

Chapter 2

The Mobility of the Elderly and Family-Based Care: A Case Study of Chinese Migrant (Grand)Parents



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2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the mobility of Chinese migrant elders in relation to the family-based care regime in China. Chinese older people migrate mainly for ‘family reasons’, most notably to take care of the younger generations who have migrated and/or to satisfy their own old-age care needs (Li and Gan 2017; Li and Huang 2018). A recent survey on older migrants in the metropolises of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen shows that 35.2% of the respondents migrated for the purpose of helping with childcare for the third generation (their grandchildren), 19.3% to take care of the second generation (their adult children) who have migrated and 23.1% for their own old-age care needs (Li and Huang 2018). An important context for this ‘family-reasoned’ migration is that family is still the most important and reliable care provider in China. There is an intergenerational mutual reliance or unwritten contract in care arrangements within the family. While the second generation relies on their parents for childcare, the older generation is dependent on the second one for care in their old age (Eklund 2018; Zhao and Huang 2018; Zhong and Li 2017). This chapter focuses on older grandparents who have migrated to take care of their grandchildren and explores both how the trajectory of their mobility is shaped by the intergenerational contract on care and how migration may possibly change this intergenerational contract.

The elderly migrants whom we study are commonly called in Chinese *sui qian lao ren* or ‘accompanying older migrants’. The word ‘accompanying’ indicates that they migrate because of their children’s migration. Internal migration in China was

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strictly controlled during the era of state-planned economy and large-scale internal migration did not start until the early 1980s, shortly after China's economic reform began in 1978. Because the development of the market economy required the free mobility of labour, it triggered most notably – but not exclusively – a mass rural–urban migration of cheap labour (Chan and Zhang 1999; Li 2004). As for the accompanying older migrants, the initial migrants were their adult children who often migrated to big cities for better jobs or a career. Therefore, the migration of these elders can be regarded as a continuation of the large-scale internal labour migration process.

The analysis offered in this chapter is based on qualitative data from 16 in-depth interviews with ten older migrant grandparents living in one residential area in Shenzhen, a major city and economic centre near Hong Kong. In order to explore the links between the mobility of these migrant elders and the care needs and arrangements within the family, we analyse in particular their decisions to move and their future plans regarding the dilemma of whether to stay in Shenzhen or return home.

Since care arrangements within the family constitute an intergenerational 'contract', it is essential to discuss the mobility of migrant elders in relation to the intergenerational relationship. Our discussion on this aspect will be embedded in recent theoretical debates on Chinese descending familism or neo-familism (Obendiek 2017; Yan 2016, 2017; Zhao and Huang 2018) which describe the significant changes that have taken place in Chinese family life and new perceptions of traditional ideals and norms regarding family relations in China – in particular the notion of filial piety and the changing power relations between the first (the elderly parents) and the second generations. This chapter contributes not only to knowledge about the migration of older people in China but also to discussions on continuities and changes in current Chinese family life in the context of migration and the effect of the One-Child Policy. Furthermore, it proposes to add a welfare perspective to our understanding of continuing internal migration in China and highlights the connections between the migration of the elderly and China's family-based care regime into which the care arrangements within the family are incorporated.

2.2 The Chinese Family-Based Care Regime in the Context of Social Transformations

The Chinese family-based childcare and elderly-care practices are closely related to the Confucian norms of filial piety – the core and basic norm which regulates intergenerational ties and family relations. Traditionally, there are two interrelated central aspects of filial piety that children must obey: respect and absolute obedience to parents and filial support and care of them in their old age (Zhong and Li 2017). Filial support and care means that children have an obligation to provide for, serve and care for their elderly parents and arrange their funerals after their deaths. Filial

piety is also fundamental to and shapes grandparenting norms in China (Ko and Hank 2014; Silverstein et al. 2006). Because a married child is expected to fulfil their duty of filial piety by living with their elderly parents, grandparents are likely to live with their grandchildren, which makes them a natural source of childcare (Chen et al. 2000; Ko and Hank 2014; Yasuda et al. 2011). Traditional grandparental roles under the Confucian family culture tend to be related to fostering intergenerational bonds and extending family heritage (Cong and Silverstein 2012).

