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Positive youth development in rural China: The role of parental migration

Ming Wen ^a, Shaobing Su ^b, Xiaoming Li ^c, Danhua Lin ^{d,*}

^a Department of Sociology, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

^b Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development, Tufts University, Medford, MA, USA

^c Prevention Research Center, Department of Pediatrics, Wayne State University (WSU) School of Medicine, Detroit, MI, USA

^d Institute of Developmental Psychology, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how parental rural-to-urban migration may affect left-behind children's development in rural China. We used two-wave data collected on 864 rural youth age 10–17 years in the Guangxi Province, China in 2010. We tested psychometric properties of a positive youth development (PYD) model theorized and corroborated in the US, compared a range of developmental outcomes among rural youth by their parental migration status, and explored the mediating role of family economic and social resources in observed associations between developmental outcomes and parental migration. The results showed the PYD model had some international validity although modifications would be needed to make it more suitable to Chinese settings. Little difference in the PYD outcomes was detected by parental migration status. On other outcomes (i.e., self-rated health, school grades, educational aspirations, problem behavior), positive influences of parental migration were observed. Increased income but not social resources in migrant families helped explain some of these patterns. The take-home message from this study is that parental migration is not necessarily an injurious situation for youth development. To advance our knowledge about the developmental significance of parental migration for rural Chinese youth, we urgently need large-scale representative surveys to collect comprehensive and longitudinal information about rural children's developmental trajectories and their multilevel social contexts to identify key resources of PYD in order to better help migrant and non-migrant families nurture thriving youth in rural China.

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During the reform and opening era in China, the large-scale rural-to-urban population movement has helped accelerate the country's urbanization and industrialization processes but meanwhile has also exerted hollowing effects of pervasive absence of prime-age inhabitants on rural communities (Cong, 2011). A huge number of rural children are left at home by one or both parents who cannot afford bringing their families to the cities. According to the most recent estimates, about 62 million rural children belong to the population of left-behind children (LBC) in 2010, accounting for over 22% of all Chinese children age 17 or younger (Duan et al., 2013).

The plight of LBC has drawn widespread media attention and stimulated researchers' interests. However, evidence remains sparse as to consequences of parental migration for child development in China. Although negative effects of parental migration

on children make intuitive sense and are anecdotally highlighted, limited research has generated mixed results on different developmental outcomes (Hou, 2014; Lu, 2012; Ye and Lu, 2011). This discrepancy may reflect a true countervailing nature of how parental migration affects developmental trajectories of LBC.

The current study is unique in several respects. First, it provides a fuller picture of how parental migration is linked to youth development in rural China, defined as the process of young people's growing up and adapting to the world, and captured by a wide range of social, academic, moral, and behavioral outcomes in this study. Second, by focusing on the conceptualization and operationalization of a positive youth development framework, it contributes to the limited understanding of positive youth development in rural China. Third, it tests two specific mechanisms linking parental migration to left-behind children's development: family economic resources that can be increased via remitted earnings and family social resources that can be shifted by various types of parental migration. Few studies have considered the potential tradeoff between increased material resources and possible

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ming.wen@soc.utah.edu (M. Wen), shaobing.su@tufts.edu (S. Su), xiaoli@med.wayne.edu (X. Li), danhualin@bnu.edu.cn (D. Lin).

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social deficits that can be simultaneously incurred from parental migration in rural China.

1. Background

1.1. Parental migration and youth development

What children receive from their parents can be broadly categorized into two groups: economic resources that can be capitalized to pursue opportunities and socio-cultural orientations conveyed via parent–child socialization (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). An adequate purchasing power is essential for the family to make available to the growing child development-promoting assets such as adequate nutrition and good housing condition, high quality school and neighborhood, and additional opportunities for skill building (Wen, 2008). Increased economic resources made possible by remittances sent by migrant parents (Morooka and Liang, 2009; Taylor et al., 2013) would presumably be a beneficial factor for child development in migrant households (Asis, 2006).

Parents can also influence their children via parent–child socialization instilling cultural orientations such as habits and value systems into the child and reinforcing or undermining parent–child bonding (Maccoby, 1992). Lacking mutual company on a daily basis, LBC and their non-resident parents may be subject to impaired parent–child affection and trust (Ye and Lu, 2011). Parental monitoring can also be weakened as in-person presence is often a prerequisite for parents to exert regular and effective supervision maintaining authority and implementing the established codes of family duties and roles.

