home for Spring Festival.

Unlike the majority of migrant workers who go to major cities, most migrants from the village went to Shigatse, a city around 300 km away from Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet. Shigatse is less developed and characterized by poor living conditions (e.g. high altitude, thin air, intense sunlight, strong wind). For this reason, salary for laborers there is much higher than that in Sichuan. Although salary in major metropolitans (e.g. Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen), the most popular destinations for migrant workers, could also be attractive, these cities are far away from Sichuan. Therefore, good pay and relative short distance from hometown have driven adults in the village to go to Tibet. In addition, some low-SES male migrants who found it difficult to have a wife in Sichuan might marry a Tibetan ethnic minority woman and later try to settle down in Tibet (e.g. S4's father).

I stayed in the village for the second visit and lodged in the home of a teacher close to me. We went to the school together in the morning and then he helped me arrange interviews. I purposively chose student interviewees (Creswell, 2011), trying to strike a balance between gender, grade and left-behind status. Despite the teacher's help, I was not able to interview every student I hoped to reach out. In addition, interviews with parents were on an opportunistic basis (Creswell, 2011) and teacher interviewees were recommended by the helping teacher.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2011). Interview questions for students, parents and teachers were different, but they all centered around the following topics: 1) school experiences (e.g. academic achievements, class performance, relationship with teachers, peer influence), 2) after-school life, 3) left-behind experiences (e.g. guardians, communication with parents), 4) parents' educational involvement (e.g. strategies, rationale), 5) understandings of education (including attitudes and changes in attitudes due to migration) and 6) educational and career expectations.

In total, I interviewed 26 migrant children from Grade 4–6 (16 boys and 10 girls), six migrant parents (two mothers and four fathers) and six teachers. Among the interviewed students, nine had received shadow education. Over their primary school years five of the interviewed parents migrated to Tibet; one of them (S1's father) went to Chengdu and before that,

Shenzhen. In the meantime, I had in-depth discussions with the helping teacher, someone with more than ten years of teaching experience in that school, on the school and its students.

Researcher positionality

Qualitative researchers are basically instruments for qualitative data collection and analysis (Stake, 2010); therefore, the researchers' position in relation to the researched is critical (Kobakhidze, 2018; Peng, 2018). I, the researcher of the present study, was born and raised up in Chengdu. I spoke Sichuan dialect and knew Sichuan culture. Given this, I easily established rapport with interviewees and other local people. I had no experience living in rural areas prior to this study and inevitably held urban attitudes. I viewed migrant parents and senior teachers in the school as respected people from whom to learn about education in rural China and established close relationships with a few local young teachers, given that we were around the same age. The close relationships allowed the teachers to share extensively about what they thought and experienced in and out of formal interviews.

Data analysis

I analyzed the data using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) with Nvivo. I started with student transcripts and located information relating to their parents' involvement in their education. As mentioned earlier, the theme of shadow education emerged and then I looked further into it. I coded the student data twice to assure reliability and 95% of the results matched. I then examined the differences and made final decisions on the codings. Following this, I coded parent data, focusing on their educational strategies and linked to the student data for triangulation. Lastly, I analyzed teacher data which supplemented the other data sources and served for triangulation.

As I intended to explore migrant parents' involvement in their left-behind children's education, parent interviews could be the best data source for analysis. However, due to issues surrounding data availability,[7] I resorted to student interviews as the major channel through which I explored the parents' practices. Nevertheless, I cited parents' original utterances as support for arguments as much as I could.

Notwithstanding, student data have been used to explore topics primarily concerned with parents in previous studies (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011; Fang et al., 2017). These studies provide support for my approach. In addition, children's voices have become increasingly valued in the literature; particularly, Hajar (2018) explored children's perceptions of shadow education.

FINDINGS

It was found that most migrant parents involved in this study did not meaningfully involve in their left-behind children's education. Nevertheless, these parents' attitudes towards education diverged. Some valued education but were not able to meaningfully involve because they lacked necessary resources and were constrained by various barriers (see "mixing zones"); a few did not value education because they believed education could not help with job hunting for their

[7]At the time of the research, migrant parents were busy with attending gatherings for Spring Festival.

children (see "natural growth"). Only a small number of parents valued education *and* meaningfully involved by means of intensively using shadow education (see "concerted cultivation").

