
The role of children and parenting in migration

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Participants in the second panel discussed the role of children and parenting in middle-class migration. When Nyíri (1999) did research among an earlier wave of Chinese migrants in Hungary, concern for the present welfare of the child was absent, although it was encompassed in migrant narratives that presented the future material welfare of the family, understood as more or less extended kin, as the purpose of migration. Today's middle-class migrants explain migration as serving the emotional and mental health of the child, in many cases attended to by both parents living in a state of semi-retirement and leaving their own parents and other kin behind (Beck & Nyíri, 2022). These migrants appear to practice an extreme form of 'intensive parenting', which Yan Yunxiang (2021) sees as contributing to the state-led ideology of 'neofamilism', but many are far from following the filial piety it prescribes. How generalisable is this centrality of children? Is it sufficient to subsume children in the framework of reproduction or is it important to regard them as agents shaping migration? How is middle-class migration shaped by shifting family ideologies, and how does it shape or challenge them?

Krzysztof Kardaszewicz

My paper discusses the growing Chinese educational migration to Poland. I argue that it is driven by the pursuit of a good life due partly to a growing emphasis on happiness and personal fulfilment. I believe these ideas are the outcomes of state efforts and commercial intermediaries ultimately leading to an educational fetish: seeing overseas learning as a life-changing experience in what are largely imagined destinations.

First, we have changing families: the family ideology, structure and authority patterns are all becoming more flexible. Children and their formative experience are increasingly becoming the centre of family life. However, the shift in ideas about learning and childhood (that learning should be child-centred and childhood should be happy) do not go together with a relaxed attitude toward success and achievements. It should not be misread as a sign that parents are less ambitious.

Second, even though the rejection of the educational system in China is very real, it happens in the context of larger governance reforms. We have increasingly convergent policy trends, for example, the UNESCO project on 'happy schools' or the national 'happiness education' framework in South Korea. Happiness is now an official development indicator and so learning is becoming increasingly standardised as something that is supposed to be happy, creative, open, natural. All of this is done in the name of making students more efficient and productive.

This feels similar to efforts in policymaking on diaspora management – where ‘best practices’ are circulated and adopted to establish an efficient model of engaging diaspora and tapping into its resources. Alan Gamlen has a book out called *Human Geopolitics* (2019) which details the process behind such converging practices, and I think this has relevance to what we see in migrant focus on ‘happy education,’ and to the way such pursuit is designed and standardised to match official development goals. So because of this, the focus on achievement is still very important. As seen in my interviews, parents want their children to be both very happy and very competitive at the same time.

We talked about the idea of security, and that economic security is the basis of what is now pursued as emotional security. The concept of security can be as tricky and vague as the idea of the middle class. While people are materially better off they can be hugely insecure. So, we could ask what is really changing and why are these changes happening? How much of the above is a generational change to parenting? How much of the migration to Europe is about cultural citizenship versus gaining access to an exclusive club? Is flexible citizenship going out of fashion because it is too common?

Fanni Beck

I would like to bring in a distinction between what enables migration in the present political economy, and what drives it. By this, I mean a closer focus on values that animate the choices of these people, thereby bringing in Weber’s work on the distinction between *Zweck-* and *Wertrationalität*, instrumental versus value-oriented rationality. It is tricky because probably both kinds of rationality feature in decision-making, but I would like to focus on the latter. Economic considerations (*Zweckrationalität*) do provide an explanation for how these migration trajectories emerge, but they have little analytical value in explaining why they emerge in the first place. In order to answer that question, we need to take migration narratives more seriously, and understand that the perceived emergency that triggered this mobility was caused by values (*Wertrationalität*) rather than economic necessity.

We have already talked about how the idea of a happy childhood has been taking a strikingly uniform shape around the globe – with significant variations regarding what happiness means in particular contexts. I think the concept of the middle class is crucial to understanding this phenomenon. Middle class cannot be reproduced merely through inheritance: it has to be secured by parenting. This is a universal phenomenon that takes specific forms based on what the political-economic context allows.

For instance, China is probably producing middle-class outmigration because of the specific Chinese middle-class dilemma of class reproduction. On the one hand, extremely harsh and ever-increasing educational competition has clear economic exigencies due to the processes that turn education into an investment for securing one’s children’s place in society. On the other hand, there are two competing ideals of childhood being promoted by the authoritarian capitalist state. One encourages children to be submissive, filial, obedient, while the other promotes a child who is competitive, creative, and innovative. This makes middle-class parenting inherently ambiguous and confuses parents about how to raise happy and successful children.

I want to bring in the question about the geography of migration and the unlikely destinations for the pursuit of happiness such as Hungary and Poland. Unlike Krzysztof

[Kardaszewicz], I see these parents as pursuing something different than competition. They seek a space outside competition and prescribed trajectories for success and thereby endow 'happiness' with their own signification. They want to reorganise their priorities and thus allow their children to live in the present. The emergence of the ideal of fulfilling your personality, finding your human nature and developing it is largely oriented at the present. Simultaneously, however, the fear of losing out in the competition does not disappear. My interviewees are deeply ambiguous about this dilemma. These decisions are negotiated over and over again.

Lastly, this parenting experience is fundamentally different from what these parents experienced as children in the 1970s and 1980s. So there is intergenerational conflict driving this ambiguity as well. Barbara Ehrenreich argues that American middle-class parents seek to reproduce their own childhood experiences in their child-rearing practices. In contrast, Chinese middle-class parents experiment with radically new ways of shaping childhood, and migration makes this possible.

