

# The Gendered Ways Families Reduce International Migration and Mobility

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## Abstract

Prior scholars have examined how in gendered ways families encourage, support, and sponsor family members to migrate and how migrants had confronted and overcome opposition from family members before they migrated abroad. Yet we know less about how and why families prevent many potential migrants from migrating abroad. I draw on semistructured interviews and observational data from 61 Chinese parents and children in a region of Fujian which has had a historically high percentage of emigrants from China. Although China's traditional patrilocal and patrilineal kinship system puts stronger sanctions on sons than daughters from moving away from their parents, recent changes in China lead parents to oppose children and especially daughters from going abroad. This opposition derives from parent's (1) concerns for the child's safety and cultural-linguistic survival, (2) socioeconomic constraints and intergenerational resource dependence, and (3) extrafamilial pressures to conform to social norms, all further bolstered by filial piety of children toward parents and the strong paternalistic influence parents exercise over their children's marital, educational, and career choices. This parental opposition lessens as adult children age and their economic resource dependence declines. This contributes to research on how family dynamics, intergenerational pressures, and the demands of the life course reduce international mobility and migration.

## Keywords

family, migration, immobility, sex, gender, China

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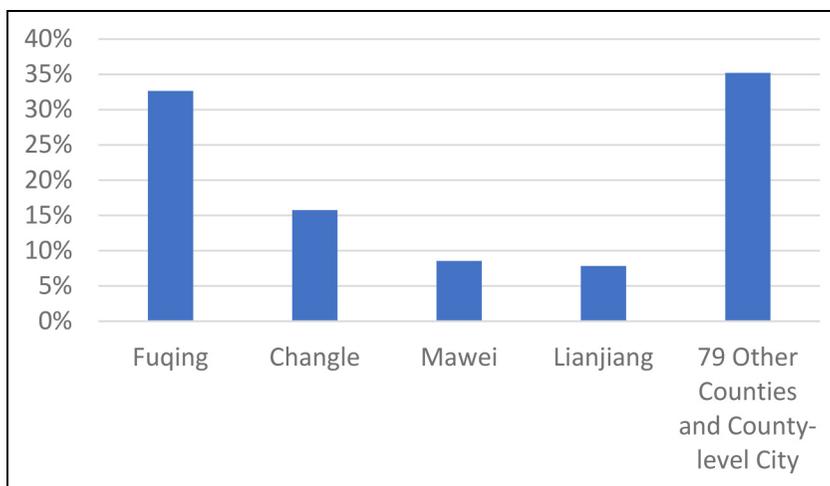
## **Introduction**

Migrant selectivity is a product of how visa policies, inequalities, and social forces interact in complex ways to restrict the opportunities of some more than others to migrate. Migration scholars have conventionally assessed this by comparing immigrants to the entire population within the country of origin (Feliciano 2005; Kapur 2010). Yet we know much less about how these mechanisms that generate such selectivity in the entire population at early stages in the pre-migration process. Although visa requirements and visa adjudications are readily observable and well-studied mechanisms contributing to migrant selectivity (Satzewich 2015), another more elusive mechanism shaping what type of people migrate at the pre-migration stage are the social forces that reduce the number of aspiring migrants who take necessary steps to pursue their migratory aspirations or apply for a visa. This paper focuses on one such important social force by analyzing how and why parents oppose successfully prevent their children from applying for a visa and making other efforts to travel or migrate abroad, a case of how familial ties can reduce international migration and mobility as much as they can facilitate it.

For decades, scholars have discovered that both young adults and especially women who emigrated had before confronted and overcome opposition to their migration from members of their families in diverse migrant-origin societies, including Bangladesh, Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Vietnam (see Paul 2015 for thorough summary). Past research has focused on young women who ultimately succeed in emigrating by negotiating with family members to allow them to emigrate, often by performing or “doing gender,” and framing their migration as a gendered duty of fulfilling their traditional and culturally sanctioned role as a mother, daughter, or wife (Paul 2015). Yet we know less about aspiring migrants who fail in overcoming their family’s opposition. The ability of the aspiring migrant to negotiate the option of migrating is arguably most constrained in cases of parents opposing the migration of their children. Such “involuntary immobility” (Carling 2002) of young aspiring migrants is consequential because as many potential migrants mature and grow they come to understand their projects of transnational mobility as an individualistic way to free the self from familial and collectivist ties in society, enabling them to form an identity less constrained by the cultural norms of their society that many of potential migrants find stifling and to inhibit their personal growth (Huang 2022). Going abroad also becomes an important way for young people to fulfill postmaterialist desires to become independent, live in a different culture, discover and learn more about themselves and those different from themselves, escape unhealthy relationships, pursue formal education, build international connections, and expand their career options and business opportunities. Scholars who research international migration and family often emphasize how familial ties multiply the number of migrants by encouraging, supporting, and sponsoring family members to go abroad (Garip 2017; Massey et al. 1999), findings that hold in China (Liang and Morooka 2004).

Yet these two strands of research have not thoroughly analyzed the mechanisms through which such families *prevent* family members from going abroad even before they apply for a visa or take other steps necessary to know whether the government of the migrant-destination society will permit them or not to migrate. How do families discourage and reduce the number of people who travel and migrate to other countries? This article focuses on cases of parents opposing their children's migration, providing evidence of how in the context of a strong tradition of filial piety and paternalistic influence many children give up their migratory aspirations when confronted with their parents' concerns over (1) the physical-cultural-linguistic survival of their child, (2) competing economic priorities, and (3) societal norms about life-course expectations. I focus on one of the least likely cases one would expect to observe such a phenomenon — a subprovincial region of China that for much of the past 40 years had a relatively high rate of emigration and what one anthropological study conceptualized as a “culture of migration” (Chu 2010). I contribute to the abundant research about those who overcame family opposition and the role of family in facilitating migration with negative cases of people deterred by family members from migrating, enriching our understanding of how families limit the amount of international migration and mobility.

This study is not about the general population of mainland China, but Chinese adults residing in southeastern Fujian Province in mainland China during 2016–2017 who aspired to migrate or travel abroad but whose families opposed and successfully prevented them from doing so. This subpopulation is different from those in most other regions of mainland China because it has historically had a relatively higher volume of out-migration and especially of unauthorized migration. Due to this long-standing culture of migration, a randomly sampled resident of this region is much more likely to have desired or considered emigrating than a randomly sampled resident in most other provinces from which much fewer people have emigrated. At an intraprovincial level, calculations from 2010 National Census data (Figure 1) produced by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of China suggests that of the 83 counties in Fujian, around 65.2 percent of its emigrants came from four geographically contiguous counties and county-level cities where I focus my field research, a bit lower than the 74 percent that Liang and Morooka (2004) found a decade before. By 1995 and 2000, the Fujianese accounted for 28.05 percent and 17.6 percent of the 236,800 and 756,626 emigrants from China, respectively, with even Shanghai trailing it at 15.25 percent and 5.66 percent, respectively. This subnational context, therefore, constitutes one of the *least likely* cases in China where one would expect to observe family deterring a family member from going abroad. However, to externally validate my results and show such dynamics I discover here operate elsewhere, I also collected 20 oral history interviews and narratives of familial opposition to migration in other provinces from diverse Chinese social media channels (e.g., Douban (豆瓣), Xiaohongshu (小红书), Hupu (虎扑), Weibo (微博), and Zhihu (知乎)) with historically lower out-migration provinces like Hebei and Inner Mongolia and even metropolitan centers of China like Hangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of emigrants from different counties and county-level cities in Fujian Province, 2010 population census of Fujian Province.

