ORIGINAL ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION   IOM UN MIGRATION

Constructing children's psychological well-being: Sources of resilience for children left behind in Northeast China

Shuai Wang

Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

Correspondence
Shuai Wang, Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Colchester, UK.
Email: wangshuaiolivia@gmail.com

Abstract

Population mobility has become an inevitable trend of social transformation in contemporary China. Parental migration has changed family structure patterns and brought great uncertainty to the psychological well-being of left-behind children. By comparing left-behind children to children of non-migrants, this study examines the impact of parental migration on children's psychological well-being and the potential support of schools for children's resilience development along three dimensions: children's school belonging, teacher–student relationships and peer support. Using a mixed-method approach, this study draws on an original survey of children ($N = 605$) and in-depth interviews with children, parents, grandparents, and teachers ($N = 41$) in Hunchun City, Northeast China. Overall, maternal migration has a negative impact on children's psychological well-being. In addition to teacher–student relationships, school belonging and peer support significantly mitigate this negative impact; qualitative data further suggest that peer support distracts from, rather than offsets, children's poor psychological well-being associated with maternal migration.

INTRODUCTION

As China's urbanization and modernization accelerate, large numbers of people have joined the migration wave, as migration is often a family strategy to alleviate poverty. The latest data from China's seventh census show that as of 2020, the migrant population whose place of residence does not coincide with their domicile and who have been away from their domicile for more than 6 months reached 375.82 million, an increase of 69.73% over the 2010 census data (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2021). Migration not only affects individuals in the migration stream but also has a broad and profound impact on family members who remain back home. It is well established that parental migration can result in difficulties for parents to provide physical care, disrupting family structures and childcare arrangements, thus posing challenges to children's psychological well-being (Duque-Páramo, 2012). However, children are more resilient than expected (Cebotari & Mazzucato, 2016). The topic of children's agency has only recently come to the attention of scholars of migration studies, and while there is a growing literature discussing children's agency, much of it has focused on migrant children (e.g. Belloni, 2020; Thompson et al., 2019) rather than left-behind children (exceptions see Lam & Yeoh, 2019; Nazridod et al., 2021). In the Chinese context, most research on left-behind children has focused on risk factors associated with parental migration, while protective factors have been comparatively overlooked (e.g. Liang et al., 2017; Wang, 2017).

As of 2020, there are 26.74 million left-behind children in the nine-year compulsory education stage, including 12.90 million rural left-behind children and 13.84 million urban left-behind children, a striking number that exceeds rural left-behind children (NBS, 2021). Research on left-behind children in China has historically focused on rural left-behind children due to policy restrictions, poor living conditions and lack of resources, whereas urban left-behind children have long been understudied in China (e.g. Tong & Peng, 2016; Wang, 2017). Despite China's increasing population mobility, little is known about children left behind in urban areas as a consequence of parental migration.

To fill the gap, this study draws on quantitative and qualitative data obtained in 2019–2020 among children aged 9–15 in Hunchun City, Northeast China, with a focus on children's psychological well-being and resilience development. By comparing left-behind children with children of non-migrants, I investigate the association between parental migration and children's psychological well-being and the potential protective effect of schools on their psychological resilience in terms of school belonging, teacher–student relationships and peer support, to better understand how children in different contexts benefit or suffer from parental migration.

BACKGROUND

Parental migration and children's psychological well-being

Although a growing body of research focuses on the overall effect of parental migration on left-behind children's psychological well-being, much of it is pessimistic. Tomsa and Jenaro (2015), for example find significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression among children left behind in Romania compared to children of non-migrants. Adhikari et al. (2013) investigate stress among children left behind in Mexico using a mixed-method approach and find that children of migrants are more vulnerable to stress. In the Chinese context, multiple studies find that separation from migrant parents leads to children suffering from a range of psychological issues, such as depression, loneliness and low levels of life satisfaction (e.g. Liang et al., 2017; Wen & Lin, 2012). However, there exist studies arguing the opposite: Asis (2006), for instance, finds that left-behind children in the Philippines have better well-being outcomes than those of non-migrants. Similarly, a case study in Thailand finds that children of migrants report more positive assessments of well-being, such as higher levels of life satisfaction and more enjoyment at school (Jampaklay & Vapattanawong, 2013). One possible reason, they argue, is that children in such families have father-only migrating.

It is well established that the impact on children's psychological well-being varies by the gender of the migrant parent. Many existing studies suggest that the negative impact of maternal migration on children's psychological

CONSTRUCTING CHILDREN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: SOURCES
OF RESILIENCE FOR CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND IN NORTHEAST CHINA

INTERNATIONAL
MIGRATION

IOM
UN MIGRATION

3

well-being is greater than that of paternal migration, given mothers are often the primary caregivers in the household (Arlini et al., 2019; Lam & Yeoh, 2019). Parreñas (2005) finds that children in the Philippines are more likely to accept the migration of fathers than that of mothers, as fathers for children are expected to fulfil the role of breadwinner in the household, whereas the migration of mothers often results in children feeling abandoned. Similarly, Vanore's (2016) gender-specific analysis in Moldova reveals that left-behind children with mother-only migrating present more emotional symptoms compared to those with father-only migrating. Migrant fathers are often regarded as the breadwinner and authority of the family, and as such, paternal migration is more often associated with improving the economic conditions of the family, while the impact of paternal absence on children's psychological well-being has been side-lined in transnational family studies (e.g. Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2013). Recent research has criticized the generalization of migrant fathers as not caring for left-behind children (Chereni, 2015; Winters, 2014), and argued that they are increasingly involved in the emotional care of children (Peng, 2018). For instance, a study of paternal migration from Ghana to the Netherlands reveals that migrant fathers show a greater ideal of "involvement" in parenting while assuming responsibility for providing for their families – migrant fathers seek to develop an emotional connection with children and maintain an active role in children's psychological development (Poeze, 2019).

