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Of flexibility, futurality and fracture: a temporal perspective into migrant parenting in China

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ABSTRACT

How China's gigantic rural migrant population juggle economic productivity and family social reproduction is a well-researched topic, little, however, is written from a critical temporalities perspective. Based on longitudinal qualitative data gathered from two provinces, I unpack the temporal challenges encountered as well as strategies developed by rural migrants to care for and educate their children through a multi-level analysis. I report three findings. First, to cope with temporal constraints imposed by urban governance and production regimes that strategically incorporate migrants as a permanently temporary, disposable and exploitable workforce in cities, rural migrant families adopt generational and gendered division of labour to reconfigure parenting roles across time and spaces, hence 'flexible' care arrangements. Second, the pace and the timing of care (re)configurations are often determined by 'critical moments' in children's educational career which is pursued as a future-oriented family project. Last, the conflicting and competing temporalities required of migrants from their precarious labour conditions and from their parental roles to accommodate children's structured school schedules create fractures in parental care-giving and intergenerational intimacy. The findings reveal coexisting vulnerabilities and resiliencies of China's migrant working class. I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical, methodological and policy implications of this study.

KEYWORDS

Internal migration; temporality; parenting; family; China

Introduction

In post-reform China, millions of rural migrant families are challenged to juggle economic productivity and family social reproduction. They split their family into separate households across spaces and reunite over time, sometimes reverse arrangements in response to policy changes and situational needs. They resort to intergenerational support as a reliable resource and prioritise children's development as a future-oriented family project, hence are highly responsive to 'critical moments' in children's educational career. They lead asynchronous lives even in the same household, subject to different sets

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of institutional and organisational schedules, compounded by prior separations in the family history, which often complicate intergenerational ties. Without sounding overly romantic, one may characterise their lives by a constant struggle for and against time: for temporary and episodic arrangements of care and economic activities, for upward social mobility through advancing children's educational prospects, for long-term familyhood and wellbeing, and against temporal constraints imposed by urban governance and production regimes that strategically incorporate them as a permanently temporary workforce in cities. Time and temporality thus constitute an important lens in understanding the social condition of and the social fabric of migrants' family lives.

However, existing literature on China's internal migrant population rarely broaches this analytical perspective. A growing literature has examined how rural migrant parents negotiate migration and childrearing (Choi and Peng 2016; Ling 2017; Murphy 2014; Peng 2020). The studies have explored intergenerational collaborative child-rearing strategies (Peng 2020); the gendered division of labour between conjugal couples (Choi and Peng 2016); the modified patterns of son preference (Ling 2017); and the role of education in linking migrant parents' and left-behind children's mutual commitments (Murphy 2014). Despite added insights into the changing dynamics in migrant families, this literature has several limitations. First, due to research designs relying on single-generation data collection (from either migrant parents or children), it lacks an intergenerational perspective in unpacking how the family as an organisational unit live their everyday life. Further, it builds on a static and cross-sectional conceptualisation of the migrant family without accounting for its fluid and dynamic nature. For example, families with left-behind children and those with migrant children are often studied as distinct groups, rather than families at different stages of life history (Gu 2022a). This leads to a gap in exploring a wider range of spatiality and temporality of migrants' family life as they engage in multimodal and multidirectional migrations.

This temporally sensitive study fills these empirical and theoretical gaps. Based on longitudinal interview data gathered from 38 rural migrant families in Shenzhen and Hunan over four years, I reveal three temporal features of migrant parenting and family life – a flexible care network across children's life course, parental involvement responsive to children's educational career as a future-oriented project, and fractures in intergenerational intimacy due to asynchronous and parallel lives of different generations. Empirically, I unpack the temporal challenges encountered as well as strategies developed by migrant parents and/or their substitute carers to care for children through a multi-level analysis. These include the institutional timeframe that conditions migrants' mode of stay as permanently temporary workers in cities, the industrial temporal order which compels migrants' commitment to extra, irregular and inflexible time as informal workers, as well as migrant families' temporal strategies to cope with child-rearing in pursuit of social mobility. Relatedly, embedding the agency of migrants and their families within broader socioeconomic processes and structures, I provide a balanced view of migrants' parenting practices and strategies in contemporary China. This challenges a popular media and policy discourse that pathologizes rural migrants' family life (Gu 2022b). Theoretically, this study unsettles, enriches and broadens the parenting literature which often adopts a narrow and static view of family as a nuclear unit of geographical proximity (Mazzucato and Schans 2011) by conceptualising the temporality of parenting that reflects the fluid, flexible and ever-changing family lives in a globalised

world. In addition, it contributes to a growing literature on time and temporality in migration studies by transcending its primary focus on the figure of the transnational migrant negotiating 'the times of migration' (Cwerner 2001) at receiving societies. Instead, I examine how migration temporalities intersect with temporalities of childrearing in shaping parenting practices and familyhood in an internal migration context. Methodologically, a longitudinal design incorporating multiple generations' perspectives generates rich and temporally sensitive data that serve the purpose of a time/temporality analysis. In this sense, the study also offers a methodological lesson.

In what follows, I first sketch the research context of internal migration and childrearing in post-reform China. This is followed by a review of literature on time and temporality by migration scholars and family sociologists, establishing the theoretical perspective in this study. After outlining the research methodology and fieldwork experience, I then examine the ways in which Chinese rural migrant families negotiate parenting across localities and time amidst institutional and socioeconomic constraints. I conclude with a discussion of theoretical, social and policy implications of this study.

