

Migrant Mothering in Transition: A Qualitative Study of the Maternal Narratives and Practices of Two Generations of Rural-Urban Migrant Mothers in Southern China

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Published online: 15 November 2017
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Abstract In the last few decades, mothering in many societies has been affected by mass migration. Although migrant mothering is acknowledged to be dynamic, diverse, and continually reproduced in specific socio-cultural contexts, its transformation over generations has been ignored. Drawing on qualitative data obtained from 61 rural-urban migrant women in southern China, I compare the narratives of two generations of migrant mothers and their daily mothering of their left-behind children, revealing how the intersection of gender, class, and the rural-urban divide in China shapes their gendered ideology and performance of childcare over time. Whereas first-generation migrant mothers perceive good mothering as helping their children to start their own families and establish careers and therefore prioritize economic support for their children's life endeavors as their main expression of maternal love and care, new-generation migrant mothers devote themselves to their children's overall needs, focus more on the quality of the mother-child relationship, and adopt various strategies to meet their children's emotional and educational needs. The present study gives a voice to migrant mothers, confronting the biased stereotype of migrant mothers as irresponsible parents and helping them to construct meanings for their maternal experiences during family separation. Documenting the transition in migrant mothering also

underscores the importance of recognizing the changing needs of migrant mothers and their left-behind children over time.

Keywords Mothering · Childrearing practices · Mother-child relations · Mother-child communication · Migration · Left-behind children · China

Mothering refers to women's experiences, practices, and activities in bringing up the next generation, and it significantly shapes women's gender identities and relationships (Glenn 1994; O'Reilly 2014). An essentialist interpretation presents mothering and raising children as instinctive for women and treats the maternal experience as universal and unchanging across cultures and societies; however, feminists have challenged this perspective in the last decades. Feminists have argued that mothering is a social construction: Maternal narratives and practices are not only shaped by the various material and cultural resources available in different societies, but also constructed, reproduced, and even contested "through men's and women's actions" and interactions in childrearing in specific historical and social circumstances (Glenn 1994, p. 3; also see Jeremiah 2006; Miller 2005; O'Reilly 2014). As socially located and culturally embedded experiences, women's daily childrearing practices vary across and within societies and are constantly changing over time (Glenn 1994; Miller 2005; O'Reilly 2010, 2014). Numerous studies (e.g., Glenn et al. 1994; O'Reilly 2010, 2014) have demonstrated not only that mothering in Latino, African, and Asian societies diverges from the hegemonic discourse of intensive mothering in many Western societies, but also that the maternal experiences of single, working, and immigrant mothers in Western societies differ from the normative image of good mothering as intensive maternal engagement in and sole responsibility for childcare in an isolated domestic sphere.

Electronic supplementary material The online version of this article (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0855-7>) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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In the last few decades, mothering in many societies has been affected by mass migration, which has dispersed families geographically while enabling family members to maintain their connections across national and cultural boundaries (Goulbourne et al. 2010; Parreñas and Choi 2015). Acknowledging the emotional suffering and moral crises encountered by migrant mothers, extensive studies of transnational Mexican, Filipino, and Vietnamese families (Dreby 2010; Hoang and Yeoh 2012; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Madianou and Miller 2012; Parreñas 2005; Parreñas and Choi 2015; Peng and Wong 2013) have shown that migrant mothers are able to make use of available resources and proactively adopt creative strategies, such as regular remittance and intensive telecommunication, to maintain family connections and rearrange childcare in the context of family separation. They also incorporate economic support for their children into their maternal narratives and use it to justify their physical separation from their left-behind children (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Migrant mothering in these societies has further demonstrated the diversity of women's actual childrearing experiences, which sometimes diverge from the normative model.

Although the literature acknowledges diversity within migrant mothering, variations in, and transformation of, migrant mothering between generations of migrant women have received relatively less attention. Exploring generational differences in the maternal narratives and practices of migrant women is especially important in societies (such as Mexico, the Philippines, and China) in which family separation is not sporadic but rather is sustained for generations. If migrant mothering is in a constant state of flux, how do the maternal narratives and practices of migrant women change in response to socio-economic developments? To address this question and enrich the discussion of migrant mothering, rural-urban migrant women in China were selected as research participants in the current study because prominent differences in the demographic characteristics, motives for migration, and post-migration employment and lives of two generations of rural-urban migrants have been observed to accompany China's rapid economic development and social transformation over the last three decades. Drawing on qualitative data obtained from 61 rural-urban migrant women in southern China, my research compares the narratives of two generations of migrant mothers and their daily practices in mothering their left-behind children, and it reveals how the intersection of gender, class, and the rural-urban divide in China shapes migrant women's gendered ideology and childcare performance over time.

Mothering, Migration, and Intersectionality

Migrant women's mothering is usually subject to the intersectional influence of various social divisions or inequalities.

Introduced by U.S. Black feminists in the late 1980s, the theory of intersectionality is predicated on the assumption that disadvantaged groups are subject to multiple systems of oppression, such as those of gender, class, race or ethnicity, and nationality (Collins 2000; Cooper 2015; Crenshaw 1989; Mahler et al. 2015). Rather than treated as merely cumulative, the effects of these systems or divisions on people's social locations, identities, and access to social resources are understood to be interwoven (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989; Yuval-Davis 2006). Therefore, oppressed individuals have different social experiences of and respond variously to the intersectional structure of oppression (Collins 2000). They also produce situated knowledge and assign different meanings to their social locations and experiences over time (Collins 2000; Few-Demo 2014). The intersectionality perspective not only reveals the hybridity and diversity of people's experiences across and within categories, but also highlights the fluid nature of experiences and identities (Few-Demo 2014).

Because migration entails dislocation and relocation in spatial, economic, and political terms, migrant mothers inevitably cross various boundaries and encounter multiple constraints (Anthias 2012). The literature (Dreby 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2005) indicates that most migrant mothers are subject to the intersectional oppression of gender, race/ethnicity, and class. Their maternal experience is shaped by their socioeconomic status as low-income members, their marginalization as ethnic/racial minorities, and their gendered role as primary caregivers. Although most of the discussion in this field has focused on cross-cultural or cross-societal comparisons of the experience of migrant women, some researchers (Anthias 2012; Burkner 2012; Few-Demo 2014, p. 176) have recently indicated the need to consider the temporality of migration, thereby capturing the "fluid, dynamic, and multidimensional nature" of social divisions/inequalities and individuals' changing responses to and interpretations of these factors over time. In other words, even if migrant mothers are subject to the intersectional influences of multiple social divisions, the specific expression and social implications of these social divisions and mothers' reactions to these factors may show nuanced differences over time. Within the intersectional framework, how migrant women understand, perform, and reconstruct their gendered identity as mothers over time is worth investigating. This offers a new direction for the exploration of migration and mothering, as pursued in the current study.

Moreover, although gender, race/ethnicity, and class are usually the three key dimensions in the intersectional structure shaping migrant mothering in the literature, the case of migrant mothers in China offers a new axis for the interlocking system of oppression: the rural-urban divide. Whereas the theory of intersectionality offers an insightful perspective to uncover the complex experiences of rural migrant women in multiple social divisions in China, their experiences also

provide empirical evidence of how the intersectionality theory applies beyond Western societies and highlight the “need to encapsulate marginalization structures that are salient in other locales” or societies into the discussion (Purkayastha 2012, p. 61).

Women and Mothering in China

Influenced by Confucianism, traditional models of Chinese childrearing emphasize patriarchal familial relations and position parents as responsible for raising well-adjusted children to contribute to a collectivist society (Hsu 1971). In traditional Chinese families, women are usually confined to the domestic sphere, and gendered labor division defines men’s primary responsibility as providing economic support for and managing matters outside the family and women’s responsibility as taking care of family members and managing matters within the family (Mann 2011). This gendered pattern of labor division also shapes parental roles and is mainly reflected in the “strict father, affectionate mother” model, in which the father is the economic supporter and moral instructor who provides food and shelter for his children and helps them to enter the outside world and the mother is the loving caregiver who provides “a secure and loving environment within the home” and is responsible for her children’s physical and emotional care (Jankowiak 2011; Jankowiak and Moore 2017, p. 90; also see Li and Lamb 2013). The principle of filial piety [xiao]shun], according to which parents’ care for their children must be repaid by children respecting their parents and looking after them in their old age, is also emphasized in traditional Chinese childrearing (Jankowiak 2011; Jankowiak and Moore 2017).

After 1949, in pre-reform China, the socialist revolution challenged Confucian family values and emphasized people’s loyalty to the socialist state. Under the banner “women can hold up half the sky,” both rural and urban women were mobilized to participate in production activities and contribute to the socialist state. Although women’s economic contribution to the family increased accordingly, their gender role as the primary caregivers of children and their intensive involvement in housework did not fundamentally change (Croll 1983; Judd 1994). Mothering and domesticity are still central to the gender identity of Chinese women and to their relationships with other family members. In post-reform China, childrearing ideology and practices were explicitly influenced by economic advancement and changes to family structures as well as social and cultural norms (Evans 2010; Jankowiak 1992; Kuan 2015; Li and Lamb 2013).