In post-reform China, along with accelerated urbanization, an increasing proportion of women have joined the migration trend, which has challenged the traditional division of labour in the household. Not only has the feminization of migration empowered migrant women to connect their role as primary caregivers to the breadwinner but migrant men are also increasingly involved in the emotional care of left-behind children (Peng, 2018). Given China's growing migration flows and the increased feminization of migration, it is unclear how migration further affects the gendered division of labour in left-behind families and how the gender of migrant parent influences left-behind children in different ways. Therefore, it is critical to locate children's psychological well-being within the diverse forms of parental migration.

Children's resilience and schools as sources

When faced with adversity, individuals can utilize a variety of resources to cope with adversity to protect their well-being and, through this adaptive process, to strengthen and enhance their ability to respond to adversity, which is, resilience (Masten, 2011). Despite the high risks, resilience can produce positive outcomes and provide the capability to persist in the face of threats and recover from trauma (Sewasew et al., 2017). Olwig (2003) argues that children's well-being does not necessarily depend on the availability of parental care. Although left-behind children experience separation from their parents, there are additional sources of resilience beyond receiving remittances from migrant parents, that is children still live within the familiar network of family and school (Cebotari & Mazzucato, 2016).

The ability of left-behind children to positively adapt to the challenges of parental migration depends on the capacity of their environmental systems to develop protective mechanisms against the challenges, and schools are considered an environment consisting of social interaction structures nested in a child-centred ecology (Hamilton et al., 2011). Schools are replete with conditions that promote children's resilience, especially in the absence of protective factors from other environments (Liu et al., 2020). For instance, Henderson (2012) indicates that educators at school can contribute to children's resilience development by providing supportive settings and high expectations. Thus, whether and how schools function in children's resilience development is of interest in the research exploring the mechanisms underlying the impact of parental migration on children's psychological well-being. I will introduce schools as support for children's resilience development in the context of parental migration in terms of the following three potential school-related protective factors.

Children's school belonging

Children's school belonging is defined as the sense that children feel accepted, respected and encouraged by others in the school environment and that they are important members of school life and activities (Goodenow, 1993). It is

an important indicator of the quality of children's school life and experiences, linked positively to their well-being and life satisfaction (Huang, 2020). Liu et al. (2020) find a significant negative correlation between school belonging and children's psychological well-being, suggesting children with greater school belonging are less likely to have psychological problems. Therefore, I hypothesize that

Hypothesis 1 *High levels of school belonging weaken the negative association between parental migration and children's psychological well-being.*

Teacher–student relationships

Teacher–student relationships are interpersonal connections between teachers and students, which are an essential part of children's school experience. The impact of teacher–student relationships on children is multifaceted and has a profound impact on their learning, cognitive, emotional, and social development (Davis, 2003). Supportive teacher–student relationships are often associated with beneficial socio-emotional outcomes, such as reductions in suicidal ideation and emotional distress (Benjamin, 2016).

Research has further found that children in disadvantaged conditions are more likely to be affected by teacher–student relationships: children who have better relationships with teachers have greater access to necessary guidance and support, which is particularly crucial for children who face challenges in accessing support due to their vulnerable situations (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). In the case of left-behind children, the challenges posed by parental absence may make supportive teacher–student relationships even more important for their psychological well-being. Therefore, I hypothesize that

Hypothesis 2 *Good teacher–student relationships mitigate the negative correlation between parental migration and children's psychological well-being.*

Peer support

As children grow older, they become less dependent on their parents, and peers become more important in their socialization. Harris (2009) claims that rather than focusing on parents, a better understanding of children's development over time can be gained by considering peers, those with whom they are generally close, and those with whom they identify the most. Good peer relationships are positively associated with a range of psychological well-being indicators, such as the ability to cope with adversity, basic trust in people, and higher self-esteem (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). However, unfavourable peer relationships can lead to negative social interactions and cognitive problems that hinder children's psychological development (Van Zalk et al., 2011). Prolonged separation from parents due to migration forces children into premature independence from parents, and peers can be an important resource for children's social connections and support in this adverse environment (Wen & Lin, 2012). Therefore, I hypothesize that

Hypothesis 3 *Strong peer support improves children's poor psychological well-being associated with parental migration.*

THE CONTEXT OF HUNCHUN CITY

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Hunchun City, Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, Jilin Province, China. By 2020, the registered population of Hunchun was 239,359. Among which, 64.95% of the population is Han Chinese and 26.31% is ethnic Korean Chinese (People's Government of Hunchun Municipality, 2020). The ethnic

Korean minority is an ethnic group with a long history of migration. From the 1860s onwards, increasing numbers of people migrated from the Korean Peninsula to China as a result of war, famine and political changes. Gradually, they settled in northeastern China, developing the ethnic Korean minority – one of the 56 ethnic groups in China. With the history of migration from the Korean peninsula, the ethnic Korean minority in China maintains a common language with South Korea, and this, along with the wage gap due to the high exchange rate between the currencies of China and South Korea, resulted in a great number of ethnic Koreans migrating to South Korea rather than to other regions of China. As of 2020, there are 708,000 ethnic Korean Chinese living in South Korea (NBS, 2021).

Consequently, a significant proportion of children left behind in Hunchun are affected by parents' international migration – a longer duration of parent–child separation and less frequency of parent–child reunification than domestic migration. This separation may lead to a significant reduction in parental input and more disruptions in the children's psychological well-being. Hunchun, as a city with a concentrated ethnic Korean population, therefore, provides an opportunity to focus on left-behind children in the context of high population mobility and a unique culture composed of the Han majority and ethnic Korean minority in an urban setting.