## Prior Research on How Family Increases and Reduces Migration and Shapes Migrant Selectivity With Respect to Gender

Traditional theories of how familial ties structure migration have emphasized how such ties facilitate migration via family reunification provisions in immigration policies that allow migrants to sponsor family members for immigrant visas. Family plays an important role in amplifying the number of people who migrate regardless of whether such scholars conceptualize people migrating due to an individual family member's desire to maximize its utility by migrating (neo-classical models), an endeavor by the family to insure their collective material welfare in the migrant-origin country (new economic models of migration), or a wish to maintain transnational community ties (social networks and cumulative causation) (Massey et al. 1999; Garip 2017). The feasibility of migration notably also often depends upon non-migrants in the community like grandparents left behind who provide care for grandchildren and others in the community, enabling others to go abroad (Yarris 2017). Parents also sometimes actively and intentionally raise their children, investing both money, social capital, and norms in their children so they are prepared for a life of studying and working abroad (Tong, Persons, and Harris 2019).

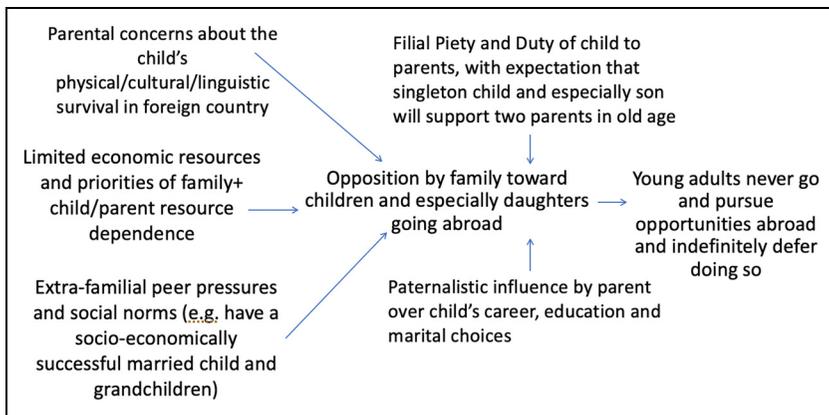
The above theories have all exhibited a “mobility bias” (Schewel 2020) in stressing how the family increases migration rather than constrains it. Yet the design of most “nonimmigrant” or temporary visas — which require demonstrating solid, binding ties to their society to be granted a nonimmigrant visa — implies that social ties like those of family play a gravitational role in tying people to their migrant-origin society, reducing migration and structuring selectivity. Even within contexts that

scholars have described as possessing a “culture of migration”, families maintain the continuity of many traditional norms and highly gendered cultural roles that discourage women from going abroad and stigmatizing men who do not (Chu 2010). Often the social ties of family members also function as a form of “family capital” that consists of valuable resources like connections, socioeconomic status, civic virtues, reciprocity, and trust transmitted across generations that can ensure the continuity of a family’s class (Prandini 2014) and that are only valuable locally or are more valuable locally than they are abroad. Many aspiring young adult migrants would reasonably not be willing to risk sacrificing such valuable capital by going abroad if their family opposes this, particularly if they are too embedded in societal norms like collectivism/familialism and constrained by traditions like parental paternalism and filial piety (孝顺, xiàoshùn) .

Filial piety is a traditional obligation of youth to obey and care for their parents. This is easier to do if they live nearby. This obligation remains prevalent (Hu and Scott 2016) in “neo-familial” societies (Yan 2010), even if parents with higher levels of education and living in more urbanized areas now may more likely renegotiate “filial expectations” (Croll 2006; Shi 2009; Wang 2004). Many Chinese elders and young immigrant adults also draw on traditions of filial piety to justify sponsoring their parents for immigrant visas, having parents in migrant-origin societies send “reverse remittances” for a down payment on a house in the migrant-destination country, and engaging in seasonal and circular migration (Ran and Liu 2023; Liu and Ran 2022). One powerful example of filial piety is how young women after learning an unmarried partner impregnated them and realizing their parents would refuse their desire to shotgun marry the father, clandestinely or with the approval of parents have an abortion, reasoning that “intergenerational ties more enduring and reliable than ties between intimate partners” (Lai and Choi 2021, 1).

Parents also often set these expectations by strongly influencing and cultivating even their adult children’s career, education, residential, and marital choices (Choi and Luo 2016). The filial piety of children and the strong influence of parents jointly bolsters and intensifies the power of parental decisions to deter their children from going abroad, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Chinese traditional kinship norms of patrilocality and patrilineality suggest that parents more strongly sanction sons for marrying outside their ethnic group and hometown than daughters (Yan 2010). Sons in China have been historically responsible for providing financial, emotional, and physical support to Chinese parents, who often invest almost twice as much in sons than daughters (Ho 2017). Familial pressures also prevent men from marrying a woman with whom they develop romantic relationships outside their hometown because parents insist their sons must compromise in marrying a woman that lives near them, or they will not pass down to them the wealth that the men often need to buy a home and hold a wedding (Choi and Peng 2016). However, decades of the one-child policy have recently challenged these conventions by making a sole daughter the only descendant and arguably the sole source of social security. This both raises parent’s investment in daughters (Fong



**Figure 2.** Modeling Chinese family ties as a deterrent to family members going abroad.

2011) and makes a daughter's place of residence more consequential for contemporary Chinese parents than in earlier more patrilocal periods.

When young adults go abroad, research suggests they “no longer need to play the role set up by others.” They feel freer from stifling cultural constraints and norms, become more independent, and come to learn about and understand new cultures and alternative ways of living (Huang 2022, 340). Due to this, families concerned about children maintaining these roles and their ties might understandably oppose their children from going abroad. Following the traditional patrilocal kinship system, Asian male immigrants in some societies like the United States are likelier to reside with their parents than female immigrants (Qian 2012; Qian and Qian 2019; Wang 2019). Gruijters and Ermisch (2019) found that Chinese parents also doubt their daughters migrating within China will continue to support them, despite empirical evidence to the contrary (Xie and Zhu 2009). Women who go abroad are more likely than men to immigrate into another society through marriage because many Asian women dislike the “traditional Asian male role” of adhering to less egalitarian values (Kitano et al. 1984). In contrast, Asian men abroad find it more challenging to compete with native-born men for dates (Kao, Balistreri, and Joyner 2018). In the United States, partnerships between Asian women and non-Asian men are also more frequent than between Asian men and non-Asian women (Yang and Bohm-Jordan 2018). They are likelier to last longer (Bratter and King 2008). In addition to these relational bonds, women, once they go abroad, are also more likely to wish to immigrate than men because they purchase durable goods and furnishings for their family that materially tie them more to their new country of residence (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991). Due to the above, although Chinese parents would have reason to be concerned about sons going abroad and not returning to support them, those with daughters may therefore have heightened fears that if they allow her to go abroad, they will devote

more emotional and financial attention and resources to a distant “family of affiliation” into which they will marry than their ancestrally related “family of orientation” (Parsons 1943) in China. This can jeopardize the parents’ primary source of income as they age.

