Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on International Law and Legal Policy
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.38978

Labour Migration and Family Wellbeing among Miao Households: A Qualitative Study of Baisha Miao Village

Yuhao Hu

Department of Social Science, Beijing Haidian Foreign Language Tengfei School, Beijing, China
hardy20091211@gmail.com

Abstract. Rural labour migration has profoundly changed family livelihoods and well-being in ethnic minority rural communities in southwestern China. Although migration may increase family income, geographical separation often leads to a complex trade-off between material security and family cohesion. This qualitative study explores how labour migration affects household finances, family ties, and parents' self-reported health-related stress in Baisha Miao Village. Data were collected from 31 parents through semi-structured interviews and analysed using deductive thematic analysis. The study found that migration is a constrained family survival strategy rather than a purely voluntary choice. Although remittances to some extent alleviate economic pressure, both migrant and non-migrant parents reported persistent economic insecurity. Long-distance separation was associated with weakened parent–child and marital relationships, and participants reported that although digital communication alleviated some emotional strain, they still experienced psychological and physical stress. Additionally, the study identified a context-specific self-reinforcing migration pattern within the village. This single-case study emphasises that economically rational migration decisions come with significant relational costs, providing useful insights for supporting rural ethnic minority families experiencing separation.

Keywords: labour migration, family well-being, rural households, Miao communities, left-behind families

1. Introduction

Large-scale rural–urban migration represents one of the most transformative social changes in contemporary China. Due to economic disparities between urban and rural areas, millions of rural labourers have moved to cities in search of better employment opportunities [1]. Due to restrictions imposed by the household registration system, most migrant workers cannot secure equal access to urban public services for their children, forcing families to make a difficult choice: either to keep their children in their rural community or to bring them to the city, where they may face institutional exclusion [2]. Some migrant children later return to rural areas for secondary education as return-migrant children, whose life trajectories remain under-researched. These diverse migration-related experiences raise critical questions about children's human capital accumulation, mental well-being and educational inequality.

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.38978

The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) offers key theoretical insights into household migration decisions. Migration is understood as a household-level risk-buffering strategy under imperfect rural credit and insurance markets, rather than as purely individual behaviour driven by wage differentials [1]. Remittances ease household financial constraints, yet labour outflow reduces available domestic labour and reshapes family care arrangements [3]. For rural communities of origin, migration yields mixed consequences: remittances improve household material conditions, while the loss of educated young people may trigger rural brain drain and village hollowing [4, 5].

Global and Chinese empirical studies document the developmental costs of parent–child separation. A landmark meta-analysis finds higher risks of depression, anxiety, and mild nutritional disadvantages among left-behind children despite economic gains enabled by remittances [6]. Heterogeneous effects emerge across different migration patterns: paternal, maternal and dual-parent out-migration exert uneven impacts on children's non-cognitive skills, social-emotional development and academic performance [7, 8]. Cumulative maternal absence, in particular, elevates early-age social-emotional risks for rural children [9]. Generally, the disadvantages stemming from lost parental care often outweigh remittance-driven material improvements [8].

Despite abundant existing scholarship, most quantitative studies focus broadly on income effects or average outcomes of left-behind children across national or large-scale provincial samples. Less attention has been paid to how ethnic minority rural households in specific local contexts actively negotiate trade-offs between income gains from migration and the costs of parent–child separation. Few studies centre on household decision-making within a single Miao village, where local cultural norms, livelihood constraints and migration realities jointly shape family choices around labour out-migration and child-rearing. To fill this gap, this paper addresses one core research question: How do rural parents weigh the economic benefits and family costs of labour migration?

Drawing on local-level evidence, this paper unpacks these household-level trade-offs. It concludes with a discussion of practical implications for the local context.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. New Economics of Labour Migration

The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) reconceptualises migration as household-level decision-making, rather than an individual choice driven purely by wage gaps [1]. Under conditions of imperfect rural credit and insurance markets, households deploy labour migration as a strategy for risk diversification: sending household members to cities spreads livelihood risk when local farming is volatile. Migrants send home remittances, which act as informal capital to ease household budget constraints, cover consumption costs, and fund local productive activities [1]. In this framework, migration is a collective risk management investment for the whole family instead of a personal pursuit of higher income.

This theoretical framework fits the present study well. This study focuses on how rural parents within a Miao village deliberate over migration options as a household unit and weigh potential economic gains. This focus aligns with NELM's emphasis on household-level calculation. Nevertheless, NELM has notable analytical limitations. It primarily explains why households choose to migrate by focusing on material risks and economic returns. It pays limited attention to non-material costs generated by migration, especially weakened parent–child attachment, emotional burdens and relational harms resulting from long-term parent–child separation [3]. These intangible family and emotional costs are not fully incorporated into classic NELM assumptions. This theoretical limitation creates analytical space for the present study to explore how Miao village

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.38978

parents negotiate these undertheorised emotional and relational trade-offs alongside material benefits.