Research shows that adolescent–parent attachment has profound effects on cognitive, social and emotional functioning and a sense of secure attachment is associated with better mental, social and behavioral outcomes (Moretti and Peled, 2004). Lacking parental monitoring is also a risk factor of adolescent malfunctioning (Matjasko et al., 2007) and has been cited as a key explanation for higher prevalence of problem behaviors of adolescents in single-parent families in the U.S. (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Supportive evidence also emerged for rural children in China showing protective effects of parental presence against loneliness and beneficial effects of parent–child communication on levels of life and school satisfaction and happiness (Su et al., 2013).

On the flip side of the coin, parental absence caused by economically-driven labor migration may not always incur emotional strain for older children but may sometimes provide needed space for them to reflect on their lives, grow more independent and mature, and become more appreciative of their parents' hard work and giving. In fact, a recent study based on data collected from five Chinese cities finds that LBC are more likely to seek help from their parents when they encounter problems in their studying compared to those living with their parents in the same rural community (Zhou et al., 2005). As the authors noted, this finding may suggest there exist many issues in parent–child relationship among rural families and parental absence due to migration may not necessarily deplete family social resources but rather have an unintended benefit in terms of conflict avoiding and trust building.

Therefore, in theory, we speculate there are both positive and negative impacts of parental migration on LBC's developmental outcomes via two plausible mechanisms: increased economic resources via remittances and varied family socialization due to distant parenting.

1.2. Literature review

Most evidence on the impacts of parental migration on LBC is from studies of transnational migration from developing

countries such as Mexico and the Philippines to more affluent countries (e.g., U.S. for the Mexican) and areas (e.g., Hong Kong for the Filipino). Family separation is common in these international migratory flows. Both positive and negative impacts on child development have been reported in this literature. In the case of Mexico-to-US migration, research found advantages associated with parental migration in terms of LBC's earning better grades at school (Kandel and Kao, 2001) and having better child and infant health (Frank, 2005) and disadvantages in socioeconomic outcomes (Halpern-Manners, 2011) and emotional wellbeing (Bernhard et al., 2009).

Although rural-to-urban migration in China differs from transnational migration in terms of physical and legal barriers involved in the process, the split family structure is a shared commonality between the two types of migration. There are three subgroups of parental migrant families, namely both-parent migration, father-only migration, and mother-only migration. Children of mother-only migrant family seem to be the most vulnerable group in terms of having the highest risk to get sick and the lowest possibility to get treatment (Song and Zhang, 2009) and the highest risk of unhealthy behaviors and school disengagement (Wen and Lin, 2012). This category is also the most uncommon among the migrant family types (Wen and Lin, 2012; Ye and Lu, 2011).

Although evidence remains sparse, a burgeoning literature has appeared reporting on how parental migration is associated with child well-being in rural China and has produced mixed results. Parental migration has been negatively linked to physical health conditions (Song and Zhang, 2009; Wen and Lin, 2012), school engagement and academic satisfaction (Wen and Lin, 2012), happiness and satisfaction (Gao, 2010), and psychosocial functioning (Jia et al., 2010), while positively to higher levels of loneliness (Su et al., 2013), problem behaviors (Fan et al., 2009; Gao et al., 2010), and anxiety and depression (Liu et al., 2009). However, nonsignificant results have been reported in outcomes such as school satisfaction and happiness (Su et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2011), educational status (Lu, 2012), physical health (Jia et al., 2010), and subjective well-being (Zhang et al., 2006). Meanwhile, there has also emerged evidence on positive impacts of parental migration on developmental outcomes such as self-concept, academic performance, and educational outcomes (Chen et al., 2009; Hou, 2014; Leng and Park, 2010; Morooka and Liang, 2009). These mixed results point to a complex, varied picture rather than a single-directional pattern. To make substantial empirical advancement on this issue, a fuller theoretical model of youth development is needed.

1.3. Positive youth development perspective

In western literature of child development, a relatively recent vision has emerged since the beginning of the 1990s, termed the *positive youth development (PYD) perspective*, focusing on positive sides of developmental trajectories and highlighting the potential presence of developmental plasticity or adaptive developmental regulations (Lerner, 2004). Different than the traditional deficit models of youth where adolescence is assumed to be a disturbing time, this strength-based conception views youth as potential resources to be cultivated or capitalized, emphasizing the role of ecological assets of multilevel social contexts in promoting all-round healthy functioning characteristic of a thriving youth (Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Theoretically, the PYD concept has been linked to several latent constructs such as 'competence, confidence, caring, character, and (positive social) connection,' embodied in the Five Cs Model of PYD (Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). These domains are meant to capture the major strengths desirable in a youth. In turn, when an adolescent manifests these Five Cs over time, he or she is more likely to achieve a successful transition from

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