

# **Intergenerational obligations: the paradox for left-behind boys by parental migration in rural China**

**Nan Zhang**

Corresponding author

The School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work, The University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL, The UK.

Email: [nan.zhang-7@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:nan.zhang-7@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk)

**Tarani Chandola**

Cathie Marsh Institute for Social Research (CMIST), School of Social Sciences, The University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL, The UK

Email: [tarani.chandola@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:tarani.chandola@manchester.ac.uk)

**Laia Bécares**

Cathie Marsh Institute for Social Research (CMIST), School of Social Sciences, The University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL, The UK

Email: [laia.becares@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:laia.becares@manchester.ac.uk)

**Peter Callery**

The School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work, The University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL, The UK

Email: [peter.callery@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:peter.callery@manchester.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

This article draws on in-depth interviews with caregivers of left-behind children (LBC) in rural China, to explore their understanding of migration motives and the social process of taking on caregiving roles for LBC. The authors argue there are underlying socio-cultural explanations pertaining to economic motives for migration, for example, making contributions for social events (weddings and funerals) in village life, and fulfilling social obligations for left-behind sons' futures. This suggests a paradox of intergenerational obligations for boys in a society in which sons are culturally more valued than daughters. This is because parents migrate to save for sons' but not daughters' adult lives. Grandparents, particularly on the paternal side, are expected to fulfil social obligations to care for left-behind grandchildren even without immediate financial returns. Left-behind boys, and in particular boys cared for by paternal grandparents, may be at greater risk than other LBC as they may receive even less investment in form of remittance from migrant parents in their early childhood.

**Keywords:** rural-urban migration; left-behind children; China; intergenerational obligations

## **Introduction**

Migration in developing countries and deprived areas can relieve poverty at the household level and boost economic growth at the national level (Mines, 1981, Grindle, 1988, Massey et al., 1987, McKenzie and Sasin, 2007). Many theories have been developed to explain labour migration from the economic perspective (Lewis, 1954, Jorgenson, 1961, 1967, Harris and Todaro, 1970, Stark and Taylor, 1991). Neoclassical economics emphasises the importance of human capital and consider migration as a rational choice to maximize individual net benefits (Sjaastad, 1962, Todaro, 1980). However, this has been challenged by the new economics migration theory that views migration as a strategy to maximize the net gains for the entire household rather than for an individual (Adams and Page, 2003, De Jong, 2000, Stark, 1991). Thus, the main difference between the two perspectives of migration is whether decision making is at the individual level or the household level (Massey et al., 1993). Grasmuck and Pessar (1991, p.15) have made it clear that: ‘It is not individuals but households that mobilise resources and support, receive and allocate remittances, and make decisions about members’. Economists tend to focus on the economic nature of migration and assume *homo economicus* in many economic models; anthropologists and sociologists, however, argue that economic motives are far from sufficient to predict human movement without accounting for social and cultural contexts that constrain human behaviours (Brettell and Hollifield, 2008). The household rather than the individual as a social and economic unit can help understand the interaction of structure and agency in most societies (Wallace, 2002, Morgan, 1989), which may enable researchers to integrate other socio-cultural factors with economic factors in the study of migration. The household approach can also help interpret the phenomena of temporary migration, split family structures and remittances in migration.

### The Chinese context: internal migration and left-behind children

China has provided a good example for studying temporary migration where the world’s largest internal migration is taking place since the reform and opening up that started in the late 1970s (Hu, 2012a), with a massive surplus of rural labourers transferring to cities. At the national level, about 15% of all rural families have at

least one member migrating to an urban area (Zhang, 2004). The population of migrant workers was around 268.94 million in 2013, up by 11.0% over that of 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2014, 2011). The massive internal migration, mostly of young adults aged 25-49 years old (Hu et al., 2008, Wong et al., 2007), has fundamentally altered the Chinese demographic landscape.

The split family structure is common in rural China due to internal migration. The household registration system (known as *Hukou*), which used to act as a strong constraint on individual rural-urban movement throughout China (Vendryes, 2011), limits migrant workers' access to urban welfare entitlements (Xiang, 2007, Gong et al., 2012). Therefore, migrant workers have to leave their children, especially those of school-age, in their rural hometowns (Ye and Pan, 2011), resulting in a social group of 'left-behind children' (LBC) in contemporary China. The most recent survey based on the Sixth National Population Census of the People's Republic of China estimated that the overall population of LBC aged 0-17 in rural China in 2010 was around 61 million (accounting for 37.7% of total rural children and 21.9% of all children in China) (All-China Women's Federation, 2013).