Despite concerns about the erosion of filial piety by modernisation and rapid social changes (Yeh et al. 2013), scholars commonly agree that filial piety still plays a major role in contemporary family lives in China (e.g. Cheung and Kwan 2009; Lin and Yi 2011), albeit in new and revised forms or even with radical changes (e.g. Eklund 2018; Santos and Harrell 2017; Yan 2003, 2016). One central change concerns the decline of parental power, with the result that filial piety today no longer requires the submission and unconditional obedience of the younger generation (Yan 2003; Zhong and Li 2017; Chen et al. 2011). In his theorisation on descending familism, Yan (2016) points to a new model of intergenerational solidarity that builds on an intimacy between the older and younger generations and a new, more flexible, family structure in which the focus and meaning of life flow downward to the third generation – i.e. the grandchildren. In particular, Yan considers the emergence of intergenerational intimacy, in the form of increased communication and understanding as well as the sharing of emotions, as the major breakout from the traditional Chinese family culture, where this kind of intimacy was suppressed to maintain hierarchy and parental authority (Yan 2016).

This change in the perception of filial piety also influences how family members perceive their obligations and roles regarding child and elderly care. Zhong and Li (2017), for example, argue for an investment perspective through which to understand intergenerational relationships. Without the element of unconditional obedience in the perception of filial piety, the older generation no longer takes filial care by their children for granted. Consequently, they actively seek to secure their future old-age care by investing in the younger generation, not only financially through helping them to purchasing a home but also emotionally, by caring and strengthening the intergenerational bonds (see also Wang 2010; Xiao 2014; Zhang 2005). Understood from this perspective, grandparents providing childcare can also be a strategic and emotional investment by the older generation in exchange for more secure old-age care and emotional support from the younger generation in the future.

Although our earlier study on migrating grandparents (Zhao and Huang 2018) to some extent confirms this investment and exchange perspective, we argue that the intergenerational care arrangements within the family are not merely cultural practices based on certain norms of family relations. Rather, they are part of wider institutional arrangements on care and welfare, shaped by social and related family and labour policies. For example, the heavy reliance on grandparents for childcare is also due to insufficient institutional support in contemporary China: statutory maternity leave in China is 98 days, up to a maximum of 4 months (ILO 2012), while the average age for enrolling a child in kindergarten is approximately 3 years. Grandparents often have to fill this childcare gap. Meanwhile, the relatively early

retirement age in China (50 or 55 for women and 60 for men) enables grandparents to be the main labour force for childcare. Grandparents providing childcare has thus been institutionalised through policies and institutional arrangements. Meanwhile, the overall policy of elderly care follows the principle of being ‘based on individual families, backed up by the communities, and supplemented by different institutions’ (State Council of PR China 2017). Family members, primarily children, are still expected to play a major role in providing care for their senior parents. Therefore, intergenerational care arrangements are an adaptive family strategy based on a *functional solidarity* within a welfare and care regime. More importantly, when elderly grandparents migrate to help with childcare, the migration itself is part of the family welfare strategy and functional solidarity.

We therefore find it necessary to add a welfare perspective to the cultural perspective on family norms in order to understand the mobility of the migrant parents. One concept which we consider to be relevant here is the ‘welfare resource environment’ (Levitt et al. 2017), which helps to map and analyse individuals’ access to social protection and welfare in a transnational space created by global migration. Though the migration we look at is domestic, it shapes a similar translocal space in which the older migrants navigate the care needs and resources to find the best solution for both their family members and themselves. Consequently, we analyse how the elderly position themselves with a view to balancing the different care needs and required resources and how we can understand the mobility of these older people through these positionalities.

2.3 Research Context and Methods

The empirical base for this chapter consists of 16 qualitative semi-structured interviews, carried out in two rounds, with ten elderly migrant grandparents living in one residential community in Shenzhen. Because of its special geographical location bordering Hong Kong, Shenzhen became China’s first special economic zone in 1980 – soon after Deng’s ‘economic reform and opening-up policy’ – and has since then developed from a town centred on the fishing industry, with a population of 332,900 (Zhang and Qi 2006) into one of China’s most important economic centres, a modern city with a total registered population of around 12.5 million at the end of 2017 (World Population 2018). Shenzhen is thus a city of migrants, its population reflecting the pattern of China’s mass internal migration that started during the 1980s (Ye 2013), including a high proportion of older migrants, the majority of whom moved to follow their adult children (Li and Huang 2018). Shenzhen’s government has adopted a series of incentive policies to attract young talent to go there and settle down. These policies include economic rewards and relatively easy procedures for moving Household Registration (in Chinese, *Hukou*) – a system which has been used to regulate people’s access to social protection and welfare (Wu 2013), including public health and care – and more favourable conditions for purchasing housing. Consequently, Shenzhen has become an attractive city for young

migrants, particularly those who are well-educated and are seeking better career opportunities or/and a more Westernised lifestyle. The children of our participants belong to this category. They all have a university degree (two have Master's degrees), moved to Shenzhen because of job opportunities and have their *Hukou* in Shenzhen.