Natural growth

Lareau (2011) clarified that what she meant by "natural growth" is that parents involve in their children's lives within certain boundaries: providing safety and necessities (e.g. food, clothes) is their responsibilities while additional intervention (e.g. educational planning) goes beyond the border. What I found from the data is a narrower scope of parental responsibility for a few migrant parents who rarely involved in *all* aspects of their left-behind children's lives. To them, parental responsibility meant remittances to rural relatives that would support the children's growth. They neglected education for their children and the attitude reflected anti-education sentiments prevalent in rural China that result from structural and ideological changes over the past few decades. Interviews showed that this model of child-rearing existed in around a quarter of the migrant families (precisely 6 out of 26). The following stories illuminate natural growth as carried out by the parents.

S9 was a Grade 5 girl whose parents migrated to Tibet and divorced there. The father remarried and stayed in Tibet and came back to hometown during Spring Festivals only. The child told me that she did not talk to her parents much and she did not spend much time with her father growing up. I also learned, during an interview with the father, that he did not really know about his daughter's life and schooling. The mother was more present in the child's life, as she would stay with the child and help with her studies when she came back each November. But for most of the time, the child was looked after by her grandparents.

An episode concerning shadow education showcased the parenting approach adopted by S9's parents. S9 told me that she had asked his father to enroll her into Chinese tutoring classes. Her Chinese-language scores dropped significantly at the time, as she was concerned about intensifying relationships between her parents. However, the reply she got was, in her own words, "dad told me tutoring is not very important. What matters is how much effort I make myself. Working hard can help improve my scores. There is not much difference between studying alone and going to tutoring classes." During an interview with S9's father, I received a similar message "Children should play. Doesn't tutoring make her tired?… It depends on herself to improve scores. Tutoring may do her no good… Her academic achievements can just be like that, tutoring cannot help, really." He considered the student's academic achievements as good enough and thus cited it as a primary reason for declining the request "For tutoring… I think her current scores are good, so tutoring is not necessary".

Similarly, S19, a Grade 6 girl, shared that she wanted to receive tutoring because her exam scores had dropped and she wanted to improve the scores to be admitted to a good lower-secondary school. She feared to go to a poor one because her teachers had informed her what she would face there. She asked for tutoring, but her mother declined, asking her to work on her own.

Concerted cultivation

Concerted cultivation was evident in four out of the 26 migrant families. It was conducted by migrant parents primarily through arranging shadow education for their children. The intensive parenting style reflected the parents' attempts, through education, to prevent their children from following their footsteps into tiring manual work.

S3's (a Grade 5 boy) father migrated to Tibet and his mother worked in a nearby kindergarten. The student had always been an average student in his class and, as transition to lower-secondary education was around the corner, his parents were anxious. The student's father told me, during an interview, that his son was in an uncomfortable position:

> His exams scores are ranked in the middle. That's unnerving. Just, not good or bad. If his scores drop, he will be a low achiever. If they improve, he will be an above-average one. We [my wife and I] just want to make it stable, so that we will be at ease. That's what I mean. If he makes it to above-average, we will be relieved. Being average is not comfortable.

While the father did not involve directly in his son's education, the mother played a large role. She was occupied with the kindergarten job, but proactively arranged shadow education for her child, in addition to asking for tutoring (as help) from relatives (e.g. the child' older cousins).

Her active role was manifested through her timely adjustment of the use of private tutoring to respond to emergent needs. For example, when the student transitioned to Grade 4, she decided to quit on-site large-class tutoring which her son had been receiving for a year and opted in one-on-one online tutoring which, according to the student, was more intensive and expensive. "I have tutoring for Chinese and math from Monday to Friday, then a two-hour session on Saturdays. . . It is more expensive than the previous tutoring which cost around 2,000 per term." The change, according to the father, was because the previous tutor could not significantly improve his son's exam scores. The parents desperately needed an improvement in their son's exam scores for a smooth transition.