With China opening its door to the world in this period, Western parenting ideologies were imported to China and introduced new elements into the ideology of Chinese parenting, such as intensive time and financial investments in

childcare, the importance of parent-child communication and emotional interactions, and the authoritative parenting style (Evans 2010; Jankowiak and Moore 2017; Kuan 2015; Li and Lamb 2013). Meanwhile, an indigenous discourse of “quality education” [suzhi jiaoyu] promoted by the Chinese government also influenced the childrearing ideology of Chinese parents by emphasizing their responsibility to raise high-quality children in a highly competitive world (Jankowiak and Moore 2017; Kuan 2015). In urban China today, with a drastic decline in fertility and increases in family income, most parents have intensified their investment of money, time, emotions, and energy in their singleton children (Jankowiak and Moore 2017; Kuan 2015). Urban mothers, especially middle-class urban mothers, face great challenges in trying to measure up to these hegemonic discourses; they perceive the need to raise academically outstanding and competitive children who are able to survive in an uncertain, high-risk market economy while simultaneously attending to their children’s inner worlds and cultivating their development into happy, psychologically healthy, and well-developed adults (Kuan 2015).

Although rural parents are also influenced by the quality discourse and feel obligated to provide their children with a better future, their parental attitudes and practices more closely resemble the traditional model of childrearing, as expressed by an emphasis on parental authority and children’s obedience and less attention to children’s inner worlds (Ho 1989; Huang 2014; Wu 1996). Compared with their urban counterparts, rural mothers have more resource and knowledge constraints in practicing mothering in accordance with the child-centered parenting discourse (Wu 1996). They were observed to indulge their children by prolonging breast feeding and delaying toilet training, paying less attention to children’s independence training, keeping untended children confined at home, and asking older children to take care of their younger siblings (Ho 1989; Huang 2014; Wu 1996). More importantly, many rural mothers in post-reform China face significant problems caused by long-term mother-child separation as a result of migration to cities for urban employment. As migrant mothers, these women not only deviate from traditional and modern childrearing discourses in China but also encounter many difficulties in performing maternal duties due to the intersectional structure of gender, class, and the rural-urban divide in post-reform China.

Rural-Urban Migration and Migrant Women in Post-Reform China

China’s *hukou* (household registration) system was established in the 1950s, and it has since worked like an internal passport system to regulate population movement and determine people’s access to various public resources and social

welfare according to their location of hukou registration (Chan and Buckingham 2008; Chan and Zhang 1999; Cheng and Selden 1994). Since mass rural-urban migration began in China in the 1980s, as a result of China's market transition and the increasing demand for cheap labor in urban areas, the hukou system has created many structural obstacles for rural peasants who migrate for urban employment. Generally, although millions of rural people have worked and lived in their destination cities for years, most are unable to change their place of hukou registration from their rural hometowns to destination cities due to the government's control of the urban population. Without urban hukou in their city destinations, rural migrants in urban China are deprived of access to public benefits and social welfare, remain stuck in the secondary labor market, and usually take jobs in labor-intensive manufacturing factories, on construction sites, or in the service industry (Solinger 1999). Due to the intersectional structural constraints of class and the rural-urban divide, most rural-urban migrants are impoverished members of a disadvantaged group with long working hours, an intensive workload, oppressive working conditions, and low salaries (Lee 1998; Pun 2005; Solinger 1999). They also experience discrimination from urban residents who regard them as inferior, uncivilized peasants, and they are socially and culturally excluded from urban communities (Lee 1998; Pun 2005; Solinger 1999). Their children have limited access to public resources and welfare, such as public education and medical services, in urban China (Goodburn 2009, 2014).

As a result, most migrants leave their children behind in their rural hometowns. Despite the government's gradual relaxation of the hukou system in recent years, China was home to more than 61 million left-behind children in 2010, making up 37.7% of rural children and 21.88% of all children in mainland China (All China Women's Federation 2013). Although both migrant men and migrant women suffer as a result of being physically separated from their left-behind children, the gendered roles of homemaker and primary caregiver expose migrant women to greater challenges, criticism, and ambivalence than their male counterparts. Although the experiences of migrant women as factory workers, single women looking for romance, and filial daughters have been well examined (Lee 1998; Pun 2005; Shen 2016; Wallis 2013), their maternal experiences and gender role as mothers have received insufficient attention. According to the limited research in this field (e.g., Ling 2017; Murphy 2014), their maternal duties are mainly reflected in their hard work in the cities and economic support for their children's education.

To enrich the discussion, in the current study I investigate the responses of two generations of migrant mothers in southern China to the interwoven structural constraints of gender, class, and the rural-urban divide on their mothering. I addressed three specific research questions. (a) How do two generations of migrant mothers understand good mothering?

(b) How do they perform three main childrearing duties (i.e., economic support, emotional care, and child education and discipline) in a migratory context? (c) What are the major differences in their maternal narratives and practices across generations? The notion of good mothering refers to the ideal performance of maternal duties. In the following discussion, it is mainly associated with migrant women's subjective understandings or perceptions of how they should fulfill their maternal duties, which guide their daily maternal practices in the context of migration.

Method

Qualitative interviewing, a widely used research method, enables researchers not only to elicit participants' stories in their own words, but also to "understand the research participant holistically, as an experiencing, meaning-making person" (Josselson 2013, p. viii; also see Edwards and Holland 2013). It also helps researchers to uncover the meanings of participants' experiences, conversations, and behavior and associate these meanings with the specific sociocultural contexts in which participants live (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Therefore, qualitative interviewing was used in my study as the main research method to obtain rich data on the subjective perceptions and practices of migrant mothers.

Participants

Rural-urban migrants with children were recruited to participate in a large-scale project investigating the translocal parenting of rural-urban migrants in southern China, which was conducted by our research team in 2014 and 2015. The field sites were Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Dongguan in Guangdong Province, the major destinations of rural migrants, hosting 7.52 million, 8.37 million, and 6.43 million migrants, respectively, in 2013 (Guangzhou Daily 2014; South Daily 2015). A sample of 61 rural-urban migrant women with left-behind children in their rural homes was used in the current study. At the time of the interviews, the 61 migrant mothers were aged between 23 and 53. A majority (33, 54.1%) of the mothers worked in the manufacturing industry, 21 (34.4%) worked in the service industry, 5 (8.2%) were self-employed, and 2 (3.3%) were unemployed. Most (55, 90%) of the mothers were married, 5 (8%) were divorced, and one was widowed; 51 (84%) had migrant husbands and 4 reported having left-behind husbands. Fully 56 (92%) of the mothers had left all of their children behind, and 5 (8%) had both migrant and left-behind children. Of the 96 left-behind children reported, 70 (73%) were younger than 18. With the exception of the four migrant mothers with left-behind husbands serving as primary caregivers, most of the migrant mothers

relied on grandparents as the main substitute caregivers for their left-behind children.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through personal referral and snowball sampling. Over the last decade, I conducted multiple field trips to Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Dongguan to investigate rural-urban migrants. My fieldwork experiences in these cities not only gave me access to rural-urban migrants, but also enabled me to befriend some migrant workers and small entrepreneurs who became my key informants in the current project. In the initial stage of participant recruitment, I contacted my key informants in these cities to look for rural-urban migrants with children—whether they had left-behind children, migrant children, or both. The key informants introduced friends, co-ethnics [laoxiang], and relatives who fit the participant profile to me. A snowballing strategy was used in the second stage. The participants interviewed in the initial stage introduced relatives, friends, coworkers, and neighbors to me for interviews. In the process of participant recruitment, I also considered the gender, age, and occupation of each rural-urban migrant. As the full sample of the project (137 valid cases) comprised both migrant mothers and fathers in different age groups and provided a complicated picture of migrants' childrearing experiences in terms of their gender, age, and children's status (migrant or left behind), the current study focused only on the childrearing experiences of the 61 migrant mothers who reported having left-behind children when interviewed.

Data Collection

Our research team made seven field trips to the three target cities. During each field trip, I worked with two to three research assistants who had received intensive training in qualitative interviewing. Face-to-face and one-to-one interviews were conducted by us in Mandarin and in various locations, such as the participants' places of work and homes and the hotels in which the research team stayed while carrying out the fieldwork. A letter of consent was presented to every participant before their interviews to give them information on the project and the interview process. The interviews lasted for 1–4 hours each and were audio-recorded with the participants' permission.