DATA AND METHODS

This study was conducted in 2019–2020 in four schools (one primary school and three secondary schools) in Hunchun City. Based on the total number of students in primary and secondary schools in Hunchun, and taking into account the limitations of the fieldwork, 10% of the students – approximately 1000 – were selected through convenience sampling. The questionnaire was piloted in November 2019 and amended; 527 questionnaires for children in the ethnic Korean schools and 532 for children in the Han schools were distributed afterward. A total of 980 questionnaires were collected, of which 933 were considered valid after data cleaning. The response rate of the questionnaires is 92.54%, with a valid response rate of 88.10%. After removing observations with missing values of variables, the final sample size of this study is 605.

The qualitative interviews in this study are semi-structured. A total of 41 interviews were conducted, including 18 interviews with children, 13 with teachers, 7 with children's parents and 3 with left-behind children's grandparents. The selection of children as interviewees was based on their parents' migrating status, which the head teachers mostly provided. Head teachers were first considered interviewees for the teacher interviews, and other teachers were also included. Interviews with parents and grandparents were conducted with the help of the children (with the school's consent). Interviews with children were conducted during break times, and each interview lasted approximately 30 min. Interviews with teachers ranged 1–1.5 h, and interviews with parents and grandparents lasted 40 min–1 h each.

This study employs triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data to increase the validity of the findings and to further interpret the underlying mechanisms. Given that the survey in this study is cross-sectional and prone to endogeneity and reverse causality when analysing the association between variables, qualitative data contribute to a better understanding of the direction of impact.

VARIABLES AND MEASURES

The dependent variable children's psychological well-being is measured by a depression scale – 6 items asking children whether they had any of the following feelings in the past 7 days: feeling depressed; feeling that life is meaningless; feeling nervous and anxious; feeling restless or fidgety; feeling hopeless; and feeling that everything is difficult to deal with. This scale draws on the China Education Panel Survey (CEPS) – a large-scale, nationally representative, longitudinal survey of students' education in grades 7–9, which has been widely used in Chinese academia to measure children's depression (e.g. Liu et al., 2020). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (5) is used

for each question and then summed up. The higher the score, the more depressed children feel. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this scale is 0.9131 (>0.8), suggesting high internal consistency.

The main independent variable parental migration is a 4-category variable (children of non-migrants, children with mother-only migrating, children with father-only migrating and children with both parents migrating), which is measured by three successive questions: (1) "Are any of your parents working out of your hometown?" (2) if yes, "How long has your mother been working outside?" and (3) if yes, "How long has your father been working outside?." Children who reported that their mother or father worked outside the hometown for at least 6 months are recorded as having mother, father or both parents migrating. Children with deceased parent(s) are excluded. For children with separated parents, this study focuses on the parent with custody.

Children's school belonging is measured by the question "I feel I am part of the class," the response is based on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree).

Teacher–student relationships are measured by two sets of indicators. (i) teacher's attitude towards children, constructed by 3 items using exploratory factor analysis that ask children how often the head teacher did the following things in the past 12 months – asking me about my life; talking to my guardians about my study; praising me in class (never or almost never, several times a year, several times a month, several times a week). Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude of teachers towards children. (ii) children's satisfaction with teacher–student relationships, measured by the question "How satisfied are you with the relationship with your head teacher?" with a 5-point Likert scale as response categories ranging from "strongly dissatisfied" (1) to "strongly satisfied" (5).

Three indicators are used to measure peer support: (i) number of best friends: "How many best friends do you have at school?" (none, 1–3, 4–7, 8 or more). (ii) closeness with classmates: "how close are you with your classmates?" (not at all close, not that close, neither not close nor close, somewhat close, and very close), and (iii) satisfaction with peer relationships: "How satisfied are you with the relationship with peers at school?" (strongly dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neutral, satisfied, strongly satisfied).

I control for the socio-demographic variables, including the child's gender, age, grade, number of siblings, ethnicity and mother's and father's education levels. Descriptive statistics for all variables are shown in Table 1.

ANALYSIS

I first estimate models with no predictors for children's depression other than parental migration, and then gradually add controls. Next, I include each school-related factor as the main effect and then as interactions with parental migration to test whether they moderate the effect of parental migration on children's depression.

RESULTS

Quantitative results

In Table 1, children with mother-only migrating have higher depression scores than the other three groups. In addition, left-behind children generally have a lower sense of school belonging than children of non-migrants, while similar to or even more positive than children of non-migrants in terms of peer support.

Table 2 illustrates the models of depression scores among children with different types of parental migration. Model 1 shows no significant difference in depression scores between left-behind children and children of non-migrants, regardless of parental migration type. In Model 2, after adding the socio-demographic factors, children with mother-only migrating have significantly higher depression scores than children of non-migrants, while children with father-only or both parents migrating show no difference. Model 2 is used as the base model specification for all subsequent analyses.