The mother's large role in her child's education was also manifested through her intensive and, to some extent, authoritarian approach to parenting. According to the child, all decisions on education were made by his mother and he just obeyed. For example, when she quit on-site tutoring, the child said the tutoring was good and there was no need to quit. The mother replied, according to the child, "you just go and receive the online one." The mother had also arranged winter vacation tutoring for the child at the time of the present research and purchased more sessions for math, as she hoped to improve her son's math scores further.

The parents' (particularly the mother's) prominent role in the child's education was driven by their anxiety that their son would become an educational low achiever and repeat their toiling paths. The father told me that he was disadvantaged and had suffered because of his poor educational background. He strived to help his son lead a better life and to do that through investing in education seemed the only option.

> I think he firstly should have a high educational level. . . If he has that, it doesn't matter whether his job really fits his area of expertise. . . If he doesn't have a good diploma, he can just have unstable and poorly paid jobs. . . Those IT people make a lot of money in good offices. . . People like me work in construction fields. It is really exhausting and I feel upset. I realized knowledge is really important. I am disadvantaged as someone with a poor educational background. . . I told [my son] 'your father couldn't afford to go to school. If you can learn well, I will definitely pave a way for you!'.

However, the parents were not able to provide academic assistance themselves because they were busy with work and ill-educated (the father told me he just had primary school education). The father then expressed his helplessness and told me purchasing private tutoring to them was the only thing they could do to help their son:

His English is not good. But we can do nothing about English for him. I can't understand English, how can I teach him? It all depends on him. . . I told him 'your teacher has assigned you homework, you should work on it'. . . These days [when I am back from work] I remind him of his homework. I am not able to tutor him, so I can just pay tutors and ask them to help him. Having tutoring is better than no tutoring. This is the only way I can figure out. That's what I can do.

Similar intensive parenting styles were also observed in the cases of S10 (boy, Grade 5), S14 (boy, Grade 6) and S16 (girl, Grade 6). The three students had received shadow education across their primary school years. S10, particularly, started going to tutoring classes even before Grade 1. They received shadow education on weekends and during summer vacations for multiple subjects. In addition, they all had academic assistance from relatives, either arranged by their parents or on a voluntary basis.

Mixing zones

In addition to accounts above that represent typical concerted cultivation and natural growth approaches, there is a large area of mixing zone (16 out of the 26 migrant families fell into this category) where the boundaries between the models of natural growth and concerted cultivation became blurred. The blurriness primarily refers to dis-alignment between what the parents *hoped to do* (i.e. parenting logics) and *could do* (i.e. parenting practices). Specifically, their parenting practices might be aligned more with natural growth, while their parenting logics came closer to concerted cultivation. I argue the dis-alignment reveals various constraints the parents faced in their efforts towards social mobility in a society shaping and shaped by credentialism. In this section, I firstly documented the experience of S4's family to illustrate the dis-alignment in general and then examined other cases more involved with shadow education.

S4's father migrated to Tibet and came back during Spring Festival only each year. During an interview with him, I found that he rarely involved in his son's education. He flied back that morning from Tibet and came to a parent-teacher meeting which he described as "urgent," as his son had poor academic performance and might have problems transitioning to lower-sec-ondary education. Nevertheless, he demonstrated his willingness to get involved in his son's education and hoped that his son could have a university degree.

I hope he can have a university degree. I am not expecting a renowned one, just an ordinary one. High school is essential. I will definitely enroll him into a good one. Vocational schools are definitely not an option. People there just get by without learning anything. Education there doesn't count.

The problem, he lamented, was lack of time. "Teachers don't have a good impression of me. They said I don't care about him. I don't have time to care about him. The thing is that I need to earn money and support the family." He continued that, despite his willingness, he did not know how to guide his son through studies. He sighed and said "I don't have much education and I think it's too bad to have little education. . . I don't know how to raise him up, or how to communicate with him. . .I don't know much about things about education".

