

## COMMENTARY

# Commentary: East Asian Educational Migration as Narrative Quests

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## ABSTRACT

I interpret the rich conceptual insights and empirical findings of the special issue *Childhood, Migration and the Pursuit of Happiness in Middle-Class East Asia* through the lens of understanding migration as a journey of narrative quests. Drawing from moral philosopher McIntyre's theory of narrative self and the pursuit of a good life, I highlight the dialectic and dialogic aspects of 'narrative quests' across multiple cases of East Asian educational migration (educational migration broadly construed). I highlight key features, central themes and tensions of narrative quests among these migrant families. I also pose questions for expanding further inquiry under this theoretical framework.

## 1 | Introduction

A hallmark of contemporary middle-class childhood is 'intensive parenting' (Hays 1998), which can be defined as being 'child centred, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive and financially expensive' (Faircloth 2014, 27). Nowhere else is parenting and educational competition more intensive than East Asia, with leading results in standardized international tests (e.g. Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development 2022), soaring childrearing costs (Yeung 2024) and, concomitantly, ultra-low fertility rates (Rajvanshi 2024). Against this backdrop, the United States or Western Europe is no longer the only desired 'paradise' (Fong 2011) for educational exodus out of East Asia. As the special issue *Childhood, Migration and the Pursuit of Happiness in Middle-Class East Asia* demonstrates, more and more middle-class families choose destinations such as Eastern Europe or Southeast Asia or exit the mainstream system via alternative pathways domestically. Throughout this commentary, I use the term 'educational migration' in the broadest sense, referring to migration that involves moving children to different schooling systems or different countries, even though, in some

cases, families are motivated by lifestyle or other purposes, not just children's education. Venturing into migration studies as an anthropologist interested in morality and focused on the nexus between culture and the mind, I interpret this excellent collection through the lens of understanding migration as a journey of narrative quests. In what follows, I demonstrate what I mean by 'narrative quests'. I highlight key features and central themes of narrative quests among these migrant families. Towards the end, I pose questions for expanding further inquiry under this conceptual framework.

This narrative approach has theoretical, methodological and epistemological implications. My first point is that these articles, from research questions to methodology, all centre on the research interlocutors' narratives. Regarding methodology, most articles are based on ethnographic or life-history interviews, and their analyses also feature core themes deduced and distilled from those interview scripts of a biographical nature. Regarding epistemological lenses, many articles aim to understand how East Asian families understand, conceptualize and/or envision their own migration experience, through analysing their own

narratives. Tu's study of upper-middle-class Chinese teenagers in elite American schools is an apt example: 'their educational journey initially is narrated from a point of unhappiness for some whereas become unhappy for others in the process' (p. 2). Moreover, Choi et al.'s study of young Chinese adults with transnational experience, based on their retrospective life-history interviews, deduces ideal types of parental aspirations which exemplify narrative tropes. We will return to the keyword of 'aspiration' later. But first and foremost, the various stories of middle-class families' migration in/from East Asia, as these articles effectively tell, demonstrate the value of ethnographic work, that is, understanding migration experience from the research interlocutors' own perspectives and in their own contexts.

Moreover, from an 'emic' perspective, 'narrative quests' not only offers an overarching framework to interpret and organize the different articles motivated by diverse conceptual traditions. This approach resonates with my personal experience. Not just a scholar of East Asian childhood, family and education, I am also an educational migrant from China into the United States, a Chinese daughter, wife and mother living between different worlds. As anthropologists and feminist scholars have long argued, a researcher's positionality inevitably shapes the ethnographic knowledge gained in the research process (Behar and Gordon 1996; Haraway 1988). I also, inevitably, insert myself into reading this collection and let these stories speak to myself. From youth to now middle-aged life stage, I have experienced what many of the protagonists in this collection, teenagers, young adults and parents, have shared with their researchers: for example, heartfelt aspirations and painful disillusionments, searching for 'global' identity or longing for belonging, negotiating different value systems, balancing self-pursuit and family duties, choosing between relentless competition and 'humane education' (Xiang 2022) and juggling multiple roles. These experiences are always scripted, built upon certain narrative schemas and cultural models, but they are also infused with idiosyncratic thoughts and emotional signatures and often rendered vivid in memories.

Lastly, a narrative approach highlights important and common features of migration experience. Temporality is inherent in human narratives: Stories often have a beginning, middle and end. Migration experience, especially in migrants' own storytelling, often involves the past, the present and the future. In many cases, mobility complicates temporality, be it 'stepwise migration', one destination after another in seeking for a better future or returning to the home country as the major upward mobility route (Igarashi), or nostalgia for the past home while being trapped in unhappiness in a foreign system (Tu). Related to its temporality, narrative is also fundamentally dialectic, moving forward in tensions, and dialogic, individual voices always embedded in, and sometimes motivated by, social relations. These dimensions are connected to values, as 'the end'; however, changing and uncertain it is, the tensions, as well as the social relations, are all central to pursuing a good and worthy life. Expanding from the view of educational migration as profoundly 'a life's work' (Waters in this issue) and seeing migration as 'inseparable from values—migrants' perception of what is good, important, and worthy' (Xiang and Nyiri 2022, 201), I will further develop the argument of migration as narrative quests.