In the Chinese context, internal migration has indeed alleviated household poverty in migrants' rural communities of origin (Zhu and Luo, 2010, Huang and Zhan, 2008). Economic motives for migration are often highlighted (Ye et al., 2013, Fan, 2007), and seemingly, taken for granted without examination of the underlying explanations. The focus on household economic gains can neglect non-economic sociocultural dimensions that underlie decision-making for migration (Fan, 2007). For instance, narrative data from migrant workers suggest that, unlike their previous generation, 'new generation' migrants born after 1980s participate in rural-urban outflow for gaining new experiences and broadening horizons apart from economic motives (Hu, 2012b).

#### Caregiving arrangements for left-behind children in China

Migration is a complex decision-making process at the household level (Stark and Bloom, 1985, Aagesa and Kim, 2001). It concerns not only those who intend to migrate but also those who are left behind. A migrant's decision making often involves considerations for other family members (Rowland, 1994). In particular for

migrant parents, caregiving arrangements for their left-behind children may become a major concern. In China, both parent migration accounts for around 46.7% of the 61 million LBC. Over one in five of LBC aged 6-11 shares a household with a parent plus grandparents, while one third live with grandparents only (All-China Women's Federation, 2013). Grandparents therefore play a key childcare role in multigenerational as well as 'skipped generation' households (Burnette et al., 2013).

Kinship care of children, especially by grandparents, is a common arrangement in the developing world, and it can be a cultural norm for extended families to play an active role in child rearing (Ma, 2010). Adult children may be motivated to take up migrant work to improve the household's economic status when their own parents are available to look after young children. Those who were left behind in the extended family can constitute 'a reliable and effective support system' (Chang et al., 2011). This is consistent with the group/mutual aid model, in which each household member's capacity is maximized to ensure the success of the household as a whole (Lee and Xiao, 1998). By caring for their left-behind grandchildren, grandparents enhance their migrant children's economic capacity to reciprocate in the form of remittances (Agree et al., 2002), which may compensate grandparents' efforts as surrogate parents. This form of intergenerational exchange has been called 'intergenerational contract' (Croll, 2006) or 'time-for-money' exchange, which has been observed in several Asian countries including China (Cong and Silverstein, 2011, 2008, Frankenberg et al., 2002, Shi, 1993).

Drawing on in-depth interviews with caregivers for LBC in rural China, we explore how caregivers explain migration motives and the social process of taking on caregiving roles for LBC. Most of the literature to date tends to focus on determinants and/or consequences of migration, or the caregiving arrangements of LBC. We argue that decision making for migration and caregiving arrangements are inherently related to each other and are operated at the household level. It is essential to take into account of caregivers' perspectives because as critical social actors in the migration process they contribute to migration decision (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011). Although caregivers may act as an 'outsiders' for migration decision-making, their perceptions of migration can be important because of the potential to influence their

decision about taking on caregiving responsibilities for LBC, which in turn may affect their own as well as LBC's wellbeing.

Despite rapid socio-economic changes that China is undergoing, the structure of Chinese families continues to be mutually dependent and family obligations still play an important role in family relationships (Qi, 2014). We argue that there are some underlying socio-cultural explanations pertaining to economic motives for migration, for example, making contributions for social events (weddings and funerals) in village life, and fulfilling social obligations for left-behind sons' but not daughters' futures as an important driver to motivate parents to migrate. Grandparents, particularly on paternal side, are expected to fulfil social obligations to care for left-behind grandchildren even without immediate financial returns. Children left in the care of paternal grandparents may actually receive fewer remittances from their migrant parents than maternal grandparents and so fewer resources to care for children. This suggests a paradox of intergenerational obligations for boys in a society in which sons are culturally more valued than daughters: because parents migrate to save for sons' rather than daughters' adult lives; left-behind boys, in particular boys cared for by paternal grandparents, may have less investment in their early childhood than left-behind girls.