The interviews followed a semi-structured guide, helping the participants to focus on eliciting their childrearing experiences while giving them the autonomy and flexibility to provide information on new issues based on their diversified experiences. The interview questions for migrant mothers with left-behind children concentrated on their childrearing practices from a distance, such as how they dealt with the emotional suffering incurred by physical separation from their children, how they maintained contact with their children,

and how they disciplined their children from afar. These questions were tested during the first field trip and revised. New questions eliciting migrants' views on good mothering and their collaboration with family members in childrearing were incorporated into the interview guide. The final interview guide covered questions on four themes: (a) migration motives and experiences, (b) family members and relationships, (c) childrearing practices and intra-family collaboration in childrearing, and (d) childrearing perceptions and narratives, (The full interview guide is available in the [online supplement](#).) During the interviews, the interviewers also developed follow-up questions to obtain more childrearing stories, examples, and explanations from the participants. Immediately after each interview, the interviewer wrote a page of field notes recording the participant's appearance and the interviewer-participant interaction and indicating any problems encountered during the interview. This helped me to evaluate data quality when analyzing each case.

Researcher Positionality

Interviewing entails collaboration between researchers and participants to elicit the participants' experiences and construct meanings for the world and the events the participants have experienced (Rubin and Rubin 2012). How the researchers present themselves and interact with the participants may affect the data generated during the interviews. I was originally from Hunan Province, which sends out a large proportion of China's rural-urban migrants, and had worked as a highly skilled migrant in Hong Kong for years. My assistants also came from mainland China and had migration experiences. Our identity as co-ethnics and our shared migration experiences helped us to build a rapport with the participants. Because we were single and younger than most of the participants, we positioned the participants as experienced parents sharing stories of childrearing practices. In most cases, I also matched the interviewers and participants according to age and gender (Choi and Peng 2016). A majority (47, 77%) of the 61 migrant mothers in the study were interviewed by my female assistants and myself. The other 14 (23%) were interviewed by two young male assistants who positioned the participants as older "aunties" or "sisters" to gain their trust and avoid embarrassment. Most of the migrant mothers treated the interviews as an opportunity to pour out their feelings, problems, and experiences relating to raising children from a distance. Because most of the senior migrant mothers had adolescent or adult children when interviewed, they were asked to discuss their experiences of mothering their children when young. This strategy helped us to obtain enough information to compare the senior migrants' mothering experiences with those of the younger migrant mothers, most of whom (22, 71%) had young children at the time of the interviews.

Data Analysis

All of the interviews were transcribed in full by the research assistants. I read all of the transcripts and carried out the data analysis using a grounded theory approach, wherein “concepts and themes emerge from the data” (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 204). The first stage of the data analysis was open coding, which allowed me to gain familiarity with the data, identify the similarities and differences between cases, and generate themes. Two themes, “two missions” and “children’s overall needs,” were identified during this stage; I noticed that these issues were mentioned by many mothers when describing their understanding of maternal duties or good mothering. The two missions emphasized by most of the senior migrant mothers were helping their children to find employment and helping their children to build families. The topic of children’s overall needs related to the necessity to satisfy children’s physical, emotional, and financial needs. Most of the young migrant mothers considered satisfying these needs to be their maternal duty.

During the second stage of the data analysis, the 61 cases were sorted into first-generation versus new-generation migrant mothers based on differences in age and maternal perceptions and practices. First-generation migrant mothers were defined as those born before 1978, when the introduction of China’s household-responsibility system [*jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi*] brought about economic reform. Most (23, 77%) of the 30 first-generation migrant mothers had migrated between the late 1980s and mid-1990s. New-generation migrant mothers were defined as those born in or after 1978; most (28, 90%) of this group of 31 women had migrated after the late 1990s. The profiles of the two generations of migrant mothers fit those described in previous studies (Choi and Peng 2016; Pun and Lu 2010).

The new-generation mothers generally had more education (8, 26% had attended senior high school or above), less agricultural experience, and higher urban incomes (an average family income of 10,639 yuan [about \$1600 or €1367] per month) than their predecessors (2, 6.7% had attended senior high school or above, and the average family income was 6360 yuan [about \$957 or €817] per month). The new-generation migrants tended to have developmentally oriented motives for migration and were more inclined to settle in cities than were their predecessors, who usually reported economically oriented motives for migration and planned to return to their rural hometowns (Pun and Lu 2010). Focused coding and analytic memoranda were used to identify more nuanced differences between the two generations of migrant mothers in their maternal narratives and daily long-distance childrearing practices. For example, I considered the generational differences in financial support, mother-child communication, and mother-child interaction. During the third stage of the data analysis, I used constant comparison to identify intra-

generation similarities and differences in mothering and check the data validity and consistency in each case (Corbin and Strauss 2015).

Results

Additional information about each mother quoted in the following section can be found in Table 1. Table 2 outlines the themes and maternal practices for both first-generation and new-generation migrant mothers that organize my results as well as provides a summary description and prototypical example of each theme and practice.

First-Generation Migrant Mothers

The first generation of migrants suffered greatly as a result of China’s rural-urban divide and hukou constraints, and they undertook rural-to-urban migration at a greater cost than their younger counterparts did. Born before China’s economic reform, many of the first-generation migrant mothers reported experiencing extreme material shortages during their childhood and even after marriage. Shen offered the following recollection: “We were extremely poor at that time. It is hard for you to imagine. When I got married to my husband, our family was so poor that we did not even own a bowl.” Economic incentives were the main factors driving them to migrate in the 1980s and 1990s. Almost half (14, 47%) of the migrant women in this cohort reported undertaking their first migration before marriage to provide financial support for their natal families, such as funding the education of younger siblings and contributing to the cost of house construction. They associated their first migration with fulfilling their familial roles as filial daughters and responsible sisters, and they considered it natural to sacrifice their individual interests for the collective interests of the family. After marriage, these women usually stayed in rural villages and took care of their young children. When their children were older and family expenses had increased, they undertook their second migration. Of the 30 first-generation migrant mothers, 28 (93%) associated their latest migration with maternal duties, specifically the provision of financial support for their children’s growth and education. The two exceptions were Ma, who migrated to escape an unhappy marriage, and Wu, who migrated to avoid a government penalty for violating the birth-control policy.

In the 1980s and 1990s, when both China’s central government and local urban governments defined rural migrants as temporary migrants contributing cheap labor to urban development and advertised China’s “bottomless supply” of cheap labor to attract global capital (Choi and Peng 2016), first-generation migrant mothers were subject to exploitation by capitalists and harsh treatment and control by local

Table 1 Characteristics of first-generation and new-generation migrant mothers

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Home province	Children's gender (Age)
(a) First generation migrant mothers				
Ann	47	Divorced	Sichuan	Boy (26), Girl (17)*
Bao	42	Married	Hubei	Girl (17), Boy (7)
Bian	50	Married	Sichuan	Boy (28), Boy (26), Girl (26)
Bing	39	Married	Hunan	Boy (14)
Cheng	42	Married	Chongqing	Boy (18), Boy (11)
Gao	42	Married	Hunan	Girl (20), Girl (14), Boy (12)
Guo	37	Married	Chongqing	Boy (12), Boy (6)
Han	40	Married	Hunan	Boy (17), Girl (13)
Hong	40	Married	Sichuan	Girl (13)
Hu	45	Married	Sichuan	Girl (22), Boy (5)
Huo	45	Married	Sichuan	Boy (22), Boy (14)*
Jiang	41	Married	Sichuan	Girl (8)
Liao	44	Married	Anhui	Boy (17), Boy (17)
Lin	37	Married	Guangxi	Girl (11), Boy (9)
Long	40	Married	Guangxi	Boy (12)
Ma	41	Remarried	Sichuan	Boy (17)
Min	44	Married	Sichuan	Boy (24), Boy (20)
Niu	50	Married	Hunan	Boy (30), Girl (28), Girl (26)
Ong	43	Married	Guangdong	Boy (18), Boy (18)
Pan	43	Divorced	Chongqing	Boy (20)
Qian	41	Divorced	Hunan	Boy (15), Boy (7)
Shen	50	Married	Hubei	Boy (26)
Song	38	Married	Guangxi	Boy (15), Boy (13)
Sun	47	Married	Guangdong	Boy (26), Girl (24)
Tao	49	Widowed	Hunan	Girl (27), Girl (26), Boy (22)
Tian	53	Married	Sichuan	Girl (25)
Wu	49	Married	Hubei	Boy (30), Boy (27)
Xue	41	Married	Chongqing	Boy (died at 10), Girl (13), Girl (10)
Yang	39	Married	Hunan	Boy (18), Girl (12), Boy (12)
Zhu	40	Married	Sichuan	Girl (14)
(b) New generation migrant mothers				
Bei	35	Married	Guangdong	Girl (9), Girl (7), Boy (6)
Cao	23	Married	Hubei	Boy (3)
Chun	31	Married	Hubei	Girl (4)
Cui	34	Married	Shanxi	Boy (15)
Dong	36	Married	Chongqing	Girl (11)
Fang	36	Married	Hunan	Boy (13)
Jiao	36	Married	Hubei	Girl (14)
Jie	32	Married	Jiangxi	Girl (13), Girl (6 months)
Jing	31	Married	Guangdong	Girl (11), Boy (10)*
Kong	36	Married	Hubei	Boy (15), Girl (5)
Lan	32	Married	Hunan	Boy (10)
Li	30	Married	Guangxi	Boy (3), Boy (2)
Mei	33	Married	Hainan	Boy (4)
Meng	28	Married	Guangdong	Girl (2)
Nan	34	Married	Hubei	Boy (8)
Ping	36	Married	Anhui	Boy (16), Boy (9)*
Qin	36	Divorced	Guangdong	Girl (11)