2.2. Structural drivers shaping household migration decisions

A set of broader structural constraints shapes the menu of livelihood options available to rural households and frames parents' migration deliberations. Hukou-linked institutional barriers in education create difficult trade-offs for migrant-origin families. Without local urban household registration, migrant children face systematic barriers to accessing high-quality urban public schooling [10-12]. Families are confronted with two imperfect options: leaving children behind in rural areas for stable school enrolment, or migrating together while accepting inferior educational resources in cities. Existing studies suggest this institutional pressure may influence household migration choices.

Rural households also face financial risks stemming from gaps in the rural healthcare system. Unexpected large-scale medical expenses can rapidly drain household savings in contexts where social security protection remains limited for rural populations [13]. Earning higher urban wages through labour migration becomes one potential strategy for households to build financial buffers against health-related shocks. Existing studies suggest this economic pressure may influence household migration choices.

Low economic returns from traditional local livelihoods further push rural households to consider out-migration. Agricultural income often struggles to keep pace with rising costs of daily subsistence, children's education and other household needs under ongoing rural hollowing-out processes [5]. For many rural families, sending household members to take up non-farm urban jobs becomes a plausible livelihood strategy. Existing studies suggest this livelihood-related pressure may influence household migration choices.

Importantly, these structural conditions do not mechanically determine migration outcomes. They constitute the contextual background within which rural parents weigh the costs and benefits of labour migration.

2.3. Family-level costs of parent-child separation

Labour-migration-driven parent–child separation can produce diverse well-being consequences for different household members.

For children, reduced daily care and limited interaction are associated with an increased risk of social-emotional difficulties and poorer developmental outcomes [6]. Long-term absence of parents may weaken the parent–child relationship and create ongoing psychological adaptation challenges for left-behind children [8]. These findings reflect potential developmental risks rather than inevitable harm for all separated children.

Older grandparents who remain in rural areas usually take on the main care responsibilities for their grandchildren. In addition to daily household chores, they also undertake additional caregiving tasks, which may increase their physical burden and contribute to feelings of loneliness [8]. Although some grandparents feel satisfied while caring for their grandchildren, the care demands may have a negative impact on the daily well-being of older adults.

Migrant parents themselves also experience hardship due to long-distance family separation. Physical distance limits in-person involvement in children's growth and daily family affairs, which may create psychological stress and intrahousehold relational tensions for migrant workers [6].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.38978

Migrant parents must navigate emotional trade-offs between earning income away from home and reduced participation in family life.

Existing scholarship has documented a range of potential well-being costs associated with parent–child separation for children, older caregivers and migrant parents. Most available studies focus on measuring post-separation developmental and health outcomes. Far less empirical attention has been directed to household decision-making itself. This study addresses this gap by exploring how rural parents recognise these potential family costs while deliberating over labour migration options in the context of a Miao village.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and participants

This qualitative study employed a semi-structured interview approach to explore the familial adaptations and livelihood experiences of residents affected by rural labour migration, with all fieldwork carried out in Baisha Miao Village. Local parental caregivers of the village were selected as the participants via purposive sampling. On-site household recruitment was used to gather various experiences of households, including a wide range of labour-migration households in the village and diverse family and migration backgrounds. The final sample included 31 parents aged between 28 and 42 years old, and the average age of the parents in the sample was 35. In terms of demographics and migration status, the 20 non-migrant parents in the sample included 14 mothers and 6 fathers; they resided and worked in the village and had no prior experience of urban migration. The other 11 participants were migrant parents, including four migrant mothers, six migrant fathers and one returned migrant mother. All formal one-on-one interviews were conducted from March 23 to March 27, 2026. Research ethics procedures were observed during the study. Before each interview, all participants were fully informed of the research goals, the content of the interview, and their right to refuse participation or withdraw at any time. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interview and audio recording. For privacy protection, all personally identifiable information and specific household data in the interview transcripts have been redacted.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