### **Methodology and data**

A qualitative study design was used to enable the generation of rich and in-depth information about the complex phenomenon of migration and caregiving arrangements (Creswell, 2006). Qualitative research can 'capture complexity of family life in the sense of an ongoing stream of behaviour over long period of time that interweaves the perceptions of individuals with behaviours in relationships' (Wampler and Halverson, 1993, p.189), and produce rich data to provide good understanding of the intra-household dynamics and/or social processes behind the numbers (Jones and Sumner, 2009).

This study was carried out at a rural site in one township in Henan Province, People's Republic of China, from September 2013 to February 2014. Henan Province is located in the northern central part of China, which is the most populous and traditionally one of the largest migration-sending provinces throughout China

(All-China Women's Federation, 2008, 2013). The annual per capita disposable income of urban residents in 2012 was 19,408 RMB (approximate 1,900 GBP) and 7,432 RMB (approximate 740) for rural residents (Yongcheng Government, 2013), lower than the national average (24,565 RMB or approximate 2,400 GBP for urban residents and 7,917 RMB or approximate 790 GBP for rural residents) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2014). Child participants were recruited at a primary school. The sample was purposive in order to achieve maximum variation (Creswell, 2006) of age, gender, and family structures (left by mother, father, or both parents). To be eligible, LBC had to be children who stay in rural areas with at least one parent having migrated to urban areas for employment. Caregivers for eligible children were invited to take part in this study.

Twenty-one LBC were recruited (Table 1): 12 boys and 9 girls; 10 were cared for by paternal grandparents, 4 by mothers, 4 by one parent and paternal grandparents, 2 by maternal grandparents, and 1 by an aunt; 19 of 21 LBC have at least one brother within household. Table 2 presents the characteristics of caregivers in the study sample. Of the 21 grandparents (17 on the paternal side and 4 on the maternal side), 15 were aged over 60 years old, and 6 were aged over 70. Only two of them went to primary school and the rest had never attended to school. The other caregivers (5 mothers, 1 aunt and 1 uncle) had a middle school education or less.

#### Data collection

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with caregivers, either individually or together with their partners. LBC were present for ten interviews with their caregivers. The interviews took the form of informal conversations in which the interviewer asked open questions about parental migration and caregiving arrangements for LBC using a topic guide. Caregivers were encouraged to elaborate on their answers and to raise additional topics that they considered relevant. Questions became more focused and specified as data analysis progressed and the key themes emerged. Interviews were conducted in Chinese (mandarin or dialect). Each interview lasted approximately between 1 and 1.5 hours. All interviews were conducted by the first author in participants' homes and were audio-recorded with their permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim in Chinese by a different

person outside the research team. The first author checked all the Chinese transcripts to minimise data loss.

### Data analysis

Principles and procedures of the constant comparative methods guided data analysis (Charmaz, 2006), following transcription and entry into the qualitative analysis computer program Nvivo 10 (QSR, 2012). Concurrent data collection and data analysis occurred with codes and categories being inductively developed from the data. Analysis involved identifying codes and their properties and dimensions, grouping the codes to create categories, systematically comparing and contrasting the codes, and examining the connections between the categories and subcategories.

Data analyses were initially processed in Chinese in order to avoid misunderstanding and minimize the risk of losing participants' meanings. It has been argued that the Chinese language is quite complex and it is often difficult to achieve equivalence of meaning in English language (Twinn, 1998). As the analysis developed, data relating to emerging themes were translated into English to facilitate review and discussion with co-authors. The translated versions and the original Chinese versions were checked by an independent and bilingual person outside the research team.

### Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from participants using either in writing or by verbal audio-recording from illiterate participants. Pseudonyms have been changed to preserve participants' anonymity.

## **Results**

### Migration to 'make ends meet'

Carers described economic motives for migration. Three emphasised that migration was reluctant and economic-driven for meeting basic needs or survival of the household members who remain behind:

'No one would ever migrate away if they have enough to eat at home.'

[Paternal grandmother 5]



If having enough money for a living, no one would ever migrate away. Just like others [non-migrants], they [migrant parents] also would like to be with their children. Who would not want to be with his wife and children? To put it bluntly, it is just for money. [Paternal grandmother 8]

Some carers described the underlying reasons for migration as to ensure individual survival, such as ‘get enough to eat’ and ‘making a living’. These carers’ emphasis on meeting the first and basic stage of physiological needs were consistent with motivational theory (Maslow et al., 1970).