Partly due to his parents' insufficient support, S4 was a low achiever. He was described by his home-class teacher as "creepy." I also learned more about his family from the teacher:

His parents migrated to Tibet for work. They had another child there. . . He lives with his grand-parents here. The grandparents go to work during daytime and have no time to take care of him. He doesn't do homework at all. . . One day, I asked him what he did after school, he said he slept. I said,

did you go back home and directly go to sleep? He said he watched TV and went to sleep. I said, how about dinner? He said his grandpa cooked for him. His grandpa works in Dongchang... and comes back after 7 pm and leaves for work at 4 am. He is literally left to himself... He wrote in his written task: mom and dad, please come back and then I will not cry at night alone.

The father's practices, at least in the teacher's eyes, were inclined towards natural growth, as he transferred the child's guardianship to his parents and did not involve in the child's education. Nevertheless, his commitments that reflected the logic of concerted cultivation were "invisible" to the teacher (Kong, 2016) due to insufficient communication. The dis-alignment between parenting logics and practices resulted from primarily cultural (i.e. the father did not know how to educate his son) and financial constraints (i.e. the father had to migrate and earn money) the father encountered.

While S4's case illuminates the dis-alignment and highlights migrant parents' conundrums in general terms, the following cases are more involved with shadow education.

S1 was a Grade 4 girl whose parents migrated to Chengdu, the nearby provincial capital and came back home during Spring Festivals only. The child had an older brother and was under the guardianship of her grandparents. I had an interview with her father and learned what he thought about education.

A few minutes into the interview, the father expressed his guilt of not staying with his daughter and not providing her with good educational resources:

> ...in terms of child-rearing, I learned in Chengdu what parents there think about education, their attitudes and they spend more money on education than I do. I am away from home and it's not convenient for me to come back home. So, I can't take good care of my daughter... Sometimes I feel guilty. I feel I owe her [good education] ...Some of my friends in Chengdu take their children with them. They bought tutoring for their children. They take care of their children themselves and their children behave better. I am far away from home. it all depends on her grandparents. What they can do at home is just to tell my daughter that education is important. The outcomes are different.

What the father could do was to make phone calls from time to time, asking the child to work hard on studies; besides, he asked hometown relatives to provide help with learning. The child told me her older cousin, a secondary school boy, would come over every weekend and tutor her.

The father told me he thought of enrolling his daughter into tutoring classes, but the problem was, as he claimed, lack of money. "If I can afford the tutoring, I will pay for it." He was in short of money because he had paid for tutoring for his older son who was about to sit transitional examinations to higher-secondary schools. The "later stage," in his words, was of higher stake.

He considered paying for tutoring as partly fulfilling his parental responsibility:

> Once I watched a TV interview and they said in the 21st century, the investments with the most returns are in education. I was inspired at the time... strive to cultivate children with all I can do. Although people out there say they don't support tutoring, the reality is that everybody is doing tutoring. So [I] must take action, too. Parents are not with the children...If the children don't go to tutoring, they may lag farther behind. [This] prompts me to strive to help them learn.

Thus, the father developed the strategy of "tutoring by-turn" in response to his constraints and parental responsibility. He later shared his expectations for his children with me:

[I aim at] key upper-secondary schools. To us, ordinary people, they would be much better than my generation. [I hope] they have a university degree, a good one the best. I don't know whether they can make it. I can just think about it.

The above episode shows that the father had a strong sense of parental responsibility of providing good educational resources for his children; however, in practice, he was constrained by physical distance and limited resources. He drew on his resources and developed strategies that represented his care for and responsibility towards his children. In this sense, his parenting logics resembled concerted cultivation which features high levels of parental role construction (Liu & Bray, 2018), though his practices were aligned more with natural growth.

The case of S5, a Grade 5 boy, also highlights the tensions between parenting logics and practices and offers novel aspects not mentioned in the previous cases.

The child was left behind by his parents who migrated to Tibet for employment. In an interview with the student, I learned that his parents came back home during Spring Festivals only and he was under the guardianship of his grandparents.