Furthermore, due to persisting female disadvantage in China’s labor markets and their potential higher gain in earnings abroad relative to men (Meng 2012), parents may believe that overseas educational investment in their daughter will yield lower domestic economic returns than sons and women after going abroad would be more motivated to settle down and immigrate. Parents also may be more concerned about their daughters’ physical and sexual safety in a foreign, unfamiliar country than that of their sons, particularly if the local media instills fears about how dangerous migration and the migrant-destination societies are (Gerard and Pickering 2014). Finally, as noted earlier, Chinese parents often reflect society’s attitudes due to societal pressures from others in their community who would criticize them if their children did not follow cultural conventions. For example, in China parents of gay and lesbian children who know of their child’s sexual orientation sometimes encourage them to performatively/nominally marry an opposite-sex non-heterosexual friend and even bear and raise a child together so the parents do not suffer stigma in their socially conservative, heteronormative community (Choi and Luo 2016).

Understandings of mobility and immobility are different for men and women (Angulo-Pasel 2018) in terms of survival (Brigden 2018), providing emancipatory life-changing opportunities, or maintaining a respectable, gendered reputation in society (Galam 2017). Even if some more independent-minded women selectively go abroad to escape patriarchal societies (Jackson 1984), demographic research also has shown that common traits of highly patriarchal societies — low educational levels, early marriage and childbearing, and a social stigma toward divorce — deter women more than men from going abroad (Kanaiaupuni 2000). Consequently, women often tactfully persuade their family they need to migrate to fulfill traditional gendered roles rather than openly speak of their own personal desires and goals (Paul 2015).

Institutional-historical factors accentuate such cultural dynamics. China’s decades-long one-child policy increased the educational, emotional, and financial resources parents devote to their singleton child — especially daughters (Lee 2012) — and expectations of reciprocal obligatory care the child owes to their parents. Due to China’s weak welfare provisions, the elderly often cannot afford to stay in high-quality (private) care homes (Zhan, Feng, and Luo 2008). Ninety percent of the elderly rely on their family to care for them, with not only norms and shaming but also some laws obligating and motivating adult children to care for their elders (Xiang 2012).

Parents may also prefer to prioritize resources for purposes other than facilitating a child’s migration. Due to parents’ unilateral executive control over household finances and the resource dependence of the child upon the parent, parents often

decide ahead of time that their child will not go abroad in their early adult life by how they invest in their education, purchase a home (Davis 2010), or assist their children in obtaining a job (Lin 2018), giving parents leverage with which they can determine the international mobility of children (Choi and Luo 2016). This enables parents to veto the migration of adult children who lack the capital to finance going abroad. Research also shows how for many aging Chinese parents having adult children abroad can become a burden because the parents will feel obligated to provide their children money in the form of gifts, financial support, pooling financial resources, and investments as their adult children socio-economically struggle to immigrate and settle down (Ran and Liu 2023).

Finally, prior research also shows how within a culturally collectivist society, parents confront societal pressure to meet the expectations of others (Tong, Persons, and Harris 2019). Although this can further motivate some parents to encourage and prepare their child to migrate abroad, especially in a context of intense competition, if the above countervailing concerns are prevalent this can also result in stronger peer pressure for parents to oppose their only child from going abroad.

Figure 2 above is a diagram of the analytical framework of how concerns about the child's survival, limited economic resources, and peer pressures — bolstered and intensified by both filial piety of the child and the paternalistic influence parents exercise over a child's important life decisions — can lead to parents to oppose and successfully prevent their adult child from traveling and migrating abroad. This framework suggests that both cultural traditions and contemporary social changes in China can result in reduced international migration and mobility of young Chinese people in gendered ways if parents have reasons to oppose their child going abroad. This calls for research about how family members can deter international migration and mobility of young people rather than facilitating and magnifying it as emphasized by prior research and how this may structure migrant selectivity and stratify migration in terms of gender and other dimensions of social inequality.

## Data and Methods

I collected interview data from 61 adult children, their parents, and grandparents in Fuqing, Fuzhou, and Changle municipalities in the southeastern corner of Fujian province during 2016 and 2017 based upon an ethics protocol approved by UCLA's Institutional Review Board. During the past 30 years, this region has had a high rate of out-migration based upon a strong "culture of migration" and a regional evasion of the government's decade-long one-child policy (Chu 2010). Based on the two-step aspiration-ability model (Carling and Schewel 2018), I sampled individuals who expressed *aspirations* to go abroad but who did not apply for a visa because of opposition from their parents. This builds upon prior research on how individual-level socioeconomic constraints result in involuntary immobility (Carling 2002). I

also do not limit my analysis to those who claim to have a specific motive for going abroad, like labor migration (Massey et al. 1999; Garip 2017), since women migrants disclose other private reasons for going abroad other than maximizing income (Paul 2015).

I included anyone in the sample if they identified or someone else identified them as someone who aspired but could not go abroad due to opposition from their family or if they were a family member of such an individual. I excluded anyone who had no interest in going abroad, had no one in the family with such an interest, had faced no opposition from their family, or whose parents were dead. Referrals were advantageous because I found Chinese individuals deterred from migrating are often embarrassed or concerned about “losing face” by admitting that they aspired to go abroad but did not do so. This sample does not aim to be empirically representative of any population but instead to theoretically capture the general mechanisms of how familial pressures discourage young adults from going abroad. However, participants comprised a broad cross-section of society in terms of class, including business managers, factory workers, college-educated professionals, retired seniors, and secretaries. I define people as socioeconomic working-class (middle-class or upper-class) if they have below (above) average assets, education, and income, relative to the median citizen in the society. My final sample included around two-thirds of women and one-third of men. I include sociodemographic descriptive statistics of my sample in Supplemental Table A1.

Since I was concerned about my positionality and inducing social desirability bias by interviewees as a White American man, I had Peng Huang, a Chinese male undergraduate research assistant (RA) from Fujian, conduct open-ended interviews for those participants ( $N=42$ ) who said they would be more comfortable in doing so with him. Participants seemed more comfortable with Peng than me if they had never been abroad, had a lower-than-average formal education, or had less experience interacting with foreigners. I arranged to have adult children and their parents interview away from each other so they could speak as candidly as possible about matters they often felt very differently and strongly about. Like previous researchers who have sampled the views of multiple generations about a complex phenomenon to understand better how intergenerational relations have developed over time (Liu and Ran 2022), I found interviews with both adult children, their parents, and even some grandparents yielded a more multiperspectival understanding of how many never go abroad due to family dynamics. One can access a complete list of standard questions in the supplementary materials.