## 2 | Why 'Narrative Quests?'

From a moral anthropology perspective, Western social theories tend to formulate human action 'too automatically, too strategically, too self-consciously, or too self-interestedly' (Lambek 2010, 40). New theoretical perspectives on migration begin to emphasize the meaning-making nature and ethical dimensions of human actions. Meaning-making practices and projections are intimately connected to people's value judgement, yet 'values are curiously absent' in social science studies of migration, as extant research adopted a predominantly political economy approach (Xiang and Nyiri 2022, 201). Waters' review piece in this collection particularly resonates with me for its theoretical vision and ambition: Waters questions the classic paradigm of 'capital accumulation' that East Asian educational migration is motivated by strategic concerns such as accumulating economic, social, cultural capital or the combination of all those forms. Instead, inspired by Charles Taylor's philosophy, Waters advocates for reframing East Asian educational immigration around 'ideas of the dialogical self and the whole life' (p. 8). Departing from a reductionist and individualist framework that concerns 'transmigrants' ostensibly strategic and immediate goals' (p. 9), Waters emphasizes a narrative, biographical, relational and life-course approach to migration.

In line with such new interests in understanding individual migrants and their families as meaning-making actors, I further see migrants as authors in their 'narrative quests' (MacIntyre 2007). My argument is inspired by the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's thesis on the narrative self and what constitutes the human pursuit of the good life: 'I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"' (MacIntyre 2007, 216). Relatedly, I see the multiple and sometimes contradictory 'narrative templates' that shape people's value judgements, including their convictions of a worthy life at any given moment (a telos), as 'co-authors' in such narrative quests (Wertsch 2021). I also extend from my previous research on the narrative self of urban middle-class mothers in contemporary China (Xu 2022). But in educational migration, individuals and families move across various types of borders and travel between multiple values systems in time and space. Educational migration provides a new and promising topic to apply and enrich this narrative approach and understand individuals' life trajectories and moral choices.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre points out that humans by nature have a story-telling disposition, both in actions and in fictions: 'Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutters in their actions as in their words' (2007, 216). The duality of 'action and fiction', or we can say 'action and aspiration', is crucial for understanding East Asian families' migration journey: As we learned from this special issue, this journey is often mediated, or even initiated, by some form of imaginations that are marketed by media, business intermediaries or instilled by family members. According to Kardaszewicz, migration agencies lured many well-off but not wealthy middle-class Chinese parents to move or send their children to Poland, portraying Poland as a place where Chinese people can enjoy a 'European lifestyle' with low costs as well as a relaxed childhood. Some agents even used a CCTV (Chinese Central TV) documentary about Poland to advertize their programs. In this narrative, Poland and its

'European lifestyle' are of course romanticized, requiring a 'leap of imagination' on the part of migrants to fit-in their particular aspirations with an unknown destination. Moreover, migrants are not just passive consumers of media narratives. Such a 'leap of imagination' requires the migrants' active participation; for example, when the local agency recommended Poland to the young adult Alice, she immediately thought of her previous summer trip to Cambridge, England and the image of that beautiful summer came to her mind.

Not only is narrative fundamental to both human thoughts and actions, narrative also underpins the basic unity of a person's life-long, meaning-making journey: 'The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail' (2007, 219). But it is narrative quest that 'allows us to interpret the significance of particular stories and acts in our life in light of the larger project' (Wertsch 2021, 185). What is 'the larger project'? What is a life that is worth living, or, in MacIntyre's words, 'A quest for what?' (p. 219)

The dialectic and the dialogic features of narrative quests are particularly relevant to this special issue: The first feature is the dialectic between partial teleology, some determinate conception of where one's life is ultimately headed (the final telos) and the inherent unpredictability (Wertsch 2021, 186). One's narrative quest is neither random nor predetermined as 'miners search for gold' (MacIntyre 2007, 219). This dialectic is dramatized in East Asian middle-class families' migration journey, contributing to the plurality of narrative quests. These migrants have to negotiate childhood values and educational strategies across quite different meaning systems, whether they choose to exit their home country's dominant system through moving abroad or home-schooling (Göransson), or in the Korean case, bringing children on short-term international travel to gain new aspirations (Kang). Different meaning systems have different scripts for how to live (teleology) and travelling between those also entails high unpredictability. In addition, migration can disrupt or destabilize one's narrative quest due to its temporality, be it short- or long-term. To some extent, these migrants have to rewrite their telos and re-script their lives in their narrative quests: for example, Japanese mothers in Malaysia, from the disillusionment with Japan's conformist schooling system to the aspiration of nurturing a proud Japanese in a multi-cultural society; but then after a while, some parents start to worry about maintaining their children's 'Japaneseness', especially the language, and consider returning to Japan (Igarashi). Taken together, narratives play a central role in the identity work and meaning-making journey of migration.