Concerns about the stability and reliability of work were also mentioned. Working away was described as necessary for parents to ‘make ends meet’ with a secure income compared to working locally:

‘Local work is not stable. You may have work today but you may lose it tomorrow. Working away is more stable and reliable.’ [Paternal grandmother 6]

Working away is better than working locally. Most of the times you have work today but perhaps you may lose it tomorrow. But this is not the case if you work away. They [LBC’s parents] were unable to make ends meet when working locally. So they both migrate away. [Maternal grandmother 3]

In addition, some grandparents referred to problems in marital relationships as a motivation for migration. Wives and husbands from poor households sometimes fought against each other for limited household resources. Relationship problems were in essence linked to household economic restrictions.

Life is not well off. And my son has no practical skills to earn money. They [son and daughter-in-law] used to fight over this. At last they decided to migrate away for work. You know, they did not get along well with each other at home as they could not make money. [Paternal grandmother 6]

They [LBC's parents] used to fight a lot constantly when they were still at home as they had no money. Now they are away for work, I am not sure whether they still fight, at least out of sight, out of mind. I need to care for kids for them. [Paternal grandmother 8]

One paternal grandfather who helped his daughter-in-law care for two left-behind girls indicated non-economic motivation for migration:

'He [LBC's father] got some mental problems. When he was around he often beat the kids. The girls were so scared of facing him. I just asked him to migrate away.' [Paternal grandfather 2]

Parents' needs to migrate to cities for work because of lack of land to cultivate or employment opportunities can be seen as 'push' factors that drive rural population to migrate to other places. On the other hand, more employment opportunities and higher salaries pull them to migrate to developed regions (Cheng et al., 2006).

Three carers mentioned that they were not concerned about survival. They, however, had to pay contributions to 'ren qing' (social and moral norms of reciprocal favour, 人情) 'li jie' (cultural etiquette, 礼节) to maintain social relationships in villages, which caused extra pressure on household finances:

The contribution to one funeral used to cost much less than it is nowadays, no more than 10 RMB (or 1 GBP). It is now around 100 RMB (or 10 GBP). We were asked to give 500 RMB (or 50 GBP) for one relative's funeral. We had to do so as others do. [Paternal grandmother 12]

Anyway what he [LBC's father] earned is enough for our survival. We have farmland to provide grains...You know, "ren qing li jie" [social and moral norms of reciprocal favour and cultural etiquette, 人情礼节] can cost a lot every year, even at least 100 RMB (or 10 GBP) for attending just one funeral. Other families in this village are better off than us. They usually contribute several hundred RMB for weddings and funerals. We

can do nothing but to follow. This has made our situation even worse.  
[Mother 4]

In these two cases, participants experienced financial difficulty in contributions to social events (weddings and funerals) but described them as important for social interactions in rural areas. It is likely that these expenses can reduce the household resources allocated to children. A longitudinal evidence from rural southern China suggests that prenatal exposures to social festivals tends to ‘squeeze’ resources allocated to food and nutrition for poor households, which appears to lower height growth of young boys (not girls) under 6 years old (Chen and Zhang, 2012). Our data suggested expected contributions to social events are a source of comparison and judgement in the village, and so an additional financial pressure:

‘Other families in this village make contributions of one or two hundreds for social events [weddings and funerals], it would be inappropriate if you just contribute 50 RMB (or 5 GBP) as it could make yourself and your host [of the social events] lose face.’ [Paternal grandfather 2]

#### Migration to meet social obligations for sons

Another economic motive for migration was to earn and save money for sons’ futures. This was prominent during the interviews with all the caregivers of left-behind boys, but not mentioned by caregivers of girls. This may suggest gender disparities in intergeneration social obligations for boys and girls in the context of rural China where sons are more culturally valued and receive more resources than daughters (Burgess and Zhuang, 2000, Ebenstein and Leung, 2010). Carers of boys referred to social expectations in rural areas that parents would take responsibility for sons’ futures:

‘We have been in debt since we married off our two sons. First, weddings for sons, then feasts for celebrating the new-born grandchildren-both are our responsibilities.’ [Paternal grandmother 6]