Research context

Four decades after Reform and Opening-up, China has re-emerged as a major economic powerhouse. Behind this success story, however, is a development strategy of 'incomplete urbanization' (Chan 2010) that capitalises on cheap labour by rural migrants while limiting their claims in cities, based on a differential citizenship structure – the *hukou* (household registration) system. The system binds an individual's social entitlements to a particular category of population (agricultural vs. non-agricultural) and a particular locality (local vs. nonlocal) (Wang 2005). As such, rural migrants are strategically incorporated into cities as temporary workers without full citizenship rights. Though the past decade has seen reforms at both national and local levels towards expanding non-*hukou* residents' access to public services, the hierarchical nature of the citizenship structure remains (Gu 2017; Gu and Yeung 2020). For example, the *hukou* reform package announced in 2014 aiming to reduce barriers for *hukou* conversion in cities is found to be multi-tiered and differentiated by host cities' positions in China's urban hierarchy, with popular migration destinations (major and mega-cities) implementing points-based systems to selectively incorporate migrants in public provision of services (Gu 2022a). The points systems follow a neoliberal logic that differentiates individuals' *deservingness* based on seemingly meritocratic criteria such as educational attainment, skills level and estate ownership, legitimising the existing bifurcated urban governance regime which defines transience/permanence based on migrants' educational qualifications (Fan 2002). For the majority of rural – urban migrants, their limited human capital and wealth offer little prospect of *hukou* conversion leading to permanent settlement, hence their status as an indefinitely transient labour force in the urban scene.

It is worth noting that the migration regime in post-reform China has largely relaxed the aspect of mobility control yet retained the aspect of restricting migrants' settlement via the *hukou* system, despite the aberration of excessive use of 'organized' mobility restriction policies between 2020 and 2022 (Xiang 2022). Tracing policy changes in Shenzhen, a popular destination, Gu (2019) finds that the early set of policies in the 1980s that strictly controlled migrants' mobility and residency gradually phased out in

the 2000s. Despite a dim prospect of settlement, rural migrants moved to the cities en masse for job opportunities. Between 1983 and 1993, the number of rural migrants increased from 2 million to 62 million, a 30-fold increase (Cai, Du, and Wang 2009). In 2020, rural migrants living away from their home villages reached 286 million (NBS 2021). The institutionalisation of temporarizing the migrant population's stay by urban local governments, however, creates a conundrum for migrants to achieve familyhood, particularly in terms of childrearing. As a result, 58 million under-aged children are left in rural communities under the care of one parent, or grandparents or other relatives (often referred to as 'left-behind children'), and another 38 million accompany their parents to cities (referred to as 'migrant children'), where their opportunities of accessing public services are limited (ACWF 2013). How these children fare has attracted enormous attention from the general public and scholarly communities. Below I develop a temporality framework to guide empirical analysis in this study, based on a review of literature on time and temporality by family sociologists and migration scholars.

Bridging the literatures on time and temporalities

Time use, temporal experiences and family life

An established literature in family sociology has documented the shifting patterns of time use and temporal conflicts between productive and reproductive engagements within families in industrialised Western societies (Bianchi 2011; Bianchi, Robinson, and Milke 2006; Cornwell, Gershuny, and Sullivan 2019; Hay 1998; Hochschild 1997; Hochschild and Machung 1989). For example, Hochschild and Machung (1989) investigated the politics of division of labour for care and work between dual-earning couples, contributing an influential concept – 'the second shift' – that captures the structural dilemma facing working women in their expected roles at home and in the formal economy. Hochschild (1997) further linked the encroachment of the Taylorist production regime with qualitative changes in temporal experiences of domestic life, which has become increasingly crammed, regulated and colonised by individuals' work schedules. This line of work is empirically tested by quantitative research based on national representative data that track broad patterns of American adults' time use over decades (Bianchi 2011; Bianchi, Robinson, and Milke 2006). Bianchi, Robinson, and Milke (2006) found that from the 1960s to the 2000s, American mothers joined the workforce without reducing time spent on childcare, instead cutting back on housework and multitasking more. Working mothers faced a 'double shift', working almost 19 h more per week than homemaker mothers and 5 more hours than working fathers. Fathers also increased their involvement in domestic duties and parenting, suggesting a more dynamic gender negotiation than Hochschild's (1997) research indicated. Similar trends were found in other industrialised societies across Europe, Canada, and Australia (see a review in Cornwell, Gershuny, and Sullivan 2019).

The fact that parents devote more time to childcare and parenting activities despite feeling more rushed at home and work points to a cultural transformation of childhood in industrialised societies. Childhood is increasingly constructed as a 'future-oriented' (Lister 2007, 697) life course where the adults-in-waiting are sheltered, prepared, trained (see Shakuto 2025, for more about the pains of living according to the normative

Japanese lifecourse as experienced by her interlocutors) and developed intensively as future 'desirable adult workers' (Dobson 2009, 356). Accordingly, parental roles have ratcheted up: taking care of children's daily necessities such as housing and food becomes insufficient. Instead, an ideology of intensive parenting (Hay 1998; Mu 2025, for how ideals of a 'good' childhood prompt highly educated China-born migrant mothers in Singapore to quit work for full-time motherhood as an alternative life path) advocates for parents' active engagement in children's development by choreographing their educational pathways early, dedicating time to cognitive skill-building through daily drills, and intervening with institutions in the child's interests, what Lareau (2003) described as 'concerted cultivation'. Empirical evidence shows that the skills-development aspect of parenting has been more prominent over time. Bianchi (2011) found that while time spent on routine caregiving by American parents remained steady from 1965 to 2000, time spent on interactive activities like playing, reading, and helping with homework nearly tripled, from 1.5 h to 4.0 h per week.

A few emerging studies capture similar child-centred time use patterns in industrialised Asian societies. For example, Park (2021) finds that from 1999 to 2014, Korean parents (of both genders and across all levels of education) increasingly spent more time for childcare, particularly so among university-educated parents. Teo's (2023) ethnographic research in Singapore documented how supporting primary school children's homework has been incorporated as an important part of gendered parental care labour, generating enormous stress for working mothers who regularly feel rushed to accommodate hectic schedules from work and at home (see Wang 2025, who employed 'content-context diar(ies)' as a method).

This literature, though immensely informative and rich, is limited on several accounts. First, it needs to expand beyond the current focus on industrialised societies to newly developed societies such as China, where simultaneous and rapid changes in social, economic and cultural arenas provide a more complex context for studying temporality and family dynamics. Second, this literature builds upon a narrow conceptualisation of family as a coresiding nuclear unit (Mazzucato and Schans 2011), thus excluding in its analysis geographically dispersed migrant families across Asia (Yeoh 2009).

