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Peggy A. Kong  
*University of Hong Kong*

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“To Walk Out”: Rural Parents’ Views on Education.\*

Peggy A. Kong

University of Hong Kong

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Each time that I boarded the second of two public long-distance buses that I took to my research site, I noticed how few seats were left unoccupied. The bus filled quickly with individuals and families carrying and transporting supplies and food from the city back to their villages. Overflowing sacks of clothes, cases of alcohol, and other household goods were stowed in the overhead baskets, seats, and on people's laps. As the bus meandered along the road, passing small squat buildings and giving way to open land, fellow bus riders asked me where I was going. When I told them that I was going to Shao Xingwen Primary School (SXW), my fellow bus riders would ask if I was a teacher. I would explain that I was not a teacher, but a researcher interested in understanding rural family life and children's schooling. They could not understand my interest in rural life. My fellow bus riders were not the only ones bewildered by my interest in interviewing and studying the life of rural residents; most of my participants, teachers, and county officials often raised the same questions. I usually responded by saying that we know a lot about urban residents, but do not know that much about the lives of rural residents. My answers, however, never seemed to be satisfactory. Rural residents told me that urban families would not only have more to say than rural families, but were more worthy of study. Rural parents found it odd that I choose to live in a rural area when they felt that most rural residents simply wanted to leave rural life for an urban lifestyle.

### **“To Walk Out”**

During one of my first chats with Mr. Zhan, the district education leader, he told me that rural parents have one thought, and that is to have their children “walk out” of the rural areas. Mr. Zhan explained to me that after the agricultural production brigades were dissolved, many

rural parents participated in basic agricultural trainings.<sup>1</sup> He believed that these trainings stimulated parental interest in learning and encouraged parents to have high educational expectations for their children to exit the rural areas.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Zhan's words resonated with findings from other studies in rural China, where parents' desire social mobility for their children (Kipnis, 2001). Past studies have found that rural parents hope their children will leave the countryside (Thogerson, 2002; Murphy 2004); that rural parents hope education will help improve their children's future (Chi & Rao, 2003); and that education will be able to help their children secure employment outside of the village (Chi & Rao, 2003).

In this paper, using qualitative in-depth interviews and participant observation of rural parents in one rural community, I explore the relationship between rural parents' views on education and their desire for their children "to walk out" (走出去) of rural areas and to go to more developed areas (cities). I draw on Fong's (2004) cultural model of modernization to understand how rural parents understand the role of education for their children's future within China's recent economic, cultural, and social changes. I found that rural parents have developed their own model of modernization that includes highly valuing education for their children's future, reflecting rural parents' internalization of China's current modernization efforts including policy discourse along with their own lived experiences.

Rural residents considered their own quality of life lacking compared to what they believed was the good quality of life of urban residents. They explained to me that rural

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s, agricultural production in this area was divided up into production brigades, which were the equivalent of natural villages, but were later disbanded as part of the rural economic reforms.

<sup>2</sup> Lin (1993) also suggests that as a result of the change to the rural responsibility system, rural parents became more aware of the importance of knowledge and skills.

conditions were less developed and that their work and living conditions were “bitter” (苦).<sup>3</sup> The rural parents with whom I worked did not want their children “eating bitterness” (吃苦) and they viewed getting an education, and living in the cities as not only signs of success, but necessary for survival. Rural parents often invoked the adage of “hoping one’s child becomes a dragon or phoenix<sup>4</sup>” (望子成龙/望女成凤) when they spoke of their reasons for supporting their children’s education. Rural parents described their experiences of being a poor rural resident during China’s rapid socioeconomic development and how they believed that education was a necessity for living in today’s modern society.

## **Background**

### *Culture of Modernization*

Fong’s (2004) cultural model of modernization offers a framework for understanding why rural parents an urban lifestyle for their children. Fong (2004) illustrated her cultural model of modernization in her work on urban Dalian adolescents. Fong described the lives of eight teenagers, in order to illustrate how urban youth and their families experienced and understood various aspects of the cultural model of modernization. Fong (2004) found that urban youth and their parents yearned to join the First World. They often made reference to how China was inferior to other developed countries and how they wanted to have the higher living standards enjoyed by people in developed countries. Each family engaged in different strategies to realize their aspiration of having their children live First World lives. Fong (2004) found that poor

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<sup>3</sup> This is a commonly used Chinese idiom meaning to live a grueling life of sorrow and servitude. There is a sense a bondage to their farm work and social class.

