Precious Son, Reliable Daughter: Redefining Son Preference and Parent–Child Relations in Migrant Households in Urban China

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Abstract

This article examines the parent–child relations within rural-to-urban migrant households to explore the continuations and changes in the patrilineal family system under the forces of migration and urbanization in late-socialist China. Based on ethnographic data collected between 2008 and 2015 in Shanghai, it takes a processual approach to understand son preference as a contextualized family practice and examines four aspects of parent–child relations in migrant households: reproductive strategy, childrearing practices, educational investment, and parental expectation of adult children. Through exploring intimate negotiations between migrant parents and their children over material and emotional resources at different life stages, this article demonstrates how the gendered parent–child relations in migrant households in Shanghai have been shifting away from the traditional focus on sons and gradually giving way to pragmatic adjustments and emotional redefinition under the forces of socialist institutions and capitalist markets.

Keywords: China; parent–child relations; son preference; migrant family; urbanization; gender; childrearing; Shanghai

Three decades of massive internal migration in China since the post-Mao economic reforms have had a tremendous impact on the family relations and gender dynamics within migrant households. Much research has focused on first-generation rural-to-urban migrant workers and their changing relationships with their families back in the countryside. Now, as China's internal migration pattern continues to change from "floating" to urban settlement and family reunification, how much have patrilineal and patriarchal family systems changed within these migrant households that have been living in cities for a decade or more?[1]

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1 Chan 2012. A 2011 survey on rural–urban migrant children and left-behind children by the All-China Women's Federation estimated that more than 35.8 million migrant children now live in cities with their parents.

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Parent–child relations within migrant households remain hidden to studies of family relations in urban China that focus on local households. Yet, as migrants continue to be deprived of access to public services such as medical insurance and education in the rural–urban, local–non-local dividing household registration (*hukou* 户口) system,[2] their family strategies and experiences should not be assumed to be the same as those in local, urban households. The fact that rural-to-urban migrant families are not subjected to the stringent one-child policy, which until recently targeted non-agricultural households in cities, also invites scrutiny of parent–child relations in multi-children families in Chinese cities where the only-child family has become the norm after three decades of state-imposed family planning.

Drawing from ethnographic data collected between 2008 and 2015, this article examines the gender dynamics between first-generation migrants and their children, who grow up in the cities, in four aspects: reproductive choice, childrearing, educational investment, and adulthood expectation. Through exploring the intimate negotiations between parents and children over material and emotional resources at different stages of life, this article demonstrates how gender preference has been shaped and redefined by migration and urbanization in late-socialist China.

Highlighted in this article are the unintended ways through which state policies and market forces have gradually transformed parent–child relations in migrant households. Although son preference persists to various extents among first-generation migrant parents often leading to additional children and investment in boys' basic education, as children enter adulthood, their parents' attitudes towards them are redefined because of *hukou*-based discrimination against rural migrants, urban China's increasing market segmentation, and the imbalance in sex ratios caused by son preference in the first place. By teasing out the contextual factors and exploring everyday family practices over time, this article calls for a processual approach to studying son preference as a contextualized family practice rather than as a static feudal legacy.

Son Preference, Migration, and Urban Socialization

Although agricultural modernization and urban development are generally believed to promote women's productivity and status, scholars of development and gender have cautioned against any simplistic optimism about gender equality. Socio-economic developments, without intentionally addressing pre-existing gender inequalities, may perpetuate or even enlarge the gender gap.[3] For instance, men are often more likely to receive formal education and training and are, hence, favoured by an urban economy.[4] The global "missing female"

2 Solinger 1999; Wang, Fei-Ling 2005.
3 See review in Razavi and Miller 1995.
4 Boserup 1970.

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phenomenon, referring to gender-selective abortions and the excess mortality of unwanted daughters, testifies to the persistence of son preference despite incremental achievements in economic growth and women's rights in the past century.[5]

It is known that the preference for male children endures in post-reform China despite rapid economic growth. In the Chinese patrilineal family system, sons have higher value because they continue the family line, stay with their parents and care for them in old age, and contribute to ancestral rituals. Survey studies have shown that the patrilineal family system sustains a social, economic and cultural need for at least one son in the post-reform era, especially in villages where clan organizations and ancestral worship remain important.[6] This requirement leads to fertility control and childrearing practices that discriminate against daughters. China's highly skewed sex ratios at birth (SRB) over the past decades, especially in hinterland provinces like Anhui and Henan, are both an indicator and consequence of a strong social preference for sons.[7]

That being said, the Chinese patriarchic and patrilineal system has been undergoing challenges. Sustained rural-to-urban migration is believed to help reduce the preference for male children in the countryside. The remittances sent by unmarried female migrant workers to parents have been gradually changing the perception of daughters in rural China.[8] This in turn reinforces "social remittance"[9] when migrant women's more egalitarian gender attitudes and fertility practices infuse origin families and villages through remittances and returns.[10]

In Chinese cities, son preference has shown signs of decline among permanent urban residents partly owing to three decades of the one-child policy. The consequent large number of one-daughter families has fuelled heavy investment in the education and well-being of girls. In turn, only daughters who conform to gender norms of being obedient tend to navigate China's exam-oriented education system better and perform well, and are empowered by it at home.[11] The rise in the educational level and earning power of women as well as the adoption of neolocal residence among young married couples also combine to level the playing field between sons and daughters to various extents in urban China.[12]