I engaged in a purposive sampling<sup>1</sup> that strategically aimed to gain the specific perspectives of both children and their parents and grandparents on why

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<sup>1</sup>Purposive sampling refers to a group of nonprobability sampling techniques in which a field researcher selects the units because they have traits that are similar to the target population they wish to study.

family members oppose other members from going abroad. Specifically, I sampled such individuals by (1) randomly approaching individuals in public places like cafes and restaurants within these high-emigration areas, (2) snow-ball sampling based on some familial contacts of Peng who had resided in the area for a long time, and (3) recruiting eligible individuals or contacts of individuals in whose home I stayed during the field research and contacted through online platforms for procuring accommodation. The respective weaknesses and strengths of different sampling strategies complement each other. Going through my RA's contacts and relations offered trust from participants and access to otherwise inaccessible institutional spaces like factories and community centers, and those individuals who answered my request to let us stay in their home provided me opportunities to directly observe their living conditions and child-parent interactions. Randomly approaching individuals in public added a sample that was more representative of the population than the other two approaches; however, my interactions with these participants were less rich in ethnographic observations than the other two approaches. I also periodically inspected the data and adaptively and reflexively sampled individuals I noticed were underrepresented in our data set, like older or low-income individuals. Interviews and observations occurred in diverse contexts like factories, homes, canteens, offices, ancestral shrines, shopping malls, swimming pools, community centers for the elderly, and taxis. Interviews solicited information about the interviewees' history of parent-child relations, attitudes of different family members toward going abroad, socioeconomic constraints, extrafamilial pressures of a parent's peers and community, and to what extent the child had become financially independent of their parents.

I had interviews and focus groups transcribed into Mandarin with noteworthy nonverbal signs (e.g., sighs, laughs). I then translated the transcripts into English based on semantic meaning. I took an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012) in first coding my interview data regarding the themes that have emerged from prior research — concerns about safety, resource dependence, and extrafamilial pressures — yet later allowing surprising research evidence from fieldwork to enable me to recursively build new hypotheses and theories leading to the collection of new evidence. An abductive approach was appropriate because often surprising evidence emerged through a process of reflexively comparing complementary and contrasting types of data collected by both the positionality of myself as an outsider to this community and that of Peng who was a relative insider. To further develop my theoretical framework, I also revisited the field site to resample from it and re-interview previous participants a year later, textually recorded observations to defamiliarize myself with the research phenomenon, and “cased” my data through the prism of different theories and dialogue with local interlocutors and scholars at conferences and workshops. Given the social sensitivity of the phenomenon I was researching, I use pseudonyms for informants to preserve anonymity and do not disclose details about them that ethically compromise guarantees of confidentiality.

## Findings

### *The Role of Filial Piety and Paternalistic Influence in Strengthening Gendered Deterrence*

Although participants had clear aspirations to go abroad, filial piety and parents' influence over their adult children's lives jointly played a strong role in bolstering and strengthening the force of parental authority and, therefore, the ability of parents to prevent their children from both traveling and migrating abroad. Of those interviewed, 49 either mentioned filial piety or alluded to it. Ai, a 24-year-old single male salesman, evoked this reciprocal norm of filial piety when he said:

There's a motto in Chinese: When ones parents are still alive, one should not travel far away (父母在, 不远游 Fùmǔ zài, bù yuǎn yóu). As a child, it's hard for our parents to raise us. Being away from them when they are old is not a good idea. I wish if they have any problem when I'm at work, they can call me and we go back to their side. Or if I'm in a bad mood, I can go back home whenever I like.

Like many young adults in mainland China, Ai recognized the tremendous sacrifice his parents had made in raising him, given that he was the only child the government would allow them to have. When he was younger and more vulnerable and in need of their care to survive, his parents reliably nurtured him and ensured he had all his needs met. As they aged and needed more care, based upon traditional Confucian ethical principles of filial piety, he therefore felt obligated to care for them, and this would be difficult if he lived far away from them.

Parents would frequently frame this filial piety in utilitarian terms of "being useful." For example, one mother in her forties noted how even if her daughters went abroad to visit their husbands, they would always come back because in her words, "We have several old people were here to be taken care of. They had filial piety. They could have stayed in Japan to live their lives, but they remained in China and took care of elder people. My daughters were useful people." When she used the word "useful," she meant that they performed the proper socially sanctioned role they were culturally obligated to play within the traditional system of Confucian ethics.

Two daughters I interviewed also evoked this notion of being "useful," but more critically, indicating resistance. For example, Qi, a 26-year-old middle-class female marketer, noted how they believed their parents pressured them to remain in China, marry, and give them a grandchild because their parents did not know what else to do with their lives, and caring for a grandchild would make them feel "useful." She explained, "They want to feel useful to someone else. I tell my dad, you are not useless to me; you are everything to me. I do not think of myself as using my parents any more than they think of using me." In this way, the tradition of filial piety sets up a recurring cycle of reciprocal expectations between generations

that adult children will be nearby so they also can be “useful” in caring for both their aging parents and a child in the same way that their parents had paternalistically cared for them and their parents.. This strong societal expectation and obligation of reciprocal care prevented some young adults like Qi from pursuing their own post-materialist aspirations to go abroad and gain more distance and independence from their parents, like her desire to backpack around the world and complete a master’s degree abroad.

In contrast, participants described how their parents viewed going abroad as “useless.” Luo, a female 32-year-old middle-class state-owned enterprise employee, ruefully reflected, “My mother put it euphemistically: Going abroad is a waste of money, and it is useless. So I gave up, and every time I think about it, I feel very uncomfortable and regretful.” Although she confessed that she “always dreamed of studying abroad since I was a child,” her parents had persuaded her that doing so would be impious. Accompanying filial piety is the enormous influence parents exercise over their child’s life, even into adulthood. One young 22-year-old man, Liu, described how he attended one of China’s top universities and majored in economics in addition to sociology not because he thought the university was particularly good or found economics interesting, but because the university had a higher ranking than many other universities that admitted him and his parents believed he could earn a higher income with a degree in economics. A 22-year-old middle-class Starbucks barista, Ye, also described how she was studying a subject only because her parents preferred her to do so. “In China, you do not have free will to do anything you like. In other countries, students can have a gap year after graduating high school, and they can do whatever they want. But in southern China, you can’t follow your heart.” Many female participants also spoke of how they were unable to embark on the career that they desired or marry their boyfriend because their parents did not approve of him — all corroborating evidence of the strong influence parents exercise over adult children’s lives.

Female child interviewees (23) more often described themselves as feeling constrained by their familial attachment to their parents than male interviewees (11). However, female interviewees also seemed more open than male interviewees to acknowledging and discussing it. A 25-year-old working-class female participant, Min, when asked why she did not travel to another country after expressing her wish to do so, replied:

We must be together, even if you feel like a foreigner while living with your parents. We Chinese people will always stay together throughout life until death. Your feelings for your mother and father will be deep. Many young Chinese ask, must I live with them if I love my mother and father? If you live with them, you will want to fly away. But it is impossible to separate from your parents completely.

Min’s words expressed an ambivalent dialectical tension between how young adults seemed simultaneously to desire to attain autonomy and distance from their parents

but also to be close to them and fulfill their filial duties. Filial piety ultimately led her to remain near her parents and not move away as she personally wished to do. Some participants more explicitly expressed how they suspected their parents did not want them to go abroad due to concerns that no one else would take care of them later. A 24-year-old single working-class male plastic factory laborer, Liang, believed his parents never permitted him to go abroad to study because he had no siblings: “My parents do not want me to live far away from them, so they will not allow me to go abroad because they want me to visit them frequently.” He found it extremely awkward to continue talking to them about his desire to go overseas, even though he frequently would discuss this with his friends.