Second, the dialogic nature means that 'the narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives' (MacIntyre 2007, 218), so the pursuit of a good life is never a purely individualistic project. Two sources of narratives shape this dialogic nature in the cases of East Asian educational migrants. One is cultural community: 'the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity' (MacIntyre 2007, 221). For migrations, this means embedding one's life story within multiple 'narrative templates' (Wertsch 2008), as migrants often traverse cultural boundaries. The other is the family: In Waters' words, migration "decision-making"

is almost always undertaken within a familial context and in continuous dialogue with others (even when it has involved only one person's mobility) (p. 7). Waters believes that Charles Taylor's communitarian ethics is more compatible with East Asia's foundational habit of thoughts, Confucianism. Empirically, we see from this collection that family still figures potently into East Asian people's selfhood and moral compass, so much so that migration is often 'a joint family venture' (Kardaszewicz), from aspirations to actions, in re-assessments and in retrospection. Therefore, both multiple 'narrative templates', rooted in different cultural communities, and significant others, often family members, become co-authors of migrants' narrative quests. This polyvocality is another reason for using the plural 'quests'.

The idea of 'narrative quests' provides a useful lens to examine important features of East Asian educational migration. The first feature is diversifying trajectories of such narrative quests, which reflect different life-stories families are making. This collection together demonstrates diversification in migration destinations and pathways: More and more Chinese families are going to Eastern Europe despite the very elite families still sending their children to American private schools for secondary and college education; Japanese families going to Malaysia and Singaporean families moving to Thailand; other creative solutions are also emerging, which do not require moving abroad long-term, for example, home-schooling in Singapore and alternative forms of English-learning instead of 'ESA' (early studying abroad) in South Korea. Even within one sample, for example, among Chinese teenagers who went to elite American secondary schools, diverse frames of migration narratives emerge. These cases shed light on different definitions of what is good and successful, such as a relaxed childhood, enjoying nature, multi-cultural education, maintaining national identity and pride and so on. Taken together, this collection revealed diversifying motivations in the quest for a good and worthy life beyond, or at least not limited to, the sole telos of status competition with academic achievements as its proxy in East Asian childhood.

This collection also presents convergent themes in migrants' narrative quests, as well as common tensions between competing 'end goals'. One convergent theme, echoing the main title of this collection, is happiness. Or, to be more precise, how people construe and negotiate different ideas about happiness, almost always in dialogue with, sometimes as the antithesis of, a particular notion of success. Neither happiness nor success, however, should be understood as abstract values, but as narratives embedded within specific historical and biographical contexts. The abstract idea of 'happiness' might be a long-standing final telos for all humanity, but in this collection, happiness in childhood refers to a new narrative emerging among the global middle class, with a focus on socio-emotional well-being as opposed to academic achievements (Göransson). This new, teleological narrative is shaped by the influence of psychology and the rise of a therapeutic culture (Madsen 2014). The concept of success, too, needs to be unpacked, not assumed. Tu's article sheds light on the varied narratives of 'success', or ideal types of 'success frames', among the 'parachute generation', upper-middle-class Chinese teenagers studying alone in America, far away from home. Many enjoyed friendship and popularity as 'good students' in China, yet after being parachuted into America with a different school culture, they lost such joy from social life and could only hold

onto academic success (Tu, 13). Contrary to the ideal of pursuing a happy childhood, as their parents sought ‘a silent exit from the anxiety-ridden Chinese educational system’ (Tu, 4), unhappiness (*bu kaixin*) became a salient theme in these teenagers’ own narratives. This irony leads to my next point, tensions in migrants’ narrative quests.

The idea of tension, expressed in words like ‘ambivalence’, ‘contradiction’ and ‘disjuncture’, is central in each and every piece in this collection. Tensions manifest at different levels and in different forms: At a structural level, there is the tension between educational reform policies, for example in China (Tu), South Korea (Kang) and Singapore (Göransson), and implementation of these reforms, or between aspirational narratives from the perspective of the state, and failures in outcomes. For many parents, this was what drove them to seek alternative educational systems. At a familial level, there are conflicting aspirations between parents (Choi et al.) or the tension between parental expectations and children’s experiences (Tu). Even at an individual level, families experience disillusionment with reality in the new environment, especially when compared against idealized ‘dreams’ (Kardaszewicz). Although some of these tensions also exist in the lives of those who stay within the mainstream education system (Xu 2017), the dialectic, dialogic and polyvocal aspects of migrant families’ narrative quest are more dramatized as I explained earlier; therefore, these tensions are heightened. They form foundational and intertwined elements of migrants’ biographic narratives and figure into their existential quest for a good and worthy life.

