



The consequences of parental labor migration in China for children's emotional wellbeing



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ABSTRACT

Using data from the 2010 wave of the *China Family Panel Studies* (CFPS), we study the effects of internal migration in China on the emotional wellbeing of children age 10–15. The 2010 CFPS, a national probability sample survey of the Chinese population, includes 3464 children within this age range. We compare five groups: rural children with local registration living with both parents; urban children with local registration living with both parents; children accompanying their migrant parent(s), children left behind with one parent when the other parent goes out to work; and children left behind or sent to live with others when both parents go out to work. We expect the last three groups to be at risk of increased emotional difficulties compared to children living with both parents. We test these expectations using both conventional regression models and community fixed-effects models. The evidence supporting our expectations is very weak and inconsistent, leading us to conclude that in the Chinese context family arrangements have little impact on the emotional wellbeing of children. We conclude by offering some conjectures as to why this is so.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 30 years, China has experienced massive internal migration, mostly by rural migrants moving to cities or to industrial areas near cities in search of work. The result is that as of 2010 about 260 million people—approximately 20% of the population—were living in places other than where they were registered ([Chinese] National Bureau of Statistics, 2012, Table 7–2). Unlike the U.S., where residence more or less automatically confers local rights for U.S. citizens, albeit sometimes after a waiting period, in China local registration, and concomitant rights and privileges, are not easy to obtain.

Labor migrants tend to be young and also disproportionately male. But many are married and have children. Because many social benefits require local registration, and because of the consequent difficulty of arranging adequate child care, housing, schooling, and health care, married migrants often leave their families behind when they “go out for work.” However, it also is increasingly the case that married couples migrate together, taking their children with them or starting families in their new work locale. Duan et al. (2013a) estimated that as of 2010 44% of migrants lived in 2- or 3-generation families. But because

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they often live in difficult circumstances—rented rooms, very small apartments, and sometimes even dormitories—and work very long hours, and also suffer the same institutional constraints as those migrating without their families, many migrant couples find it difficult to care for their children. For these reasons, many either leave their children behind or send them to live with other relatives. The most recent data, from 2010, reveal that about 70 million children—about 25% of all Chinese children—have been left behind by one or both parents; 88% of these are from rural areas (Duan et al., 2013b).¹ As of 2005 18 million children below age 15 had accompanied their migrant parents (Duan and Yang, 2008; Duan and Huang, 2012) and as of 2010 38 million children below age 18 had accompanied their migrant parents (Duan, 2012); clearly, part of the increase is due to the wider age range reported for 2010, but it also is probable that the proportion of Chinese children accompanying migrant parents increased over the 5-year period. In our data, about 30% of children age 10–15, the children we study, fall into these vulnerable groups—children left behind and children migrating with their parents.

The question we address in this paper is whether children affected by migration—both migrant children and children left behind—suffer emotional deficits relative to children living with both parents in non-migrant families. There is little firm evidence for China. With the exception of the present study, and a parallel study using different methods and investigating somewhat different outcomes but based on the same data (Xu and Xie, 2015), there has been, to our knowledge, no research on the consequences of migration for children's emotional wellbeing using national-level data. The existing work on this topic is based on samples restricted to one or several provinces or, usually, to more limited locales. Moreover, much previous research has used school-based samples, which are subject to various biases—particularly in China where many pupils above primary level attend schools located away from home and live in dormitories.

Still, this literature—reviewed in detail below—is suggestive and, together with findings from studies conducted in other nations, leads to several hypotheses. We begin with hypotheses regarding the emotional well-being of children left behind by one or both parents who have “gone out for work.” We then turn to a review of the empirical literature focusing on these effects in Chinese settings and also review corresponding studies of the effect of being left behind on educational and cognitive outcomes and on physical health. We then consider the emotional consequences for children who migrate with their parents, which leads to one additional hypothesis; in this case we incorporate our review of the literature into the development of our additional hypothesis since the empirical literature for China is quite limited. (The bulk of studies compare migrant children to children living with both parents in destination locales, which is not the proper comparison.) In reviewing both literatures we ignore studies based on data collected only from migrant children or children left behind, which, because of the absence of a comparison group of non-migrant children, make it impossible to assess the effect of migration on children's lives (e.g. Li, 2004; Liang, 2004; Women's Federation of Meishan Municipality, 2004; Zhao, 2004; Liang et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2009; Wong et al., 2009; Yuan et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2015).

1.1. Left-behind children

Emotional well-being: hypotheses. It is well established in U.S. studies that the quality of parenting is one of the strongest predictors of children's emotional wellbeing. But the quality of parenting tends to be degraded in single-parent families relative to intact families. Single parents tend to be “less emotionally supportive of their children, have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, are more inconsistent in dispensing discipline, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children” (Amato, 2005, p. 83; see especially the references cited in note 46). Poorer parenting by single parents has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes among children, including emotional problems, conduct problems, low self-esteem, and problems forming and maintaining social relationships (Amato, 2005, p. 83, and the references cited in note 47). Single parenting also may lead to a greater risk of parental emotional difficulties and parental difficulties may in turn lead to a higher risk of child emotional difficulties. It follows from these points that the absence of one parent, and even more so the absence of both parents, is likely to be emotionally damaging to children. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994, p. 1), in a well-known U.S. study, summarize the existing evidence as “quite clear: *Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parents' race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries*” (emphasis in the original). More recent studies in the U.S. (Carlson and Corcoran, 2001; Brown, 2004; Kim, 2011; Pearce et al., 2014) and also studies in a number of other nations (Australia: Perales et al., 2015; Canada: Freistadt and Strohschein, 2013; Gt. Britain: Dunn et al., 1998; Kiernan and Mensah, 2009; and Ireland: Hannan and Halpin, 2014) show results essentially similar to those summarized by McLanahan and Sandefur.

To be sure, the Chinese context is rather different from that in the U.S. and the other Western nations cited because most single parent households in these places result from divorce or non-marital childbearing, neither of which is common in China, where almost all—97%—children in single-parent (or neither-parent) households are due to the labor migration of one or both parents. However, the fundamental point holds—that in China as elsewhere single parents face greater stress, have more difficulty providing high quality parenting, and experience greater likelihood of depression (Lu et al., 2012), which

¹ Chan (2009, p. 8) reports data from the 2005 1% sample census showing that of left-behind children 47% lived with one parent, usually the mother; 26% with one or both grandparents; and 27% with others or alone.

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