<sup>4</sup> This adage means that parents want their children to be successful. In the past, the dragon was a representation for the emperor and the phoenix was a representation for the empress. Thus, parents aspire for their children to attain a higher social class, with the emperor and empress representing the highest possible class.

urban Dalian parents did not want their children to be like them; parents wanted a better life for their children and were willing to provide high levels of support their children's education.

### ***The Importance of Education in Rural Areas for Creating a Modern China***

Over the last thirty years, China's policy discourse has been focused on modernizing China to be a competitive global power. As part of China's Four Modernizations, communes were dismantled and private markets were resumed, which allowed farmers the opportunity to work in non-farm positions. To ensure that China transformed into a modern society, Chinese policymakers focused on educating rural people (where the vast majority of China's population resides). To this end, during the mid-1980s, the government instituted two important educational reforms, *The Decision on the Reform of the Education Structure of 1985* and *The Compulsory Education Law of 1986*. *The Decision on the Reform of the Education Structure of 1985* laid the groundwork for decentralizing China's education system with a focus on modernizing:

The nation, society and the family must all ensure the education of the nation's citizens. This is necessary for the development of modern productivity and modern life and is an indicator of modern civilization. The basic education of our nation is still very backward and this is in sharp contradiction with the urgent need for our nation's people to construct a prosperous, democratic, civilized modern socialist society (1985 Decision, Section 2).

*The Compulsory Education Law of 1986*, provided for nine years of free compulsory education for all children. The importance of education for China's modernization was reaffirmed in June 1999 in *The Decision on the Deepening of Educational Reform and the Full Promotion of Quality Education*.

## **Data and Methods**

Ethnographic data for this article were collected as part of a field study of parental involvement in children's schooling in a rural community in Gansu province between 2003 and 2005. The study included participant observation and in-depth interviews with 33 families of sixth-grade students, five teachers, one principal, one district education leader, and one county education bureau leader. Interviews and observations explored family relations, educational attitudes and expectations, gender attitudes, and school-family relationships.

### *Research Site*

Fieldwork was conducted in Shao Xingwen Township located in Gansu Province, located in the northwestern part of China and encompassing 390,000 square kilometers of mountains and plateaus. The population of Gansu, according to the 2000 census, is 25.62 million people, with 6.15 million of them living in urban areas and 19.47 million living in rural areas. Gansu was an appropriate site for investigating rural parental involvement because Gansu was one of the poorest provinces in China with high levels of illiteracy. In 2003, there were 8 villages in Shao Xingwen, but by 2004, there were only 6 villages, as 2 villages had consolidated. According to 2006 Jun Xu County data from there are 11,067 residents in SXW.

### *Selection of Participants*

I identified participants from the two sixth-grade classrooms for this study using purposive sampling (Patton, 1990). In selecting these sixth-grade children, I tried to cover the heterogeneity present in the population in terms of family background, home-school interactions, and student achievement levels in order to be able to describe diverse variations and common



patterns (Miles and Huberman, 1994). My purpose was not to be representative of the population, but to describe diverse experiences.

After observing students in class, I met with the *banzhuren* (homeroom teachers) to review student records, discuss student family backgrounds, and teacher interactions with parents. After my observations and discussions with the teacher, I selected 16 students (9 girls and 7 boys) from the Class 1 classroom and 17 students (7 girls and 10 boys) from the Class 2 classroom to follow. I selected students with a range of academic achievement, family economic/education backgrounds, and varying levels of parent-teacher interactions, as described by the *banzhuren*. The participation of the children and their families was completely voluntary. I interviewed the principal of SXWCPS, sixth-grade Mathematics, Chinese, and English teachers, parents of selected students, and the selected students themselves.