Hence the question arises of whether rural-to-urban migrant families, after long stints of migration and urban settlement, have converged with local urban residents and grown gender-neutral attitudes in their reproductive and childrearing practices. Sensationalized news of migrant couples giving away unwanted

5 Sen 1990.
6 Murphy, Tao and Lu 2011, 683.
7 The sex ratio at birth in Anhui reached as high as 123 males for 100 females, whereas the nationwide sex ratio at birth was 118 males to 100 females according to the 2010 national census. See Huang and Yang 2006; Loh and Remick 2015.
8 Xu 2000; Gaetana and Jacka 2004; Murphy 2004; Yan 2006.
9 Levitt 1998.
10 Chen, Jiajian, Liu and Xie 2010; Lu and Tao 2015.
11 Fong 2002.
12 Attané 2009; Michelson 2010.

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daughters in the 2010s reminds us of how factors such as age, education, date of first migration and ties with rural communities may combine to maintain the patrilineal ideal of having at least one son.[13] The highly skewed SRB of rural–urban migrants' children based on China's fifth census also seems to show that son preference persists among rural migrants.[14] A survey study in Shenzhen confirms the resilience of this son preference based on the gender ratio of migrant children and their parents' answers to the question, "what will you do if your first child is a girl?"[15] However, the 2000 fifth census fails to capture the effects of long-term urban settlement because migrants who have lived in the cities for over five years have been underrepresented (only 5.4 per cent) in the sample.[16] The measurement of son preference by the SRB or expressed reproductive choice is also too one dimensional and misses the dynamics of gender preference in everyday practices.

Meanwhile, assimilation to urban lifestyles and reconstruction of networks may change the childbearing culture among migrant households.[17] Social network theories argue that more participation in heterogeneous communities is positively associated with aspirations for smaller families and more neutral attitudes towards the sex composition of offspring. The survey study in Shenzhen shows that living in urban centres for a long time has a negative effect on son preference in reproduction, and migrants who have regular interactions with those outside of their own family circles show more gender-neutral attitudes towards childrearing.[18] Although Charlotte Goodburn's qualitative studies of the gender disparity experienced by migrant girls in terms of basic education and healthcare in Shenzhen show that migration does not necessarily reduce gender inequity in the short term, further exploration is needed to determine whether gendered parent–child relations will change after prolonged urban settlement.[19]

This article takes a longitudinal approach to examining the evolution of son preference among migrant families over time in terms of childrearing, educational investment, and expectations of adult children as well as reproductive choice. In each aspect, I highlight some key institutional factors that have shaped the private domain of parent–child relations and discuss how individuals navigate the complex web of influences in everyday life, revealing continuities and changes in the patrilineal family system in urban China.

13 Xinmin.net 2012.
14 Wu, Haixia, Li and Yang 2005.
15 Li, Shuzhuo, et al. 2006, 235, although the percentage of migrants having strong son preference is very low.
16 Wu, Li and Yang 2005, 17.
17 Bongaarts and Watkins 1996; Kohler 2001.
18 Li, Shuzhuo, et al. 2006, 241.
19 Goodburn 2014; 2015.

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Research Methods

This article draws on ethnographic data from long-term multi-sited fieldwork that was mostly conducted in Shanghai, China's largest migrant-receiving city, between 2008 and 2015. By 2014, two out of every five residents in Shanghai, which has a total population of 24 million, had a non-Shanghai *hukou*.[20] According to the 2010 national census, 77.5 per cent of non-local residents live with some family members in Shanghai.[21]

I spent 14 months conducting multi-sited field research between 2008 and 2009 linking migrant households, public and migrant schools, volunteer organizations, and labour markets in Shanghai. I followed up with most of the same informants in the summers of 2010, 2011, 2014 and 2015. In addition to rounds of interviews and participant observation with 50 migrant students in and outside of school, I paid home visits to 25 migrant households during this time, which allowed me to interview parents and observe their living conditions at first hand. I also conducted five short stints of field research between 2007 and 2011 in villages in Anhui, Henan and Sichuan, where some of the informants originally had come from. These field trips allowed me to participant-observe rural livelihoods and schooling conditions in order to better contextualize the everyday childrearing practices of migrant households.

All the migrant informants in this study are ethnically Han Chinese, which corresponds to their predominance (about 91.5 per cent) in the Chinese population. Approximately half of the migrant families came from rural Anhui, the province that sends the largest number of migrants to Shanghai.[22] The rest came from rural Sichuan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Henan and Fujian provinces. More than 75 per cent of the migrant families in this study have actively engaged in Shanghai's informal economy, working as construction contractors, street peddlers, garbage collectors, interior decorators, pedicab drivers and stall keepers, etc.

My approach of meeting migrant students through their middle schools and volunteer organizations before reaching out to their parents has led me to this less-studied migrant subgroup. Unlike waged migrant labourers, who work in factories, restaurants, construction sites and beauty salons, self-employed workers and petty businessmen tend to face fewer physical and financial constraints when raising their children in the cities. Of course, this approach may result in a self-selection effect, in that migrant parents who are willing to and capable of bringing their children, including daughters, to the cities may be overrepresented. This may lead to an overly positive portrait of the decline of son preference among migrant households. Given that the number of left-behind

20 Stats-sh.gov.cn 2015. "Shanghai shi guomin jingji he shehui fazhan tongji gongbao" (Shanghai economic and social development statistic report 2014), 28 February 2014, http://www.stats-sh.gov.cn/sjfb/201502/277392.html. Accessed 3 March 2015.