This preliminary analysis suggests that, on average, left-behind children do not experience more depression than children of non-migrants, with the exception of children with mother-only migrating. However, these average effects

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for the variables in the sample

	No parents away	Mother away	Father away	Both parents away
	Mean/ percentage (SD)	Mean/ percentage (SD)	Mean/ percentage (SD)	Mean/ percentage (SD)
Child's depression scores	11.433	13.552	11.183	11.118
	(5.568)	(6.983)	(5.269)	(5.687)
Child's age	13.322	12.828	12.992	13.071
	(0.955)	(1.311)	(1.452)	(1.334)
Child's gender				
Boy (%)	43.05	37.93	39.17	48.24
Girl (%)	56.95	62.07	60.83	51.76
Child's grade				
5 (%)	4.09	20.69	19.17	14.12
7 (%)	10.35	24.14	20.83	28.24
8 (%)	74.66	41.38	41.67	42.35
9 (%)	10.9	13.79	18.33	15.29
The number of siblings				
No siblings (%)	52.04	65.52	57.5	55.29
1 (%)	44.14	31.03	40	42.35
2 or above (%)	3.81	3.45	2.5	2.35
Child's nationality				
Han (%)	75.75	20.69	12.5	14.12
Ethnic Korean (%)	24.25	79.31	87.5	85.88
Mother's highest education level				
Middle school or below (%)	58.04	41.38	38.33	41.18
Technical middle/high school (%)	32.7	51.72	51.67	44.71
College or above (%)	9.26	6.9	10	14.12
Father's highest education level				
Middle school or below (%)	51.23	37.93	38.33	38.82
Technical middle/high school (%)	39.51	55.17	51.67	47.06
College or above (%)	9.26	6.9	10	14.12
Teacher's attitude	0.082	−0.190	−0.167	−0.104
	(1.025)	(0.881)	(0.959)	(0.961)
I feel I'm part of the class				
Strongly disagree (%)	2.45		3.33	2.35
Disagree (%)	1.09	3.45		2.35
Neutral (%)	5.99	3.45	10.83	3.53
Agree (%)	14.71	24.14	22.5	21.18
Strongly agree (%)	75.75	68.97	63.33	70.59
Satisfaction with teacher–student relationships				
Strongly dissatisfied (%)	2.18	6.9	4.17	3.53
Dissatisfied (%)	1.63	6.9	3.33	2.35
Neutral (%)	21.25	6.9	23.33	22.35

(Continues)

T A B L E 1   (Continued)

	No parents away	Mother away	Father away	Both parents away
	Mean/ percentage (SD)	Mean/ percentage (SD)	Mean/ percentage (SD)	Mean/ percentage (SD)
Satisfied (%)	34.6	27.59	31.67	36.47
Strongly satisfied (%)	40.33	51.72	37.5	35.29
Number of best friends				
None (%)	1.09		0.83	
1–3 (%)	19.07	10.34	19.17	27.06
4–7 (%)	27.52	41.38	23.33	24.71
8 or more (%)	52.32	48.28	56.67	48.24
Closeness with classmates				
Not at all close (%)	1.63	3.45		1.18
Not that close (%)	3		2.5	1.18
Neither not close nor close (%)	13.9	10.34	8.33	15.29
Somewhat close (%)	35.15	20.69	30.83	35.29
Very close (%)	46.32	65.52	58.33	47.06
Satisfaction with peer relationships				
Strongly dissatisfied (%)	2.18	3.45	2.5	4.71
Dissatisfied (%)	2.45	10.34	1.67	1.18
Neutral (%)	11.72		10	14.12
Satisfied (%)	27.79	20.69	33.33	29.41
Strongly satisfied (%)	55.86	65.52	52.5	50.59
Observations	368	29	123	85

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses.

may conceal differential associations based on the potential resilience factors, and it is therefore worth investigating the interactions of parental migration and school support measures.

To examine whether measures of school support play a moderating role between parental migration and children's depression, I first include them one by one in the base model. Results indicate that almost all measures of school support are negatively associated with children's depression and therefore have a protective effect on left-behind children's psychological well-being (See Table 3).

In Table 4, I interact these school support measures with parental migration to examine whether the association between parental migration and children's depression is lower among left-behind children with greater school support. Results show that, overall, the interaction effects are consistently larger in the case of maternal migration than in other parental migration types, suggesting that school support is a particularly important source of resilience for children with mother-only migrating. Furthermore, in addition to teacher–student relationships, strong school belonging and peer support significantly buffer the negative association between maternal migration and children's depression.

Qualitative results

Overall, the in-depth interviews corroborate the main quantitative findings. Specifically, maternal migration is negatively associated with children's psychological well-being among the different types of parental migration. Findings further demonstrate that schools can provide a certain level of support for children's resilience development to

CONSTRUCTING CHILDREN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: SOURCES
OF RESILIENCE FOR CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND IN NORTHEAST CHINA

INTERNATIONAL
MIGRATION

IOM
UN MIGRATION

9

TABLE 2 Estimated model on the psychological well-being of left-behind children [higher depression scores indicate poorer mental health]

Parental migration (Ref: No parents away)	Model 1	Model 2
Child with mother away	2.082	2.690*
	(1.084)	(1.100)
Child with father away	−0.381	0.0608
	(0.585)	(0.674)
Child with both parents away	−0.352	0.128
	(0.676)	(0.742)
Child is girl		1.085*
		(0.456)
Child's age		0.148
		(0.345)
Child's grade		1.129**
		(0.402)
Number of siblings		0.295
		(0.398)
Child is ethnic Korean		0.381
		(0.588)
Mother's highest education level		−0.0429
		(0.509)
Father's highest education level		−0.604
		(0.512)
Constant	11.47***	0.753
	(0.293)	(2.946)
Observations	605	605
R-squared	0.008	0.079

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; p-values ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

respond to the challenges of maternal migration, that is school belonging and peer support, in addition to teacher–student relationships, can significantly moderate this negative association.

As discussed earlier, with the increasing feminization of migration, more women have joined the migration trend. However, this has not shaken the social structure of gender and the traditional concepts of the gendered division of labour, women are expected to accomplish double duty by balancing work and household responsibilities (Lam & Yeoh, 2019). The gendered division of labour contains not only women's responsibilities but also the expectations regarding the role of women as wives and mothers (see Parke, 2013). That is, the traditional division of care labour expects more caring from mothers, which increases children's need for emotional support from mothers, and thus not surprisingly, this study finds that maternal migration has a significant negative impact on children's psychological well-being rather than paternal migration, which is consistent with other studies in Asian societies (e.g. Xu et al., 2019).