Until very recently, there have been strict restrictions on elderly migrants moving *Hukou* in Shenzhen – at the time of the first round of interviews, no participants had their *Hukou* there. Since each province or municipality has its own separate social and medical insurance programmes, without a *Hukou* in Shenzhen, the participants have very limited access to the local welfare benefits and social services. For example, if they fell ill, they would have to travel back to their home towns for medical services if they are to get reimbursed for the cost of treatment. However, right after the first round of our interviews in late 2015, Shenzhen had started to ease the requirements for migrant older parents to move their *Hukou* (Shenzhen Government 2016). Among the participants in the second round of our interviews, two had already moved their *Hukou* to Shenzhen and one was in the process of applying. However, this does not solve their problem of how to access pension and medical insurance in Shenzhen. According to the regulations, to obtain access, the older migrant must not only have a local *Hukou* but must also have never received a pension elsewhere in the country (Shenzhen Social Insurance Fund Administration 2018).

The community we chose to recruit participants from also has a high proportion of residents with a recent migration background, reflected in the high number of households who rent as opposed to owning their home. New migrants often rent due to high house prices in Shenzhen. Even though the first generation is often willing to support them financially, the assets that the migrants and their families accumulate elsewhere are often not enough for a down-payment in Shenzhen. This community also has housing units with different price levels, which enabled us to recruit participants with varied socio-economic backgrounds. We used the local social work station as the initial door-opener and thereafter the snowball technique to recruit participants who met the following two criteria. Firstly, they had to be in their 60s or thereabouts and to have mainly migrated to help with childcare. We therefore focused on migrants who were relatively healthy and not heavily in need of care themselves. Secondly, they must have lived continuously in Shenzhen for more than 6 months. In addition to socio-economic background (both their own and that of their children), we considered other social variables in the recruitment to ensure that both male and female, rural and urban, single-child and non-single-child parents and both maternal and paternal grandparents are represented in our sample. All ten participants recruited to our study – six females and four males – had moved to Shenzhen from other provinces. They were between the ages of 58 and 69 and had lived in Shenzhen between 3 and 10 years at the time of their first interview. An overview of the participants' socio-demographic background can be found in Table 2.1.

The second author conducted the interviews in two rounds, the first in late 2015 and early 2016, when she interviewed eight participants. In this round of interviews, we focused on how the decision to move was made and how the participants

Table 2.1 Participants' socio-demographic background at the time of the first interview

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Household type	Home province	Educational background	Years in SZ	Spouse's residency	Number/gender of children
1	Grandma Sun	65	Urban	Henan	Senior middle school	10	Shenzhen	1 son
2	Grandma Yi	69	Urban	Shandong	Primary school	10	Widowed	1 son
3	Grandpa He	67	Urban	Zhejiang	University	5	Shenzhen	1 daughter
4	Grandma Zhu	58	Rural	Heilongjiang	Primary school	3	Hometown	1 son/1 daughter
5	Grandpa Wang	61	Urban	Jiangxi	Senior middle	7	Shenzhen	1 son
6	Grandma Jin	63	Urban	Shandong	Junior middle school	9	Hometown	1 son
7	Grandma Li	68	Rural	Hunan	Illiterate	6	Hometown	2 sons
8	Grandpa Fan	64	Rural	Hebei	Junior middle school	4	Shenzhen	1 daughter
9	Grandma Wu	63	Urban	Hunan	Junior middle school	6	Hometown	1 son
10	Grandpa Zhou	67	Urban	Heilongjiang	Senior middle school	5	Shenzhen	1 son

experienced the changes in their life after migration. The second round took place exactly 2 years later – the plan being to follow up the same eight participants. The background for this new round of interviews was that we registered a dilemma from the first-round interviews that most of the participants face concerning the question of whether to stay in Shenzhen or return home. In the second round interviews, we intended to explore this dilemma further and address the question of the mobility of these elderly migrants. We managed to interview six of the eight participants – of the other two, one had returned due to illness and the other did not respond to our inquiry. To compensate for the missing data, we recruited two new participants. In other words, among the ten participants, six were interviewed twice, two were interviewed once in the first round of data collection and the remaining two were interviewed once in the second round. Each interview lasted around 1 h and took place at the participants' homes.

2.4 The Decision to Move

All the participants said that their move to Shenzhen was initiated by their children, upon the birth of a grandchild. However, they responded differently to the request. Three participants, Grandma Sun, Grandma Yi and Grandpa Zhou, responded positively and decided immediately to move permanently to follow their children. As parents of a single child, they all expected to move to follow their only child, even before their children asked them. For them, moving was just a matter of time. By contrast, the remaining seven were reluctant to move – mostly because going to Shenzhen would represent a major upheaval in their lives – and they all said that they were used to the places where they had spent their entire lives. They therefore stated that moving to Shenzhen was a choice of no choice. In this part of the analysis, we look at these two groups separately. We start with the older (grand) parents who had expected to move.