Having a son was considered to be associated with enormous expenses in rural areas:

‘It would cost hundreds of thousand RMB for a boy, like buying him a house, getting him a wife. This is the reality in rural areas.’ [Maternal grandfather 1]

Parents started working hard to accumulate wealth even when their son was still young, for example, one paternal grandmother said her son and daughter-in-law started to migrate and save money when their son was only 3 years old:

They [LBC’s parents] are worried about buying house for their son even though he is just 3 years old. They both could save around 30,000 RMB (or 3,000 GBP) per year. In this case, it will take about 10 years for them to buy a house. You know, currently the house costs hundreds of thousands RMB, even for the house in the town costing 200,000 RMB (or 20, 000 GBP). No one knows where the rate of house will go in ten years. [Paternal grandmother 6]

Having more than one son could make life even harder:

I have been talking to my sister all the time, “you don’t have the ability to make money then how come you still give birth to babies, in particularly baby boys-the boys make life even harder”. So may the God let the rich have more boys, and the poor have fewer. But it does not work this way, does it? [Aunt 1]

For some families, having a second son was a push factor for parents to ‘migrate again’:

He [LBC’s father] used to work away when our first boy was around 5-6 years old. When we had our second child, another boy again, so he had to migrate again to make more money. Two boys, how come he stayed at home instead of working away? [Mother 1]

In another case, parents were concerned about when they could afford two houses for their two sons:

His [LBC's] father said they [LBC's parents] need to make money for buying sons houses. They migrate away to work for houses for sons. How much money would it cost for two boys, you see? They have been worried sick about this: when will they be able to make enough money for houses? [Paternal grandmother 3]

At least, 'migration especially both parents away make it not impossible to buy houses for their sons'. [Paternal grandmother 6]

Taking on caregiving roles for left-behind children

Paternal grandparents as the first choice

Most of the 12 children with both parents migrating were left in the care of paternal grandparents ( $N=10$ ). The remaining two were only left with maternal grandparents because paternal grandparents were not able to provide help with childcare. A six-year-old boy was originally left in the care of his paternal grandmother but transferred to his maternal grandmother due to health problems:

He [LBC] was cared for by his paternal grandma when he was from 1 to 4 years old. Unfortunately, his paternal grandma got hepatitis B. For his health sake, my daughter and son-in-law took him along when they migrated. However, they both worked and could not manage to look after him. My daughter told me her sufferings and requested me to help her. [Maternal grandmother 2]

This maternal grandmother described how the caregiving roles were transferred. She gave priority to looking after her paternal grandchildren. Her daughters-in-laws were important considerations when she made her decision of looking after her maternal grandson:

You know, I have my own grandchildren [paternal grandchildren] to look after. My sons may have no problem if I look after my maternal grandson but the problem is with daughters-in-law who might not be alright with this. A proverb goes, "Daughters-in-law are not close

enough with mother-in-laws from North China to South China (从南京到北京儿媳妇不跟老婆婆亲)". So I just told my daughter that I can help her but I cannot guarantee how long I can do this for her. [Maternal grandmother 2]

Another left-behind boy and his younger brother who were cared for by his maternal grandparents were expected to be looked after by their paternal grandparents in the first place:

If his [LBC's] parents are away just for one or two days, perhaps he can stay with his paternal uncles. But the thing is his parents are away all the year around. In this case, he can stay with his paternal grandmother who is old and ill though. He complained that his paternal grandma's cooking was dirty. So he ended up staying with us. [Maternal grandmother 1]

Four mothers with LBC directly referred to paternal grandparents when asked about caregiving roles of LBC. Two of them mentioned that paternal grandparents were too old to provide childcare. Another two indicated paternal grandparents refused to provide help due to family conflicts:

He [LBC's paternal grandfather] never helped out...He used to say, "We [LBC's paternal grandmother and paternal grandfather] would starve to death if we depend on you [LBC's parents] for elderly care". In fact, we had three kids and were trying hard to make ends meet for survival, how could we have extra money for you? He even locked the door from the inside once when my kids approached him for food. How could you do this since they are your grandchildren by blood? [Mother 2]

This account suggested that paternal grandparents expected future returns, in the form of elder care from their adult children, when they decided whether to provide childcare or not.