This section introduces the research process and the implementation of interviews and data analysis. All of the primary research data were obtained through face-to-face semi-structured interviews in the local village. To reduce the communication gap and facilitate participants' use of daily language, interviews were conducted in either the local Miao dialect or Mandarin Chinese according to each participant's preference, and each interview was about 30 minutes long. With the participants' informed consent, all interviews were recorded. Fieldwork was conducted to collect audio data; these files were then transcribed manually. All Chinese- and Miao-language interview materials were translated into English by the author for quotation and presentation of the results in this paper. Based on the theoretical system presented earlier, deductive thematic analysis was used for the data in this study. No qualitative analysis software such as NVivo or MAXQDA was employed; therefore, all coding was carried out manually. The interview transcripts were read, compared and organised several times according to the theoretical dimensions; materials not directly relevant to the research problem were excluded; the main narrative content was refined; and the main themes were summarised. All the conclusions and results of this study are based on the original interview materials.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.38978

4. Findings

4.1. Financial pressures

Interviews with multiple households revealed ongoing financial hardship, with migrant and non-migrant families facing different types of economic pressure. Households staying in the village depended primarily on subsistence agriculture and small-scale livestock rearing, sources of annual income that were both low and volatile. Such income was frequently insufficient to meet essential expenses, such as home repairs, medical fees, and children's school costs. One non-migrant mother (P1) commented: "I really can't afford housing for four kids. I can't support their schooling." Many non-migrant parents reported that farm income varied according to harvest yields, leaving almost no spare funds to cover unexpected events such as illness. Another non-migrant respondent added that village-based earnings barely covered basic daily needs, with virtually no possibility of accumulating savings.

Migrant parents, by contrast, earned higher nominal wages in urban workplaces, yet they still faced heavy expenditure burdens that limited savings. A migrant father (P2) explained: "We barely make 4,000–5,000 yuan every month, and still it's not enough to get by." Urban living costs, remittances sent back home, school tuition, and elderly care expenses consumed most of their monthly income. While migration raised total household cash flow, it did not reliably eliminate financial insecurity. Non-migrant families grappled with a low income baseline, whereas migrant families contended with high ongoing expenses. Both groups reported anxiety about meeting household needs, though the roots of their financial pressure differed noticeably.

4.2. Emotional strain and changing family bonds

The interview data revealed emotional strain and changes in family bonds associated with long-distance separation, which fell into two themes: parent–child relationships and marital relationships.

4.2.1. Parent-child relationships

Numerous migrant parents reported limited daily interaction with their children and expressed sorrow at missing ordinary moments of their children's development. Digital communication tools, including phone calls and video chats, could not fully replace face-to-face care and presence. One migrant mother (P3) observed: "The children need money for school and food, so it is too hard to go back home." She elaborated that financial pressures compelled her to remain in the city, leaving her unable to attend to her child's immediate needs or engage in day-to-day parenting. Nevertheless, these experiences were not universally adverse; several migrant households sustained fairly stable parent–child ties by maintaining regular video-call schedules, indicating variation across families.

4.2.2. Marital relationships

Extended physical separation also altered marital dynamics for couples separated by labour migration. A non-migrant mother (P4) stated: "We have two kids. My husband drives a truck, and the children's school fees and supporting the elderly are the main expenses." His long-haul trucking work required prolonged absences, resulting in only brief, infrequent reunions between the couple. Insufficient in-person time hindered full resolution of complex household disputes, and small grievances could accumulate over months apart. Many couples relied on online messaging to negotiate family matters, an approach that occasionally led to miscommunication without direct

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.38978

conversation. In all these accounts, parents acknowledged these emotional burdens while continuing to regard migration as a vital strategy to sustain family livelihoods.

4.3. Health issues and chronic stress

Interviews captured self-reported physical and emotional symptoms linked to family financial pressure and migration-related separation. These were participants' subjective accounts, not clinically diagnosed medical conditions. Non-migrant parents mostly attributed their stress to worries about household finances, medical costs, and children's schooling. Migrant parents associated their discomfort with physically demanding urban labour and constant anxiety about family members staying behind in the village.

A non-migrant single mother (P5) reflected: "It's not that I value staying with my kids all the time. It's mainly for financial reasons. I can't make money there without thinking much about anything else." She described persistent rumination over household costs, which contributed to self-reported anxiety and disturbed sleep.

For migrant workers, workplace exhaustion was compounded by homesickness. A migrant father (P6) commented: "I've made very little money this year, it's barely enough to get by." He reported bodily pain from heavy manual work, worsened by concern over his children and ageing relatives left in the village. The data show that both groups experienced stress-related symptoms, but the triggers differed: non-migrant parents' strain centred on household financial uncertainty, while migrant parents' distress reflected both strenuous urban work and separation from loved ones.