Time, temporality and migration

Recently, an expanding literature in migration studies has also taken up issues of time and temporality in understanding migration regulation and governance, as well as migrants' lived experiences (Anderson 2007; Baas and Yeoh 2019; Cwerner 2001; Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson 2013; Robertson 2015, 2019; Somaiah et al. 2025; Somaiah 2025). Migration, the act of crossing political, social and economic borders, is in essence a process of negotiating with different regulatory frameworks, labour conditions and social worlds which all have their respective temporal orders and norms.

Recognising the centrality of time and temporal orders in shaping the living conditions and everyday experiences of migrants in host society, migration scholars have developed a growing vocabulary capturing the complexity of migration temporalities. Cwerner (2001) is often credited as a pioneer who brings time to the centre of migration research. Focusing on a case of international migration (i.e. Brazilian migrants in London), he developed an analytical framework that incorporates temporalities and

timeframes of different types and levels embedded in migrants' interactions with institutions and host society, including immigration control, everyday life and community building. However, it is the concept of time-scale in Meeus's (2012) and Robertson's works (2015, 2019) that unleashes the analytical power of multi-level analysis of 'layers of social and political temporal ordering' (Robertson 2019, 173), ranging from the macro timescale of the global political economy, the meso timescale of migration regimes and the micro-level timescale of individual biography. As Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson (2013) pointed out, it is not only the multiplicity and multidimensionality of migration temporalities that deserve our attention, but more importantly the temporal asynchronicity, marginality and liminality produced out of uneven power structures between migration regimes and the global migrant underclass, and the implications for migrants' work and family life (see Loh et al. 2025, for more about the affective dimensions of cross-national family life). Baas and Yeoh (2019, 166) summed it well: 'temporality is the product of both the transnationality of migrants' lives as well as the realities of the structures and systems that they are part of'.

This literature on migration temporalities tends to spotlight the figure of the (transnational) migrant and the multi-layered temporal orders in host societies that condition their mobilities, everyday life and subjectivities. Until recently, insufficient research, with exceptions including Acedera and Yeoh (2019) and Yeoh et al. (2020), is devoted to exploring how the temporalities of migrants' transnational family life are implicated by unpacking the 'migration – left behind nexus' (Toyota, Yeoh, and Nguyen 2007). Moreover, the studies are primarily concerned about the nation-state of host societies and its governance apparatus in setting the temporal structures of migrant life via visa procedures and transition trajectories between different residency statuses in international/transnational migrations. Less is known about the temporal structures of migrant life in the context of internal migration which is of a greater scale in Asian societies and involves different sets of institutional structures (Hugo 2016). The border in internal migration, for example, is likely to be more porous, less visible, which makes migration governance more effective on differentiating localised citizenship status in relation to entitlement to public goods than controlling migrants' mobility and the legality of their residency (see Kone et al. 2018 on India; Gu 2019 on China).

To bridge the research gaps identified above, this study explores the temporalities of parenting in the context of China's internal migration. I unpack how different temporal systems affect migrants' parenting practices and strategies in a multi-scaler framework (Robertson 2015), including the institutional, organisational/industrial, familial (life course), and individual levels.

Fieldwork, data and methodology

This analysis draws on data gathered from 38 migrant families during fieldwork undertaken in Shenzhen (a major migration destination) and Hunan (a major migrant-sending province) between September 2014 and February 2015, supplemented by follow-up interviews with a smaller set of interviewees in 2018. This multi-sited longitudinal design allowed me to observe over time the multiple ways in which children (left behind, migrant or relocated) are affected by parents' and own migration trajectories.

Fieldwork

In 2014–15, in each site, I first approached a school with targeted adolescent populations and gained permission to conduct research there from key 'gatekeepers' – school principals. Through their help, I recruited a purposive sample of adolescent interviewees and care-givers, following three criteria: (a) respondents were registered under the agriculture-*hukou*, with at least one migrant parent in each family; (b) each adolescent interviewee was paired with at least one caregiver interviewee, whose narratives could triangulate each other to overcome the limitations of self-reports (Dreby 2010); and (c) there was a balanced representation of gender and family socioeconomic conditions. The child sample included 15 left-behind adolescents (Hunan), 8 adolescent migrants in a county seat (Hunan), and 15 adolescent migrants in Shenzhen. The adult sample included 26 mothers, 5 fathers, 8 grandmothers, and 4 grandfathers. Fieldwork was conducted mostly on school campuses, where I interviewed adolescents in person, in venues such as empty classrooms, teachers' offices, or school sports fields. After that, I conducted research with adult caregivers in manners and venues of their preferences: I visited about half of the households to interview or engage in informal conversations with caregivers (mostly grandparents in left-behind households) and telephone-interviewed the rest (mostly migrant parents in cities) to accommodate their schedules. Interviews, lasting from one to three hours, followed a semi-structured interview guide. In interviews with adolescents, I focused on gathering information on their family histories, everyday life and intergenerational interactions and relationships; with adult caregivers, I asked about their migration motivations and experiences, childcare arrangements and (substitute) parenting practices.

Between August and October of 2018, I returned to both sites to follow up with the original families, and (with the assistance of teachers) was able to revisit 16 of them (six original left-behind households in rural Hunan, six migrant households in the county, and four migrant households in Shenzhen). After graduating from junior middle school (i.e. completing Compulsory Education), the adolescents diverged in their paths: six were continuing education in academic high schools, seven were attending vocational schools and three became a new generation of migrants in their families.[1] In each family, I interviewed an adolescent-caregiver pair to understand children's post-compulsory-education experiences, family life, migration trajectories and intergenerational dynamics, yielding a sample of 16 adolescents, 4 grandmothers, 9 mothers and 3 fathers.