Anders Sybrandt Hansen

I would like to react to the previous speakers and introduce some provisos. In Krzysztof [Kardaszewicz]'s work, there is a reluctance to take what people say at face value: you end up with the concept of education fetish, which you describe as deception. But I wonder, since people make all sorts of discursive constructs, how do you ascertain that exactly this is a trick or deception? What criteria do you use? In reaction to Fanni [Beck]'s paper, I liked the idea of escape. Perhaps taking it seriously means that unhappiness drives people out.

For quite a while now, educational migration was not necessarily a financially sound decision. It doesn't always translate into a pecuniary benefit. As you have pointed out, Fanni, there must be other reasons as well.

If there is a particular kind of unhappiness driving migration, can we say anything useful about it? I think we can. If we were to take seriously the theme of unhappiness, I think the idea of acceleration could be useful, which is something Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Hartmut Rosa both talk about. And some of these processes are felt particularly strongly in China compared, for example, to Denmark. These processes are unevenly distributed. In my work with Stig Thøgersen on education migration (Hansen & Thøgersen, 2015), I interviewed Chinese students who would talk about involution – at the time, the favourite word for this feeling was *fuzao* 浮躁. They described life as a student in China as too busy and shallow. They felt that they were not reaching any goals, but constantly grasping for a receding horizon.

I did phenomenological interviews with the students, and during this process, I was alerted to particular themes I could not predict. Temporality was the main theme I caught up with. In some cases, they told me that their life as a student in Denmark gave them more free time. Free of peer pressure and parental pressure. And for the first time in their lives, the luxury of being alone for extended periods of time. They would speak of differences in terms of the environment. There was empty space around them, there was no crowding, resulting in a different feel of life. If we are being generous, these experiences hold the promise of existential reflexivity. Some of my interlocutors who went back to China said that they would not continue to pursue the stressful life in the big cities, but rather move to the countryside.

To theoretically conceptualise these findings, I turn to the concept of temporality as used by Pierre Bourdieu and Edmund Husserl. Bourdieu makes the argument that we normally live in the mode of protention, meaning we know relatively well the social games that we engage in, and we can predict more or less what will happen. This happens in relatively stable environments with familiar social and cultural customs. But this can break down, and people's lives can become unpredictable in disruptive events (for instance, when people are fired), or when you are stuck in an involution game, where continuous efforts do not result in predictable results. This makes sense in connection with Guy Standing's concept of precarity. We are seeing precarity and the casualisation of work on the rise in China.

I argue that protention can also be broken down in a more productive way. For example, if you go abroad and you are outside of your normal concerns and you are existentially provoked into a reflexive situation. As long as you are financially and physically secure, as these middle-class students were, you have time for reflection, with potentially far-reaching existential implications. So I think, yes, education is a commodity, but it is also a life-changing event.

Andrew Kipnis

First, there are happy people in the Chinese education system. I knew a couple who would say 'my happiest time was in high school because we had a really clear goal that we were studying for the university entrance exam.' When I was teaching in Hong Kong about how competitive the Chinese education system was there was a student who would say: 'Oh, I never found it very hard... I work a lot harder at the university than I ever did in high school.'

There is this famous 1983 book by Thomas Rohlen, *Japan's High Schools*. At the time, they divided high schools into five levels: the brilliant, level two, level three... Rohlen spent a few months in each type of school, and he found that everybody knew that they were going to a good university at the top level. Thus, they had really good discussions on history, the students were engaged but not uptight. At the bottom level, kids knew that they were not going to university, so they were not uptight in a different way. But those in the middle three levels were absolutely uptight. So, there are different types of schools and different children.

My second point is that being a parent is contradictory. You cannot choose what you get. Sometimes, the child is unpredictable, and parents have to react, resulting in the contradictoriness of what parents articulate.

The third point, in reaction to Fanni's paper, is the question of reproduction. What are you reproducing? Is it the class status? Maybe you were trying to move up your class status. Are you trying to reproduce a certain value structure? I want my kid to be creative, or kind? Maybe it may even be called reproduction but an unconscious drive to have better material success. In a certain national context, this may lead to reproduction, but in an economically thriving country, it leads to upward mobility. If you bring in traditional anthropology, then the question is: are you trying to reproduce patriline? For example, these people who are moving to Hungary for their children, would they be happy if their children do not have offspring? Is it enough to create happiness for them?

Discussants elaborated on the frequency of education migration among middle-class families who strive for their children's success. It also became clear that this is not the only or even the major motivation in many cases. In a case mentioned, the child's feelings became more important: parents chose the destination based on them.

Participants discussed how the importance of intermediaries had grown due to the increasing volume of education migration. Such businesses could count on the popularity of the 'happy childhood' ideology and use it as a sales strategy. They emphasised the 'feeling' or 'culture' of a destination country to parents. But especially for less well-off Chinese parents, there was also an economic motivation to choose more affordable elite education in Eastern Europe that is out of reach in both their home countries and Western countries.

It was also emphasised that many Chinese parents reject their home countries' approach to childrearing in a broad sense. Beyond the economic reasons, cultural, political and personal motivations were seen among parents. They did not want their children to get the same upbringing they had had, and so many young parents severed family ties with their own parents via migration.

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