In line with extant research on the effect of school belonging on children's psychological development (Wang, 2017), findings suggest that children's school belonging significantly buffers the negative effect of maternal migration on children's psychological well-being. High levels of school belonging enhance children's identification with school values and motivate children to devote more time and energy to school-related activities, which in turn provides them with great satisfaction. Migration presents challenges for parents to provide adequate emotional support to children, while strong school belonging can offer additional support. Interviews with children were relevant in this regard:

TABLE 3 Estimated model on the psychological well-being of left-behind children – measures of school support included [higher depression scores indicate poorer mental health]

Parental migration (Ref: No parents away)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Child with mother away	2.767**	2.513*	2.428*	2.702*	2.850**	2.603*
	(1.056)	(1.096)	(1.062)	(1.100)	(1.084)	(1.066)
Child with father away	−0.0424	−0.0822	−0.360	0.0689	0.220	−0.0132
	(0.648)	(0.673)	(0.654)	(0.675)	(0.666)	(0.654)
Child with both parents away	0.240	0.00435	−0.245	0.105	0.0916	−0.120
	(0.713)	(0.740)	(0.719)	(0.743)	(0.732)	(0.721)
School belonging	−1.797***					
	(0.252)					
Teacher's attitude		−0.591**				
		(0.223)				
Satisfaction with teacher–student relationships			−1.525***			
			(0.227)			
Number of best friends				−0.200		
				(0.279)		
Closeness with classmates					−1.095***	
					(0.254)	
Satisfaction with peer relationships						−1.446***
						(0.233)
Constant	3.366	1.129	4.395	0.944	1.521	2.501
	(2.853)	(2.935)	(2.894)	(2.960)	(2.909)	(2.871)
Observations	605	605	605	605	605	605
R-squared	0.152	0.090	0.144	0.080	0.107	0.136

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; *p*-values ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; Models also control for gender, age, grade, numbers of siblings, ethnicity, mother's highest education level, and father's highest education level.

> We [classmates and I] always play games together after class. Sometimes I feel uneasy after my mom calls me and being with my classmates makes me feel safe.
> (Informant 0403, student in the ethnic Korean primary school with both parents working in South Korea)

Given that parents migrate primarily to provide a better educational environment for children (Mahapatro et al., 2017), daily conversations between migrant mothers and children are often study-related, which leads to a subconscious transfer of the notion of the importance of study to children in relation to mothers' decision to migrate, which may serve as another source of children's focus on school-related activities to distract from the negative emotions associated with maternal migration:

> My mother always tells me that she is working in South Korea for me and that I need to study harder so that we wouldn't be separated for nothing.
> (Informant 0607, student in the ethnic Korean secondary school with both parents working in South Korea)

> I always told him to study hard so that his mother would come back home sooner.
> (Informant 4001, grandfather of a 14-year-old boy with parents working in South Korea)

T A B L E 4   Estimated model on the psychological well-being of left-behind children – Parental migration interactions with measures of school support [higher depression scores indicate poorer mental health]

Parental migration (Ref: No parents away)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Child with mother away	17.72**	2.254*	2.485*	3.074**	3.308**	2.614*
	(6.439)	(1.119)	(1.060)	(1.104)	(1.087)	(1.063)
Child with father away	−4.348	−0.0395	−0.431	0.0895	0.223	−0.0836
	(2.777)	(0.677)	(0.654)	(0.672)	(0.667)	(0.652)
Child with both parents away	−2.111	−0.0122	−0.259	0.125	0.00383	−0.109
	(3.436)	(0.742)	(0.718)	(0.742)	(0.725)	(0.721)
School belonging	−1.979***					
	(0.322)					
Mother away × school belonging	−3.244*					
	(1.390)					
Father away × school belonging	0.981					
	(0.607)					
Both parents away × school belonging	0.508					
	(0.740)					
Teacher's attitude		−0.563*				
		(0.277)				
Mother away × teacher's attitude		−1.405				
		(1.202)				
Father away × teacher's attitude		0.248				
		(0.577)				
Both parents away × teacher's attitude		−0.212				
		(0.679)				
Satisfaction with teacher–student relationships			−1.461***			
			(0.295)			
Mother away × satisfaction with teacher–student relationships			−1.595			
			(0.861)			
Father away × satisfaction with teacher–student relationships			−0.260			
			(0.548)			
Both parents away × satisfaction with teacher–student relationships			0.719			
			(0.651)			
Number of best friends				−0.0609		
				(0.353)		
Mother away × number of best friends				−4.383**		
				(1.575)		
Father away × number of best friends				0.0660		
				(0.697)		
Both parents away × number of best friends				−0.167		
				(0.783)		

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Parental migration (Ref: No parents away)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Closeness with classmates					−0.536	
					(0.308)	
Mother away × closeness with classmates					−3.645**	
					(1.105)	
Father away × closeness with classmates					−1.012	
					(0.709)	
Both parents away × closeness with classmates					−1.575*	
					(0.756)	
Satisfaction with peer relationships						−1.378***
						(0.299)
Mother away × satisfaction with peer relationships						−1.975*
						(0.923)
Father away × satisfaction with peer relationships						−0.456
						(0.614)
Both parents away × satisfaction with peer relationships						0.831
						(0.629)
Constant	13.16***	1.247	4.230	0.871	1.953	2.293
	(3.210)	(2.957)	(2.918)	(2.952)	(2.890)	(2.861)
Observations	605	605	605	605	605	605
R-squared	0.157	0.093	0.152	0.092	0.129	0.147

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; *p*-values ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; Models also control for gender, age, grade, numbers of siblings, ethnicity, mother's highest education level, and father's highest education level.