5. Discussion

5.1. Migration as a constrained household strategy

Based on semi-structured interview data with 31 parental participants from Baisha Miao Village, this study examines rural households' migration rationales, economic dilemmas, and family relational sacrifices. Most importantly, the interview narratives answer the key research puzzle: why rural households persist in migration despite evident family strains and psychological costs. Rather than a voluntary individual economic choice, local labour migration is better conceptualised as a constrained household survival strategy, in which families tolerate non-negligible personal and relational losses because structural livelihood constraints leave few viable local alternatives to sustain household welfare [1]. This section strictly distinguishes empirical field observations from theoretical interpretation to clarify this mechanism.

Three consistent empirical findings are directly drawn from participants' accounts. First, local agricultural livelihoods are structurally inadequate. Farming and small-scale livestock breeding only generate low, unstable seasonal incomes that regularly fail to cover rigid household spending on children's education, medical treatment, and elderly support. Second, urban migration provides limited net economic benefits. Although migrant workers earn more than the local agricultural workers, high living expenses and remittance obligations in the cities reduce their disposable income significantly, leaving both migrant and left-behind families in financial difficulties [3]. Third, cross-regional migration harms family function. Many participants reported less face-to-face time with their children and marital discord due to prolonged separation. Although digital communication alleviates temporary emotional isolation, it cannot substitute for in-person care, daily interaction, and physical closeness of family life, leading to relational and psychological costs [14].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.38978

Based on the above empirical results, this study integrates the three independent findings to construct a single constrained household strategy system. Households are not migrating for individual advancement but to reduce structural livelihood risks; therefore, migration is a necessary but limited collective choice. This explanation extends the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM). NELM can be seen as a family's way of risk management in the absence of effective rural credit and insurance markets, and thus migration is economically rational [1]. Traditional NELM focuses too much on instrumental economic reasons and neglects non-economic sacrifices. This study adds to the body of knowledge by offering cases of economically rational migration decisions that involve high relational and emotional costs. Local households do not choose family fragmentation and subjective stress out of desire; instead, the limited rural living conditions severely restrict sustainable livelihood options. Separation is associated with heightened anxiety in parents, but continuous remote communication can also provide emotional support for them [7, 9]. The participants' problems are due to circumstances rather than clinical disorders, and migration-induced household insecurity is thus structurally caused rather than individually pathological [6, 8].

5.2. A self-reinforcing migration pattern

This section introduces a context-specific self-reinforcing pattern of out-migration in Baisha Miao Village, explicitly separates interview-supported empirical facts from researcher-led analytical inferences, and notes that it has limited generalisability. The cycle of cause and effect is as follows: Youth out-migration reduces the local labour and care-giving force, increases the household's dependence on migrant remittances, and thus promotes further intergenerational migration [4, 5].

The two main links in the cycle are directly supported by first-hand narratives of parental interviews. First, a large number of young people have left the village for urban areas, and now only older people and children remain to live here. All participants reported that few young people are left for local employment or agricultural production. Second, the household economy has become dependent on remittances, as basic living expenses, education and medical fees cannot be met through local income alone. A typical villager mentioned the closed-loop problem: "All the young people have left the village, leaving only the elderly and children at home. There is no one to earn money locally, so our children have no choice but to keep working outside—we have to rely on their wages to support the whole family." These two phenomena are consistent empirical observations derived from interview data.

In contrast, the core causal linkage connecting labour depletion to sustained migration reliance is a synthetic analytical inference rather than a participant-stated mechanism. While parents described population outflow and remittance dependence as concurrent realities, the progressive, self-reinforcing causal loop is interpreted and theorised by integrating all interview accounts and village contextual features. Methodological limitations further restrict the applicability of this cyclic pattern. The study adopts cross-sectional one-off interviews that capture only static household conditions, lacking longitudinal dynamics of repeated migration and return [15]. The sample solely comprises parental perspectives, excluding children's and adolescents' experiences of family separation [2]. Additionally, deductive thematic analysis may overlook indigenous local understandings of migration.

Most importantly, this self-reinforcing migration pattern is strictly a single-case observation based on 31 parental caregivers in one Miao village. It reflects the unique livelihood and demographic context of Baisha Village and cannot be generalised to broader ethnic minority rural areas in southwestern China or ordinary Chinese rural communities.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.38978

Despite these limitations, the findings imply that local governance should shift from passive migration regulation to active local livelihood reconstruction and social support for left-behind families [11, 16]. Future multisite comparative and longitudinal research can verify the cross-context applicability of this cyclic migration mechanism and capture the long-term evolution of household migration strategies [10].