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Home province	Children's gender (Age)
Ran	36	Married	Henan	Girl (16), Boy (7)
Ru	35	Married	Guangdong	Boy (12), Boy (10)
Sha	29	Married	Hubei	Boy (1)
Shui	33	Married	Guangdong	Girl (7)
Ting	28	Divorced	Jiangsu	Girl (3)
Wang	27	Married	Chongqing	Boy (5)
Wen	32	Married	Chongqing	Girl (10), Boy (8)
Xiang	28	Married	Guangdong	Girl (6), Boy (4), Girl (2)
Xin	35	Married	Shandong	Girl (11), Girl (10 months)*
Ya	36	Married	Hunan	Boy (17), Boy (13)
Ying	33	Married	Henan	Boy (9)
Yue	34	Married	Chongqing	Girl (10)
Zhang	28	Married	Sichuan	Boy (8)
Zhou	25	Married	Henan	Girl (4)

Children marked with a star are migrant children. The rest are left-behind children. The box indicates that the case was not counted in the number of children (both left-behind and migrant children)

governments. Working for more than 10 hours a day, they received salaries of only 300–800 yuan [about \$45–120 or €39–103] per month in the 1980s and 1990s. Although their wages increased due to a labor shortage after 2003, 26 (87%) of the first-generation migrant mothers reported a monthly income of 2000–4000 yuan [about \$301–602 or €257–514], and two (Song and Qian) reported a monthly salary lower than 2000 yuan. Together, the economic hardship they experienced in their rural homes, their socioeconomic marginalization in cities, and their gendered familial duties, such as the obligation to behave as good daughters and mothers, led the first-generation migrant mothers to regard their migration as a form of self-sacrifice on behalf of their families and emphasize economic support to their children in their maternal narratives.

Good Mothering: Accomplishing Two Missions

The first-generation migrant mothers interpreted good mothering as the accomplishment of two missions: supporting their children's efforts to find employment and helping them to start their own families. Zhu phrased this interpretation as follows: "I believe that every parent expects their children to become capable people. What does being capable involve? In my case, my daughter will find a good job and build a good family." These twin goals, encapsulated in the old Chinese saying "chengjia liye" [establishing a career and a family], were regarded as the essence of adulthood. Although the concept of chengjia liye was traditionally associated with adult men and defined as the father's parental duty to help his sons to become productive members of society (Choi and Peng 2016), it has more recently been extended to the nature of

adulthood of both sons and daughters and defined as the duty of both fathers and mothers. In my study, most of the first-generation migrant mothers evaluated their childrearing practices by the degree of their accomplishment of the aforementioned two goals.

Financial Support for Two Missions

For most of the first-generation migrant mothers, breadwinning was critical to achieving these two missions, partly because women's participation in productive activities had been the norm in both urban and rural China since 1949, and partly because their husbands' incomes were insufficient to cover childrearing expenses, which made their own income indispensable (Choi and Peng 2016). Providing financial support for their children's education was the starting point in their pursuit of the two parental missions. Huo elaborated on the relationship between her children's education and her parental missions as follows:

We [Huo and her husband] expect our children to study well. Academic success will give them a bright future. ... If my younger son gets a college degree, he will be able to find a good job, earn a high income, and establish a family. With a career and a family, he will become an independent adult. This is what we as parents expect. (Huo)

The mothers' emphasis on their children's academic success also reflected their own experiences of migration and urban employment. As mentioned previously, most of the first-generation migrant mothers had experienced

Table 2 Themes, descriptions, maternal practices, and examples for first-generation and new-generation migrant mothers

Theme	Description	Example
(a) First-generation migrant mothers		
Two missions	First-generation migrant mothers' interpretation of good mothering as helping their children to develop careers and families	"We work hard for the next generation. No matter how hard our life as migrants is, we work for our children. [We] helped them to gain more education, find jobs, become economically independent, and then get married. When these tasks have been completed, we will feel satisfied [as parents]."
	This understanding is reflected in the following maternal practices:	
	1. Financial support Concentrating economic resources on children's education, career development, and marriage	"A good mother should be able to make money to support and take good care of her children...I work hard for my children and expect them to have more education [than I have]. ...I expect my son to find a good wife and have a good family...I am under great financial pressure to sponsor his wedding."
	2. Emotional care Expressed in the form of authoritarian guidance and inquiring after children's academic performance and physical well-being	"[On the phone], I ask my sons to listen to their grandmothers, listen to their teachers, and study hard, and not to fight with other kids."
	3. Child education Associating children's academic performance with innate characteristics and taking a laissez-faire approach to children's studies	"I am not able to supervise my daughter's studies. How would I do that? ... Sometimes we talk about her academic performance on the phone...But I have never supervised her studies...As long as she understands what she learns, I am fine with it."
(b) New-generation migrant mothers		
Children's overall needs	New-generation migrant mothers' understanding of being a good mother: satisfying all of their children's needs. Their maternal practices have the following characteristics:	"We have only one child. We should try to give her the best we can. [We] care for her. [We] help her to plan her future life...[We] try our best to provide her with a good education. [We also] give her a lot of financial support."
	1. Financial support Satisfying children's material needs by giving them high-quality goods or other forms of rich material support	"Regarding material support, I definitely spend more on my daughter than other parents spend on their children. I believe that I have a duty to provide rich material support for my daughter...Half of my salary is spent on my daughter."
	2. Emotional care Direct emotional expression, intensive communication, and considerable effort to maintain mother-child intimacy	"When I miss my daughter, I call her and hold videoconferences with her. [On the phone], I ask, 'What are you doing at home? Do you behave well at school? Do you miss me?' My daughter misses us even more...She always calls me...Sometimes, she asks me, 'Mom, do you feel tired [due to work]?' and says, 'If you feel tired, please take a rest.'"
	3. Child education Emphasizing the important role of nurturing in children's academic performance and providing more practical help in children's study	"Sometimes, when she has a problem with her math homework, she sends the question to me or reads the question out during a video call...We supervise her homework. From Monday to Friday, whenever she needs help with her homework, she calls us. We help her to solve problems with her homework."

exploitation and harsh treatment in their post-migration lives due to the intersectional oppressions of class and the rural-urban divide. They attributed their low salaries and appalling urban working experiences to their lack of education, and they regarded education as the only way for their children to improve their socioeconomic status

across China's rural-urban divide and eventually succeed in life. Ann described her situation as follows:

I am handicapped by my lack of education. If I had received more education, I would not have to work as a bus steward now. ... If I had more money, I would

have a happy life: I would hire someone to take care of my children and send them to better schools...I hope that my children will have more knowledge. [With more knowledge], their lives will be different from mine. (Ann)

Most of the migrant mothers practiced strict frugality in their urban lives to save as much of their income as possible for their children. They regarded regular remittance payments as a significant way of showing their love for their left-behind children (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), as reported by Niu:

My children complained that I was a stingy mother, as I never bought them clothes or sent them gifts from cities. They still complain about that. ... [In the 1990s], I made very little money [500 yuan per month]. I saved as much as possible...I never bought myself any clothes [in the city]. I saved all of my money and sent payments back home to support my children's education and the building of a house [for our family]. (Niu)

To justify their long-term separation from their children, the first-generation mothers argued that good mothers should demonstrate their love and care for their children through practical means such as providing financial support and satisfying their children's basic needs. The mothers argued that through their hard work and frugality in cities, they were sacrificing their own lives to secure their children's futures. They believed that their children's academic success would be the best reward for their effort and sacrifice, as explained by Bian:

I told my children, "Mom migrates to earn your tuition fees. You should study hard. Remember: strive for vindication, and try your best to go to college. This is how you can repay my hard work. ... I don't mind 'eating bitterness' in the city as long as you can go to college." (Bian)

These migrant mothers continued to financially assist their children in early adulthood, after finishing school. They helped their children to establish small businesses or funded their skills training. For example, Wu invested tens of thousands of yuan in her elder son's computer business, and Shen paid for her son's vocational training and spent 200,000 yuan [about \$30,084 or €25,697] on his business, although both start-ups ultimately failed. In addition to sponsoring their children's careers, these migrant mothers felt obliged to fulfill a second goal: providing the financial support required for their children to marry and start new families. In post-reform rural China, where patriarchal hypergamy remains the norm and marriage is still understood as parents' responsibility to seek

daughters-in-law to perpetuate patrilineage, parents with adult sons are expected to provide their sons with houses (Davis and Friedman 2014). Due to soaring house prices in China in recent years, it is not easy for rural parents either to build houses in their home villages or purchase flats in nearby towns for their sons. Many migrant mothers in their 50s continue to work hard along with their husbands in cities to earn money to pay for their sons' houses. For example, Shen reported spending 400,000 yuan [about \$60,168 or €51,395] on building a house in their rural hometown for her son, and Sun built a five-story house for her son in their hometown. In addition to providing houses, financing weddings is regarded as a parental responsibility. For example, Wu spent about 500,000 yuan [about \$ 75,210 or €64,243] on her two sons' weddings, which almost exhausted her family's life savings. Sun and her husband spent tens of thousands of yuan on their son's wedding. Sun explained, "His wedding banquet hosted 40 tables of guests and cost tens of thousands of yuan. We paid for it all. He is our only son. It was our responsibility to provide him with a grand wedding."