Thus, good school performance can be perceived by children as a means of reunification with their migrant mothers, and even as a reward for mothers' migration.

Interestingly, and inconsistent with existing studies (e.g. Baker, 2006), findings in this study suggest that teacher–student relationships do not moderate the association between parental migration and children's psychological well-being, one possible reason is that the effect of teacher–student relationships on children's psychological well-being is influenced by different cultural contexts.

Influenced by Confucianism, the profession of teaching has always occupied a highly respected social status in China. Similar to the traditional Chinese value of "respect for seniority," teachers often have a certain authority in the education system and are the initial authority for children's social integration (Cheng, 2018). The old Chinese proverb, "Once a teacher, always a father," demonstrates the importance of teachers as educators, and indirectly reflects teacher–student relationships in the Chinese context: respect your teachers as much as you respect your father, even if they teach you for 1 day. As a result, children growing up in such a cultural context are more likely to be in awe and fear of teachers, which in turn hinders the support that teacher–student relationships for children's development:

> They hardly come to me to share their feelings and they are somehow afraid of me … I have to (show them my authority), because if I don't, they won't follow the rules I set for the class, and they won't take my words seriously.
>
> (Informant 1603, head teacher in the ethnic Korean secondary school)

> (Do you share your feelings with your head teacher?) No, none of us do … I feel scared to talk to her
> [the teacher] in person because most of the time she asks me to meet in the office just to discuss what
> I did wrong in class.
> (Informant 0602, student in the ethnic Korean secondary school with mother working in South Korea)

Furthermore, given that most children keep their distance from teachers, those who are close to teachers can easily be excluded from the group and thus rejected by peers as "outsiders" or even stigmatized as "snitches" in class, thus making it necessary for children to consider the pros and cons first under peer pressure, as a teacher mentioned:

> The other day, she [a student] came to my office crying and said that many classmates had stopped
> talking to her because they said it was her who told me about the secret couples in my class.
> (Informant 1802, teacher in the Han secondary school)

Overall, influenced by the traditional Chinese culture, teacher–student relationships tend to be more of a manager-managed relationship, and thus children may feel more awe than closeness to their teachers, which interprets the lack of teacher–student relationships to actively support left-behind children's psychological development.

Consistent with research suggesting that children's ability to cope with challenges and adversity is greatly affected by their interactions with peers (e.g. Wen & Lin, 2012), results in this study indicate that number of best friends, children's closeness with classmates, and satisfaction with peer relationships mitigate the negative relationship between maternal migration and children's psychological well-being, suggesting that peer support plays an important role in children's psychological resilience. Prolonged mother–child separation can result in mothers' lack of timely and effective emotional support for children in their daily lives, which in turn makes children more inclined to choose friends as their emotional support to compensate for this loss. Having peers to share daily life with helps children cope with the various stressors they encounter in life:

> My friend and I have similar hobbies and we always have so many things to talk about … She is always
> able to make me laugh when I am in a bad mood.
> (Informant 0404, student in the ethnic Korean primary school with both parents working in South Korea)

> She always shares her little secrets with friends, neither I nor her parents know about them.
> (Informant 4003, grandmother of a 13-year-old girl whose parents work in South Korea)

Adolescence is a period accompanied by physical and psychological changes that gradually provide children with a sense of adulthood, which may lead to an emotional disconnection between children and mothers, coupled with the additional challenges that mother–child separation poses to mother–child interactions in daily life, thus creating barriers for children to share emotions with mothers:

> I'm mature enough to deal with problems on my own, not to mention that my mom is so far away from
> me that even if I tell her, I still have to deal with them by myself … She doesn't have much available
> time to talk to me about this anyway.
> (Informant 0601, student in the ethnic Korean secondary school with both parents working in South
> Korea)

As discussed earlier, children's education as one of the main motivations for parental migration can predispose mother–child communication to study-related conversations and many migrant mothers motivate their children to study hard by constantly instilling in them the hardships of migration, which constructs children's perspective on the hardships of mothers' lives at their destinations and leads to a reluctance for children to express their emotions to

mothers to avoid creating more worries for mothers. As children grow older, they are likely to seek less emotional support from mothers and instead become more empathetic to mothers' hardships and more focused on mothers' emotional needs, as shown in the interviews with children:

> It's hard enough for her just trying to provide a better life for me ... When my mom asks about my daily life, I always say it's going well, even if it's not.
>
> (Informant 0605, student in the ethnic Korean secondary school with both parents working in South Korea)

However, I found that the topics left-behind children share with peers are selective. Although they are willing to share daily lives with peers, many participants express that they rarely share family issues with peers, especially emotions related to maternal absence. This suggests that despite good peer relationships, the negative emotions associated with maternal migration are ultimately handled by left-behind children themselves. Fortunately, the quantitative results indicate that, despite not sharing such feelings directly, the daily companionship and support of peers are sufficient to distract left-behind children from the depressive emotions brought about by maternal absence:

> Usually, I don't tell my friends how much I miss my mom, it is embarrassing to talk about such issues. I don't think they would understand, I don't think anyone would ... I just keep them to myself, sometimes I listen to music or do whatever I like until I feel better.
>
> (Informant 0602, student in the ethnic Korean secondary school with mother working in South Korea)

> I feel like telling them [friends] I miss my mom is showing them I'm weak, and I hate being seen that way.
>
> (Informant 0803, student in the Han secondary school with both parents working in another city)

Thus, it is evident that peer support can alleviate children's negative emotions brought on by maternal migration through daily interactions and companionship, yet qualitative data further address the underlying mechanisms by which peer support serves more to assist children in distracting from the poor psychological well-being brought on by maternal migration rather than offsetting it.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Using a mix-methods approach, this study has examined the impact of parental migration on left-behind children's psychological well-being and school support for children's resilience development in this context by comparing left-behind children with children of non-migrants. Overall, the findings suggest that among the different types of parental migration, maternal migration has a significant negative impact on children's psychological well-being. Comparatively, inconsistent with the literature that emphasizes the increasing input of migrant fathers into children's emotional needs and the growing impact on children's psychological well-being (e.g. Shochet & Smith, 2014), there is no evidence of an association between paternal migration and children's psychological well-being. Thus, despite the increasing feminization of migration and the challenges to gender norms, findings suggest that mothers, as traditional primary caregivers of children, remain dominant in children's psychological development, providing additional evidence for the resilience of the gendered division of labour (Arlini et al., 2019; Peng, 2020).

