

*The Children of China's Great Migration*, by Rachel Murphy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xiv+288 pp. A\$156.95 (cloth), A\$54.95 (paper), US\$80.00 (e-book).

As a Chinese based in the PRC, shortly after I started this book's first chapter, I started asking myself why I had not seen things from the perspective that Rachel Murphy takes on a topic that is so often taken for granted by Chinese people. The book is engrossing, with a lot of vivid, subtle, and emotionally moving narratives on the children left behind in rural China and their families. While the text incorporates numerous references to the literature, one always strongly feels that it is about real lives and real issues and Chinese realities.

"Being together" (*zai yiqi* 在一起) is an essential characteristic of a Chinese family and plays a critical role in the socialization of children. Yet around 60 million rural children have been separated from one or both of their parents, who seasonally or yearly migrate to work in cities to support their families. The left-behind children are widely seen as the price paid by millions of families in the country's pursuit of modernization. During the past 40 years, massive rural-urban migration has played an indispensable role in China's industrialization and urbanization, and contributed greatly to China's extraordinary growth and development. An aspect of this has been elaborated in a previous excellent work by the same author, *How Migrant Labor Is Changing Rural China* (2002). Murphy's *The Children of China's Great Migration* is a much-valued companion volume to this earlier work.

The official number of officially reported left-behind children has diminished since 2016, but this is mainly a result of a strategic redefinition of the term "left-behind children" by China's Ministry of Civil Affairs. In reality, the magnitude and severity of the phenomenon has remained unchanged and continues to be one of China's critical social problems: a core theme of academic research, policy discussions, and societal debates for more than 20 years, mainly focusing on the negative impacts of parents' migration on left-behind children from perspectives such as political economy, agency, gender, and so on.

Any discussion cannot shy away from the negative consequences on the children's everyday lives, their studies, and their inner worlds. Yet, millions of rural parents have still made the decisions to move to cities sometimes thousands of miles away, leaving their children behind in the home villages in order to strive for a better life. *Striving* (*fendou* 奋斗) is a term that Chinese people take for granted, as the ethos of each individual and family to pursue their goals of upward mobility. Murphy has seized upon this common Chinese term as a thread that connects her empirical observations and theoretical constructions, as well as connecting different parts of the book into a coherent unity. She realizes that the split families are supposed to involve every member striving: the parents who migrate to cities to work extremely long hours, the children who stay behind and

who are supposed to study hard, and the grandparents in the villages who dedicate themselves to the daily task of caregiving. Hence, this is collective striving, or *parent-child striving teams*, as Murphy writes. She innovatively points out that this striving combines “work” (to do) and “aspiration” (to expect) and is connected to and sustained through family relationships. Thus, striving is used as a lens to interpret the lives of the left-behind children and the family members split across multiple locations (see especially chaps. 1–2). It is used as a framework to analyze both the agency of actors and the structure in which they are embedded, particularly by prioritizing children’s agency and viewpoints and situating them within a context that incorporates their relationships with their parents and other caregivers, their families’ capital endowments, gendered and generational configurations, and the wider social, economic, cultural, and political environment that the children inhabit (chaps. 1 and 8).

Murphy conducted excellent field work, engaging in matched interviews with 109 rural children and their at-home parents, grandparent caregivers, and teachers, with intermittent follow-up interviews with 25 of the children and their families over a period of five years, during which most of the children progressed from primary to junior high school or from junior high to senior high or vocational school. In total, she conducted over 250 formal interviews with individual children and adults, and had informal conversations with many others (details are listed in the appendix). She interviewed the migrant parents of 14 children during their return to the village and the migrant parents of six children in four cities, and observed their working and living environments. Such impressive longitudinal and latitudinal interviews with diverse actors and various kinds of critical observations provide a solid base for a high-quality piece of research. The book is an in-depth and convincing analysis of qualitative materials and is strong in its theoretical construction. However, the regression and statistical tests in chapters 4 and 7, though limited, seem an unnecessary statistical exercise.

Murphy rightly highlights that the pathways to striving and to recognition within and beyond the family lie in success or failure in the labor market, in the marriage market, or at school. These are not just personal endeavors but also the business of one’s parents, spouse, and children. Therefore, the children left behind are urged to study as hard as they can; to help their parents as much as they can during their visits to see them in the city; and as they grew older, to try their best to deal with their distanced, reproachful, and conflicted feelings toward their migrant parents. They are supposed to dream of making their families proud of them through hard work and educational success and try to displace any pain in the present or past (see chap. 8).

The real world has never been monolithic but is highly complex and diverse. The book displays the heterogeneity and variations in terms of sharply contrasting viewpoints toward the migration project, family striving, family relationships, the sacrifices, studying, resource distribution, domestic chores, and caregiving by

individual people within different clusters of age, gender, and experience. Such complexities are reflected in the high degree of ambivalence and the bittersweet reactions of people. For instance, children expect their migrant parents to return home during Spring Festival, although they may feel uneasy that they are more strictly disciplined when their parents are around. Similarly, some of the children expect to visit their migrant parents during the summer holiday, although they may feel confined in the city, where they are usually have cramped, noisy, shabby accommodations, and may wish they were back in the countryside, free to explore their surroundings (see chaps. 5–7). Population and migration studies have always encountered highly complex family configurations, and this book presents the full spectrum of these.

Rural-urban work migration and the left-behind population are closely associated with major social, economic, political, and cultural themes in rural China. These include the household farming system, land redistribution, agricultural taxes and levies, rural school mergers, trends in marriage arrangements, filial piety, and so on. Each of these themes is covered in the book. In this regard, the book enables readers to gain a broad knowledge of the history of contemporary rural China and, in particular, the processes underlying its transformation. Moreover, as in many social-science studies that link micro realities to the macro picture, the book intertwines its focus on the theme of left-behind children with a concern for broader development paradigms. This is reflected in the long list of questions raised at the end of the book, concerning class positions, rural-urban relations, development models, alternative choices, care of the elderly, the future of the left-behind generation, and so on.

*Jingzhong Ye*  
*China Agricultural University*

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