Research ethics

Data collection in both rounds of fieldwork was approved by Institutional Review Board for research with human subjects at National University of Singapore. I took measures to protect adolescents' well-being in research: (1) I obtained informed consent from both the adolescents and their main caregivers before initiating interviews, making it clear that they could choose not to answer questions that may cause discomfort and could withdraw when necessary; and (2) I created a relaxing and comfortable atmosphere for private conversations and was sensitive to their moods during interviews and interactions. Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees and names of places below the provincial level are also anonymized to protect interviewees' privacy.

Data analysis

The interviews (and informal conversations), conducted in Mandarin and translated by me, were digitally recorded, transcribed, and cross-checked within each child – caregiver pair. Following the thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis 1998), I began the analysis with systematic reviews of interview transcripts and field notes to identify emerging themes. This process involved multiple rounds of reading and coding to ensure that patterns were consistently recognised across different participants. I first conducted open-coding to allow themes to naturally emerge from the data, followed by axial coding to establish relationships between key concepts. I then constructed a family history profile for each family, integrating data from multiple sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of their migration experiences and dynamics. These profiles included details about migration trajectories, economic circumstances, and caregiving arrangements. To deepen the analysis, I cross-read children's narratives of salient temporal patterns – such as transitions, disruptions, and continuities – with those provided by their caregivers. This comparative analysis helped to uncover consistencies and discrepancies in perspectives, offering insights into intergenerational understandings of migration experiences. Additionally, I triangulated interview data with observational notes and other relevant documents to enhance the validity of the findings. This ensured a robust and nuanced interpretation of the data, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

Family profiles

Table 1 is an inventory of the 16 families in this longitudinal study. I consider the focal adolescent and their parents as the core of a family, including the adolescent's siblings and other care-givers (mostly grandparents) in the same household. In Table 1, I use a three-tiered spatial framework to describe parents' migratory and living arrangements, where V refers to living in the home *village*, C refers to living/working in the *county* and U refers to living in or migrating to higher-tiered *urban* destinations. For illustrative purposes, this table only displays parents' migration and living statuses during the two observation points (2014/15 and 2018), which is insufficient for capturing the full range of changes, as the cases studies will show. The table also presents information about the focal adolescent in each family, including their demographic characteristics and care arrangements in 2014 and study/work status in 2018. Besides summarising demographic and household information, the table serves as an overall reference for the case studies to be discussed in detail.

Flexibility: against temporal odds

Childcare arrangement in rural migrant families is often described as flexible in response to the ever-changing work and migration trajectories of the migrant parent(s). Constant adjustments and negotiation occur between the couple, and between the middle generation and grandparents to secure care for underaged children (Fan 2009). Indeed, if taking a life history approach, we see a high level of flexibility in care arrangement: with children increasingly participating in migration, the negotiation of childcare does not confine to the rural left-behind household, and increasingly expands to a wider

Table 1. Inventory of the 16 migrant families in two waves.

Family	Parents' migration status[1]		Focal child profile	
	2014–15	2018	2014 (age, gender[2], birth order, migration status[3], care arrangement)	2018 (child status[4], current residence)
#1	UU	CU	Kai, 12, F, 1st child of 2, LB, grandparents	HS, county
#2	UU	UU	Ni, 12, F, 1st child of 3, LB, grandparents	HS, county
#3	VC	VC	Long, 14, M, 1st child of 2, LB, mother & grandmother	MW, Dongguan
#4	UU	UC	Peng, 13, M, 1st child of 4 (blended family), LB, grandparents	MW, Zhongshan
#5	VV	UU	Kang, 12, M, 1st child of 2, NM, parents	VS, provincial capital
#6	UV	CU	Qian, 13, F, 2nd child of 2, LB, father-alone	VS, county
#7	CC	CU	Xin, 15, F, 1st child of 2, MC, parents	HS (graduate), county
#8	CC	CU	Cheng, 12, M 1st child of 2, MC, parents	HS (graduate), county
#9	CU	CU	Qiang, 15, M, 2nd child of 2, MC, mother-alone	HS (graduate), county
#10	CC	CC	Xing, 14, F, 2nd child of 3, MC, parents	VS, provincial capital
#11	CU	CU	Yu, 14, F, 1st child of 2, MC, mother-alone	VS, county
#12	UU	UC	Jun, 12, M, 3rd child of 3, MC, mother-alone	VS, Shenzhen
#13	UU	UU	Bo, 10, M, 2nd of 2, MC, parents	HS, Shenzhen
#14	UU	UU	Yang, 10, F, 1st of 2, MC, parents & grandmother	VS, Shenzhen
#15	UU	UU	Yong, 11, M, 2nd of 2, MC, parents	MW, Shenzhen
#16	UC	UC	Hao, 12, M, 1st of 2, MC, mother-lone	VS, Shenzhen

Notes: 1. Parents' migration status (mother, father): V-village, C-county, U-urban destinations; 2. Child gender: F-female, M-male; 3. Child migration status: LB-left-behind, MC-migrant child, NM-non-migrant child; 4. child status in 2018: HS-academic high school, VS-vocational school, MW-migrant work.

range of spatial contexts, including the county as the third space and host cities (Gu 2022a). Not only do we capture shifting care-arrangements in migrant families through retrospective recollections in 2014–15, but also in the four years of longitudinal research. Table 1 shows that in half of the 16 families in the two rounds of interviews, at least one parent moved away or relocated to another destination, thus triggering new reconfigurations of care arrangements in the households.

Following a rational choice theory, Cindy Fan (2009) argued that the flexible household strategy is pursued by the migrant family 'to obtain the best of the urban and rural worlds, by gaining earnings from urban work and at the same time maintaining social and economic security in the countryside' (377). This argument underscores the agency of migrant families to maximise collective welfare and minimise risks. However, this celebratory emphasis on agency significantly downplays structural barriers driving such practices. Flexibility needs to be conceptualised in terms of the level of control/autonomy conferred to the actor(s) involved, hence the power structure they are embedded in (Gerstel and Clawson 2018). Employee-driven flexibility, often promoted in public policy, aims to empower the worker to address work-family conflicts by providing them easier access to vacations and leaves and more discretions over working hours and place. But if flexibility is demanded of workers by the external environment, it is better understood as insecurity, because the sense of control has been stripped away from them. In the case of rural migrant families, flexibility is related to what Cwerner (2001) describes as the 'heteronomous times' in migrants' lives – times beyond their control, imposed by external forces (migration regimes, workplace restrictions etc.) and often experienced as oppressive disciplinary powers.