2.4.1 *To Move Permanently: Fear of Becoming the ‘Empty-Nest’ Elderly*

As mentioned above, three participants had intended to move, even before the initiation by the second generation. This intention was based on their own old-age care needs. For example, Grandma Sun says:

My son worked in a big company in Shenzhen. He was always very busy and had little time to rest. After he had decided to settle down in Shenzhen, we also started considering moving to follow him, so that we could take care of him. If we chose to stay in our hometown, we would be ‘empty-nest elders’ (*kong cao lao ren*), which is awful. There were lots of reports on empty-nest elders in the media. I felt panic each time I heard or read about them. Then my son also needed us to come when his wife was pregnant. Someone needed to take care of his baby. So we decided to come! My son also said the family should be together... At that time, I was already retired, but his father was about to retire the year after. So we decided that I would come first, and then he would come as soon as he retired. ... I thought Shenzhen was a good place for old-age care, because the hospitals and doctors here are much better than those in my hometown. So when we decided to come, it was based on consideration for our future.

Even though the direct cause of Grandma Sun’s migration was the birth of her grandchild, the intention to move had existed ever since her son decided to settle down in Shenzhen. For her, moving to be near their only child is a natural choice – one which is quite representative among the three participants. Grandma Yi, a widow and mother of a single son, also talked about her fear of becoming an ‘empty-nest elder’, a term which is widely used in China to refer to older people with no children or whose children have left home and very often moved away – a category considered as a highly vulnerable group in discussions of the big challenges which China faces concerning the issue of elder care. Therefore, in their decision-making, their own future care needs and their expectations of filial care from the second

generation are major considerations. At the same time, these expectations are also intertwined with their wish to support the second generation. For example, the above quote demonstrates parental love – the participant's worry about her son who 'was always busy and had little time to rest' and thus her wish to take care of him and, later, his child.

For Grandma Sun, migration seems to be a win–win situation: by migrating and living close to their son (they live in a separate apartment in the same neighbourhood), the two generations can take care of each other, which is also the case for Grandpa Zhou. In fact, these two cases share several similarities. In both, the couple decided to migrate together. In addition, they are the only two families who can afford to have their 'own' apartment after migration – which is, as we discuss later, considered an ideal living condition by our participants. Both said that the second apartment is funded by a cross-generational arrangement: the older generation provides the down-payment, while the younger generation pays the loan. Grandpa Zhou said, 'After we decided to move, we sold our apartment and car at home, and used the money as a down-payment for the second apartment in Shenzhen. We agreed to buy it in our son's name. Everything will be his after we die anyway'. Therefore, for Grandma Sun and Grandpa Zhou, the decision to move permanently was not merely based on the fact that they have only one child to rely on but also that it is economically feasible for them to spend their old age in Shenzhen. This, however, was not the case for Grandma Yi.

While both Grandma Sun and Grandpa Zhou showed great parental love in expressing their support of the second generation, Grandma Yi emphasised the duty of filial piety and was rather pragmatic in her account of her decision to move permanently. When explaining why her provision of childcare is necessary, she compared herself to a nanny and considered herself a better caregiver, both in terms of the family's economy and in terms of trustworthiness. As to the relationship between her own need for old-age care and her provision of childcare, she said: 'When I get really old, I expect filial care from my son. Like now, I help him take care of his child, then later, he will take care of me'. The explicit exchange perspective is closely related to her status as a widow and the mother of a single child, which makes her even more vulnerable in the family-based elderly-care system. So she had to emphasise the duty of filial piety and her economic and practical contribution to the second generation in order to secure her future old-age care. Therefore, the different discourses which the participants deploy (parental love vs filial piety) also mirror their different strategies for securing care in their old age based on the available resources.

Interestingly, although all the participants had the intention of moving to follow their children, none had brought it up with their children. Instead, they all waited for the second generation to take the initiative. If moving to follow an only child is a natural choice for the three participants, the birth of a grandchild seems to be a natural timing for the migration. Meanwhile, it also shows that moving to fulfil a role as a care-providing grandparent seems to be the new norm regarding the intergenerational care arrangements, something we expound on in our discussion of the cases of elders who were less willing to move.