Another seven mothers with unmarried adult sons or teenage sons stated that they had saved for their children's weddings and houses. Two migrant mothers with adult daughters (Bian and Tian) had encouraged their daughters to marry, and Bian had prepared a monetary dowry to demonstrate her maternal love and fulfill her maternal responsibility. Only after their children had completed both life endeavors did the migrant mothers believe they had fulfilled their maternal duties and that their sacrifice had been worthwhile. Three migrant mothers with married adult children (Niu, Shen, and Wu) reported their satisfaction and relief at accomplishing these two missions, conveyed by Niu as follows:

The happiest thing in my life is that I have accomplished my goals [as a mother]. My children have grown up and established families [chengjia liye]...My eldest son has had a child...This is the happiest thing. I have nothing to worry about. (Niu)

Emotional Care

As indicated in many studies of migrant mothers in various societies (e.g., Dreby 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2005), although breadwinning is perceived to justify the long-term absence of these mothers from the lives of their left-behind children, it does not make their mothering easy. Migrant mothers are expected to shoulder more childcare duties than their male counterparts do even if they are physically separated from their children. The gendered division of childcare labor in migrant families was reflected in the experiences of the first-generation migrant mothers involved in my study. Of the 22 first-generation migrant

mothers with migrant husbands, 17 (77%) stated that they were responsible for most of the emotional care and child discipline when parenting from afar, whereas their migrant husbands focused on breadwinning. Only five of the women with migrant husbands reported that the fathers regularly communicated with their children and actively engaged in child discipline. Three divorced mothers and one widowed mother were responsible for all parental childcare duties. The three migrant women with left-behind husbands and Ma, a remarried migrant woman with a left-behind ex-husband, reported that although the fathers took care of and disciplined their children, they as mothers were still intensively involved in parenting from afar. Few of the first-generation migrant mothers questioned the greater engagement of women than men in childcare. The gendered expectation of mothers as primary caregivers incurred emotional suffering for the mothers when separated from their left-behind children. Shen recalled her emotional turmoil after migrating and leaving her child behind as follows:

How could I not miss him [her son]? I missed him so much that I was even afraid of the night-time. During the daytime, work distracted me from missing my child. But at night I missed him so much that I couldn't stay in my dorm room alone. (Shen)

In the 1980s and 1990s, the inconvenience of trans-provincial transportation and the cost of long-distance communication on meager salaries prevented the migrant mothers from winning their children's hearts via gifts, short-term visits, or intensive telecommunication—strategies now widely adopted by migrant parents to maintain emotional bonds with their left-behind children. During that period, many first-generation migrant mothers had only limited contact with their left-behind children. Five of the mothers recalled writing letters to their left-behind children once a month or visited them every few years. Sun described her situation as follows:

I migrated when my elder child was 5 and my younger one was 3. At that time [the early 1990s], we [Sun and her migrant husband] didn't have cellphones...[Instead,] we wrote letters to them [their left-behind children]...Writing letters did not cost much money. Calls were very expensive. [We had] very limited contact with our children. (Sun)

Some of the migrant mothers also reported trying their best to reduce unnecessary expenses, such as making calls, to save as much money as possible for their children's education. This may to some extent explain why the findings of research on left-behind children always include criticisms of parents for ignoring their children's emotional needs.

After 2000, the migrant mothers in my study had more contact with their children due to their increased earnings as a result of a labor shortage, the reduced cost of telecommunication, and increased access to transportation services. Most mothers (25, 83%) reported that they contacted their children by telephone or text message at least once a week; two maintained mother-child contact on a daily basis; and only three contacted their children on a monthly basis. Increased contact with their left-behind children helped these migrant mothers to rebuild their emotional bonds with their children. Many reported improved mother-child relationships, but seven (23%) mothers, especially those with teenage children, still found it difficult to bridge the emotional gap. Despite their deep love for their children, 27 of the 30 first-generation mothers in the study were unaccustomed to directly expressing their emotions to their children, and they interpreted good mothering as providing authoritarian guidance and ensuring their children's obedience (Evans 2010). Only three mothers (Hu, Lin, and Xue) directly expressed their longing for their children and inquired about their children's happiness via telecommunication.

Most of the migrant mothers reported that their love and care for their left-behind children were expressed mainly in the form of inquiries about their children's diet, physical well-being, and academic performance, in addition to instructions to behave well or listen to caregivers. Some of the mothers attributed their lack of direct emotional expression to their children to their lack of education or poor communication skills. Others argued that children should be aware of their parents' unconditional love and conscientious efforts on their behalf so that there was no need to say hollow words about their emotions. Min explained, "We never talk about our feelings [on the phone]. Our children always understand us. As long as we understand each other, that is enough." Some of the mothers reported that their left-behind children did not always appreciate their emotional care in the form of nagging and authoritarian instruction. Their children found their nagging annoying and reacted either by ending telephone calls or by remaining silent. Pan said, "[On the phone] I ask him to listen to his grandpa and grandma and tell him that I work hard in the city [for him]...But my son dislikes hearing this. He always says, 'Mom, you are nagging me.'"

Children's Education and Discipline

Although their children's academic performance was a major concern for the first-generation migrant mothers, forming the main topic of their telephone conversations, most of the migrant mothers (27 of 30, 90%) lacked the education required to offer practical help with their children's studies, such as

homework supervision. Instead, they usually expressed their care for their children's academic development by urging them to study hard, and many used their own experiences as negative examples demonstrating the importance of education. Xue described this situation as follows:

I don't have much education. I care about their [her two daughters'] studies...Frankly, I don't understand their homework. All I can do is tell them to study hard. I tell them, "Study hard. Don't be like me. I regret not being educated." (Xue)

Despite urging their children to study hard, the mothers took a *laissez-faire* approach to their children's pursuit of academic success in other respects, associating their performance with innate ability. They argued that talented and clever children performed well at school without parental supervision and that disobedient children would not benefit from such supervision. "In short," said Ong, "kids who love to study always study hard, wherever they are. Kids who don't like to study don't study hard, wherever they are." Only two migrant mothers (Zhu and Yang) reported purchasing extracurricular books for their children, whereas another two (Cheng and Hong) relied on more educated relatives to supervise their children's homework.

Despite providing limited practical support for their children's schoolwork, many of the first-generation mothers seemed relatively confident in their ability to cultivate their children's morality. They argued that good mothers should help their children to develop moral values and good manners and embrace traditional virtues such as *zunlao aiyou* [respecting the old and cherishing the young]. Hong reported, "I don't supervise my daughter's studies, but...I tell her to take care of younger children and respect teachers and the elderly."

Most of the first-generation migrant mothers defined their mother-child relationships as good and felt rewarded when their children performed well at school or accomplished the two life missions. Yet Bao reported bad relationships with both of her children, and another three mothers (Cheng, Qian, and Yang) reported tense relationships with their elder/eldest sons due to the latter's ungrateful attitudes, internet addiction, uncontrolled consumption, and/or decision to drop out of school. Bao said sadly,

My daughter doesn't call me "Mom." She resents me. My son doesn't call me "Mom" either. ... Sometimes I feel that I would rather not have given birth to them. I work so hard to earn money [for them, and I] get this in return!" (Bao)

Their frustration was understandable because their children's educational failure and misbehaviors were a devastating blow

to their sense of themselves as good mothers and hardworking, self-sacrificing migrants.