The joint traditions of filial piety and a parent’s strong paternalistic influence, however, bolster and intensify the importance of several distinct reasons that parents opposed their children going abroad: (1) doubts about whether their children would physically, culturally, or linguistically survive life in a foreign country, (2) how parents prioritized limited economic resources in a context of parent-child economic resource dependence, and (3) the peer pressures parents regularly confront in society. These reasons — derived from the very different generational and social positions of parents and children — were common reasons that parents gave for reducing the international migratory and travel opportunities of children.

### *Concerns about a Child’s Physical Safety, Culture, and Language*

Since most of the children I interviewed were an only child or singleton due to the one-child policy of China, most parents were extremely concerned about the success, well-being, and survival of that child. Also, since many parents grew up when opportunities to migrate from mainland China to other countries were much more limited due to a lack of financial resources, parents had developed a very different understanding of the world outside of China and the feasibility of going abroad than their children. A minority of parents had migrated abroad to engage in working-class manual labor during the 1980s and 1990s. Such memories made many of them (correctly or incorrectly) presume that their children would engage in similar work. If such is the case, they would likely view daughters migrating abroad more negatively than sons migrating, regardless of educational level. I found both adult children (7) and parents (8) more often reported concern about daughters’ safety in going abroad than concern about a sons’ safety. Du, a 23-year-old computer programmer, suspected that her parents’ anxiety about her safety was partly a joint product of an information vacuum about foreign countries and how parents more tended to consume state-run media news that emphasized the tremendous dangers of foreign societies relative to how safe China was:

Because China blocks information from foreign countries, the information they receive about foreign countries is very negative. They hear many news stories about how girls are often shot and killed with guns. This makes them think that foreign countries are

dangerous places, but China is safe — when their information about foreign countries is quite limited.

The Great Firewall of China blocked parents' access to many alternative sources of information on the internet that came from outside of China. Climbing over this Firewall in cyberspace and accessing such information from outside of China required a virtual proxy server (VPN), which many parents lacked and some did not even know about. Older parent interviewees often stressed the grave disadvantages their adult children would confront abroad due to widespread "racism," "bullying," and them not living among "their kind of people." They often cited news stories in the state-owned media about hate crimes committed against Chinese people, mass shootings in schools, and other types of less violent forms of racial and ethnic discrimination and exploitation Chinese people confronted.

Parents were more likely to accept alternative information about other countries if they directly obtained it from other family or acquaintances who had been abroad. For example, a middle-class father of Chun initially opposed his 18-year-old daughter's wish to study abroad based on the views of his peers. However, he later traveled to Britain to visit his brother and toured the United States alone. He concluded from these trips and his conversation with his brother that the United States was too dangerous for his daughter due to its frequent mass shootings and "excessive freedom" of its citizens. Yet he reasoned that Britain was safe enough for her. As Lin, a 23-year-old female working-class financier, put it, "If we have relatives abroad, they will feel more at ease [with me going abroad]." Unfortunately, in Lin's case, most of her relatives also opposed her going abroad despite her repeated failed attempts to do so.

Some parents (3) revealed a fear of how they worried that if their child went abroad, they might fall susceptible to the influence of others that would persuade them to stay abroad. Chen, Lin's divorced mother, disclosed something Lin had not told us in her interview with us. A student from the United States, infatuated with her, had promised to help her come to the US to complete a master's degree. Chen recalled, "I was worried that the boy was also quite handsome. He was 28 then, and my daughter was only 21 when she was just studying... I don't like it... Our family objected to her going out (*laughs*), and she didn't go after that... No (*slightly louder, resolute*), my daughter listened to me very much. I said no and she stopped dating (*smiling smugly*)" Even though Lin was then an adult finishing college, she deferred to her mother's judgment on this matter and did not pursue going abroad.

Many former migrant parent interviewees had a hard time imagining how their child — having grown up under much more affluent material conditions and having more leisure time than their parents had when they were the same age — could "eat bitterness" (吃苦, chīkǔ) to the extent that they had, even after their children would try to persuade their parents how an "overseas experience" would make them more independent, mature, and successful. Several parents (3) asserted that

young people are no longer future-oriented enough to endure hardship. As the middle-class 36-year-old male lawyer Zhu said, “The younger generation just wants to have fun and enjoy life. They do not want to spend their youth in some miserable basement in New York City.” Zhu’s relatively higher socioeconomic status did not make him more inclined to encourage his son to go abroad because he worried migrating would endanger his son’s current class status in China. Parents who were affluent enough to own a home recognize that they can more easily provide for their children’s basic needs in China than abroad, where their children often would have to pay a relatively higher rent. Given the relatively substantially higher cost of housing abroad, this also gave parents much leverage.

Most parent interviewees, having grown up when they had fewer opportunities to go abroad, also perceived the cultural distance between China and foreign countries as greater than their children did. This led them to fear that their child would be more likely to run into trouble or be unable to find help. For example, Chun’s father, Bo, expressed a lack of confidence in his daughter’s ability to perform simple tasks like doing their laundry, cooking, or cleaning because when she lived at home, he and her mother had encouraged her to focus on schoolwork and did not require her to do chores. Although parents treated their sons in the same way, parents in the interviews never raised such concerns regarding their sons or would explain why they think women were worse at independently cleaning, cooking, and washing clothes than men. In fact, parents were more supportive of sons confronting new challenges, learning to do new things on their own, and living independently than daughters. I found this especially true at an ancestral hall in a low-income village on the outskirts of Fuqing, from where many had emigrated. Interviewees echoed each other’s belief that their sons should venture out into the world to “temper” themselves — usually only after finishing high school or vocational school — though they firmly agreed that women should “stay home”.

Many parents were also skeptical about whether their child could adapt to a very different education system after many years of being in the Chinese educational system, which was more familiar to them and was simpler for them to understand because it mainly only emphasized rote memorization of lots of information to prepare to score high in highly competitive exams. As one father put it after acknowledging that the job prospects of his son would be better in China if he studied abroad, “I don’t want him to start from the very beginning.” Foreign educational systems were different enough from China’s system that many parents believed their son or daughter would confront enough difficulties in adjusting to the new system that they would perform more poorly abroad than they would within China’s system.

Parents and elders who heard about foreigners abroad ethnically and racially discriminating against and marginalizing Chinese people also worried that their children would not succeed in foreign labor markets and acculturate into the mainstream culture of other countries. Ling, a 79-year-old middle-class chairwoman of her community’s senior citizen board, described how if her grandchildren went abroad, they would be “staying in an enclave with those uneducated Chinese people... The

language barrier, the eating habits, and economic constraints will stop them from assimilating into the middle class in the US.” Overall, fathers more frequently mentioned such cultural and language barriers for going abroad than mothers did, suggesting that fathers perceived these obstacles as more daunting than mothers.

Reports by return migrants in low-income and high-income areas of these cities seemed to influence many older parents and community members, who sometimes were familiar with the difficulties that acquaintances confronted while they were abroad many decades ago and presumed their children would encounter similar hardships. Parents worried such cultural obstacles would also impede their child’s upward socioeconomic mobility outside China. Gen, a 47-year-old middle-class marketer, described how he opposed his daughter going to the United States because he believed that over there “it would be very hard to enter the upper class, though it is easy to enter the middle class. In contrast, here it is easier to get into the upper class.” In his view, “to open a business” or “be very successful in the United States, you must be very creative and have high technical skills like excellent knowledge of electronics. Otherwise, you can only work and save money to invest in China.” Several fathers, like Gen, viewed studying abroad as possibly jeopardizing their’s child class status in China.