However, left-behind children can adapt to the changes in family structure brought about by parental migration, taking on an alternative arrangement for the overall benefit of the family – they can invest in coping strategies using their social networks to assist them in responding to the challenges, which resonates with the findings by Lam and Yeoh (2019) in Southeast Asia and Mazzucato et al. (2015) in Africa. Specifically, findings in this study support the

CONSTRUCTING CHILDREN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: SOURCES
OF RESILIENCE FOR CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND IN NORTHEAST CHINA

INTERNATIONAL
MIGRATION

IOM
UN MIGRATION

15

first and third hypotheses regarding school support for left-behind children's resilience development: apart from teacher–student relationships, children's school belonging and peer support can significantly buffer the negative relationship between maternal migration and children's psychological well-being. However, in line with research suggesting that peer support cannot replace low levels of parental support for children's psychological development (Buchanan & Bowen, 2008), the qualitative findings further indicate that left-behind children tend to selectively share their experiences and emotions with peers – they avoid addressing family issues, especially the topics linked to maternal absence, providing additional evidence for the ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999) that parental migration imposes on left-behind children. In other words, the negative impact of parental migration, especially maternal migration on children's psychological well-being cannot be compensated for by peer support despite its important role in children's resilience development.

Interestingly, this study has not found any moderating effect of teacher–student relationships on the association between parental migration and children's psychological well-being. One possible reason is that teachers in the Chinese context are more of a symbol of authority than mere mentors who deliver knowledge, which creates an invisible barrier between children and teachers that discourages children from approaching teachers for support.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of schools as a protective environment for children's resilience development when faced with adverse conditions associated with parental migration, especially maternal migration, and on the other hand, indicates that left-behind children can use their social networks to shield themselves from poor psychological well-being associated with parental absence, providing additional evidence for children's agency. However, in line with the findings of Cebotari (2018) on children's resilience and vulnerability in the Ethiopian context, this study argues that children's resilience does not negate their vulnerability as the findings further show that schools do pose a degree of support for children's psychological resilience development under the challenging conditions of parental migration, but school support cannot replace the presence of parents, especially mothers, in children's development due to various constraints. At the policy level, it is necessary for the government to take effective measures to coordinate and collaborate with families and schools – to strengthen the responsibility of migrant parents in children's psychological development through the adoption of regulations and guidance, and to increase the investment in psychological education in schools, with emphasis on psychological counselling for children.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/imig.13113.

ORCID

Shuai Wang https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2841-6289

REFERENCES

Adhikari, R., Jampaklay, A., Chamratrithirong, A., Richter, K., Pattaravanich, U. & Vapattanawong, P. (2013) The impact of parental migration on the mental health of children left behind. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 16, 781–789.
Arlini, S.M., Yeoh, B., Yen, K.C. & Graham, E. (2019) Parental migration and the educational enrolment of left-behind children: evidence from rural Ponorogo, Indonesia. *Asian Population Studies*, 15, 190–208.

Asis, M.M.B. (2006) Living with migration: experiences of left-behind children in the Philippines. *Asian Population Studies*, 2, 45–67.

Baker, J.A. (2006) Contributions of teacher-child relationships to positive school adjustment during elementary school. *Journal of School Psychology*, 44, 211–229.

Belloni, M. (2020) Family project or individual choice? Exploring Agency in Young Eritreans' migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46, 336–353.

Benjamin, M. (2016) Teacher and parent influence on childhood learning outcomes. In: *Dissertation abstracts international section a: humanities and social sciences*. Minneapolis, MN: Walden University.

Boss, P. (1999) *Ambiguous loss: learning to live with unresolved grief*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Buchanan, R.L. & Bowen, G.L. (2008) In the context of adult support: the influence of peer support on the psychological wellbeing of middle-school students. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 25, 397–407.

Cebotari, V. (2018) Transnational migration, gender and educational development of children in Tajikistan. *Global Networks*, 18, 564–588.

Cebotari, V. & Mazzucato, V. (2016) Educational performance of children of migrant parents in Ghana, Nigeria and Angola. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42, 834–856.

Cheng, X.Q. (2018) Review and reflection on metaphor of the traditional teacher-student relationships. *Research in Teaching*, 41, 87–90.

Chereni, A. (2015) Fathering and gender transformations in Zimbabwean transnational families. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 16. https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-16.2.2248

Davis, H.A. (2003) Conceptualizing the role and influence of student-teacher relationships on Children's social and cognitive development. *Educational Psychologist*, 38, 207–234.

Duque-Páramo, C.M. (2012) Parental migration in Colombia: Children's voices in national and international perspectives. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 17, 472–492.

Goodenow, C. (1993) The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, 30, 79–90.

Hamilton, H.A., Marshall, L., Rummens, L.A., Fenta, H. & Simich, L. (2011) Immigrant Parents' perceptions of school environment and Children's mental health and behaviour. *Journal of School Health*, 81, 313–319.