2.4.2 Grandparents ‘on Duty’: Temporary Migration and a Choice of No-Choice

Research shows that elderly people are less likely to migrate and will often experience more difficulties adapting to their new environment after migration (Li et al. 2017). The majority of our participants were reluctant to move and expressed great attachment to the place where they had lived for their entire lives and where they had a wide network, a familiar lifestyle and habitual routines. For them, moving to Shenzhen was a hard decision. When justifying their decision, they all emphasised the needs of the second generation, with a perception of their roles as supporting parents and grandparents. As an illustration, Grandpa Wang said:

I only have one son, so I do not have a choice. My daughter-in-law became pregnant shortly after they got married. My son wanted us to come and take care of her and later the baby. The parents of my daughter-in-law could not come, because they were taking care of their son’s baby. We also discussed hiring a nanny, at our expense, but my son worried about safety issues. After all, you do not feel totally assured letting a stranger take care of your baby. Finally, we decided to come. Already around that time, we had decided that we would leave once the baby got older. Otherwise, I have nothing to do here. I had no other expectations. I came to finish my mission. It was like switching duties, off-duty [retirement] in my hometown, and then on-duty in Shenzhen.

Grandpa Wang describes their migration to Shenzhen as grandparents going ‘on duty’. It is seen as temporary migration because, as soon as the duty or ‘the mission’ is fulfilled, he and his wife would return. Additionally, he described the decision-making process, where he did consider other alternatives for childcare but found out that actually he had no other choice than to move. This description of ‘fulfilling the duty of childcare’ and migration as a choice of no-choice is very representative of this group of participants. For example, Grandmas Jin and Li also used similar expressions like ‘grandma on duty’ (*nainai shanggang* in Chinese) or ‘I came to do voluntary work’ (*yiwu laodong*, also meaning unpaid work).

Migration as a choice of no-choice thus concerns the issue of how to meet the need for childcare with the given resources within the family – the extended family involving not only generations, but also the in-laws. Most of our participants, including those who were happy to move, mentioned the alternative of hiring a nanny, yet they all considered themselves to be a better provider of childcare than a nanny, in the sense that they are more trustworthy and devoted because of their blood ties to their grandchildren, described as their ‘own flesh and blood’ (*qin gurou*). By contrast, a nanny is considered as a stranger or outsider (*wairen*). In addition, there is the issue of finances. Several participants, like Grandmas Zhu, Jin and Li, indicated that helping with childcare is also a way of relieving the economic burden for the second generation, as is also reflected in the quote from Grandpa Wang. When considering hiring a nanny, he stated that this would be at their expense – i.e. as the older generation. Among our respondents, not all the families can afford to hire a nanny. Even among those who can, they consider this to be an

unnecessary expense and would rather save their money for other things, like housing and the children's education.

The quote from Grandpa Wang also touches upon another question: Which set of grandparents should be responsible for the care of the grandchildren? Since Chinese families traditionally follow the patrilineal structure, it has often been the parents of the husband who live with the young couple and thus become the natural caregivers of the third generation. However, the One-Child Policy has greatly challenged this practice (Eklund 2018). Even though two participants referred to patrilineality to account for their decision to move for the purpose of childcare, we find that the question regarding which set of grandparents should come to take care of the third generation is much more complex than the principle of patrilineality alone. For example, Grandpa Wang did not refer to patrilineality to account for his decision to move, even though it was his son whom he and his wife were to help. Instead, the emphasis is on the 'only' son, implying 'If we do not help him, who else shall we help?' As to their in-laws, they have several children, so they had to choose. Indeed patrilineality may be an unwritten rule here but, as we interpret Grandpa Wang, what he meant was, as parents of one sole child, you do not have to choose – you know who you are going to help and to whom you are to fulfil your obligations as supporting parents.

We also find that deciding which set of grandparents should take the responsibility for childcare is sometimes arranged between families-in-law. Grandma Jin moved to Shenzhen alone. Implicitly, she considered her migration as a sacrifice which the first generation makes for the second generation, because the migration entailed a long-term separation between the two members of the elderly couple. During the interview, Grandma Jin expressed great concern for her husband and looked forward to moving back and being reunited with him. When asked whether her son's family-in-law, who happened to live in Shenzhen, ever helped with childcare, she sighed and said:

They run a restaurant and are quite busy. They are also older than me. The tradition here is that the paternal parents should take care of the grandchildren. But I think, I have time, so I should help my son as much as I can. After all, we did not give them any financial support when they bought their apartment.

Grandma Jin tried to provide a good explanation for why her son's parents-in-law could be exempt from the responsibility of childcare, an explanation that is more commonly acceptable, such as a lack of time, a greater age and the tradition of patrilineage. However, the reasons why *she* chose to come is the last two sentences: the importance of being a supportive parent and their failure to provide financial support for the second generation's housing. Therefore, providing childcare becomes a necessary compensation. Grandma Jin's case once again confirms the importance of being supportive parents, for paternal and maternal parents alike. Childcare is only one form of parental support, which the two families-in-law can negotiate in relation to other forms of support, based on the different resources which each family possesses (e.g. money) or is able to deploy (e.g. time and energy).