Consider Jun's family (see Table 2 Life history of Family #11). Jun was born in 2002 in Hunan in a typical rural household, with his mother being the main care-giver of three

Table 2. Life history of Family #11 (focal child: Jun).

Year	Jun's age	Care arrangement	Father's work profile	Mother's work profile	Other
2003	1	Mother & grandparents	Construction, Guangzhou	Left-behind	2 siblings in kindergarten or primary school
2004	2	Grandparents	Coalmine, Shangguan	Factory work, Dongguan	
2005					1 + 5 policy
2010	8 (G2)	Mother	Construction, in & beyond Shenzhen	Factory work, Shenzhen	Both siblings joined migration work
2014*	12 (G5)	Mother	Construction, in & beyond Shenzhen	Cleaner, Shenzhen	
2016	14 (G7)	Mother	Construction, in & beyond Shenzhen	Part-time cleaner, Shenzhen	
2017					New policy for high school entrance exam
2018*	16 (vocational sch.)	Jun boards school	Taxi driver, Shenzhen	Returnee, Hunan, county	

Note: * indicates interview year.

children, supported by paternal grandparents, and his father being a migrant worker in Guangzhou. A year later, feeling the pressure to support an expanding family, his mother followed a distant relative to a factory in Dongguan (Guangdong), leaving Jun and two elder siblings (his sister in kindergarten and brother in Grade 1) with their grandparents. Such an arrangement lasted until 2010 when the parents decided to bring Jun (then a 2nd grader) along for school in Shenzhen where they both had worked for years, and they were finally able to meet the requirements for enrolling Jun in public education in line with local policies.[2] Another trigger was that both elder siblings had dropped out of school and became new migrants, barely finishing Compulsory Education (i.e. graduating junior middle school), which hit their parents hard: someone in the family needed to attend college and work in an air-conditioned office! Jun was transferred to a migrant-majority school and repeated Grade 2 to adjust to a new environment.

When we met first in 2014, his mother was working as a cleaner with a public school nearby and his father was on a construction project in a neighbouring city. In 2016 when Jun progressed to junior middle school, the family faced another difficult choice – whether to send him back to their hometown for school, since the policies in Shenzhen then did not allow for migrant students to attend High School Entrance Exam (*zhongkao*) in competition with locals. Return seemed to be as risky as staying: upon return, Jun once again had to adapt to a new school in the county, since the rural school his siblings attended was not competitive at all. Staying on, the family betted on their good faith in a more migrant-friendly Shenzhen. After all, the municipal government often promotes its migrant-friendly image through slogans like 'you are a Shenzhener once you come here (*laile jiushi shenzhenren*)'.[3] In March, 2018 when Jun had to register for *zhongkao*, the policy indeed changed: students whose families satisfying a list of criteria[4] could participate in the exam, though their admission to public high schools was limited by quota. To the devastation of this family, Jun's registration failed due to a slippage in his mother's social insurance record (three months short of the three-year criteria) which was caused by an untimely job loss a year prior. As a result, Jun could sit in the *zhongkao* exam but could only apply for expensive private high schools or secondary vocational schools. In the summer of 2018 when I revisited the family, Jun had received

the admission letter from a vocational school to study Modern Logistics (*xiandai wuliu*). His mother, about to leave Shenzhen for good to assume grandparenting duties for Jun's elder brother's new-born baby, showed palpable remorse for not doing her due diligence in following the ever-changing policies and for not being able to keep a steady job, which had repercussions for Jun's education.

This case pushes us to think beyond a rational choice theory of flexibility in understanding the temporality of migrants' family life: this family's temporal experience, characterised by temporary, contingent, uncertain and precarious, or 'heteronomous' (Cwerner 2001), is largely conditioned by institutional rules regulating migrants' mode of living in Chinese cities. As said, rather than controlling the entry or exit of migrants as in international/transnational migrations (Cwerner 2001; Robertson 2015), migration governance in internal migration in China relies more on the *hukou* system to define migrants' second-class citizenship status (Gu 2019). In popular destinations like Shenzhen, to (seemingly) comply with central directives to provide public services to migrants while saving local budgets, a deflecting strategy is to set stringent eligibility criteria beyond migrants' reach, thus making such services on paper 'phantom services' (Chan and O'Brien 2019). Such eligibility criteria usually have a temporal component. For example, when Jun applied to register for *zhongkao*, the eligibility criteria included: at least one parent had 'legal and *stable* employment' as well as 'a legal and *stable* residence place', and at least one parent had valid Shenzhen Residence Permit which had to be renewed *every year*, and the family needed to show paper trail of at least one parent having paid old-age insurance and/or medical insurance in Shenzhen for *3 years* (emphasis added). Despite Jun's parents' best efforts, such criteria were hard to satisfy, considering steep barriers confronting them. The father worked as a construction worker on different projects in and outside Shenzhen, which disqualified him as a proper parenting figure from the state's perspective. Though the mother's location of work and residence were relatively stable, the nature of informal work was essentially insecure and her job with the public school was terminated abruptly in 2016, which pit against her son educational opportunity in public high schools. Here we observe the paradoxical, and schizophrenic, constructions of migration temporalities by the Shenzhen municipality: the permanently or long-term temporary worker, whose labour precarity is rooted in a political economy that strategically exploits the migrant aliens' lack of full citizenship (Gu 2019), is supposed to lead a 'stable' family life in order for their children to be eligible for the right to attend public high schools. Migrant parenting, hence, involves constant negotiation with a restrictive migration regime that places competing temporal demands on migrants' family life and work conditions. For many, like Jun's mother, it is an uphill battle with moving targets, often resulting in negative emotional experiences.