Three children with only mothers migrating were left behind with fathers who cohabited with LBC's paternal grandparents. In fact, paternal grandparents were

taking the caregiving responsibilities for LBC. If the paternal grandparents were too old and/or they were not good in health status, the maternal grandparents or other relatives, such as an uncle or aunt may replace their caring roles to assume this task. For example, a twelve-year left-behind boy whose paternal and maternal grandparents were too old to provide help, was looked after by his maternal aunt.

#### Caring for left-behind grandchildren: feeling obliged?

Caregiving practices often involved preparing food, washing clothes for LBC, sending young LBC to school and collecting them after class. Some carers indicated that 'looking after them (LBC) is very demanding' as they need to care for more than one child. In two cases, grandparents needed to look after four LBC, 'it is just like running a kindergarten'. On the other hand, two paternal grandmothers expressed their willingness and pleasure in doing this. Otherwise, they would 'feel lonely' without LBC's companionship.

However, grandparents indicated strong feelings of responsibility and obligation about caring for left-behind children. Our interviews suggested that caring for paternal grandchildren is a social expectation of grandparents:

Daughters-in-law are expected to give birth to children and paternal grandmother is responsible for rearing them, which is quite true in this village or any other village. They [migrant parents] assigned you a task to care for the kids. So it becomes our responsibility to look after them. What are you gonna do about it? [Paternal grandmother 12]

'We are doing this [looking after the two left-behind boys] just for our kids' sake even though we are quite old. What are you gonna do? My own paternal grandchildren and my own maternal grandchildren, how come you don't look after them?' [Maternal grandfather 1]

These narratives showed strong culture-based responsibility and obligations for grandparents, in particularly paternal grandparents, to help their adult children look after grandchildren. They were the most common caregivers and often the first choice to take on caregiving responsibilities for LBC when both parents were away. Caring for grandchildren in China is considered to be the culturally norm, and thus

expected (Burnette et al., 2013). However, we found that paternal grandparents in particular may feel obliged to take on caregiving roles. Although they found caring for LBC ‘not easy’ and ‘very demanding’, especially for ageing grandparents or those in poor health status, they still encouraged parents to migrate to ‘make ends meet’. Adult sons and daughters may be motivated to take up migrant work to improve the household’s economic status when parents are available to look after their young children. Those who were left behind in the extended family constitute ‘a reliable and effective support system’ (Chang et al., 2011). These findings are also consistent with the group/mutual aid model, in which each household member’s capacity is maximized to ensure the success of the household as a whole (Lee and Xiao, 1998).

#### Remittances from migrant parent(s) to non-parental caregivers

In this study, the remittances mainly refer to monetary remittances (e.g., money and in-kind goods) rather than social remittances in terms of ideas, norms, and practices gained through migration to household members who stay behind (Levitt, 1998). Participants’ accounts gave the impression that the remittances could be small and irregular, in particular for paternal grandparents acting as caregivers. Ten out of thirteen paternal grandparents said they did not receive remittances from LBC’s migrant parents (see Table 3). Two of three paternal grandparents who did receive remittances described the amounts as inadequate to cover all the LBC’s expenses:

My son gives me money irregularly when he gets back home. He asks me to use this money for buying clothes, shoes, food and drinks for them [LBC]. When the money is running out, I spend my own. You know they are my own grandchildren, how could I don't love them? [Paternal grandmother 3]

The other day I spoke to my son, “you think you give me 2000-3000 RMB (or 200-300 GBP) a year, but you don’t know how much money I need to spend, around 10,000 RMB (or 1,000 GBP)”. He seemed to be alright with it. I almost spend all my income covering the outstanding expenses. [Paternal grandmother 4]



Two paternal grandmothers showed understanding for their adult children not sending remittances:

They never gave me money or buy me any clothes. They don't have any money for me since their small business went broke. My son would be able to work in construction fields to earn money if he is in good health condition. They are so poor. I never ask them for money. I don't want to see them suffer a lot. [Paternal grandmother 12]

They [LBC's parents] have no money at all. My daughter-in-law has many siblings so they need to pay many contributions, like weddings, celebrating new-born babies, and so on. Last year I fell down and was sent to hospital. They borrowed money to pay for my medical expenses. So they don't have money. [Paternal grandmother 10]

However, all three maternal grandparent carers said they received remittances from migrant parent(s) (see Table 4) and two described 'it is enough for the kids'. One left-behind girl and her little brother were cared for mainly by paternal grandparents, and occasionally by maternal grandparents. Only maternal grandparents received remittances:

My daughter sent me money to pay tuition fees for my little grandson. You know he is in pre-school and it is not free. And the rest of money is used to buy some food and snacks for children. It is enough for the kids. [Maternal grandmother 3]

Although financial returns can cover LBC's own expenses, we were unable to know whether maternal grandparents received additional compensation for their help with childcare.