2.5 The Return-or-Stay Dilemma

In the first round of interviews, most participants, especially those who were originally reluctant to move, expressed a strong desire to return to their home town or village. This was often expressed through narratives about the challenges and difficulties they had experienced after migration, which often concerned their relationship with the second generation (tensions/conflicts caused by different lifestyles and opinions on child-raising and the loss of parental power and autonomy), social adaptation (loneliness, and lack of a social network and belonging), accommodation situation (small, cramped apartments and lack of their own space), and rights to public social services and benefits related to *Hukou* (e.g. they have to travel back to their own homes for medical reimbursement) (see Zhao and Huang 2018). In addition, they all emphasised that childcare is demanding, never-ending work, further contributing to their lack of a social life. The interviewees who came to Shenzhen alone also expressed great concern about their spouses who had remained at home. Nevertheless, they all stayed because, while living in Shenzhen, they became even more convinced of how dependent the second generation is on their help with childcare and housework. Although the people who had already moved permanently did not experience the same stay-or-return dilemma as their counterparts, they mentioned the same challenges and difficulties, to varying degrees. From time to time, they also compared Shenzhen with their home towns and became quite nostalgic. We have therefore decided to include their perspectives when exploring the stay-or-return dilemma to understand the mobility of older migrants. In particular, we explore the dilemma in relation to the intergenerational care arrangements within the family, in which the participants are positioned as both (re)sources and recipients of care.

2.5.1 *Grandparents as an Important Care (Re)Source for the Nuclear Family*

As already mentioned, when they decided to move, most participants thought that they would return home as soon as the new-born baby was a little older, although nobody could say exactly when. In fact, several participants were still assisting with childcare, even though their grandchildren had reached school age. Grandma Jin has been in Shenzhen for 11 years, the longest among the participants. She said:

Today's young generations are too busy! While they concentrate on their careers, it is us elders who come to help. This is so common! Look at this neighbourhood – it's the same in every family. Before Yangyang (grandson, age 10) was born, I told them I would go home when he was a little bit older, like when he does not need me to take him to school or pick him up. But I cannot imagine how they would manage without me. Before, I needed to drop off and pick up Yangyang at kindergarten and later school, because his parents did not have time. Now he is big enough to walk alone. Still, someone needs to be at home when he gets home from school. His parents normally come home around 8 in the evening, sometimes

even later. Then who can make food for him? ... Now, my daughter-in-law is pregnant again, so I don't know when I can go back [sigh].

This quote expresses two representative aspects. First, there is always a need to care for the third generation. Second, grandparents caring for school-aged children is quite common. Grandpa Zhou said dropping off and picking up children at kindergarten is often the task of grandparents. Once he attended a family event at his grandson's kindergarten and around half of the adult participants were grandparents. Grandpa Wang also said that, in addition to normal school, he also used to accompany his grandchild to private tutoring and hobbies. Both Grandma Sun and Grandpa Wang reported that they normally cook two meals a day, one specifically for the second generation, who come home late. Several participants say that they have remained in Shenzhen to also take care of the second generation. Like Grandpa He said: 'In name, we are here to take care of the grandchild; in reality we are here to make their [the second generation's] life easier'.

We also notice a paradox in our participants' narratives about their children. On the one hand, they complained a lot about the second generation being so busy that they barely had time for their elderly parents. Therefore, the latter feel lonely and have no emotional support. On the other hand, they feel proud of their children, who have careers in a metropolis like Shenzhen, thanks to which they are likely to climb upwards through the social stratification system. The children's migration and settlement in Shenzhen is thus regarded as an achievement, as it is for the whole family. Consequently, the participants expressed their willingness to support their children. Despite their complaints about how demanding childcare is, several participants told us: 'As long as they need me/us, I/we will be here to help'. This willingness can also be understood as a continuation of Chinese parents' heavy investment in their children's (often their only child's) education for the purpose of lifting the family's economic status, as Vanessa Fong described it in *Only Hope* (Fong 2004). The self-sacrifice implied in these narratives also features one aspect of Yan's 'neo-familism': the notion of 'sacrificing the small self for the realization of the greater self, with a concrete, affective and materialistic goal' (Yan 2017) which, in the context of our study, is the success of the second generation.

The participants also talked about themselves as an irreplaceable care resource in respect of their emotional bond with the third generation. In particular, the paternal grandmothers expressed doubt as to whether their daughters-in-law, whom they consider to be too occupied with their career, are capable of being a good care-giver for the children. Grandma Li, who has two sons, said:

I have another son at home. So I think I will go back [for old-age care]. The problem is who will take care of my grandson? Last time, I went back for a wedding, he was crying for me all the time. So I had to come back the same day!