I learned from the student's mother during an interview her attitudes towards education and how she had involved in her son's education. She knew that her son's math was poor and consulted his math teacher. The suggestion she received was that her older son (i.e. S5's older brother) could help the student with math learning and she accepted the suggestion. However, the student told me the tutoring was not effective, as he often forgot what he was taught. He added that his mother tried to enroll him into fee-paying tutoring classes once, but in the end gave up because she was concerned about safety issues:

Because they were not at home at the time and they were worried about my [safety], so they quit...Accidents might occur when I am on my way back home [from tutoring centers] ... I am naughty and I like to hop and jump when walking, so they were worried.

The mother shared that she was willing to invest intensively in her son's education; but in practice, what she did was just arranging tutoring within the family, which to her knowledge, did not turn out to be useful. She was left with no other option though, as tutoring centers could be far from home and grandparents, due to poor health, could not accompany him.

I followed up and asked why she supported investments in her son's education and she told me her own story which resembled those I heard from other migrant parents (e.g. S4's father):

I grew up in a remote mountainous area, I didn't have an environment that supported learning. There was not a teacher to teach me. I don't have much education. I stopped schooling when I was in Grade 2... We are so backward... If our son wants that [tutoring], I will support him... I can't understand his exam questions. I can just speak simple Chinese and recognize a few characters. I can't understand math or English at all. So, I am not able to tutor him...If he has a university degree, he will be much better than we are. He learns more knowledge and the people he meets and makes friends with will be different... We just came out of village and work. We've had a lot of pain. We work under the rain, under the sun and we are blown by strong wind... At least his job will be much better in the future. His life will be much easier with a university degree. He won't be as tired as we are... He will be better... We can't teach him anything. It's all up to him. If he really needs money for studies, we are willing to sell our house.

The mother at least, in the teachers' eyes, was not uninvolving, as she had proactively reached out to the teachers, discussing his son's education with them. Besides, she had arranged academic assistance within her family and stepped forward exploring opportunities for receiving

shadow education. However, dis-alignment between parenting logics and practices was also present, as the mother resorted to an "inexpensive" (Verduzco-Baker, 2017, p. 1010) version of shadow education due to multiple constraints.

The dis-alignment between parenting logics and practices existed in other migrant families, too. For example, I learned from S2' grandmother that her family wanted to purchase private tutoring for the child as she had lagged behind academically; however, they were handcuffed by poverty. The grandmother told me the child's father was her only child who worked far away and her husband had a severe disease that cost much money. She herself spent massive sums of money recently on an operation on her legs. She lamented "I also hope she [the child] could be good... If she can be a top student, I would feel really proud. However, we don't have the resources." In addition, S20, a Grade 5 girl, shared that safety was the only reason she was required to quit tutoring, as no family member could accompany her to tutoring centers. These accounts are not first-hand views shared by migrant parents; nevertheless, they served to enrich and support (at least to some extent) the argument on the dis-alignment and further sketched the mixing zones between concerted cultivation and natural growth.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

China has been developing rapidly over the past few decades and hundreds of millions of rural people have migrated to cities and undertaken un/low-skilled jobs there. There is little knowledge on how these people, as parents, involve in their left-behind children's education.

To fill the gap, I explored the parents' educational involvement for their left-behind children with data collected at a village in Sichuan Province. Most parents involved in this study migrated to a less developed area in Tibet. Data from these parents thus contribute to the literature that has so far focused on those going to developed cities. I highlighted the use of shadow education among other educational practices of the parents because it is prominent in the data and new to the literature. I made sense of the data through the theoretical lens of concerted cultivation and natural growth (Lareau, 2011) and with a view to China's evolving culture, ideology and social structures.

Findings highlight what the parents *hoped to do* and *could do*. The majority of parents involved in this study, but only a few of them could meaningfully involve in their left-behind children's education. Parents who meaningfully tended to have more resources and shadow education served as a major channel through which they played a role in their children's education (i.e. concerted cultivation). On the other hand, those with greater disadvantages, despite their willingness, were not able to meaningfully involve because they lacked necessary resources and were constrained by various barriers. I elucidated this conundrum in "mixing zones".