### *Data Collection*

In order to understand the meaning-making of rural parents with regard to their children's schooling, I used multiple methods of data collection (Fontana and Frey, 1998), including in depth participation observation, in-depth interviews, informal interviews, and secondary data. This combination of data collection methods not only deepened my understanding of the parents' support for their children's schooling but also served as a method for triangulating my data and served as a validity check.

### *Analysis*

I used a loosely structured, emergent and inductive approach called grounded theory to analyze my data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data analysis was an ongoing part of my data collection, and informed my data gathering.

First, I transcribed each interview in Chinese. Then, to provide anonymity for the participants in my study, I provided each participant with a pseudonym. Next, iteratively, I used open inductive coding and then as relationships emerged I conducted a more focused coding, categorizing, and memo-writing, as I developed analytic themes within each family and then across families. Through this process, patterns emerged that helped me understand how rural parents supported their children's schooling.

## **Findings**

### *Wen Zhixin's Family: "Eating Bitterness"*

Wen Zhixin's family lived in Tu Shao village. They moved from a more remote village to Tu Shao when Wen Zhixin was in third grade. His mother started third grade, but was withdrawn so that her older brother could continue his education. Wen Zhixin's father had never been to school and was illiterate. Wen Zhixin was ten years old when he started school, three years older than most children, and he had repeated third grade, making him four years older than his peers. He had a younger sister who was in seventh grade. His sister started school earlier than Wen Zhixin and did not repeat a grade. The family farm had 13 *mu* of land.

In our conversations about the importance of education, Mrs. Wen echoed the cultural norm of not wanting her children to live a difficult life. She told me that she used this idea of "eating bitterness" as a carrot to encourage her son to study well. She told me:

Whose views are these? Everyone has these wishes that their children don't "eat bitterness" (吃苦) [because] it is hard to swallow bitterness...I tell him if he doesn't continue in school then he'll have to work the land and "eat bitterness."

Mrs. Wen clearly wished to keep her son from having to live a hard life and she encouraged him to study.

*An Jingqi's Family: "Hoping One's Child Becomes a Dragon or Phoenix"*

During my first visit to An Jingqi's house, I found An Jingqi's mother outside putting leavened bread in a communal oven near her house. She looked at me suspiciously when I asked if this was the home of An Jingqi, but her pursed lips gave way to a smile when I told her who I was and why I was at her house. She invited me into the main living area of their home. As I entered the courtyard, through a brick opening, there was one room to my right and the main row of three rooms straight ahead. The room on the right was the kitchen. The row of three rooms included a storage room for food, a bedroom, and the main bedroom and living room. In the living area, there was a television tucked in the corner, a bed in the opposite corner, and a coal stove in the middle of the room. Mrs. An pulled out a couple of stools for us to sit upon as we huddled around the coal stove. These basic household items reflected an average economic situation for the An family. An Jingqi's parents were a little unusual because his mother had a higher level of education than his father. His mother graduated from high school and his father graduated from middle school. An Jingqi had two siblings, including one older sister and one younger brother. He is a high-performing student. The family had four *mu* of land for a family of five. In addition to farming the land, Mr. and Mrs. An both worked outside the home as day laborers.

In our discussion about her educational aspirations for her children, Mrs. An told me that rural parents try the best that they can do. She told me:

It is like this, we do what we can, we are all the same, we hope that our children will become dragons...We all feel this way, we all want the best for

our children's education, so that they will learn better, so that they will stand up. My hope is that all three of my children will go to college.

Having been educated herself, Mrs. An wanted her children to be successful in school and to improve their social position. Rural parents were well aware of the important role that education played in securing employment and a better place in today's society. It was interesting that Mrs. An used a common adage to express her desire for success for her children and then defined that success as the modern-day goal of receiving a college education.

### *Lu Xinqi's Family: Education for Survival*

Lu Xinqi's family lived in the fifth village near a tree farm. In addition to farming, Lu Xinqi's father and grandparents also worked at the tree farm. In the summer, Lu Xinqi earned a little spending money by picking a local red herb. Her father completed middle school and her mother completed third grade. Lu Xinqi had a younger brother in third grade.