6. Conclusion

This study explores how labour migration shapes household livelihoods and family well-being among parents in Baisha Miao Village. The findings demonstrate that migration represents a household response to persistent economic pressures, including expenses for children's education, elderly care and daily household maintenance. While migrant households gain remittance income to ease material shortages, migration simultaneously generates emotional strain, weakened parent-child and marital bonds, and self-reported health burdens for both migrant and non-migrant family members. The evidence reveals a trade-off between economic security and family togetherness. This study's contribution lies in illustrating that a household strategy which appears economically rational may still carry substantial relational and psychological costs. The Miao families in this village do not choose to migrate freely; rather, their decisions are prompted by limited local living conditions. Implications of this case include improved rural healthcare, more equal educational opportunities, and practical local employment prospects; thus, the pressure for family separation may be reduced. Only one village and cross-sectional interview data are included in this study. Future research will conduct comparative fieldwork in several Miao villages to determine if the patterns found in Baisha are also present in other ethnic rural areas. At the same time, according to the interviews, sustained out-migration may increase the demand for migrant remittances as local labour and care resources decline. Taken together, the results suggest that the assessment of rural labour migration should consider household economic security, relational continuity and self-reported well-being simultaneously, and higher migrant income alone is not sufficient to indicate improved family welfare.

References

[1] Taylor, J. E., Rozelle, S., & de Brauw, A. (2003). Migration and incomes in source communities: A new economics of migration perspective from China. *Economic Development and Cultural Change, 52*(1), 75–101. https://doi.org/10.1086/380135

[2] Huangfu, Y. (2024). Return migration of rural-urban migrant children in China. *Population Research and Policy Review, 43*, 41. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-024-09885-4

[3] Davis, J., & Lopez-Carr, D. (2014). Migration, remittances and smallholder decision-making: Implications for land use and livelihood change in Central America. *Land Use Policy, 36*, 319–329. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2013.09.001

[4] Shen, A., & Zhou, J. (2024). Education opportunities for rural areas: Evidence from China's higher education expansion. arXiv. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2408.12915

[5] Liu, Y., Liu, Y., Chen, Y., & Long, H. (2010). The process and driving forces of rural hollowing in China under rapid urbanization. *Journal of Geographical Sciences, 20*(6), 876–888. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11442-010-0817-2

[6] Fellmeth, G., Rose-Clarke, K., Zhao, C., Busert, L. K., Zheng, Y., Massazza, A., Sonmez, H., Eder, B., Blewitt, A., Lertgrai, W., Orcutt, M., Ricci, K., Mohamed-Ahmed, O., Burns, R., Knipe, D., Hargreaves, S., Hesketh, T., Opondo, C., & Devakumar, D. (2018). Health impacts of parental migration on left-behind children and adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet, 392*(10164), 2567–2582. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(18)32558-3

[7] Abbasi, B. N., Luo, Z., & Sohail, A. (2023). Effect of parental migration on the noncognitive abilities of left-behind school-going children in rural China. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 10*, 11.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.38978

https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01496-8
[8] Li, J. (2023). A scoping review of internal migration and left-behind children's wellbeing in China. *arXiv*. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2305.04348
[9] Shi, H., Wang, Y., Li, M., Tan, C., Zhao, C., Huang, X., Dou, Y., Duan, X., Du, Y., Wu, T., Wang, X., & Zhang, J. (2021). Impact of parent-child separation on children's social-emotional development: A cross-sectional study of left-behind children in poor rural areas of China. *BMC Public Health, 21*, 823. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10831-8
[10] Xu, D., & Wu, X. (2022). Separate and unequal: Hukou, school segregation, and educational inequality in urban China. *Chinese Sociological Review, 54*(5), 433–457. https://doi.org/10.1080/21620555.2021.2019007
[11] Guo, Y., & Li, X. (2024). Regional inequality in China's educational development: An urban-rural comparison. *Heliyon, 10*(4), e26249. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e26249
[12] Sun, Y., Zhao, L., & Zhao, Z. (2025). Hukou status and children's education in China. *Economic Development and Cultural Change, 73*(2), 979–1021. https://doi.org/10.1086/729926
[13] Zhang, W., Su, M., Li, D., Zhang, T., & Li, W. (2023). Catastrophic health expenditure and its inequality in rural China: Based on longitudinal data from 2013 to 2018. *BMC Public Health, 23*, 1861. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-16692-7
[14] Waddoups, A. B., Yoshikawa, H., & Strouf, K. (2019). Developmental effects of parent–child separation. *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology, 1*(1), 387–410. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-devpsych-121318-085142
[15] Tang, L., Xiang, X., & Liu, Y. (2024). Family migration and well-being of Chinese migrant workers' children. *Scientific Reports, 14*, 12862. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-63589-5
[16] Hung, J. (2023). Policy-oriented examination of left-behind children's health and well-being in China. *Sustainability, 15*(7), 5977. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15075977