However, most paternal grandparents in our study reported that they did not receive regular and adequate remittances from their adult children. The remittances appeared to only cover LBC's own expenses and did not involve additional compensation for paternal grandparents' help. Maternal grandparents reported they received remittances from their adult daughters which were considered to be 'enough' for the

LBC. This is consistent with Song et al's (2012) study suggesting that daughters who received support from their older parents (e.g., grandchild care) tend to return more financially than sons. Normally, full-time childcare for maternal grandchildren is rare in rural China where strong patrilineal family values are embedded and family resources are much less expected to be allocated to married daughters (Chen et al., 2000). When childcare is provided for adult daughters, greater expectations of financial returns are expected from them by grandparents (Cong and Silverstein, 2012).

Another possible justification for sons rarely making financial support is due to the 'long-term contract' between sons and older parents (Song et al., 2012). The care of the aged is primarily a family responsibility in China (Davis and Harrell, 1993). Sons in a traditional family are expected morally and legally to provide support for their parents especially in later stages of life (Whyte and Ikels, 2004, Ebenstein and Leung, 2010). In this case, it is possible that sons will pay reciprocally, probably in a different way (e.g., elder care), at a later stage. In our interviews, one paternal grandmother refused to look after LBC as he claimed that her adult son was too poor to provide elder care. This life course perspective of reciprocal transfer amongst inter-generations, that is 'earlier investment in the form of future support' (Thang and Mehta, 2012), may explain irregular and inadequate remittances to grandparents for childcare from adult sons. Migration is partly the outcome of meeting social responsibilities for offspring especially sons in rural China. Grandparents, particularly on paternal side, are expected to fulfil their social obligations to care for left-behind grandchildren even without immediate financial returns. These intergenerational obligations may have inadvertently strengthened family bonds through generations in rural China.

## **Conclusion**

Although the sample is from only one township in rural China, our findings are consistent with previous studies in other parts of the country that economic incentives are an essential motivation of the internal migration (Ye et al., 2013, Fan, 2005, Hu, 2012b, Cheng et al., 2006). Our study further sheds light on some underlying socio-cultural explanations pertaining to economic motives, for example,

making contributions for social events (weddings and funerals) in village life, and fulfilling social obligations for left-behind sons' rather than daughters' futures. The latter appears to be an important driver to motivate both parents to migrate. When both parents are away, paternal grandparents are often expected to be the first choice to take on caregiving responsibilities for LBC. Regular and sufficient financial returns are not always available to paternal grandparents. Findings of this study suggest strong culture-based obligations for paternal grandparents to help their adult children take care of LBC.

Despite significant socioeconomic changes in contemporary China, family obligations continue to play an important role in Chinese family ties (Qi, 2014). We could observe at least two distinctive flows of intergenerational obligations within split household due to migration. One is upward from grandparents to their adult children by providing childcare for LBC. The other is downward from migrant parents to LBC by saving up for their little sons' adult life. Son preference, though rooted in traditional Chinese culture, is still persistent in contemporary rural China (Ebenstein and Leung, 2010). Sons are considered more valuable and often allocated more household resources than daughters (Davis and Harrell, 1993). Chinese parents with sons raise their savings because of unbalanced sex ratios to improve their sons' relative attractiveness for marriage, which is particularly true in rural areas (Wei and Zhang, 2009).