To sum up, childcare in migrant families is characterised by a considerable level of flexibility, reflected in the ever-changing combinations of migrants and stayers among three generations within the family and across spaces. While cognisant of the agency demonstrated in the families' flexible householding strategies, I underscore the structural constraints at the root: the paradoxical constructions of migrant temporalities by the urban governance and production regimes make migrant families' settlement difficult, if not entirely impossible. On the one hand, the migrant worker is strategically incorporated in a process of 'incomplete urbanization' (Chan 2010) as the prototypical cheap, disposable and unprotected labourer due to their non-local *hukou* status. On the other hand,

to comply on paper with the central government's 'advocacy' of migrant integration, the urban governance regime in cities sets temporally stringent criteria to restrict migrants' access to public services: children's educational opportunity is thus rendered contingent on their temporary worker-parents' 'legal and stable' employment and economic status.

Futurality: children's educational career as a calendar-setting force

Unlike in transnational migration where parents' physical mobilities (and those of children) between sending and receiving areas are often tightly regulated and controlled by immigration authorities on both sides, internal migrants in China have greater autonomy in adjusting their productive and reproductive activities across locations and over time. Their pace and timing of care reconfigurations are not only affected by policies in destination cities as described earlier, but also prompted by the perceived needs of parental care and support in children's educational career. A survey of the life histories of children in this study finds that most of the 38 adolescents interviewed in 2014 had spent at least part of their early childhood in home villages, with their grandparents acting as co-parenting (together with a staying parent, usually the mother) or substitute parenting figures. Contributing factors include the belief that what infants and toddlers need most are food, shelter and a safe environment, a concern about the cost of living in cities, and un-family-friendly workplace practices.

As children enter into formal education, the years when they transition into different educational stages constitute 'critical moments' when families make major adjustments to balance children's educational opportunities with family livelihoods. Well aware of the tremendous gaps in school quality between rural and urban areas, and between cities at different levels in China's tiered urban system, most migrant parents expressed their preference of bringing their children to host cities for education. The realisation of this wish was contingent on a web of factors, including local policy contexts, migrant parents' employment conditions and economic standing, the child's educational performance, available care support and so on. While some were able to do so with meticulous planning, they would face greater challenges ahead as children progressed in their educational career, as Jun's case showed. Increasingly, the county emerged as a feasible, if not ideal, site for childrearing due to its combined strengths of affordable living, better educational facilities (relative to rural areas) and lower thresholds for migrants' access to public services (relative to big cities).

Take Xing's family (see Table 3 Life history of Family #7). She was an 8th grader (aged 15) in the county (Hunan) in 2014 with a complicated migration history. Together with her elder sister (2 years her senior), she was entrusted to their grandparents in the village a year after birth. When she reached 6 in 2005, both sisters joined their parents who ran a curtain shop in a wholesale market in Guangzhou. In 2012, the whole family, this time with Xing's younger brother (born in 2006), relocated to the county. Her sister was then a year short of *zhongkao*, who as a migrant child was simply denied the chance to take this test in Guangzhou. Her younger brother also reached the age for primary school. Relocating to the county, however, was not easy. Though a booming local construction sector suggested a growing demand of interior material such as curtains, Xing's parents needed to start from scratch to build a new business network. The sisters had to cope with new school life – readjusting to the local dialect they hadn't spoken for years and reading a different set of textbooks.[5] Nonetheless, taking stock of

Table 3. Life history of Family #7 (focal child: Xing).

Year	Cheng's age	Care arrangement	Father's work profile	Mother's work profile	Other
1999	was born	Mother & grandparents	Sales assistant, Zhongshan	Mother returned home for childbirth	Both parents were veteran migrants before marriage
2000	1	Grandparents	Sales assistant, Zhongshan	Factory work, Zhongshan	
2005	6	Parents	Curtain shop manager, Guangzhou	Sales assistant, Guangzhou	Xing moved to Guangzhou with her elder sister to attend school
2006	7	Parents	Same as above	Same as above	Xing's brother was born; maternal aunt cared for him temporarily
2012	13 (G7, private)	Parents	Same as above	Same as above	The whole family moved to the county
2015*	15 (G9, private)	Parents	Shop owner, county seat	Shop owner, county seat	Xing's sister tested into a key high school
2018*	19 (college)	Self-care	Same as above	Same as above	With both sisters moved out, Xing's brother was a G6 student

the situation, the parents made the decision without hesitation, in the father's words – 'this is a critical moment. You just can't gamble on children's future!'

Like other Chinese parents across the socioeconomic spectrum who link their children's future with the education imperative (Gu 2021), many migrant parents like Xing's are willing to adjust their family calendar to seize the 'critical moments' in children's educational career. They relocate to where children's educational opportunities are maximal and the mothers may temporarily reduce paid labour and concentrate on caring for the child facing a major test (e.g. *zhongkao* or *gaokao*). Contrary to public discourses that often portray migrants as irresponsible parents who prioritise money-making over childrearing (see examples in Gu 2022b), many parents in this study practice a type of intensive parenting that is temporally sensitive, catering to the needs of the child(ren) concerned. Indeed, empirical evidence from different sources indicates that over the four decades of economic reform, the Chinese family life has become increasingly child-centric, where the child's education becomes a project with coordinated devotion from the extended family of three generations. Anthropologist Yan Yunxiang (2016) employs the concept of 'descending familism' to describe such downward flows of (tangible and intangible) resources to the youngest generation within families. The future, embodied in children's educational career, thus gains a strategic importance in shaping the pace of family life (similar to what is articulated by voluntary stay-at-home Chinese mothers in Singapore in Mu 2025). This phenomenon should also be understood in terms of the strategic role of child development in relation to China's modernisation project since the nineteenth century, as promoted in official discourse. In this discourse, childrearing and child development is intimately linked with the projection of national strengths in international competition (Gu 2022b). In a sense, supporting children's educational development becomes not only a family social mobility strategy but also a moral imperative that defines 'good' parenthood. As such, many migrant parents are willing to make compromises and sacrifices to suit children's shifting needs in their educational career.