21 Stats-sh.gov.cn 2011.

22 Ibid.

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Table 1: **Number of Children in 50 Migrant Households in Shanghai**

Number of children	Number of households	Percentage
1	8	16%
2	29	58%
3	10	20%
4	3	6%

Source:
Author's field data.

children remains huge, I am cautious not to generalize the extent to which the informants in this study differ from rural households or migrant households that leave their children in the countryside.

Reproductive Choice on the Move

A survey by Shanghai's Birth Planning Committee in 2011 found that 40 per cent of registered migrant households living in Shanghai had two or more children.[23] Considering that a large number of unregistered migrants escape survey studies, the actual percentage of migrant families having two or more children in Shanghai should be higher. More than three-quarters of the 50 rural-to-urban migrant families I studied have more than one child (see Table 1). Recent surveys also confirm that in Shanghai and Beijing, a majority of the migrant schools' student bodies comprise children from multi-children families.[24]

It is not surprising that migrant families choose to have more than one child given that most migrant parents hold rural *hukou* despite their long-term stay in the cities. China's family planning policies have followed a dual track along the entrenched rural–urban divide. Rural *hukou* holders, who make up two-thirds of the total population, are allowed to have a second child if the first one is a daughter: this is the so-called "one-and-a-half-child policy." This policy modification, which was implemented in response to strong international controversy and domestic resistance, both acknowledges and perpetuates the patrilineal preference for sons.[25] Although rural *hukou* couples have to acquire "birth permission" (*zhunshengzheng* 准生证) through a cumbersome application process in order to enjoy the privilege of having a second child without penalties, the loosening of state regulations does allow and encourage more agency from rural households to have more than one child. In contrast, urban households are under much more stringent state surveillance via work units and street committees.

Migration helps rural households circumvent birth control policies. Geographic distance and physical mobility make it easier for migrant families

23 Xinmin.net 2012.
24 Li, Beibei 2004; Han 2004; Meng 2009; Yuan 2010.
25 Greenhalgh 1993.

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to escape close state surveillance and intervention at both sending and receiving ends. Jiao's parents, originally from rural Henan, managed to escape the penalties for having four children.[26] After giving birth to two daughters in their home village, the couple migrated to Shanghai in 1996 and made a living selling breakfast food and fruit on the street. There, they gave birth to Jiao, a third daughter, and eventually a son. The couple did not go back to Henan to enter the third and fourth children in the household register.[27] For more than a decade, Jiao and her younger brother kept themselves hidden from official records. They managed to circumvent administrative scrutiny by attending private migrant schools which required few official documents. It was only when these two children were graduating from middle school that the family returned to Henan to apply for official IDs in order for them to attend academic high school. The father sought help from his elder brother, who worked in the public security bureau, to register them and avoid birth-control fines totalling more than 20,000 yuan.

The above guerrilla strategy and willingness to take financial risks are a testament to first-generation migrants' strong preference for sons. Chen Jiajian et al. have found that migrant women who have been living in large cities and return to the countryside are more likely than rural non-migrant women to want only one child regardless of sex.[28] However, in my study I find that migrant parents are still committed to local reproductive ideologies. Born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they spent their formative years in the countryside, receiving a basic education at best. Only three migrant parents (all men) in this study attended senior high school. A few migrant mothers self-report to be illiterate. They either married a fellow villager before migration or another rural migrant post-migration. Most gave birth to their first child in their home village either before migration or upon return. The social pressure to have a son remains strong for them. Comments such as, "As you may know, back in our home villages, sonless households are looked down upon," are often heard as justification for their reproductive strategies.

Nevertheless, socio-economic constraints facing migrants in China's entrenched rural–urban divide may curtail the desire and capacity to have at least one son. Amei and Yingen, originally from rural Anhui, only have one daughter, Junzi. They made a living in Shanghai selling fruits, vegetables and small utensils, first from a wheelbarrow then from a hole-in-the-wall stall. Economic insecurity, the lack of family support for childcare and the demanding nature of the street-vending business deterred the couple from having another child. They named their daughter *jun* 君 ("learned gentleman"), a Chinese character that expresses their great expectation, an expectation that is generally associated with sons. Junzi lived up to this expectation, performing well in school. When she reached

26 All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

27 Delayed birth registration is common among migrant children. See Li, Shuzhuo, Zhang and Feldman 2010.

28 Chen, Jiajiang, Liu and Xie 2010.

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grade eight, she and her parents relocated to their Anhui hometown so she could sit the academic high school entrance examination there. She would have been denied that chance in Shanghai because of *hukou* restrictions.