Our findings suggest that the gender of the LBC can be an important consideration for parental migration in the context of rural China: parents of boys have the additional motivation to migrate of saving for sons' futures. This suggests a paradox of intergenerational obligations that left-behind boys are less likely to receive resources in the form of remittances from migrant parents in a society where sons are culturally more valued than daughters. This is because parents migrate to save up for their sons' rather than daughters' adult lives. Grandparents, particularly on paternal side, are expected to fulfil social obligations to care for left-behind grandchildren even without immediate financial returns. Children left in the care of paternal grandparents may end up with fewer resources from their migrant parents. Left-behind boys cared for by paternal grandparents may receive even less investment in their early childhood from migrant parents than LBC cared for by maternal

grandparents. This potentially makes left behind boys lose their opportunities of early development during the life course. Moreover, our findings on the gender differences of LBC in the social obligations and remittances from migration parents, which has an important policy implication in the context of rural China where son preference is prevalent (Burgess and Zhuang, 2000). Future studies and policy making on LBC's wellbeing should therefore consider the variables of the gender of LBC and their relationships with caregivers.

Our study has limitations. We explored the motivations of parental migration and caregiving arrangements from caregivers' perspectives rather than migrant parents directly. While this enabled us to discover what is important to migration decisions from 'outsiders' eyes', we were unable to explore migrants' views about their motivations for migration and caregiving arrangements for LBC. In addition, the participants may not be representative of the community of caregivers for LBC in the area in terms of socio-demographics or views. However, diversity was maximized within the context based on certain children's characteristics (e.g., age, gender, types of parental migration), and negative and discrepant cases analysed (Maxwell, 2012) until theoretical saturation occurred (Charmaz, 2006). Future studies could access children and caregivers in different populations with various socio-economic characteristics and elicit further insights from migrant parents directly.

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**Table 1** Sample size and characteristics of left-behind children (N=21)

	Left-behind children		Total
	Boys	Girls	
Number	12	9	21
Age range			
6-9	4	8	12
10-12	5	4	9
Siblings			
None	4	0	4
One brother	4	7	11
One sister	4	0	4
Others (two sisters)	0	2	2
Left-behind types			
Only mother away	2	0	2
Only father away	2	4	6
Both parents away	8	5	13
Caregivers			
Paternal grandparents	5	5	10
Maternal grandparents	2	0	2
Mothers	2	2	4
Fathers	-	-	-
Shared: paternal grandparents and mothers	-	2	2
Shared: paternal grandparents and fathers	2	-	2
Others (uncle or aunt)	1	-	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>21</b>	

**Table 2** Sample size and characteristics of left-behind children's caregivers (N=28)

Characteristics	Paternal grandmother	Paternal grandfather	Maternal grandmother	Maternal grandfather	Mother	Aunt/ uncle	Total
Age Range							
30-39	-	-	-	-	2	1	3
40-49	-	-	-	-	3	1	4
50-59	6	-	-	-	-	-	6
60-69	5	3	1	-	-	-	9
>=70	1	2	2	1	-	-	6
Educational attainment							
Illiterate	11	5	2	1	1	-	20
Primary school	1	-	1	-	2	1	5
Middle school	-	-	-	-	2	1	3
High school or higher	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	12	5	3	1	5	2	28

**Table 3** Remittances from migrant parent(s) to non-parental caregivers (N=16)

	Remittances		Total
	Yes	No	
<b>Gender</b>			
Boy	4	8	12
Girl	2	2	4
<b>Age range</b>			
6-9 years	2	4	6
10-12 years	2	8	10
<b>Caregivers</b>			
Paternal grandparent(s)	3	10	13
Maternal grandparent(s)	3	0	3
Other relatives (Aunt)	0	1	1

**Table 4** Remittances distribution for non-parental caregivers who received remittances

Caregivers	Sent remittances or not <sup>&amp;</sup>	Amount <sup>§</sup>	Enough for LBC <sup>*</sup>
Maternal grandfather 1	yes	Not Specific	-
Maternal grandmother 2	yes, quarterly	About 1000RMB (or 100 GBP)	Yes
Maternal grandmother 3	yes	Not Specific	Yes
Paternal grandmother 3	yes, irregularly	Not Specific	No
Paternal grandmother 4	yes	2000-3000 RMB (or 200-300 GBP)	No
Paternal grandfather 1	only Chinese New Year	Not Specific	-

<sup>&</sup> Have his/her parents send remittances back?

<sup>§</sup> How much money roughly has been sent back to you per year?

<sup>\*</sup> Left-behind children

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