Fractures: family-ing in parallel times

The conflicting and competing temporal demands placed on migrant parents – stemming from their precarious citizenship status, long working hours, and the need to accommodate their children's institutional schedules in schools – create distinct temporal rhythms in daily life. These dynamics have profound implications for developing intergenerational intimacy with their children, who are either left behind in rural hometowns or co-reside in the same households in host cities. As parents struggle to meet the competing demands of work and family life, sometimes across geographic spaces, their capacity to nurture emotional bonds with their children can be undermined. Children, in turn, may experience a sense of distance or disconnection from their parents, impacting the depth of their relationship and emotional bond. Moreover, the lack of stability in parental availability due to 'flexible' care arrangements over time, as described earlier, may also affect the parent–child relationship by hindering the development of trust and mutual understanding, which are foundational to intimacy.

In cases of split households where parents live separately from their 'left-behind' children back in hometowns, synchronising the rhythms of everyday life across locations and between two sets of schedules could be challenging. Migrant parents, either self-employed as small business runners or employed in low-end service jobs or manual labour, often work long hours (10 h or more) and irregular shifts, which leave them scarce time for family interaction during regular hours. Children, on the other hand, live highly structured lives regulated by their school. These parallel schedules erect barriers in maintaining spontaneous communications, which is further complicated by the mediacy of ICT unevenly accessed by children, similar to what is observed in transnational migrant families in Southeast Asia (Hoang and Yeoh 2015; see also De los Reyes and Yue 2025). As a result, many families adopt a structured pattern of communication on set days (often during weekends) and on repetitive topics that gradually lose steam in generating enthusiasm for children. This is well captured in a mother's (with two children, 41, factory worker in Shenzhen) disclosure in January, 2015:

> Do I miss children home? Of course. (sigh) I go to work at 7: 30 in the morning and get off work at 7: 00 in the evening. If orders pile up, we are asked to work overtime till 9 or 10pm. The boss doesn't expect you to have children to take care of. I can only talk to them on Saturdays; other times when I call my mother (the children's carer), they are already asleep. Often, they become impatient and hang up after five minutes.

Living in the same households in cities does not guarantee that the two sets of schedules could synchronise. The inflexibility of either makes 'quality time' together a rarity. According to a survey conducted in Guangdong, a prominent issue in migrant households is limited 'together time': one-third of parents reported spending less than seven hours with their children every week, and some less than one hour (c.f. Chen, Yuan, and Zhu 2018).

Adding to this time deficit is the lingering effect of lengthy separations in children's early childhood, which shatters the intergenerational bond, as is the case in Yang's family (see Table 4 Life history of Family #13). Yang was left behind in rural Hunan with her paternal grandparents until six when her parents moved her along, accompanied by her grandmother, to Shenzhen for school. When we first met in the migrant school in 2014, Yang was a bubbly 4th grader and her baby sister was two. Her parents had opened a snacks

Table 4. Life history of Family #13 (focal child: Yang).

Year	Yang's age	Care arrangement	Father's work profile	Mother's work profile	Other
2004	was born	mother & grandparents	Factory work, Dongguan	Mother returned for child birth	Parents met at work; both were veteran migrants
2005	9 months	grandparents	Snacks sales, Shenzhen	Snacks sales, Shenzhen	Yang's aunt asked her parents to help running a snacks stall
2010	6	parents & grandmother	Snacks stall, Shenzhen	Snacks stall, Shenzhen	Yang migrated to Shenzhen with grandma
2011	7(G1)	parents & grandmother	Snacks stall, Shenzhen	Snacks stall, Shenzhen	
2012	8 (G3)	parents & grandmother	Snacks stall, Shenzhen	Snacks stall, Shenzhen	Yang's sister was born
2014*	12 (G5)	parents & grandmother	Snacks stall, Shenzhen	Snacks stall, Shenzhen	
2018*	16 (G9)	parents & grandmother	Snacks stall, Shenzhen	Snacks stall, Shenzhen	

stall in front of an international school, ending years of factory work and odd jobs. The household of three generations operated under parallel schedules. Grandma Wu rose at 6:30am to prepare breakfast for Yang and walked her to school at around 7:40am before returning home to feed the baby. The young couple had their breakfast at about 9am and headed to their stall to prepare for students' morning breaks. Grandma spent the morning doing chores, minding the baby's needs and starting to cook lunch at 11am. Yang's morning sessions ended at 11:45am and she usually reached home at 12 for lunch, while her parents were occupied with business during lunch hours. Her afternoon sessions in school ended at 4:30pm, followed by a dance class in a tuition centre on every Tuesday and Friday and a late dinner at 7pm. During other days, she returned home and had dinner with Grandma and the baby at 6:30pm. In most evenings, she spent at least 1.5 h on homework, followed by occasional TV time and cuddling the baby, until bed time at around 9pm when she presented her homework on her parents' desk for check-up. Her parents closed their stall and headed home at 10pm, ending an exhausting day with a brief check-up of Yang's homework: Mum responsible for Maths and Chinese and Dad for English. Such parallel lives seemed to bother Yang, as she sank into long silence when asked about her relationship with her parents, mumbling 'little time to talk' in response. Juan (Yang's mother) was equally frustrated:

> I feel that she just does not like talking to me! Every day after work, I would ask her, as I learnt from WeChat accounts, Western parents would ask their children to share school life. I ask her how's school, if you (Yang) have happy or unhappy experiences. She always says she has forgotten. How can you forget you are happy or not?!! (Interview 35, 10 December 2014)

As this case shows, while the migrant family may effectively play their functional role in the interest of children's development by mobilising intra-family care resources and maintaining a level of structural flexibility, the relational aspect of familyhood (i.e. the communicative intimacy and emotional attachment) is not immune to fractures caused by asynchronized daily rhythms between generations. Specifically, the different rhymes of parents' long, irregular and inflexible working hours, and children's institutionalised school schedule, sometimes also across geographic spaces, create fractures in intergenerational interactions and bonding, generating a sense of estrangement between them.