Some parents even revealed in their discourse how nationalism drove their desire to oppose their child going abroad, regardless of their ability. Ping, a 38-year-old upper-class male logistic manager, explained:

If my child is not talented, then he is useless, and it does not matter where he goes anyway! But if he is talented, he should contribute to *his* country. So for all the next generations in my family, I firmly forbid them from going abroad! Second, money abroad is not necessarily easier to earn than in China. Third, life in China is more comfortable than it is in other countries! Now when many people go abroad, they are just money-making machines. They have no sense of responsibility or mission! (*loudly bellows, violently pounding his office desk*).

Ping’s view was that foreigners would not recognize the humanity of his child. Furthermore, in his view, for his child to go abroad would amount to a betrayal of China, the society that had raised him and toward which he should remain loyal and patriotically serve.

The above cases also reflect how decision-making about socioeconomic constraints was also often gendered and hierarchical. The patriarchal opinions of the father weigh far more than the mother’s opinions in the family. As Zhu, a 28-year-old middle-class saleswoman, expressed, “Even if my mother supported me in going abroad, the final decision was really up to my father.” The way parents — and particularly fathers—anticipated foreign societies posed too much danger and cultural-linguistic challenges for their children to be successful contrasted with the relatively more abundant and secure economic opportunities their parents

knew they would have in China. This was consequential due to how dependent young adults were on the economic resources of their parents to go abroad.

### *Socioeconomic Constraints and Resource Dependency of Children upon Parents*

Parents' control over the family's economic resources enabled them to veto and deny their child opportunities to go abroad if they thought the family's scarce financial resources would be better invested or spent in other ways. Due to economic resource dependency on their parents, young people would often defer to the judgment of their parents. For example, the 18-year-old male student Xiang lived in a large, opulent home built by his parents who had already arduously worked as unauthorized migrants in Japan's restaurants for many years. While I stayed in his home, Xiang spent much of his time studying for China's hypercompetitive college entrance exam so that he could enter a prestigious Chinese university. Xiang noted, "My mother says she will not give me money to go abroad, and she has the money. I must earn it." Xiang's mother told us she wanted to inculcate a work ethic in Xiang. Still, she rejected the idea that he should "temper" himself through hard labor abroad in the way she had for many years as an undocumented waitress in Tokyo. She did not want him to go through what she had, believing he would have a more comfortable and risk-free life in China if he took a job in a state-owned enterprise or as a civil servant. The prospect of losing a considerable inheritance motivated Xiang to respect his parents' wishes for him to remain in China and study hard to attain a more stable career than his parents had.

Many parents believed that finding a satisfactory job domestically was relatively easy compared to countries abroad due to China's economic growth. They noted how domestic properties had soared in value and the exchange rate of China's yuan to the currency of most affluent migrant-destination countries had increased so that people who labored abroad often earned only a bit more than or the same as well-paid white-collar employees in China, especially after adjusting for the difference in the cost of living. For young people who wanted to study abroad, many only wanted to go to the most famous universities they heard about, which were often the most expensive. A 27-year-old male engineer, Yuan, described how, "At first, my parents wanted me to go out abroad, but after [a foreign university] admitted me, they learned how high the tuition fees were. That led them to quickly change their mind. So at that time, I had to put studying abroad aside. There is no way to continue my life abroad." Although children would often stress in interviews how the decision to study abroad was a collective family decision, such cases revealed in practice that whether an adult child studies abroad ultimately became their parents' decision.

Many parents notably seemed to primarily value foreign education for its potential economic returns, rather than its other non-material benefits discovered by social scientists. Several parents saw more profitable investments in the country than

education for their children. Deng, a 31-year-old middle-class man who wanted to study abroad, recalled, “My family could have raised the money for me to study in Britain, but they invested in coal mining, so this thing was put off.” When the author asked why parents did not take out loans to finance their child’s foreign college education as many parents in the US and other Western countries do, parents frequently noted how they found borrowing money for their child to study abroad risky because of the long payback period and the uncertainty of securing a sufficiently lucrative job in the labor market abroad.

Children also seemed acutely aware of such socioeconomic constraints and their resource dependence from interviews. Li, a young female financier from a working-class background, expressed guilt over how the study she desired to undertake overseas would impose a substantial financial burden on her parents. She also noted that many young people might be far less inclined to go abroad if their parents were wealthy enough in China to provide them with social insurance, assistance in finding a job, and assets like an extra house, which often parents would offer to their child with the expectations that they will remain in the country, marry, and bear them grandchildren. Children often took initiative by proactively researching the costs of going abroad. Su discovered that she alone could not afford an agent she required to assist her in applying for a working holiday in New Zealand. “When I thought about how long I would take to save up enough money, I realized that the economic pressure I would take on would be intolerable.” As much as she desired to ask her parents for financial assistance, she continually suppressed the desire to do so, knowing that they would certainly refuse and that this would only damage the rapport between them and her. Even though Su tried to let go of this desire to venture outside of China and disregard it as unrealistic, she also remained frustrated with herself for not having the resources to pursue this opportunity.

Once children realized they needed their parents’ financial support, a few adult — more often daughters than sons — would do all they could to demonstrate themselves as deserving of that support. Ye, the 22-year-old middle-class Starbucks barista dreamed of studying dental medicine in Australia. She studied hard to score high on an English proficiency exam to convince her father to permit her to study abroad, which he thought was a waste of time. She explained how, “He does not like to hear you say what you want; he wants to see that you can do it.” Although Ye initially thought she had secured their support and had been fantasizing and early looking forward to studying abroad, when she tried to pay for her tuition with her mother’s bank card, she discovered to her horror that the account had insufficient funds. Rather than setting the money aside for her education as promised, her mother invested in risky stocks and lost most of the family’s money when the stock market plummeted. Although Ye believed that a foreign professional degree would be a much more profitable investment in the long run for the entire family than the stock market, she realized then that her parents had different priorities than she did

and that she could no longer rely on them and so she took a job working at Starbucks to become more independent.

A lack of moral or emotional support from their parents was another reason twelve women described as a reason they ultimately gave up hope of ever going abroad. After giving up the invitation by the American to do a free master's degree in the US, Lin believed that studying in Germany would be a wise decision because many in her field of international trade studied there but she again gave up doing so for reasons revealed in an interview:

Lin (L): "If my parents would just support me, I might still go abroad to study."

I: "What was the main reason they objected to you going abroad?"

L: "I am a girl (*grimaces*)—they didn't say that, but they think girls do not need to go abroad to study. They think that girls should marry early and that there is no need to continue their studies. It is also dangerous to go outside alone. They will be worried because they are too far away. If my family doesn't support me, I can't have enough money to go abroad."

Lin had tried to persuade her divorced and culturally conservative mother, Chen, that studying in Germany was more financially feasible than in other Western countries because the universities were free if students became fluent in German. Lin presumed that her mother's opposition was due to the considerable projected expense of 200,000 RMB (~US\$31,000) in living expenses. She explained, "I gave my mom a lower cost estimate, but she still would not agree." Eventually, Chen persuaded Lin to prepare for the civil service exam. Lin gave up studying German. Without her mother's emotional or financial support, this seemed too steep of an intellectual investment for her.