As suggested by social network theories, staying longer in urban areas and assimilating into urban society to a higher degree reduces son preference. Xiaming, a self-made eyewear retailer, has only one daughter, who was born in 1993 in Shanghai. His friend, Dayong, who runs a small cargo-transportation logistics business, comes from similar circumstances to Xiaming. Both men completed nine years of basic education, migrated to Shanghai in the early 1990s, and managed to set up small but stable businesses. Their nuclear families rent furnished apartments in old urban neighbourhoods where the residents are mostly local Shanghainese. They have local friends within business circles and enjoy social activities such as group meals and mahjong. Both men have decided against having a second child and have put their daughters in local public schools. In addition to their better educational and economic backgrounds, the weak ties they have formed through "job relationships" and "friend relationships," as opposed to strong ties based on kinship and geographic proximity according to Yanjie Bian's classification of migrants' social networks, have influenced their gender-neutral fertility choices.[29]

When asked about family planning, Xiaming responded without hesitation: "One child is enough and already exhausting. What's the point of raising so many kids? Look at the Shanghainese." His perception of family planning is close to the neo-Malthusian calculus implied in China's birth control regulations.[30] The calculation of childrearing costs in cities like Shanghai and the pursuit of a comfortable lifestyle are more important than filial and patrilineal obligations for him and other highly urbanized migrants.

Sibling Configuration and Gendered Childrearing

Wanting at least one son often leads to a second, and even a third or fourth child, until a son is born, creating sequences that begin in possibly multiple daughters and terminate in a solitary male. Such sequences imply that sons receive more parental care not only for being male but also for being the youngest.

Migration adds another twist. Rural-to-urban migrants commonly leave their young children in the countryside during their first years of migration.[31] Lacking education and an urban *hukou*, first-generation migrants are disadvantaged in the urban labour market.[32] Low wages, the lack of job security and the denial of social benefits all contribute to the meagre, temporary housing arrangements prevalent among them.[33] Most migrant families rent tiny shacks

29 Bian 1997.
30 Santos 2016b.
31 Xiang 2007; Murphy 2014; Santos 2016a.
32 Fan 2002; Chen and Hoy 2008; Lu and Wang 2013.
33 Wu, Ka-ming, Chan and Chen 2011.

in peri-urban communities or share barely decorated apartments to save money. Long working hours also prohibit the majority of migrant parents from accommodating and caring for their toddlers in the cities. Most migrant families operate as nuclear families in a strict sense. Few grandparents move to Shanghai with the migrant couples owing to the need to attend to agricultural work in their home villages as well as the lack of health insurance and living space in the cities. In comparison, local urbanite couples often leave their children in the care of grandparents living nearby on weekdays, resulting in the only-child–centric so-called 4:2:1 model.[34]

Lacking both family and social support for childcare, migrant parents have to choose whom to bring to their adopted cities, and when. More than half of the migrant children in my study had been "left-behind" in the countryside for months or years before joining their parents in Shanghai. The binary categorization into "migrant children" (*suiqian zinü* 随迁子女) and "left-behind children" (*liushou ertong* 留守儿童) in official documents and the media is therefore rather misleading. The statuses of these children change depending on family and life circumstances; many oscillate between the two for years.

Timing, in addition to preference for sons, plays a crucial role in migrant parents' decision to bring their children to live with them. Often when migrant parents secure a stable means of living in cities or when childcare support is unavailable in the home village (for example, because of the death of grandparents), they take their children to their adopted cities. Consequently, younger children, regardless of sex, tend to receive more parental care and material comfort than their older siblings. It follows then that the gendered sibling sequence – sister(s), then brother – means that younger sons tend to join their parents in the cities earlier and live with them longer.

Yan is the eldest daughter of the hard-working owners of a food-cart business from rural Anhui. Born in 1993, she was taken to Shanghai as an infant with her mother but was sent back at the age of six to stay with her paternal grandparents, from grades one through to six. She joined her parents in Shanghai in 2006 in order to attend middle school. Her younger sister, Tan, was born in Shanghai in 1994. Tan stayed with her parents until she was four but was sent to Anhui to live with her maternal grandparents for grades one through to three before transferring back to Shanghai. In contrast, Gan, the youngest and male child, born in Shanghai in 1997, remained and grew up with his parents in the city.

The children of migrants may exert their own agency in parenting styles by negotiating whether or not, and when, they join their parents.[35] Attachment to grandparents, or a preference for familiar lifestyles, contributes to the decision-making. Born in 1994, Xianjin was taken from rural Anhui by her parents to Shanghai in 2002 to attend primary school. Her mother, after giving birth to a

34 Wang, Ying, and Fong 2009.
35 Lui and Choi 2013.

son in 2010, stayed at home to take care of him and do housework whilst helping out with her husband's small recycling business. When the parents decided to leave Shanghai for Jiangsu in the autumn of 2010 to try their luck at coal mining, Xianjin refused to move with them. Instead, she persuaded her parents to put her under the supervision of a long-term volunteer teacher in Shanghai. In addition to estimating the opportunities in Shanghai that she would miss out on had she relocated, Xianjin emphasized how independent she had been since childhood:

I don't miss them much, because since I was little, my parents have never meddled (*guan* 管) in my business that much. [Because they were busy?] Not really. Since childhood, they have always let me make my own choices, big or small.

Xianjin went on to illustrate how she went alone in grade one to register herself at a private migrant school in Shanghai. When asked how she would describe her relationship with her parents, she did not hesitate to point out the subtle difference:

I always thought my mum spent more time with my brother, though I would not say she favoured him [*pianxin* 偏心, literally "slant-hearted"]. We ate the same food. But there is one thing: every time we fought, my mother would never let me lay a hand on her son, not once.