Conclusion

Through three keywords, i.e. *flexibility, futurality and fracture*, this study has explored how Chinese rural migrants negotiate multiple and multi-level temporalities to perform parenting across geographic spaces, against institutional constraints. The findings reveal coexisting vulnerabilities and resiliencies of the migrant working class in contemporary China. On the one hand, despite the rhetoric of inclusion and integration in official discourse, stringent and conflicting temporal orders imposed by local governments paradoxically perpetuate migrant workers' temporary, liminal and exploitable status while demanding their 'fixed and stable' residency and employment to pass as 'qualified' families to access public services. The informalization of migrant labour also makes migrants' work life temporally challenged: irregular, long and exhausting. Such 'heteronomous times' (Cwerner 2001) constitute temporal borders against migrants' integration in cities. On the other hand, migrant families resort to temporal strategies to balance family economy and childrearing: they flexiblize care and migration arrangements temporally (and spatially) to attend to the perceived priorities in children's educational career as a family project.

The contributions of this article are multi-fold. First, it unsettles, enriches and broadens existing parenting literature based upon a narrow and static conceptualisation of family as a nuclear unit of geographical proximity (Mazzucato and Schans 2011). I show that migrants' parenting practices and arrangements are temporally responsive to structural constraints imposed by public policies and employment conditions, as well as children's developmental trajectories. Future research could build on this insight to develop temporally sensitive theorisation of parenting in an era of dramatic family changes across the globe. Another direction is to foreground children's role and agency in negotiating temporal constraints and possibilities in context, which this study has touched upon but did not fully develop due to space constraints. Children in migrant families are not merely passive victims of structural forces, but more often are informed, socially mature and self-reflexive actors vis-à-vis intersecting forces of poverty, family dispersal, societal discrimination and institutional exclusion in their lives (Choi and Lai 2022; Gu 2022a, 2023).

Moreover, this study expands the literature on temporality and migration by transcending a focus on 'the times of migration' (Cwerner 2001) and exploring how 'the times of migration' intersect with 'the times of childrearing' in shaping translocal parenting practices and familyhood. In particular, evidence indicates that children's educational career is potentially an agenda-setting force in determining families' livelihood strategies and migration trajectories. It also sheds light on the commonalities and differences between internal migration and international migration: while in both contexts parents face challenges in performing parental roles due to spatial dispersals of family members and institutional barriers against family reunions, internal migrants are likely to exercise more autonomy, and in a timelier manner, in reversing and reconfiguring care and living arrangements across time periods (see Kim et al. 2025). These findings could lead to future research on migration and 'doing family' in various migrant-sending societies in the Global South from a comparative perspective.

Last, transcending methodological statism and fixedness (Robertson 2015), the multigenerational and longitudinal design in this study yields rich data on the temporal

experiences of migrant families, including real-life changes in public policies, migration governance regimes as well as unfolding individual and family biographies. This study hence provides an informative case for designing temporally sensitive and innovative research.

From a policy perspective, in order to support the migrant population's balance of economic wellbeing and childrearing, local urban governments in China need to fully incorporate migrant families in public services and eradicate policies and practices that exacerbate, rather than reduce, the temporal challenges faced by migrants. Likewise, more flexible, regular and secure working conditions are advocated to facilitate migrant parents' work-life balance. On a deeper level, China's post-reform political economy, i.e. the 'socialist market economy', follows a vision of staggered development unfolding at different temporal scales for different social groups, towards 'common prosperity' in the end though, as Deng's famous quote – 'let a small group of people get rich first' (Deng 1985) – implies. After over seven decades of urban-biased policies that have translated into urban prosperity, readjusting economic and social priorities in the country's development model could allow the current, and long-term, 'laggards' (i.e. the rural and its vast population) to catch up and make socialism a more lived reality for the broader society.

Notes

1. This sample, skewed towards a higher percentage of high school students, should not be interpreted to be representative of adolescents' post-compulsory pathways. Rather, it reflects the 'trackability' of families in rural and county-level contexts in Hunan. Meanwhile, many of the migrant households in Shenzhen have moved away and lost touch with the migrant school which they attended four years ago.
2. Since 2005, Shenzhen has been implementing a policy of '5+1' (5 documents required and parents' continuous residence in Shenzhen for 1 year and longer) in conditionally accepting migrant children in public schools. The five documents include: birth certificate or temporary residence certificate, property deed or rental contract, parents' social insurance certificates or business license, family planning certificate, and school transfer letter. See details in: http://www.sz.gov.cn/zfgb/2005/gb449/200810/t20081019_94830.htm (accessed on June 18, 2016).
3. Such propaganda could be seen in such official media discourse that the local government endorses: http://www.sz.gov.cn/en_szgov/news/photos/content/post_7900711.html (accessed on Dec 13, 2022)
4. The criteria include (1) father or mother's legal and stable employment (*hefa wending zhiye*); (2) father or mother's stable residency (*hefa wending zhusuo*); (3) father or mother's valid Shenzhen Residence Permit (*youxiao Shenzhen juzhuzheng*); (4) documentation of father or mother's payment of old-age insurance and/or medical insurance in Shenzhen for 3 years; and (5) documentation of the student's three-year registration in officially recognised local schools as a full-time student (*sannian chuzhong wanzheng xueji*). See details in: http://szeb.sz.gov.cn/ydmh/ggcyw/ywzskw/fwks3/content/post_6840395.html (accessed on October 26, 2021).
5. In 2012–13, the textbooks of all major subjects in junior middle school used in Hunan were published by People's Education Press (*renjiao ban*), while the schools in Guangzhou exercised a higher level of autonomy in selecting textbooks for different subjects. For example, the biology class used a textbook published by Jiangsu Education Press (*sujiao ban*) and the English class used a textbook published by Shanghai Education Press (*shangjiao ban*). This created chaos for students who moved between regions.

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