Mr. Lu situated the imperative of having an education for his children within today's modern society. He told me:

Getting an education is to learn a little knowledge, moral thought, to be a good person in all parts of one's life, and to have good living standards. If you do not go to school, you will not have any knowledge moreover, one's survival depends on having an education. ...In today's society, even if you are willing to eat bitterness no one will want your labor. Therefore, going to school and being educated has a large impact on one's ability to stand-up in society. Today, an illiterate cannot get a job in the city because you won't understand some of the words in Mandarin. If someone talks to you in Mandarin, you won't understand them. If you want to survive, you must have an education.

To Mr. Lu, having an education is more than just hoping that his children will be successful, education is necessary for survival in today's society. In Mr. Lu's description of how he believes an uneducated person will not find employment in the city underscores the desirable

social location Mr. Lu wants for his children. It also demonstrates Mr. Lu's knowledge of the language differences between urban and rural residents. Rural parents understood the advantages that education provided their urban counterparts and wanted an urban lifestyle for their children.

In my first meeting with Lu Xinqi's father, Mr. Lu, described rural schools and rural life, Mr. Lu explained that on the whole, the rural environment and schools were lacking in terms of student quality, teacher quality, and parent quality compared with urban environments. He shared with me:

Of course, the rural school environment is lacking compared to urban schools, from all perspectives. The rural teaching quality is also far behind, our rural students are also apathetic, and family economic situations are not good. Kids love to play, and are not successful in their education. Some teachers are able to just manage [the classroom], and are not able to work together with parents. Parents are ordinary people (老百姓) and are busy...

Mr. Lu felt that rural students had not mastered basic social and academic skills saying, "Our SXW primary school is considered to be okay, but from my standpoint, rural student quality is lacking." He explained that when rural children encountered an adult, they did not know what to do and gave off a feeling of not being "open" (开朗). Being "open" was viewed as characteristic of urban residents and children. Urban residents were seen as being confident and not dissuaded by confrontation. Upon further probing, Mr. Lu gave the following illustration of what he meant by the term "open":

Not being open means, children are supposed to be educated in Mandarin. We speak a local dialect here, so our children are unable to express themselves [at school]. Sometimes what they read in books, there is a misunderstanding, because what is in the books is not connected to their everyday lives. Therefore, [they] cannot express themselves. Writing an essay, for example, they [rural students] are just lacking compared to urban students. The facilities and resources in rural areas are not as good as urban

areas. Parents and schools need to work together and cooperate. If there is a problem, they need to communicate.

Mr. Lu's strong emphasis on how rural areas and schools were lacking, when compared to urban areas and schools, resonated consistently with all the parents in my study. But, it was Mr. Lu's ability to distinguish the reasons why rural children were not able to be "open" that was most striking to me. Mr. Lu captured the inequality between urban and rural areas; how the national curriculum and language were geared towards children in urban areas and how this obviously disadvantaged rural children. Furthermore, he described how this inequality was then exacerbated by the huge differential in resources available to urban and rural areas. Mr. Lu's description demonstrates his knowledge that urban environments offer the necessary resources to succeed in school and that rural children lack these advantages. Mr. Lu wanted his children to have an urban lifestyle so that they would be able to speak properly and be "open."

#### *Zu Huiqi's Family: Life is Changing*

Zu Huiqi's family lived along the main road. The family owned 6 *mu* of land. In addition to farming the land, the family owned an auto parts store, and both parents also worked temporary manual labor jobs. Zu Huiqi's mother did not complete primary school and his father completed middle school. His brother was 12 years old and was in fifth grade.

In discussing Mrs. Zu's own educational experiences, she told me how school was different nowadays than when she attended school. She told me:

School was different for me than it is today because today, students [families] have more money and are much better off. Before, we didn't have anything to eat, kids these days eat things that I have never seen before. In the past, the living standards were not good. I often tell my children that the snacks that they eat are snacks that I've never even seen before...I completed fifth grade and did not go on...Nowadays, kids [her children] who are as old as they are don't do any chores, [when I was their age] when we returned from school we

had to cut the grass and tend to the fire. Today, my children come home and eat their meal and when they finish eating, they go out and play. When we were 7 or 8 years old we helped our mother prepare meals, wash clothes, and fetch water. Children today do not do any of it.