This gendered opposition to daughters going abroad appears to decline for some children and especially daughters as they grew older and become financially more independent. For example, 39-year-old upper-class Lei recalled how when she was in school, her parents were wealthy enough to pay an annual US\$40,000 tuition for studying at a US college. However, shortly after the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the New York City World Trade Center—which raised concerns for her father about the safety of her going to the US—her father refused to sign a form required by her study program, telling her it would be too expensive and she would never return if she went abroad for 3 years. Yet after she married and worked for the family's luxury wallpaper company for a year, her father permitted her to go on a business trip to Germany to build their clientele base for exports of their products. When she reached her late thirties, she had built up substantial financial assets of her own and became a mother, and her parents not only did not oppose her moving to the United States but were willing to move there with her since "they saw it as a sacrifice for my daughter's future education." Lei and other cases like hers illustrate how age and financial independence over time decreased parental opposition toward daughters going abroad due to a lack of socioeconomic resources.

### *Extrafamilial Peer Pressure and Societal Norms*

A final important factor that prevents parents from allowing their children to go abroad is the extrafamilial peer pressure that parents would confront when interacting with their peers. Many parents repeatedly mentioned how their peers would regularly inquire about what university their child attended, their job (a proxy for salary and socioeconomic status), whether they were married, and when they would have children. Twelve perceptive adult children also recognized that their parents were “open-minded” about them going abroad but probably feared “losing face” and would be deeply ashamed in the eyes of their peers if their children did not achieve these important milestones by a certain age. This is how they accounted for the anxiety-inducing, intense pressure their parents placed upon them to achieve them.

Many parents considered migration to abnormally interfere with or even derail what many described as “the normal way of life,” which meant obtaining a well-paying job, purchasing a home, marrying, and birthing and raising children by certain age deadlines. The pressure to marry was particularly intense for daughters, who many in China believed would become unmarriageable after 30 and, therefore, not likely to bear children. In the words of one 25-year-old daughter who explained why she and her peers gave up the idea of going abroad, “Many parents don’t want their children to study abroad, especially the parents of girls. They are afraid that she will remain unmarried going abroad.” Hence, parents’ opposition to their only child migrating often derived from parents’ fear that their child would lose a small age-specific window of opportunity they had to marry and have grandchildren.

This societal pressure was even more intense and fraught for women than men. For example, Du, the middle-class 27-year-old female computer programmer, described how her parent’s neighbors would gossip and speak poorly of her parents because Du was single and she felt ashamed at how much being unmarried greatly damaged their reputation among their peers in their community. She expressed feeling conflicted between her profound unhappiness with living in China and feeling sorry for her parents. The parents of Du also insisted that she take a job in a state-owned enterprise, from which it was harder for her to switch jobs than for many peers who worked in private companies. She confessed that she was miserable and depressed about this job because it crushed her “naturally adventurous spirit” and only made her want to go abroad even more:

According to the traditional thought of my parents, I should get a job, and then marry and have a baby. You must follow what everyone else has done before. I see nothing wrong with that, but why must you live that way? (*raises voice*) It is so boring! Since I want to stay single, I feel I am annoying them by staying around. I am so embarrassed. I want to leave. I prefer the world outside of China, where you can be freer and do what you want, and others are different from you. Here everyone will look at you strangely if you dress differently, but abroad, even if you sit on the grass anywhere, no one cares, and if they treat you differently because you are a woman, they must pay fines... I hate my job now, and I just want to run away from here. It does not

have to be Europe or the US; any other country will do — anywhere, if it is not China! (*deep sigh*) but I am afraid that if I leave, my dad will become angry and disown me, right? (*nervously laughs*)

Du was so frustrated by her parent's preferences, stringent life-course demands, gender discrimination at her job, and her economic constraints that these factors accentuated her desire to leave China and her idealization of life abroad. Despite her despair and frustration with China's society, Du demonstrated that she was reflexively aware that her parents' opposition toward her migrating abroad derived from their fears of criticism about this by others in society that could threaten and hurt their reputation.

Some perceptive adult children who did eventually defy their parents perceptively also understood that often their parents pressured them not due to their fear for them but due to the influence of their parents' peers. Qi, the 26-year-old female marketer, explained:

On the one hand, my parents are very open-minded, but on the other hand, they constantly worry about what other people think of me because I want to travel abroad and have not yet married. In China, the economy has surged during the past 30 years, yet the minds of the older generation have not caught up. They still think in the communist way that we all need to be equally happy. So they do not understand that these pressures they put on us are unreasonable. They think this is normal because everyone does this to them too. They feel we need this pressure in a communist society to be happy. The pressure is equally fair for everyone. Everyone should be the same, with the same fucking haircuts, the same uniform — they even don't wear make-up because then they will stand out. They don't want to stand out and want to blend in because everyone expects them to do so.

Although Qi seemed to pity her peers for surrendering to this societal pressure to marry, settle down, and live a more conventional life, she also felt torn between on the one hand suppressing her desire to travel abroad to discover and develop her own independent identity and on the other hand how terrible she felt about how unlike her, her parents regularly had to deal with this annoying pressure from their peers rather than only when she came to visit them. Although Qi alludes to the “communist” and conformist cultural context as stalling social progress and development, as noted from the literature surveyed by Paul (2015), women who have emigrated from more liberal and less “communist” polities in Asia and Latin America with a relatively collectivist orientation also confronted considerable opposition, especially from men in their family. For this reason, the opposition I described here is not necessarily unique to China or a society with a centralized economy and political system but may be common in many traditionally patriarchal societies.

Young people who resisted such societal pressures their parents channeled to them often faced increasing pressure from their parents over time, often to a point they found extremely stressful. The 34-year-old marketer Di described how she would deal with the pressure to marry and tried to defuse the tension between her and

her father once when she saw her father gaze longingly at other young children with their grandparents in the park: “As a joke I told him, ‘Hey, why don’t I just marry and make love with the next guy I see on the street so you can have a grandkid?’ To this, he protested, ‘No! I want you to have a happy marriage!’” Although this was a way in which she persuaded him to give her more time to find “the right guy” and a happy marriage, she understood why many of her peers gave in to the pressure of their parents and believed this was why her peers never went abroad.

Once the real estate agent Hua reached the age of 32 and began talking about migrating to another country, her mother, upset that Hua had not yet had given birth to a child, called her and anxiously and desperately proposed she find any man who would agree to impregnate her so that she would give birth to a baby, and then let her mother raise the baby. Utterly infuriated by the boldness of this proposal, after Hua hung up the phone she loudly exclaimed to me:

She only sees me as someone to give her a baby! And she sees the baby as this cute thing to play with. She is only saying these things because she has no meaning in her pathetic life and spends all her time listening to her friends with grandchildren ask her why she does not have any!

Hua’s anger reflected her despair that her mother viewed her as only a means to an end. However, after calming down emotionally, she sighed and sociologically hypothesized that this was perhaps not her mother’s own idea but a silly suggestion she received from her peers: “The problem is that my mother has a very boring life. She gets together with her friends for tea, and they tease her about me and make her feel bad. So they plant these ridiculous ideas in her head.” Hua said she could only encourage her mother to get her own life by defying her and keep trying to emigrate from China even in the face of her mother’s strong opposition.