Interestingly, Xianjin referred to her brother as "her son" and not "my brother." The subconscious switch from first- to third-person narrative reveals her mother's preference for her son and Xianjin's sensitivity to her parents' gendered childcare practices.

Xianjin's mother is among many migrant mothers who favour sons in everyday childcare. During one home visit, I mentioned to a mother of two elder daughters and one younger son that I offered free English tutorials at her daughter's school where I was conducting classroom observation. She immediately responded by asking me to tutor her son instead, right in front of her two daughters.

A self-selection effect likely exists in such elder-daughter(s)–younger-son family structures: the mothers (and the fathers) who have elected to give birth to one or two more children after having a daughter are more likely to be committed to the patrilineal ideology of having at least one son in the first place. In addition, first-generation married migrant women, who are largely disadvantaged in the urban labour market, continue to be subject to restrictive gender roles within their households.[36] Those who do not hold jobs in the cities, such as housewives whose husbands fare well in business, tend to favour sons in childcare practices partly because of their socio-economic dependence on their husbands. This conforms to what Margery Wolf finds in the patrilocal tradition, in which disadvantaged women resort to sons to secure their status in the family power structure and hence internalize and amplify patrilineal dominance.[37]

36 Fan 2003; Jacka 2005.
37 Wolf 1978; also see Ebrey and Waston 1986.

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Schooling Multiple Children

Unlike the only-child families that predominate in Chinese cities like Shanghai, migrant families with more than one child need to allocate limited resources among their children. A negative effect of sibship size on educational attainment has been widely observed in Western industrialized societies.[38] In rapidly developing countries like China, however, the underlying "resource dilution" hypothesis demands more contextualized analysis because of heavy policy interventions and rapid socio-economic changes. The strong preference for sons, for instance, largely negated the impact of sibship size on the education of males in China in the past century.[39] In the case of rural-to-urban migrant households, the legacy of the socialist *hukou* system, including the *hukou*-based education system that discriminates against migrant students, adds even more complexity to the practice of educational investment.

First-generation migrants had their own educations cut short and so aspire to realize their educational dreams through their children, within means. In this study, most migrant parents put both sons and daughters in school to complete nine years of basic education, which they consider a minimum qualification for joining the urban labour force.[40]

Nonetheless, gender differences in terms of school type and educational quality among migrant siblings exist. China's educational regulations, particularly the decentralized financing system for basic education provision, barred most migrant children from attending urban public schools for free in their adopted cities until the mid-2000s.[41] Although the State Council issued orders as early as 1993 to urge receiving cities to admit migrant students to the public school system, city governments often lacked the political incentives and financial recourses to accommodate an increasing number of migrant children. Not until 2008 did the Shanghai government start to close down substandard migrant schools, subsidize qualified migrant schools to upgrade facilities and improve teaching quality, and incorporate migrant children with sufficient documentation into public primary and middle schools.[42] Hence, until recently, there were three ways in which migrant children could complete their basic education: by returning to their registered hometowns for free public schooling; by paying "borrow study fees" (*jiedufei* 借读费) and using connections (*guanxi* 关系) to get into urban public schools; or by attending the low-cost, substandard migrant schools privately run by migrant entrepreneurs. The different choices among these three options for children in migrant households deserve further exploration.

38 Steelman et al. 2002.
39 Lu and Treiman 2008.
40 There was only one case in this study in which a female seventh grader was asked by her parents to withdraw from middle school to care for her four-year-old brother. A grassroots organization later persuaded the parents to put her in school to complete her nine-year basic education.
41 Han 2004; 2012; Goodburn 2009; Ming 2014.
42 Lan 2014.

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As mentioned earlier, Yan, the eldest daughter of the couple from rural Anhui who ran a food-cart business, was sent back to live with her paternal grandparents in the home village for primary schooling. Her younger sister, Tan, went to a migrant school after returning to Shanghai for the second half of her primary schooling. In contrast, the parents used *guanxi* and paid extra to put their youngest child, a son called Gan, in a public school in Shanghai from grade one. They also asked Tan to quit her extracurricular activities in order to tutor Gan in his homework. While Gan was spared from most housework, Yan would get up early every morning to help her father wash scallions and prepare meat for the food-cart business before school started.

Similar educational investment strategies favouring sons have been found among migrant parents in Shenzhen.[43] Survey studies of basic education among migrant children in other Chinese cities also suggest that migrant boys are slightly more likely to be enrolled in school than girls, although the studies' gender variable was not statistically significant.[44] The slightly skewed sex ratio of migrant students enrolled in schools may have more to do with the overall sex imbalance of the total population.

Age is also a factor in migrant parents' educational investment for their children. Younger siblings born in the late 1990s generally receive more investment and study longer in urban public schools for basic education, partly because schooling conditions have improved for migrant students. Their parents also tend to fare better economically once they have been in Shanghai for a few years. Elder siblings who have already started working often help support parents in schooling younger siblings as well.