Hamre, B.K. & Pianta, R.C. (2005) Can instructional and emotional support in the first-grade classroom make a difference for children at risk of school failure? *Child Development*, 76, 949–967.

Harris, J. (2009) *The nurture assumption: why children turn out the way they do*. New York: Free Press.

Henderson, N. (2012) *Resilience in schools and curriculum design*. New York: Springer.

Huang, L. (2020) Peer victimization, teacher unfairness, and adolescent life satisfaction: the mediating roles of sense of belonging to school and schoolwork-related anxiety. *School Mental Health*, 12, 556–566.

Jampaklay, A. & Vapattanawong, P. (2013) The subjective well-being of children in transnational and non-migrant households: evidence from Thailand. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 22, 377–400.

Johnson, D.W. & Johnson, R.T. (2009) An Educational Psychology success story: social interdependence theory and cooperative learning. *Educational Researcher*, 38, 365–379.

Lam, T. & Yeoh, B.S.A. (2019) Parental migration and disruptions in everyday life: reactions of left-behind children in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45, 3085–3104.

Liang, Y., Wang, L. & Rui, G. (2017) Depression among left-behind children in China. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 22, 1897–1905.

Liu, J.K., He, X.B., He, G.Y. & Zhang, Y.L. (2020) Parent involvement, school integration, and mental health of peasant Workers' children: evidence from CEPS (2013-2014). *China Youth Study*, 3, 39–48.

Mahapatro, S.R., Bailey, A., James, K.S. & Hutter, I. (2017) Remittances and household expenditure patterns in India and selected states. *Migration and Development*, 6, 83–101.

Masten, A.S. (2011) Resilience in children threatened by extreme adversity: frameworks for research, practice, and transnational synergy. *Development and Psychopathology*, 23, 493–506.

Mazzucato, V., Schans, D., Caarls, K. & Beauchemin, C. (2015) Transnational families between Africa and Europe. *International Migration Review*, 49, 142–172.

National Bureau of Statistics. (2021) The 7th National Census Bulletin (No.7). Available from: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/202106/t20210628_1818826.html. [Accessed: 11 May 2021]

Nazridod, S., Pereira, C.P.D.C.P. & Guerreiro, M.D.D.H. (2021) Adolescents who stay, parents who migrate: gender inequalities, resilience and coping strategies in Tajikistan. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47, 1613–1630.

Olwig, K.F. (2003) *Children's places of belonging in immigrant families of Caribbean Background*. London: Routledge.

Palenga-Möllenbeck, E. (2013) Care chains in eastern and Central Europe: male and female domestic work at the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity. *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, 11, 364–383.

Parke, R.D. (2013) Gender differences and similarities in parental behaviour. In: Wilcox, B. & Kline, K. (Eds.) *Gender and parenthood: biological and social scientific perspectives*. New York: Columbia University.

Parreñas, R.S. (2005) *Children of global migration: transnational families and gendered woes*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Peng, Y.N. (2018) Migrant mothering in transition: a qualitative study of the maternal narratives and practices of two generations of rural-urban migrant mothers in southern China. *Sex Roles*, 79, 16–35.

Peng, Y.N. (2020) Bringing children to the cities: gendered migrant parenting and the family dynamics of rural-urban migrants in China. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46, 1460–1477.

People's Government of Hunchun Municipality. (2020) Xxxx. Available from: https://baike.baidu.com/reference/977418/4417fhU1vqKNMmiaP8PdwEA6c9Up9UAjBE0E0t2B1N0IWcf4rJ2_dduSlKYTNIi7H0mizBSTVwOqdeChiItnB-6LbIq3TA [Accessed 29 April 2020]

Poeze, M. (2019) Beyond breadwinning: Ghanaian transnational fathering in The Netherlands. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45, 3065–3084.

Sewasew, D., Braun-Lewensohn, O. & Kassa, E. (2017) The contribution of Guardian care and peer support for psychological resilience among orphaned adolescents in Ethiopia. *Contemporary Social Science*, 12, 175–188.

Shochet, I.M. & Smith, C.L. (2014) A prospective study investigating the links among classroom environment, school connectedness, and depressive symptoms in adolescents. *Psychology in the Schools*, 51, 480–492.

Thompson, A., Torres, M.R., Swanson, K., Blue, A.S. & Hernández, M.O. (2019) Re-conceptualising agency in migrant children from central America and Mexico. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45, 235–252.

Tomsa, R. & Jenaro, C. (2015) Children left behind in Romania: anxiety and predictor variables. *Psychological Reports*, 116, 485–512.

Tong, X.L. & Peng, H.M. (2016) A study of urban Children's resilience restructuring after separation from parents - based on baseline findings from the China education tracking survey 2013-2014. *Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 5, 148–156.

van Zalk, N., van Zalk, M., Kerr, M. & Stattin, H. (2011) Social anxiety as a basis for friendship selection and socialization in Adolescents' social networks. *Journal of Personality*, 79, 499–526.

Vanore, M. (2016) All in the family: family-member migration and the psychosocial health of children in Georgia. *Migration Studies*, 4, 309–330.

Wang, H. (2017) *The study on the psychological wellbeing of rural left-behind children - a case study in Chengdu*. New York, NY: Sichuan Normal University.

Wen, M. & Lin, D. (2012) Child development in rural China: children left behind by their migrant parents and children of nonmigrant families. *Child Development*, 83, 120–136.

Winters, N. (2014) Responsibility, mobility, and power: Translocal Carework negotiations of Nicaraguan families. *International Migration Review*, 48, 415–441.

Xu, Y., Xu, D., Simpkins, S. & Warschauer, M. (2019) Does it matter which parent is absent? Labor migration, parenting, and adolescent development in China. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28, 1635–1649.