Overall, four fathers seemed more reluctant to let daughters go abroad than mothers because the people in their social networks tended to discourage going abroad more. Based upon what he learned from his peers, the 35-year-old upper-class manager Sun confessed that when his wife suggested they send their daughter abroad to study, “At first, I was very opposed. I was very worried about her. But later, after I visited many countries, my thoughts slowly changed. I realized that her future life would have greater choices if she obtained a better education.” Even though her grandparents opposed the idea, he decided to do what he believed was best for his daughter and support her in studying abroad.

For two adult daughters, marrying but not bearing children for their parents moderated how willing parents were to allow their children to go abroad. Ye, the 22-year-old middle-class barista expressed, “I believe it will be much easier for my parents to agree with me traveling to Australia after I marry because somebody can take care of me.” For this reason, many young women might view committing to marriage as receiving sufficient social approval from their family members to go abroad, even though marriage may entail responsibilities that make them less likely to do so.

Similarly, Yan, a 28-year-old female middle-class college teacher, wanted to go to New Zealand to start a Ph.D. Yet she decided to wait until her boyfriend finished his graduate studies so she could marry him, so “he can work, and I not work, then I can go back and see my parents.” Marriage was a way for her and other young women to fulfill some of society’s expectations for her parents and reduce their opposition to her migrating abroad. Many children self-consciously and critically presented their parents’ opposition to their aspirations to go abroad. However, eventually, even those with such a critical view reflexively expressed genuine concern about how their decisions to migrate or even travel abroad would affect the opinions of their parents’ peers and, therefore, possibly damage their parents’ reputation among their peers.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Prior migration research has shown how, in diverse countries, many migrants — and particularly women — before emigrating had faced resistance from family members who viewed their migrating abroad as abandoning important gendered social roles. Yet scholars also typically portray the family as facilitating and magnifying migration. They have less frequently examined how and why family members oppose and successfully prevent and reduce international migration and mobility of family members, an instance of “mobility bias” (Schewel 2020) in how we understand families structure migrant selectivity and influence how many people migrate.

In a region of high out-migration in China, I have shown how preexisting solid cultural structures — like the tradition of filial piety and parent’s paternalistic influence over important life decisions of their children regarding marriage, education, and career — bolster and intensify the effective opposition of parents toward migration. Parents oppose their children going abroad due to their genuine concerns about their child’s physical-cultural-linguistic adaptation and survival, how migration may divert limited economic resources of the family, and how migration interfering with conventional societal expectations for the child to marry, bear them children, and care for them at old age. Older adult children in the sample described how they strategically diminish their parents’ fears that they would not survive in a different cultural environment by taking initiative and proactively pursuing their goals to go abroad, become financially independent and thereby reduce their socioeconomic resource dependence on their parents, and even strategically fulfill some of society’s norms like marriage to address the intense pressure and criticism from extra-familial peers that parents frequently would confront about their child being “late” in achieving important life course milestones. They adopted many of these tactics with the explicit aim of overcoming their parents opposition to them going abroad, though despite their child’s earnest effort in most cases I examined parents prevailed and their children never went abroad. The prevalence of these socially conservative concerns about a child’s survival, tight socioeconomic constraints, and extrafamilial peer

pressure among parents that oppose their children going abroad stand in stark contrast to what we observe among much more frequently researched parents who facilitate the international migration of their children (Tong, Persons, and Harris 2019). Although this paper focused on parental opposition toward their adult child's international mobility and migration, this is just the most common case of how other social and familial relations prevent migration in my multi-thousand person. Potential Immigrant Survey (PIS) about various reasons why more people do not immigrate into other society. Many potential migrants deterred from doing so also confront opposition to their migration by spouses, romantic partners, and other family relations that I did not discuss here but other researchers can examine further.

Since only a tiny percentage of China's enormous population goes abroad, further confirming that the findings of this case study are nationally representative with large-N data would be challenging and expensive. Yet my finding that such gendered opposition exists — in the unlikely case of three contiguous cities that arguably have historically had some of the highest rates of out-migration in China — suggests that they may be even more common within communities in China without such a substantial history or culture of migration. Although these dynamics might manifest differently in more affluent regions of China like Shanghai or more rural provinces with far less out-migration like Inner Mongolia, I found 20 cases of similar opposition in each of these contexts and many other cities and provinces of China.

This paper also highlights how processes by which families deter migration are much stronger for women than men. They are also related to age, as parental opposition toward a woman goes abroad as she ages and becomes more financially independent. Although my general approach to this phenomenon supposed that gender may be a moderator for the mechanisms I described, the abductive approach repeatedly yielded stronger evidence from both child and parent participants of this than I had anticipated, revealing how women face stronger opposition to going abroad than men. This opposition — likely not a recent development — is striking given that women have consistently comprised around 46–49 percent of total migrants during 1840–2016 (Gabaccia and Donato 2016). This raises some fascinating demographic questions for future researchers as to whether such feminization of international migration would have been counterfactually even higher if women did not face such opposition and/or whether this opposition not only deters women but reactively accentuates their desire to go abroad more than men.

Scholars of China frequently do not emphasize and demonstrate the relevance of China as a theoretical case with social dynamics that are potentially generalizable to other societies. Of course, one cannot generalize the gender inequalities I uncover here to other societies without further empirical research. Yet consider that many other migrant-origin societies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia also have strong forms of collectivism, patriarchal gender systems, survivalist and traditional values, and intrafamilial solidarity that I observed in China (Coleman, Ganong, and Rothrauff 2006; Inglehart 2006). In such societies, and especially in those who need to acquire visas to go to most countries, many young adults also aspire

to go abroad but have yet even taken the steps to do so. Such societies have also had declines in fertility, resulting in an increasingly aging society where many older people are in need of support from their children and grandchildren. Therefore, such intergenerational dynamics observed here — like societal pressures for young adults to support their parents — may also increasingly operate to deter people from going abroad elsewhere. This would explain why those who engage in the professional practice of controlling cross-border mobility and migrations — like U.S. nonimmigrant visa officers at embassies and consulates— are highly attentive to an individual’s familial bonds in their country of residence as such ties potentially induce immobility more than any coercive migration control policy: If any one individual in a family has a legitimate reason *not to go abroad*, this likely decreases the possibility others will go abroad, turning family migration into a coordination and collective action problem that reduces the aggregate level of migration from a migrant-origin population. As a result, familial ties can have a magnetic-like gravitational force that many find difficult to pull away from and escape, contrary to widely prevalent theories that families only tend to multiply the number of migrants through chain migration. In terms of how families reduce the amount of migration and mobility, this paper shows how the experience of immobility for daughters and sons is different due to how gendered this parental opposition to migration often is.

This study also generates new research questions for researchers who want to understand better how familial ties reduce international migration and mobility. For example, how do generational memories of experiences of going abroad among older cohorts influence what types of transnational mobility are acceptable for the younger generations to engage in? How does the impact of intergenerationally generated ideas about going abroad vary across cohorts, age groups, or periods? Under what conditions does the woman’s center of gravity shift from the “family of orientation” to the “family of affiliation” (Parsons 1943) after she migrates away from her parents? This article reminds us of how family and gender dynamics will remain important for migration scholars to understand better not only why many migrate but also why more people do not migrate or even travel abroad, and how opposition toward migration by family members can structure migrant selectivity and stratify international migration and mobility in terms of gender and many other important dimensions of inequality. .

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