Nevertheless, the *hukou*-based school segregation of migrant children may put boys at a particular disadvantage. Studies of the academic performances of ethnic minorities in other countries demonstrate that girls from stigmatized minority backgrounds tend to outperform their male counterparts, as the latter are more likely to rebel against school authorities.[45] Although migrant students are ethnically Han and so do not experience racial discrimination as do ethnic minorities, the rural–urban, local–non-local dividing *hukou* system has separated them into an underclass that suffers from unequal access to resources and receives different treatment within public urban schools.[46] While experiences of discrimination at school result in varying degrees of disappointment and even disillusionment among both male and female migrant students,[47] my observation, similar to other studies, finds that male migrant students tend to be more discontented and rebellious about bad teaching and poor school management, and thus are more likely to damage their rapport with teachers and perform badly in examinations.[48]

43 Goodburn 2015.
44 Han 2004; Li 2004; Liang and Chen 2007.
45 Gibson 1997; Fong 2002.
46 Ling 2012; Li, Miao 2015; Xiong 2015.
47 Lu and Zhou 2013.
48 Xiong 2010; Feng and Chen 2012.

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In contrast, a large percentage of female migrant students in this study conform to school rules, work hard and are selected to be student cadres. The smoother socialization process helps them to perform better at school than their male counterparts.

When it comes to investment in post-secondary education, gender bias becomes less relevant. Although most migrant parents spend little time supervising their children's homework and can hardly afford extracurricular tutorials, they do share the national "educational desire," at least at the ideational level, and encourage their children, regardless of sex, to pursue vocational training or other post-secondary education if available.[49] The deeply embedded cultural respect and social desire for educational qualifications and the equation of educational qualifications with human quality (*suzhi* 素质) in post-reform China help to diminish gender bias when it comes to higher education.[50]

China's *hukou*-based examination system further offsets son preference when it comes to investment in tertiary education among migrant households. Migrant families have to send their children back home in order to pursue a university degree. Travel expenses and boarding fees, in addition to tuition fees, make a university education – already more expensive since the market reforms[51] – even more costly for migrant children than for their urban peers. Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of college admissions since 1999 and the consequent degree inflation have resulted in diminishing returns to educational investment.[52] Migrant parents have to exercise more pragmatism when allocating limited resources among multiple children. Migrant children who have higher examination scores, regardless of sex, are more likely to be sent back to the countryside to endure three to four years of intensive cramming for the national university entrance examination (*gaokao* 高考).

Huizhong, the younger daughter born in 1992 in rural Anhui, joined her parents, who made a living repairing motorcycles in Shanghai, at the age of seven in 1999. Compared to her shy elder brother whose academic performance was average, she had been a top student since grade one and was transferred from a migrant school to a public school in grade three. With high expectations, her parents sent Huizhong back to rural Anhui at grade eight to enrol in boarding school. Her mother returned to Anhui in March 2011 to be by her side (*peidu* 陪读), cooking and doing laundry so that Huizhong could spend more time preparing for the once-in-a-lifetime *gaokao* in June. Huizhong did not score as highly as was expected but managed to enrol in a first-tier university in Anhui and became the first in her family to graduate from university in 2015. Upon graduation, she landed a job as a social worker in Shanghai and has been contemplating going abroad for postgraduate education. Her parents are lukewarm to this idea: they hope she will stay by their side and settle down in Shanghai. Yet,

49 Kipnis 2011.

50 *Suzhi* has multiple dimensions, but academic qualifications are one key marker. For further discussion on *suzhi* and education, see Kipnis 2001; 2007; Jacka 2009; Lin 2011.

51 Mok 2000.

52 Wu, Xiaogang, and Xie 2003; Zhang et al. 2005; Ren and Miller 2012.

when asked whether they would support her if she is admitted to graduate school, they expressed willingness to pay at least part of the tuition and living costs.

Besides academic performance and economic calculations, the gender norm that girls are more obedient (*guai* 乖) and mature (*dongshi* 懂事) often makes migrant parents feel more comfortable and confident about sending their daughters back home on their own to pursue a higher education. Many migrant parents keep their sons in Shanghai for fear that they would be out of control and turn "bad," because they believe boys to be less mature and more susceptible to bad influences. Junjie, the younger son of a construction subcontractor originally from rural Anhui, went to a secondary vocational school after grade nine. Despite the family's relative wealth and Junjie's passable academic performance, Junjie's parents decided not to send him back to rural Anhui for senior high school. "My mother did not want me to go back because she thought I would turn bad." In contrast, Junjie's elder sister completed senior high school in Anhui and went to a three-year college to study accounting. She joined her parents in Shanghai after graduation and found clerical work. The *hukou*-based *gaokao* system hence results in unintended equalizing effects upon migrant daughters' opportunities in higher education, even though it may result in a longer separation from parents.

Expectations of Adult Offspring

Despite the educational aspirations discussed above, an increasing number of migrant students of both sexes refuse to take the *gaokao* journey back to their hometowns.[53] Their sense of alienation from their home villages and the uncertainties of the gruesome *gaokao* path eclipse their once expressed desire for a university degree. Growing up in Shanghai, they have usually only visited their home villages for occasions such as spring festivals or identification card applications. They can barely speak their home dialects to converse with their local countrymen. News reports about university graduates having a hard time securing well-paid jobs following the expansion of university enrolments have also helped to increase the pragmatic appeal of vocational schooling despite its lower status and social stigma in the educational hierarchy.[54]

Shanghai's superior educational resources make it more feasible and attractive for migrant children to stay in the city. Policy changes since 2008 that opened up public schools (primary, middle and vocational schools) to qualified migrant students have added to the appeal. The city government invested millions in upgrading qualified migrant schools and incorporating them into the district education

53 Female migrant youth in this study expressed stronger satisfaction with, and desire for, city life in Shanghai, while Goodburn (2015) found in Shenzhen that fewer migrant girls than boys in primary school expressed satisfaction with city life. This difference may result from different life stages and regional variations.