Grandma Li seems to have no doubt about where she will be for her own old-age care. When considering her return, she even thought about taking her grandson back to her home town. She said, 'I thought it was a good solution. Both we [the grandparents] and his uncle can take care of him, right? But his father said that the education in Shenzhen is much better'. Thus, the third generation's education also becomes part of the dilemma of whether to stay or to return home. Remaining in

Shenzhen can also be regarded as part of the educational investment in the third generation, which has become ‘an intergenerational joint mission’ (Goh 2009, 6).

2.5.2 Balancing Care Needs and Resources Within the Family

Several participants, all female, moved to Shenzhen without their husbands. For them, their return-or-stay dilemma is intertwined with a strong desire to reunite with their husbands – some expressed guilt at not being there to take care of him. Grandma Wu said: ‘He was so used to me taking care of him, and had never even made food before. Now he has to do everything himself’. Grandma Jin also said:

My husband does not have good health. I feel bad each time I think about leaving him alone at home. I notice I am getting old too, and I often feel tired. I really miss my husband and would like to go home!

Here, Grandma Jin’s wish for reunification also indicates the emotional need of the old couple to support each other.

Sometimes, other family members’ care needs also play a role in the participants’ struggling with the stay-or-return question. For example, both Grandma Zhu and Li have two children. Their husbands chose to stay home to help the other child with childcare. Grandma Zhu said:

We have been separated for five years now. As parents, we look at the children’s needs. If they still need us, we will certainly continue to help them. Then I’ll have to stay in Shenzhen, and he’ll stay at home [sigh]. It’s not easy for young people in Shenzhen. Look at the apartment – it is too small. There is no room for another person. In addition, one more person means more expenses. They talked about buying an apartment, but prices are rising all the time. Too much pressure! It is really difficult. So I think I will return one day.

This quote shows that, when grappling with the return-or-stay dilemma, the participant navigates different care-related needs within the family, such as caring for grandchildren both in Shenzhen and in the hometown, the second generation’s need for support with childcare, their own needs for care and, not least, the emotional need to be with their spouse. These needs entail different trajectories for older migrants, even though their own needs for care were only implied between the lines. However, the participants navigate not only the care needs within the family but also the available care resources. In addition, they calculate the costs in order to find the best solution to meet these needs. This is not only demonstrated in the above-cited quote, but also in an earlier quote from Grandma Li, who even considered taking her grandson with her when she returned to her home town. The high cost of living in Shenzhen is also commonly referred to as a factor in favour of return, which contradicts their earlier narratives about themselves as an irreplaceable provider of childcare. Moreover, the common narrative on the high cost of living also demonstrates the older generation’s understanding of the younger generation regarding their life situations in Shenzhen (e.g. ‘it is not easy for young people in Shenzhen’). Implicitly, it also entails the older generation’s fear of being a burden, which will be expounded upon next.

2.5.3 *Dependency on Filial Care and Fear of Being a Burden*

While both Grandma Zhu and Grandma Li, the two participants who have more than one child, seem quite sure where they will spend their old age, the single-child participants are less certain. Their uncertainty surrounding their future old-age care is also intertwined with their dilemma as to whether to stay or return home. On the one hand, they only have one child to rely on; on the other hand, their experiences of living in Shenzhen seem to have convinced them that staying in Shenzhen is not realistic, or the best solution, not least because of the high cost of living and expensive housing. However, we do have one exception: Grandpa Wang, the participant who changed the most between the two rounds of interviews. In the first interview, he expressed a strong wish to return home as soon as he and his wife had ‘completed their mission’ as caring grandparents. In the second interview, he was much more open and positive about the idea of staying.

It was true that I wanted to return. But my wife said, family should stay together. Only when we stay together are we a family. Besides, my son does not want us to return. ... City life is not so bad after all. And very convenient! Now we are much more familiar with the city, so we feel much more relaxed. My son wants to take care of us. He really is a filial son. We only have him but luckily he never lets us down. We are very proud of him. In fact, if they do not consider us troublesome, of course we would stay. This is the best. But sometimes I am worried that we would become a burden for him instead of helping him. But he said ‘Don’t worry, mum and dad! Soon we will be able to buy a second apartment. I will buy one in the same neighbourhood for the convenience of taking care of you’.

Comparing the two interviews, we find that his change in attitude might be an outcome of a change in his social life. While he spoke much about the loneliness and difficulties of adapting to city life in the first interview, in the second he talked a lot about his ‘migrant elder’ friends and social activities. This is the background to his utterance ‘city life is not so bad after all.’ Although he was the only one in this group who had somehow changed his mind, the passage quoted above also includes other important information, which is also representative.