New-Generation Migrant Mothers

Although still subject to the intersectional influence of class and the rural-urban divide, new-generation migrant mothers lived and worked in a less oppressive socioeconomic context than their predecessors did. Since 2003, the labor shortage in southern China has forced employers to increase workers' salaries, improve working conditions, and provide for workers' welfare (Choi and Peng 2016). Against the backdrop of rapid urbanization to promote economic development, the official discourse on migrant workers has shifted from discriminatory to descriptive, more accurately depicting migrants as a deprived group injured by rural-urban inequalities. In addition, media reports and academic discussion of migrants' suffering in cities, along with various forms of resistance from migrants, have pushed the central government and local urban governments to loosen their control over migrants and their families. In 2003, the temporary residence permit was abolished and the entitlement of migrant children to urban education was acknowledged. Since 2010, urban *hukou* has gradually been made available to migrants via a points system. The issue of left-behind children began to attract public attention in 2000 and has recently been identified as a social problem that the government needs to solve. All of these developments indicate that the intersectional structure of class and the rural-urban divide in China constitutes not a static system, but a fluid one subject to the influence of both the state and migrant groups. In other words, the intersectional influences of class and the rural-urban divide continue to create structural constraints, yet the extent and specific implications of these constraints may have changed, ultimately shaping the migration and maternal experiences of new-generation migrant women.

The new-generation migrant women in my study were born after China's economic reform. Compared with their senior counterparts, most of them grew up in financially better-off rural families and more rarely experienced extreme poverty before migration. As part of their socialization, they were continually exposed to features of the urban lifestyle through the mass media and popular culture, and they became familiar with urban culture before their migration. Of the 31 new-generation migrant women, 20 (65%) reported that they undertook their first migration, usually before marriage, either to follow the popular tide of migration in their village or to explore the colorful urban life after losing interest in studying. Only six (19%) women undertook their first migration to provide economic support for their natal families.

After having children, most of the new-generation migrant women also associated migration with their maternal duties, but they interpreted migration for urban employment as a means of self-development rather than self-sacrifice for the

needs of their children. They argued that such self-improvement made them better able to care for and support their children. Five young mothers even described their migration as a means of escaping the tedious and exhausting obligation to provide care for their rural families and as a way to obtain economic independence or self-value. As Sha explained, “Even if I don’t make much money, I believe that women should have full-time jobs to demonstrate their value.”

Good Mothering: Fulfilling Children’s Overall Needs

Most of the new-generation migrant mothers defined good mothering as fulfilling all of their children’s needs. They argued that merely providing financial support for children’s growth was not enough and that good mothers should be able to satisfy their children’s needs in all dimensions.

What is a good mother? I believe that a good mother is able to satisfy all of her kids’ needs. Whatever they need, you should be able to provide them with it. For example, [you should] take very good care of them. Give them a lot of love and be sensitive [to their feelings]. ... And teach them to cultivate good manners and courtesy. Give them some instruction. (Li)

These mothers’ interpretation of good mothering shared many features with the child-centered parenting discourse in urban China. As I mentioned previously, since the 1990s, some significant changes have been observed in the parenting ideology in urban China, mainly due to the influence of Western values and the prevalence of single-child families as mandated by the one-child policy. Ideas about parents’ intensive investments in their children, the quality of parent-child relations, and parent-child communication and emotional interactions have gained prominence in the prevailing parenting discourse in urban China (Evans 2010; Fong 2004; Jankowiak 2011; Kuan 2015). Within this framework, urban mothers are defined as the primary caregivers responsible for organizing childrearing activities, meeting children’s various needs, cultivating their potential, and seeing to their overall development (Kuan 2015). Migration exposes young migrant mothers to this urban hegemonic childrearing discourse via various channels: many observe the childcare practices of urban parents in daily life, whereas some absorb parenting information via the mass media. Two mothers reported the following:

[Working as a steward], I observe that some urban mothers teach their children when and how to use the escape hammer on the bus. They teach their children who can sit on priority seats. We do not have this knowledge in our hometowns. (Ting)

I always seek out parenting information on the Internet. Sometimes I read some books about child education. ... I always google how foreign parents raise their children, as I want to compare [them] with Chinese parents...My friends also share parenting information via our WeChat friend circle. (Qin)

Although the new-generation migrant mothers encountered less oppressive socioeconomic conditions in their post-migration lives, they were more influenced by the hegemonic parenting discourse in post-reform urban China. Their exposure to this discourse through migration to some extent reinforced their gendered roles as primary caregivers and guided their efforts to measure up to a demanding standard for maternal performance.

Financial Support for Children’s Overall Need

In accordance with their self-development motive for migration, many of the new-generation migrant mothers reported that they provided their children with financial support to ensure that they lived high-quality material lives rather than to satisfy their basic survival needs. The new-generation migrant mothers in my study earned an average monthly income of 4203 yuan [about \$632 or €540] at the time of the interviews, higher than that of their first-generation counterparts (3310 yuan [about \$498 or €425]). This higher income allowed them to provide more material support for their children. Even more importantly, whereas many of the first-generation migrant mothers seemed to accept the social construction of migrants as socioeconomically inferior across the urban-rural divide and perceived urban parenting as an unrealistic ideal far beyond their capacity, the new-generation mothers rejected this construction of inferiority and argued that their children deserved lives as good as those of urban children. Therefore, the new-generation mothers were more than willing to satisfy their children’s material needs by sending them good food, clothes, and other daily necessities from the city. Chun noted that “children are precious. I never buy cheap stuff for my daughter, as low cost means poor quality. My daughter likes chocolate. I buy Jian Da [a specific brand of chocolate for children] in Shenzhen and mail it to her.” Ting, a migrant mother working in Shenzhen, even visited the neighboring city of Hong Kong to purchase imported milk powder, cookies, and toys for her daughter.

Their efforts to provide high-quality lives for their left-behind children also reflected their desire to compensate materially for their physical absence from their children’s lives. Although this “compensation psychology” has been observed among both generations of migrant mothers, the first-generation mothers talked more about saving limited resources for their children’s long-term needs, whereas the new-generation mothers usually wished to improve their

children's overall quality of life. Many of the new-generation mothers reported that they had not considered the need to provide financial support for their children's careers and marriages because their children were still very young. Only three mothers with teenage children (Fang, Kong, and Ya) had prepared money for their children's future college education or marriage, and Li expected her children to be financially independent and purchase their own homes.

Emotional Care

The new-generation migrant mothers remained the primary caregivers in terms of satisfying their children's emotional needs and providing discipline, although they reported greater involvement of migrant fathers in parenting from afar. Most (19, 61%) new-generation mothers with migrant husbands reported that they took primary responsibility for their children's emotional care and discipline. Nine (29%) mothers with migrant husbands and one with a left-behind husband (Meng) reported that their children's fathers participated actively in providing emotional care and discipline for their children, whereas two divorced mothers shouldered all of the childrearing duties.

Most of the new-generation migrant mothers claimed that emotional intimacy with their left-behind children was crucial to their mothering. In addition to urban childrearing discourse, media reports and personal experience shaped their perceptions of the emotional care required by children. Eight new-generation mothers reported being alarmed by media reports about the emotional and psychological problems of left-behind children; three (Lan, Wang, and Zhang) reported their own experiences of suffering as left-behind children; and one (Sha) stated that her husband had been a left-behind child. In contrast with the first-generation migrant mothers, who justified their emotional suffering as the cost inevitably incurred by migrant mothers and left-behind children in return for economic benefits, most of the new-generation mothers regarded emotional intimacy with their left-behind children as essential. During the interviews, 13 (42%) new-generation mothers highlighted the importance of meeting children's emotional needs or providing them with emotional care. Another nine (29%) mothers reported expressing their emotions directly to their left-behind children, such as by saying "I love you" and "I miss you" and inquiring after their children's happiness. Lan elaborated as follows:

You should let your child know that you love him even if you are not with him. He is loved by his grandparents and by you. "I had to leave [via migration], but I still care about you [her son]." You have to make this point very clear to him. Don't let your child feel abandoned. (Lan)

To avoid the fate of their predecessors, many of the new-generation migrant mothers explained that they made every effort possible to maintain emotional bonds with their left-behind children. Due to the increased convenience and affordability of communication and transportation services newly available in China in the last decade, the new-generation migrant mothers reported having frequent contact with their left-behind children. Twelve mothers visited their children once a year and another 15 visited multiple times a year. In two cases (Mei and Ya), the migrant mothers took interprovincial high-speed trains or airplanes to visit their children every month. Another migrant mother (Zhang) worked for half of each year in Shenzhen and returned to her husband's hometown in Shandong to care for her son for the remaining 6 months. Only Ping reported visiting her left-behind elder son as infrequently as every few years. When visiting their children, the new-generation mothers brought their children's favorite food, clothing, toys, and books as gifts. They admitted that their frequent visits were costly, which was especially true for 24 of the 31 (77%) mothers, as interprovincial migrants. However, they argued that regular contact enabled them to maintain emotional intimacy with their left-behind children and partly relieve their emotional suffering. Mei described this situation as follows:

He [her son] is in Hainan. I visit him every month. ... I can stay with him for 4 days. I leave on Friday night and ask for the Monday off. I come back on Monday night by plane. I don't care how much money I earn or I can save every month...My salary is not high. My basic salary is 3,500 yuan. ... But as I miss him, I have to do so. (Mei)