54 Ling 2015.

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bureaus.[55] In contrast to Goodburn's findings in Shenzhen that migrant parents thought that village schools were better than migrant schools, most migrant informants in this study perceive village schools to be worse than city schools, because they are too geared towards rote-learning for examinations and do not provide enough extracurricular activities.[56] Migrant students who have experienced both village schools and migrant schools also point out that most village schools do not teach English until grade five, but schools in Shanghai start teaching English from as early as grade one. Since the learning of English has been promoted as the means to modernity and development in post-reform China, poor English teaching in village schools is deemed as proof of the backwardness of a rural education.

The growing preference to remain in the cities among second-generation migrant youth creates both expectations and anxieties for parents. Simei and Jianguo, vegetable sellers from rural Jiangsu, were initially very disappointed when both Lin (their daughter, born in 1994) and Xin (their son, born in 1996) refused to go back to rural Jiangsu to attend academic senior high school. They nevertheless supported both of them when they enrolled in three-year secondary vocational schools in Shanghai, and gradually accepted that their children would join the urban labour market without sitting the *gaokao* exam. When asked about her expectations, Simei seemed to be relaxed about Lin's future:

> I don't have high expectations for her, so long as she "has rice to eat" (*youfanchi* 有饭吃, can make a living), it's okay. With regards to daughters, as the custom back in our hometown goes, we will just let things be (*suibian le* 随便了). A daughter is less burdensome than a son.

Simei's seemingly lower expectations for Lin's career and earning power partly stems from the patriarchal imprint that devalues women and considers a married daughter to be a member of another family. Nevertheless, her laissez-faire approach does testify to the relative ease with which second-generation female migrants are able to settle in Shanghai.

Any advantages that migrant sons may have accrued, such as receiving their basic education in public schools, growing up by their parents' side and having longer exposure to urban life, do not seem to bestow any employment advantage. The *hukou*-based closure of *gaokao* to migrant students in their adopted cities reduces the gender disparity in educational attainment. Meanwhile, young, educated females often show great adaptability to urban lifestyles and benefit from urban China's transitional economy. Shanghai has been eager to restructure its economy from a manufacture-oriented one to a service-oriented "third industry." The changing employment structure tends to favour young, educated females, especially in less labour-intensive sectors such as hotel services, information management and clerical work. These occupations are socio-culturally perceived as being of a higher status than manual work, which also helps to propel female

55 Lan 2014.
56 Goodburn 2015, 326.

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migrant students into post-secondary education.[57] In contrast, the government-sponsored vocational training programmes, which offer gender-specific majors, tend to select male migrant students to become the "next generation of industrial workers" such as digital lathe operators or automobile repairmen.[58] These manual jobs, although often better paid than regular office clerkships, are deemed to be dirty, tiring and harsh – and thus of a lower social status.

Lin chose to major in chemical analysis in vocational school. Because of her strong performance, Lin secured a school recommendation for a year-long internship in a multinational chemical company, and later signed a three-year contract as a clerk in the production planning office. Most of her office mates are local Shanghai residents, but they use mostly Mandarin Chinese in everyday work and group gatherings, which enables Lin to be included as a colleague and friend. Acutely aware that she is the only secondary vocational school graduate (*zhongzhuan sheng* 中专生), she enrolled in a part-time college programme (*chengren dazhuan* 成人大专) for career development.

By contrast, Simei has had constant worries about Xin, who has been into video games since middle school and did not care much about further study after middle school. As the conversation unfolded, it turned out that the "burden" referred to by Simei was mostly to do with her concern about meeting Xin's marriage costs. When asked whether she would help her son in marriage, Simei immediately and resolutely answered: "Of course! If we cannot afford to buy an apartment in Shanghai, we have to build a house for him back in the hometown." The strongly felt parental obligation made her extra anxious about her son's bad academic performance because of his anticipated low income.

The concerns expressed by Simei about Xin and his marriage prospects in Shanghai are common among migrant parents in the city. As parents, they still feel financially responsible for the marriage of their sons. In China, the son's parents are expected to shoulder the responsibilities of providing housing, bride price and wedding banquet. However, the issue of the "man surplus"[59] resulting from two decades of highly imbalanced sex ratios at birth has pushed up the bridal price significantly and increased the financial burden of marrying off sons.[60]

Marriage prospects for male migrant youth are even dimmer owing to their rural *hukou* and consequently lower socio-economic status in cities. The social hurdle migrant men have to overcome when marrying urban women is higher than that for migrant women marrying urban men because of the hypergamous tradition that husbands should be of a superior socio-economic status than their wives. According to the Shanghai Statistics Bureau, as of 2009, among the small number of domestic trans-local marriages (Chinese couples holding *hukou* from

57 It remains unclear how such advantages would translate into gender equity in the long run if the patriarchic system continues to impose restrictions upon women after they get married and bear children.
58 Ling 2015, 115.
59 Huang and Yang 2006.
60 Loh and Remick 2015.