The social and economic conditions had changed since Mrs. Zu was a young child. She contrasted the living standards of her childhood with those of her children.

This background information about how Mrs. Zu viewed both the economic and educational changes in her life reflected her observation of China's changing economy and the necessity for an education. Her comparison between how she did not have enough to eat as a child, living barely above subsistence levels, and how her children have snacks to eat (going beyond meeting a minimal level of food intake) clearly showed one aspect of her culture of modernization. She had lived through the experience of not having enough to eat to now being able to sufficiently provide nourishment for her children. In her description of her children's eating habits and leisure activities, we can see that she ensured that her children were comfortable. We can also see the importance that Mrs. Zu placed on her children's education, in comparison to her own time as a student, by the absence of children's chores in the Zu family.

Later in our visit, Mrs. Zu and I talked about her schooling experiences. She connected her experience in schools with her expectation of education in today's modern world. She explained:

In the past, the teacher had many students, so they were only concerned with teaching their lessons, not like today where teachers "have a firm grasp of" (抓) students. In the past, if students performed poorly, then they performed poorly, parents didn't care, if they studied they studied. This is unlike today's parents, we all want our children to study and succeed. In this day and age, if a child does not have an education they won't be able to live. In our day, there were many uneducated children, more than those who went onto middle school, and there were none that went onto high school.

Again, Mrs. Zu presented her definition of the culture of modernization which included the important role that education plays in one's life. When she was a child, parents and teachers did not place a strong emphasis on education. The government's strong emphasis on compulsory education can be seen by the high value placed on education by parents and teachers. Mrs. Zu saw education as a requirement for her children to "live" (活) in today's society and this motivated her to support her children's education. Mrs. Zu's description reflected her definition of modernization: wanting her children to achieve educational success, since to her, education now had economic implications. She believed education had become a cultural norm. In a subsequent discussion with Mrs. Zu, she described how it had become the norm in this area to have students enter high school and that even a few have gained entry into higher education.

#### *Gao Ling's Family: Use Your Brain Not Your Brawn*

Gao Ling's family lived in the Lu village about two kilometers from school. Mr. Gao graduated from middle school and his wife completed primary school. The family of four had nine *mu* of land. Mr. and Mrs. Gao both worked temporary jobs as day labourers. Gao Ling was a high-performing child who had a younger brother in third grade. The Gao family lived in a small family compound made of mud and thatch. The courtyard did not have room for planting fruits or vegetables. The home consisted of one main room that served as the bedroom, kitchen, and living room with a bed, sofa, table and chair, coal stove, and a television.

In Mr. Gao's description of how he conveyed the purpose of education to his children, he shared his social and cultural understanding of modernization. He believed that educating oneself would help the family and his country, and that his country needed educated people. He described to me how he conveyed to his children why they needed to study:



I tell them not to treat studying as if they are completing a chore. Studying will be beneficial to themselves, their family, and the country. In the future, the country surely needs human capital. I tell them, “you need to study well so that your work will be important. We [parents] are not educated, every day we engage in manual labor, after one is educated, one won’t have to endure bitterness.” I tell them, “after they have tested into college, then, they will be able to use their mind to work, and mind work takes a lot of energy. But, the amount of energy needed [to work] is less than what is needed for manual labor. At least, they don’t have to labor under the sun.

Mr. Gao communicated to his daughter the importance of education for herself, family, and country. He was able to talk about the differences he saw between those who were uneducated and conducted manual labor and those who used their minds to work. The idea that education helps oneself, family, and country is often referenced in policy documents. Mr. Gao’s attitude recalled the language in *The Decision on the Reform of the Education Structure of 1985*, which stressed education for improvement and modernization. Mr. Gao used this language of modernization to describe his desire to support their children’s education no matter what. It appears that Mr. Gao had internalized the reasons he did not want his children working on the farm. Echoing policy proclamations, Mr Gao defined getting a job that required using one’s mind as being modern and a part of the modern economy. He wanted his children to earn their living using their minds, not their brawn, and that education was the key to achieving this goal.