Meanwhile, 19 (61%) new-generation mothers reported bringing their left-behind children to their urban homes in the summer and for winter holidays. During these visits, the mothers took their children to restaurants, shopping malls, theaters, and playgrounds to spend some quality time together and give them some experience of urban life. Nan described these visits as follows:

When he [her son] comes to Shenzhen in the summer holiday, I take him to see some places at weekends. I have taken him to the Youth Palace [a playground for children and teenagers] many times. He likes going to the Youth Palace...I have also taught him to swim. (Nan)

Telecommunication has become an indispensable part of mothering from a distance (Madianou and Miller 2012; Peng and Wong 2013). Five (16%) of the new-generation mothers contacted their left-behind children daily via telecommunication, 22 (71%) did so once or several times a week, and

only four (13%) phoned their children on a monthly basis. Many described telecommunication with their children as an opportunity for conversation, sharing, and emotional expression rather than for unidirectional instruction and supervision. Instead of nagging their children to behave well or study hard, the new-generation mothers inquired after their children's well-being and mood, chatted with them about interesting topics, directly voiced their love and longing for their children, and even shared their own experiences in the cities. Some of the mothers used strategies such as positive reinforcement, encouragement, and listening carefully to win their children's hearts, as observed by Lan:

Rather than repeatedly asking about his academic performance [on the telephone], we talked with our son about some of his favorite topics. We asked him, "Are you happy at school?" Inquiring only about academic scores is not a positive method [of communication], and children don't like it. You need to show that you care about them. So he [Lan's son] loves to answer our calls. (Lan)

Mothers with preschool children favored videoconferencing via WeChat over telephone calls because their children were too young to hold meaningful voice-only conversations. During these videoconferences, the mothers evaluated their children's well-being, showed them gifts they had bought for them, told them stories, and asked their children to sing and dance for them. These activities enabled the migrant mothers to create a virtual co-presence with their left-behind young children via instantaneous visual communication (Peng and Wong 2012). Kong described these exchanges as follows:

My little girl is talkative. She always asks to have videoconferences with us. She talks to us and sings and dances for us during the video calls. She sings songs she learns at the kindergarten. She also recites poems for us. (Kong)

In addition to exhibiting excellent communication skills and devotion to winning their children's hearts, the mothers showed great persistence in reconstructing emotional intimacy with their children (Peng and Wong 2013). Shui provided a successful case. At 5 years old, Shui's daughter seemed reluctant to talk to her mother on the phone. Shui worried about her daughter's psychological health. After noticing this problem, Shui spent a whole year attempting to win her daughter's heart. During that year, she travelled more than 120 miles every month from Shenzhen to her home village in northeastern Guangdong to visit her daughter, and she called her every day. During their communications, she directly expressed her love and longing for her daughter by saying, "Sweetheart, what are

you doing? Do you miss mom? Mom is missing you, so Mom is calling you." Her great effort and persistence eventually paid off because her daughter gradually changed from answering her calls in silence to talking to her and finally to initiating telecommunication on a regular basis and sharing her feelings.

Children's Education

The new-generation migrant mothers also emphasized the importance of their children's education. In contrast with their first-generation counterparts, most of the new-generation migrant mothers emphasized the need to teach their children in accordance with their aptitude [yincai shijiao]. They believed that every child was unique and that education and disciplinary methods should be tailored to each child's personality and stage of development. They argued that nurture played a more important role than nature in their children's academic performance, as indicated by Shui: "Clever children are not born clever, but are made that way through nurture. You need to spend a lot of time, energy, and money on them." These mothers believed that they should cultivate their children's interest in studying and good studying habits, as well as create a positive educational environment both at school and at home. Compared with the first-generation mothers, who used nagging and negative examples to push their children to work hard, the new-generation mothers provided more practical support for their children's studies. Eight of the 13 (62%) new-generation mothers with preschool children purchased early education materials and taught their children basic mathematics and literacy, either through substitute caregivers (grandparents) or via telecommunication. For example, two mothers (Li and Wang) bought child-learning technology to teach their children basic mathematics and English. Another mother, Ting, bought compact discs of classical Chinese poetry and children's songs in Shenzhen, mailed them to her hometown, and asked her mother-in-law to play them to her daughter to create a good learning environment for the child at home.

For the new-generation mothers with school-aged children, supporting their children's education involved more than merely sending them to school. To provide better educational resources for their children, two mothers (Jiao and Ping) sent their children to good public schools in neighboring towns or provinces, and another three (Dong, Qin, and Ying) planned to bring their children to the cities in which they worked in the following 1–2 years and had prepared application documents for urban schools. Six mothers reported that they sent their children to after-school tutoring or hired tutors to help with their homework. Another five mothers reported supervising their left-behind children's homework via telecommunication channels. Some mothers who lacked the knowledge to

supervise their children's homework sought help from colleagues. Ying described this situation as follows:

If I don't understand my son's homework, I ask my [better educated] colleagues for help. We call our colleagues, "I have a problem with my child's studies. Would you please help me answer this question?" Sometimes we send the question via WeChat and they send back the answer. (Ying)

In addition, eight new-generation mothers (five with school-aged children and three with children in kindergarten) actively engaged in translocal collaboration with their children's teachers on matters of discipline and education. Some regularly telephoned their children's teachers, and others joined online parent-teacher chat groups and sent emails or online messages to teachers to obtain up-to-date information on their children's academic performance and behavior at school. Zhang described these activities as follows:

I always communicate with his [her son's] teachers. [I] call his teachers to ask whether he has finished his homework, whether he behaves well, and how he gets on with his classmates. I communicate with his teachers and sometimes with his tutors. . . I have his teachers' QQ numbers. We are in contact once or twice a week. (Zhang)

To promote their children's interest in arts or sports, four new-generation migrant mothers followed their urban counterparts in sending their children to after-school hobby classes. Two mothers sent their children to hobby clubs in their hometowns, and two took their children to hobby classes in the cities where they worked during their children's summer visits. Although these mothers claimed that they did so to entertain their children or promote their overall development, two admitted that they were also influenced by peer pressure. Jiao offered one example:

I send her [Jiao's daughter] to any hobby classes she is interested in. She learns piano and Chinese zither [a musical string instrument]. I don't expect her to be a pianist. But in my daughter's generation, it seems that every child must have a special talent or learn something unique. I don't want my daughter to feel inferior when her classmates talk about their hobby classes. (Jiao)

Although many of the new-generation mothers, influenced by the hegemonic discourse of urban parenting, sought to satisfy their children's needs in all dimensions, they developed their own competing discourse on their children's development and futures. Fifteen of the nineteen (79%) mothers who clearly indicated their expectations of their children in

the interviews argued that the children's development should be guided by the children's interests and matched to their abilities and that as long as their children led ordinary, happy lives in the future, they would be satisfied. For example, Chun said: "I make every effort to provide the best for my daughter, but I don't push her to be successful in the future. As long as she is a healthy and happy adult, I will be satisfied" and Ying stated: "It is unrealistic to expect every child to be a genius. . . . Just let children follow their interests and pursue their goals. I will let my son explore what he wants and support him."

Only three new-generation mothers (Bei, Li, and Ya) reported that they expected their children to be successful in the future, and another mother, Fang, used the Chinese phrase *chengjia liye* [establishing a career and a family] to describe her ultimate goals for her son. Despite their diverse opinions on this issue, most of the new-generation mothers evaluated their maternal performance based on the quality of the mother-child relationship or what they provided for their children rather than on the child's academic performance or career success. Xin made the following observations on this issue:

For me, [to be a good mother] is to support one's child's growth. . . . I am involved in every event in her [elder daughter's] life. I share her happy experiences at school. If she has unhappy experiences, I comfort her and help her to get through them. [A good mother] understands every detail of the lives of her children, always supports her children, makes sure they are healthy, and teaches them how to live in society. (Xin)

Discussion

The findings of my study contribute to the literature of migrant mothering by concentrating on cohort differences in the maternal narratives and practices of migrants. My findings indicate key differences in perceptions of good mothering and daily maternal practices relating to financial support, emotional care, and child education and discipline between two generations of migrant women in post-reform China. The first-generation migrant mothers in my study perceived good mothering primarily as providing economic support for their children to achieve their two life missions: having a family and building a career. They associated migrant mothering with self-sacrifice, and argued that good mothers should sacrifice themselves and even disregard their children's less significant needs in pursuit of these goals. Subject to great economic constraints and facing considerable structural obstacles as a result of rural-urban inequality, these mothers focused on pragmatic mothering practices and were committed to using their economic resources to support their children's education, careers, and marriages. Although many of the migrant

mothers reported that they and their left-behind children experienced emotional suffering as a result of their migration, they interpreted this as the inevitable cost of taking care of their children's larger needs. They usually expressed their emotional care and fulfilled their moral duty as mothers via authoritarian instructions to their children. The first-generation migrant mothers evaluated their mothering in terms of their children's performance or achievements. Their sacrifice through migration to some extent reinforced their demand for filial piety from their children, who were expected to satisfy their parents' wishes through academic success, career development, and even marriage.