Despite that an emphasis is generally placed on education by the parents, the question of why there is such a shared emphasis is not easy to answer. What the data showed is complexities of such an emphasis which seems to be homogeneous but in fact is subject to the characteristics of migration destinations. Parents who migrated to Tibet and undertook exhausting work there desperately desired their children to lead a better life in their adulthoods and understood that as job hunters with high educational degrees are advantaged nowadays, their children need to receive good education. In other words, the parents valued education for its instrumental value on achieving social mobility. On the other hand, it seems that parents who went to developed cities

intended to invest in shadow education because they had seen what their urban peers had done and hoped to do the same for their own children. These parents' frame of references had changed after migration and their emphasis on education could reflect a process whereby they were (being) assimilated into the city.

Overall, the parents' emphasis on education served pragmatic purposes and does not represent attempts to observe cultural obligations dictated by Confucianism. This reflects a complex interplay between traditional culture and other influences (e.g. credentialism) amid massive structural changes and declined influences of Confucianism in today's China.

Nevertheless, a few parents who migrated to Tibet did not value education and accordingly did not meaningfully involve (i.e. "natural growth"). The neglectful attitudes towards education reflect the rise of anti-intellectualism in today's China which Cultural Revolution contributed to and developed over the past few decades amidst structural and ideological changes. It could reflect how neoliberalism has operated on individual levels (W. Zhang & Bray, 2017), as the parents exercised agency and made the decision to quit education, despite expanding educational opportunities and the traditions that value education (also see Aurini et al., 2020 for a discussion on influences of macro-level factors on parenting).

Migrant parents' role in the education of their left-behind children has wider implications for social mobility of these families. As parentocracy takes hold (Brown, 1990; Liu, 2019), "[a] child's education is increasingly dependent upon the wealth and wishes of parents" (Brown, 1990, p. 66). As this study shows, migrant parents, despite their "wishes," might have limited capacity (e.g. wealth) to meaningfully involve in their left-behind children's education (see Tan, Lyu, & Peng, 2019 for a review of stratified academic benefits from parental involvement). As education has become a major marker of one's socio-economic status in China, prospects of left-behind children might be bleak.

In fact, a series of documentaries on Sanhe Talent Market (*Sanhe rencai shichang*) in Shenzhen have explored the well-being of the first generation of left-behind children. The films show that they, in their early 20s, switch between hourly-paid part-time jobs and indulge themselves in computer games; they do not have aspirations and get by without concerns for the future. They are mocked as "Sanhe gods" (*Sanhe dashen*), as they live in a way that has gone beyond earthly norms. They, as educational low achievers, follow their parents' footsteps and are left behind *again*, in their adulthood, in a rapidly developing nation that increasingly rewards educational success.

Theoretically, this study, with a focus on migrant families, contributes a Chinese "flavor" to the theory of concerted cultivation and natural growth. First, it attests to the applicability of the theory in a Chinese context. Second, it provides evidence that the use of shadow education essential to concerted cultivation as carried out in China. Third, it provides analyses of the roots of the logics of migrant parents with a view to China's evolving culture, ideology and social structures. Fourth, it argues that migration in China could be a valuable site for studying concerted cultivation and natural growth because it contains a spatial element resulting from child-parent detachment.

This study has limitations. Primarily, as mentioned earlier, collected data are not representative because most involved parents migrated to Tibet rather than developed cities. Secondly, the research is prone to reductionism. I downplayed the role of grandparents in migrant families. As they are in many cases primary caregivers for left-behind children, their voices deserve more attention. Similarly, I did not delve into differences in family structure and

personal characteristics. Insights could be produced, considering which parent migrates, children's gender and so on. Third, I largely overlooked parent-teacher communication as a means of parental involvement (Tan et al., 2019). Fourthly, I only provided tentative explanations on why some migrant parents who went to Tibet still devalued education. The explanations are tentative because they are primarily based on the literature. My data indicate similar patterns, but they are not sufficient to provide well-ground arguments.

This study leaves much space for research that could be filled by future studies. Future research could focus on how migrant parents who go to developed cities involve in their left-behind children's education. It can also explore the use of both academic and non-academic extracurricular activities. In addition, a focused investigation into shadow education market in rural China and its connections to migrant families is also worthwhile. Theoretically, comparisons between concerted cultivation and natural growth as carried out in China and the West could also deepen understandings of the theory.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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