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different provinces) registered in Shanghai, more than 76 per cent of non-local residents married to Shanghai-*hukou* holders were women.[61] This explains why Simei was so anxious about her son Xin and had to save money for his future marriage. China's rural–urban dividing *hukou* system has made the burden of having a son even more pronounced for migrant parents than for their urban counterparts.

Emotion has also become a central component of parent–child relations.[62] Noticeably, the affective ties between daughters and parents have become intensified since the implementation of the birth control policy and mass migration.[63] The high correlation between migrant daughters being older, growing up in harder times, and shouldering more household responsibilities positively shapes emotional ties between daughters and their migrant parents over the long run. Huan, the eldest daughter who has a younger sister and a younger brother, recalled to me:

> I've always known that I am the *dongshi* 懂事-type [sensible] of kid from a very young age. My parents had to work in the crop fields then. I started cooking rice at 5 am and carried my younger brother on my back around the village … My mum told me these things, and I remember as well. Usually five-year-olds can't do these things, but I could. So I have always been proud of this.

No matter whether Huan's contrived memory is true or not, the brief experience of growing up poor in an agrarian economy forced Huan to adopt the self-discipline of "eating bitterness" (*chiku* 吃苦). She also gives 1,500 yuan per month of her salary to her parents even though she is now married. This in turn has made her feel empowered and identify herself as a capable and filial daughter who helps parents and cares for siblings.

One may interpret this as the internalization of patriarchal exploitation of women, which results in and naturalizes parents' exacting requirements of their daughters. However, this also earns them affection and trust. When Huan's mother, Shumin, an illiterate woman who worked as a janitor in a department store for almost a decade, talks about Huan, she always comments lovingly on how filial and kind Huan has been. Shumin still accepts the patrilineal notion that the paternal family should help to raise grandchildren, and she is committed to taking care of her son's children in the future. Nevertheless, when Huan got married to a local Shanghainese man in early 2015, Shumin told Huan that she had saved the bride price of 50,000 yuan from the groom's family for her and would help them buy a car when they had a child. She often brings home-made nutritious soups to Huan's apartment in the hope that she will be in good shape for pregnancy. Her active involvement in her daughter's married life strengthens their emotional bond and contributes to the transformation of the gendered practice of filial piety.

61 Stats-sh.gov.cn 2011.
62 Yan 2003; Sun 2011.
63 Shi 2009; Evans 2010.

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Conclusion: Son Preference in Practice

This article takes a processual approach to study son preference as a contextualized family practice. It shows how the gendered parent–child relations in rural-to-urban migrant households in Shanghai have been shifting away from the traditional focus on the son and have been gradually giving way to pragmatic adjustments and emotional redefinition under the forces of socialist institutions and capitalist markets.

The preference for having at least one son shapes the fertility behaviour of first-generation migrants, although assimilation with urban living and the development of social networks beyond kinship and home association have started to change this situation. The common sibling configuration, in which one or more elder sisters precede one younger brother, reifies gendered childrearing in favour of sons. Lacking both state and social support, migrant parents often leave their young children back in the villages when they first move to the cities. Younger sons tend to live with parents in cities longer and receive more parental care. Nevertheless, the high correlation between daughters being older and growing up in harder times and shouldering more household responsibilities positively shapes parents' attitudes towards daughters. These positive evaluations often translate into more nuanced attitudes and behaviour among migrant parents over time.

Structural factors such as the *hukou* system and the institutions built upon the *hukou* system, including the public basic education system, the university entrance examination system and the urban labour market, all discriminate against rural migrants and have played central roles in reshaping the gender preference. In particular, the schooling barriers faced by migrant students and their ineligibility to take the *gaokao* in their adopted cities unintentionally reduce the gender disparity between migrant sons and daughters when it comes to post-secondary educational investment and achievement. The hurdles facing young men of rural origins in China's marriage market, which are exacerbated by the decade-long sex ratio imbalance and socio-cultural discrimination against rurality, also add financial burdens as well as emotional stress to migrant parents. The preference for sons hence encounters its own shadow in rural-to-urban migrant families as the duration of urban settlement extends and their children enter adulthood.

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Biographical note

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摘要: 本文着眼于城乡移民家庭中的亲子关系, 以此探讨中国社会主义晚期父系家庭体制在城乡移民大潮、城镇化影响下的延续及变迁。作者根据2008–2015 年间在上海田野调查所得的定性数据, 描绘了移民家庭亲子关系中的四个侧面: 生育策略、育儿实践、教育投资以及父母对成年子女的期望, 从而以动态的视角将重男轻女这一性别歧视阐释为情境化的家庭实践。通过研究第一代城乡移民和他们孩子之间在不同生活阶段就物质及情感资源分配上的亲密互动和协商, 本文指出城乡移民家庭中父母与子女的关系由于受到资本主义市场和社会主义户口制度及其框架下教育、医保、求职等壁垒的多重影响, 正在从传统的优待男生转化为更为实际的调整和情感上的再定义。

关键词: 亲子关系; 重男轻女; 城乡移民家庭; 城市化; 性别; 育儿; 上海

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