*Yao Xusao’s Family: The World is Changing*

Yao Xusao lived in Tu Shao village, about four kilometers from school. Yao Xusao was a low-performing student and had previously repeated third grade. He had one older brother in seventh grade, who had also repeated a grade. Mrs. Yao had never been to school and Mr. Yao only completed fifth grade. Yao Xusao’s family only had 6 *mu*<sup>5</sup> of land for a family of four.

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<sup>5</sup> A *mu* is a measurement and is equal to 1/15th of a hectare. There are about 3885 *mu* in a square mile.

They had so little land because the government divided the land and parceled it out after the Mr. Yao's older brother was born.<sup>6</sup> When you enter most rural homes, there is an open courtyard for a small garden and bedrooms and kitchens are usually located off the main courtyard. The poverty of the Yao family was reflected in their home; it did not have a courtyard and consisted of only two rooms—one for a kitchen and the second for a bedroom/living room. In addition to farming their land, both Mr. and Mrs. Yao worked odd jobs in the local area to support the household. Money was a constant topic around their house. In fact, Mrs. Yao personally went to register the children at school this year, because she was concerned that the children would lose the tuition money while walking to school. If the children lost the money, they would not be able to attend school this year. Mrs. Yao expressed how scared she was of going to the school to register her children because she was not educated, but Mrs. Yao felt having an education was a matter of survival for her children and put her own fear aside to confront school personnel.

Mrs. Yao had an intimate understanding of the importance that education played in a person's life. She described to me how the simple fact that she could not sign her own name placed her at a disadvantage and how this related to how highly she valued education for her children. She told me:

...[I want] them to be educated because it benefits one's self. It is to say that wherever you go out to work you'll be able to see the benefit of it. If you have a graduation certificate you can take that with you and use it to obtain a job...I've never been educated, I don't know how to write anything, it makes life so difficult. If they [her children] are educated then they can write whatever they want and won't have to beg anyone. They will simply be able to write what they need. When I think about it, I feel terrible, my parents were not able to support my education and I can't even sign my own name. I am 39

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<sup>6</sup> Under China's Property Law the state or village collectives own land. Individual farmers do not own farmland, but have the rights to use and manage the land. Farmers currently have a 30-year land contract. It is officially known as the first-round contract. After the first round is completed, farmers will be able to extend their contracts for another 30 years.

this year, and have never been educated, I can't even engage in simple business transactions...

Mrs. Yao's description of how strongly she felt about education illustrated her understanding of the culture of modernization. Her experiences as an illiterate woman had influenced her understanding of the purpose of education and motivated her to support her children's education. Firstly, she felt that an education would empower her children so that they would be able to write anything they wanted and not be beholden to others. Secondly, Mrs. Yao saw education and more specifically, the physical paper of a graduation certificate, as a tool that her children could wield to gain employment in the modern economy. They would have options for work and social mobility. She was saddened that her inability to sign her own name and felt that it hindered her ability to interact in modern small business opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

This paper provides rural parents' interpretations of their culture of modernization through descriptions of their lived experiences and their aspirations for their children within the context of China's rapid socio-economic development. Rural parents in my study echoed the policy discourse about the importance of education to creating a modern society. Rural parents in my study differed from parents in Fong's (2004) study in that education was not only desired, but seen as a requirement to an individual's survival in today's society. Similar to poor parents in Fong's study (2004), the rural parents with whom I worked wanted their children to walk out of the rural areas because they themselves had lived a harsh and difficult life of being a farmer with little education and did not want their children to do the same. The constant comparison by rural parents to urban life demonstrates the lifestyle rural parents desired for their children. Given the strong belief that education is essential to the survival of rural children and the

unfavorable rural learning environment, future research should specifically examine how rural parents support their children's education.

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