I found the new-generation migrant mothers to have broken with the traditional Chinese model of childrearing by reporting maternal perceptions and practices greatly shaped by the child-centered parenting discourse in post-reform China. They defined good mothering as meeting the full range of children's needs and perceived migrant mothering as a process of learning and empowerment through which they increased their own capacity to satisfy their children's multifaceted needs, absorbed new childcare information from various sources, and undertook appropriate mothering practices relevant to their children's characteristics. With more socioeconomic resources than the previous generation, the new-generation migrant mothers were better able to provide good-quality material support for their children, invest intensive time and effort in maintaining emotional intimacy with their children, and offer better educational resources and more practical help with their children's studies. Although influenced by urban childrearing discourse, few of the new-generation migrant mothers lost their autonomy and reflexivity in mothering. They developed their own, competing discourse of mothering, arguing that enabling their children to live happy and peaceful lives is more important than trying to force them to achieve economic success or be "perfect" children. Therefore, they tended to evaluate their maternal performance in terms of their children's happiness and the closeness of their relationship with their children.

Although both generations of migrant women occupy the same social location in the intersectional structure of gender, class, and the rural-urban divide in China, not only were the constraints, resources, and opportunities they encountered in migrant mothering divergent in different periods of time, but their subjective responses to the intersectional structure and reflections on their maternal duties have changed considerably over time. Whereas the first-generation migrant mothers experienced profound economic hardship in their childrearing both before and after migration and encountered more economic, political, and technological constraints on migrant mothering, the new-generation migrant mothers benefited from a less oppressive migration context, economic development, and technological advancement, yet were influenced by a more demanding parenting discourse while mothering from

afar. Therefore, the first-generation migrant mothers prioritized economic support for their children's life endeavors as their main expression of maternal love and care and expected their children's achievements and upward social mobility to improve their families' socioeconomic status, whereas the new-generation migrant mothers rejected the social construction of inferiority imposed upon them and their children and tried their best to support their children's healthy development. Despite maternal ambivalence and anxiety reported by some mothers, most of the migrant mothers in both generations actively engaged in the meaning construction of mothering. The first-generation migrant mothers challenged traditional gendered childrearing in China by emphasizing their economic support for their children and associating mothering with breadwinning, like their international counterparts (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas and Choi 2015). The new-generation migrant mothers reflected on the parenting discourse in post-reform China through questioning the feasibility of raising all children to be perfect adults and arguing that raising happy, ordinary children is equally meaningful and honorable for mothers.

Echoing the literature of mothering in general and migrant mothering in particular (Jeremiah 2006; O'Reilly 2014; Parreñas and Choi 2015), my study provides further evidence for the constructed and fluid nature of mothering and for the positionality and agency of migrant women in performing maternal duties in an intersectional social structure. My research enriches the existing literature of migrant mothering by incorporating temporality into the discussion. The influences of temporality on migrant mothering are reflected in both transformations at intersected social structures and changes in personal maternal experiences over time. Examining these changes in a historically temporal framework helps researchers to capture the dynamic process of migrant mothering construction, identify key factors shaping this process, and delineate nuanced differences in maternal narratives and practices over time. Documenting the transition in migrant mothering within the same group of women also reveals the within-group diversity and complexity in maternity (Few-Demo 2014).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

I acknowledge several limitations of the present study. First, in addition to mother-child interactions and relationships, migrant mothering inevitably involves collaboration between mothers and other caregivers. Due to its focus, my study did not explore the following interesting issues, which offer new directions for future research: (a) how different generations of migrant mothers perceive their collaboration with migrant husbands and negotiate the gendered division of parenting labor at a distance, (b) how the two generations of migrant mothers work with grandparents to rear their children and the

differences reflected in their cooperation, and (c) the complex differences between the childrearing practices of migrant mothers with left-behind husbands and those with migrant husbands.

Second, although my study focuses on migrant mothers' voices and narratives to highlight their agency and subjective experiences, it is unclear whether their perceptions of good mothering are shared by their left-behind children and other caregivers. A multi-voice research design should enable future researchers to include the voices of migrant mothers, left-behind children, and other caregivers to explore how the meaning of good mothering is co-constructed by multiple family members.

Third, although the use of 1978 to distinguish between two generations of migrant mothers is generally reasonable and appropriate, it should be noted that the changes in maternal perceptions and practices between the two generations of migrant mothers occurred gradually rather than suddenly. Two migrant mothers born in 1977 (Guo and Lin) were categorized as first-generation migrant mothers largely because their mothering perceptions and practices more closely resembled those of the senior migrant mothers than their younger counterparts. This does not mean, however, that a 1-year age difference results in dramatic differences in migrant mothering. The findings and implications associated with these cases should be interpreted with caution.

Practice Implications

Mass rural-urban migration has been ongoing in China for decades. The long-term physical separation of migrant parents and their left-behind children makes childrearing a challenging task for many migrant families. Both academic scholarship and media reports have discussed the behavioral and psychological problems of left-behind children in China. Many researchers (e.g., Jia and Tian 2010; Liang et al. 2008; Wen and Lin 2012) have obtained quantitative data on left-behind children and argued that parents' migration makes children vulnerable victims who not only experience emotional suffering due to long-term parent-child separation, but also have lower self-esteem and more psychological and behavioral problems than their non-left-behind peers. Despite the undoubted value of these findings, parents are implicitly blamed and parents' voices are seldom heard. As Tan (2011) indicated, a stigmatized public image of migrant parents has been created by mass-media reports and other discussions on the problem of left-behind children in China. The public and mass media usually attribute the problems associated with left-behind children to the poor parental performance of migrant parents, especially mothers, who are described as irresponsible parents who abandon their children. Some migrant mothers have even been called the "stepmothers" of their biological children [qinsheng houma] (Tan 2011).

My study challenges the biased or stigmatized public image of migrant mothers and enriches academic and public understanding of left-behind children and migrant families by incorporating the voices of two generations of migrant mothers and offering detailed descriptions of their daily performance of maternal duties in a context of family separation. Despite acknowledging the ambivalent feelings of migrant mothers and the obstacles they face, my study focuses on uncovering migrant women's proactivity and agency in reflecting on and negotiating intersectional structures when mothering their children from a distance. In recognizing migrant women's capacity to construct their own narratives of good mothering and performing maternal duties, my study provides not only an active and responsible image of migrant mothers, but also new insights into the importance of collaborating with migrant parents for government organizations, nongovernmental organizations, teachers, and professional practitioners working on support and intervention programs for left-behind children. In documenting the changes in migrant mothers' maternal perceptions and practices over time, my study also draws attention to the dynamic nature of childrearing and suggests that support and intervention programs should consider the different needs of migrant mothers and their left-behind children in different periods.

Conclusions

How Chinese migrant women respond to and negotiate social, economic, and political obstacles to their fulfillment of maternal duties is an important topic of both migration and gender research. Although researchers (Dreby 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2005; Parreñas and Choi 2015) have acknowledged the diversity of migrant women's maternal experiences across cultures and societies, the findings of my study enrich the discussion by revealing changes in the maternal narratives and practices of two generations of migrant mothers. My study provides empirical evidence of the influence of temporality on the interplay between migration and mothering in a specific sociocultural context and reveals the fluidity and complexity of maternal experiences within a migrant group. A historically temporal perspective not only strengthens the feminist arguments for the ongoing construction of mothering, but also provides new directions for researchers to uncover changing intersectional oppressions and women's agency in negotiating and even challenging various forms of structural oppression.

Acknowledgements The present research was funded by an Early Career Scheme (HKBU 258513) from the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong. The author thanks the informants spending time answering the questions and their generosity of sharing their stories. The data

collection would not be completed without the assistance of Bi He, Ma Huan, Du Yi, Zhang Fengjing, Tang Ling, Chen Wei, Wang Kun, and Wu Dunxu.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Disclosure Statement The research was funded by an Early Career Scheme (HKBU 258513) from the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong.

The manuscript has not been published previously. The manuscript has not been submitted to other journals for simultaneous consideration.

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Research Involving Human Participants This research involved human participants. The human research ethical approval has been sought from the Committee on the Use of Human & Animal Subjects in Teaching & Research, Hong Kong Baptist University before commencement of the research project. The reference number of the human research ethical approval of this research is: HASC/12–13/0074.

Informed Consent The participation of the informants in this research is voluntary. Each participant was given a letter of consent which provided the information of the project, the rights of the participants, the confidentiality, and the compensation. The informed consent of the participants was sought before the interviews.

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