Earlier, we pointed out that most participants, including Grandpa Wang, did not emphasise filial piety and care when accounting for their decisions to move. However, as can be seen in this quote, this does not mean that they do not have this expectation. The reason for not stressing filial piety and care is based on their understanding of the second generation’s life situation and challenges, as we illustrated earlier and is closely related to the fear of being a burden, as expressed by Grandpa Wang. Earlier studies on intergenerational relationships state that today’s elders no longer take filial piety from the younger generation for granted (Zhong and Li 2017) and, even when they are middle-aged they have fears about their old-age care that derive partially from doubts about the filiality of their children (Fong 2004). However, our study shows that these doubts are not necessarily about the second generation’s willingness to fulfil their filial duties but more a question of their capacity to do so. In other words, it is not that these older parents do not expect filial care but that they dare to expect it after seeing all the pressures the second

generation already face regarding their careers and the expectations of investing heavily in the third generation (Goh 2009).

Like most participants, Grandpa Wang complained about the cramped living conditions in the first interview. He said: ‘Each time I went to the toilet, I felt uneasy and nervous, because I was always thinking someone might be waiting outside’. However, once his child had a concrete plan to buy another apartment to accommodate the older generation, it seemed to give him hope, making him more optimistic about the idea of staying. Based on our cross-case analysis, we consider the families’ housing and economic situation to be an important factor influencing the older parents’ mobility. For example, the fact that Grandma Sun and Grandpa Zhou could migrate permanently is closely related to their economic ability, as they are able to buy their own apartment. All the participants, except widowed Grandma Yi, consider living separately from, yet close to, the second generation as the ideal living situation if they were to move permanently with their spouses. We believe that the importance attached to living separately is related to their intention to maintain at least some autonomy, which we have argued is even more reduced in connection with migration (Zhao and Huang 2018). Their reduced autonomy is also reflected in their great uncertainty about their future and lack of decision. For example, Grandma Jin, when asked whether she had thought about being reunited with her husband in Shenzhen, answered:

It’s no use me thinking about this or that. It is up to the young generation, and how they make arrangements for us. We are not the ones who make money and decide. Like we say, we wanted to stay together, then they say, no, we cannot afford to have you both here. Then what to do? Right? So I think I’ll just let them decide. ... As a matter of fact, we seldom discuss it.

The powerlessness which Grandma Jin expresses demonstrates the older generation’s dependency on the second generation’s filial care, particularly for those who only have one child. Meanwhile, this quote once again illustrates the older generation’s uncertainty about how much filial care they can realistically expect – another paradox which shapes the elders’ return-or-stay dilemma.

2.6 Conclusions

Based on our analysis, we conclude that being a supportive parent to the younger generation seems to be a more important norm than filial piety in regulating the intergenerational relationship that informs the older generation’s decision to migrate to follow their children and their trajectory after migration. Although the expectation of filial care does exist, it seems to have little effect on the mobility of the older grandparents, because the participants are uncertain about how much filial care they dare to expect, given the limited time, energy and economic capacity of the second generation. As shown in our analysis, when talking about their dilemmas and future plans for old-age care, most participants tend to be practical and realistic, focusing

on the actual care needs and what is the best solution in light of the resources available within the family rather than the cultural norms. In this context, family means the extended family, which may be spread across different geographical locations and include not only the different generations but also in-laws and siblings.

Inspired by the concept of the ‘welfare resource environment’ (Levitt et al. 2017) in transnational migration studies, we propose the conceptualisation of a *translocal care space* comprising transversal generational, sibling and in-law relations to understand the mobility of older migrants in relation to the care needs and arrangements within the family. Consequently, the mobility of the elderly can be understood as being directed by how these older migrants position themselves within the translocal care space. For example, our analysis demonstrates that, with the new norm of supporting parents, our participants tend to position themselves more as care (re)sources than care recipients, which also indicates that they prioritise the younger generation’s care needs above their own. Meanwhile, the stay-or-return dilemma can be understood in relation to the older generation’s dual positionality of being both care (re)sources and recipients, creating a paradox: while positioning themselves as the necessary care support for the younger generation, they also fear that their staying might constitute an economic burden for their children.

Based on these findings, we propose a reconceptualisation of the migration of older parents as a form of welfare migration, as opposed to family migration, in order to highlight its functionality and the logic that ultimately concerns questions of welfare. The elderly migrants’ stay-or-return dilemma also indicates that the migration of the younger generation has greatly challenged the reciprocity in the intergenerational arrangements on care and thus the sustainability of the family-based care model, particularly concerning elderly care. In this context, parents with only one child are even more vulnerable.

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