### 3 | Narrative Quests: Open Questions

Built upon the rich insights from this collection, a ‘narrative quests’ approach to East Asian educational migration also opens up new questions for future work: First of all, it helps to problematize and theorize the starting point of migration, aspirations, as they are often mediated by narratives. ‘There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a telos—or of a variety of ends or goals—towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present’ (MacIntyre 2007, 215–216). A central thesis in MacIntyre’s moral philosophy is humans’ story-telling nature both in action and in fiction. Although values and moral frameworks are abstract ideas (Xiang and Nyiri 2022), if we delve into families’ value-aspirations, in light of ‘fictions’ promoted by business agencies or other intermediaries, we will find good stories. A good story is always concrete, with compelling ‘emplotment’ based on careful selection of information (Wertsch 2021). A good story has the effect of make-believe. Future studies should closely examine the textual, visual and other sensory patterns of such advertized ‘fictions’ to illuminate how narratives, which always embody certain values, concretize or stimulate people’s migration aspirations and even motivate actions.

Second, to push further Waters’ proposal of migration as ‘a life’s work’, a narrative quest runs through one’s life from birth to death. Considering East Asian migrants’ narrative quests from a life-course perspective, the answer to this question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ (MacIntyre 2007, 216), and

the kind of values embodied in the story or stories, likely shifts for the same person. For example, life-stage transition affected the narratives of Chinese youths in elite American schools: Narratives of ‘unhappiness’ disclose a moment of ‘unsettled’ time, as these youths were still searching for or developing strategies to embrace the realities ahead. Their parents, too, were in the process of adapting to their children’s decisions, as their children grew ambivalent about the seemingly well-paved pathway. This one example about one small slice of a life’s time offers a glimpse into the complexity of narrative quests.

Over the life course, tensions among different values might be heightened as the migrant navigates mobility across different worlds and embedded in complex familial and social relations. Further research should explore migrants’ journey across different life stages to understand how their narrative quests shape and are shaped by family relations, as the teleological, contingent and polyvocal aspects all shift with time. Take my own journey as an example. The kind of telos evolved as I went through different life stages: When I aspired to study in the United States as a young adult, my own scholarly pursuit was the only thing that mattered, what a simple and romanticized telos. After becoming a mother, suddenly my child became a central character in any teleological narrative, not to mention in migration decisions. Now my parents are getting old and still left alone in China, as their only child, I am developing a more ambivalent narrative about my past journey, about how I should live my future life and whether I should return to stay closer to them. That is to say, with age, my vision of happiness, success and what is a worthy life has shifted to value relationship and family more. What about that of my parents? They wholeheartedly supported my decision to leave China and made a lot of sacrifices over time, like many parents interviewed in this collection. How do they make sense and evaluate their own life now, as their life narrative is so deeply entangled with mine? After decades of the One-Child Policy, scholars have noticed the rise of neo-familism in China, characterized by child-centred values and intergenerational-integrated personhood (Yan 2021). From a life-course perspective, Chinese singleton children would be a particularly poignant case to examine the intertwined narrative selves and the evolving family relations in transnational migration.

A third direction is to examine how macro-level and global factors configure or disrupt migrants’ narrative quests. I focus on two factors that are not yet systematically addressed in this collection, the COVID-19 pandemic and geo-politics. Built upon the notion that our present is always informed by some image of the future, I would argue that our image of the future is always informed by the past. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic not only interrupted mobility. At an existential level, it also woke us up to the brutal truth, that is, the fragility of life itself. Many works in this collection draw from interviews that took place during the pandemic time. My own experience, having to wait 4 years before I could return to my home country and visit my family and friends, prompted me to ask this question: How did the pandemic experience (experience, not just policies) influence migrants and ‘would-be’ migrants’ ethical reflections on their past life as well as their aspirations for the future?

Geo-politics is another weighty topic that destabilizes our imagining of the future. Research already shows that geopolitical

tensions affect international educational migration; for example, America is losing China's top talents (Ma 2023). As a Chinese immigrant in the United States and having lived through the escalating tensions between the two countries, I worry about the future, not just for myself but for my child, a so-called ABC, American-born Chinese. I wonder how Chinese parents think about sending their children to Eastern Europe, where nearby the Russia–Ukraine War sees no ending. Does geopolitical instability not affect their romanticized fantasies at all? Malaysia attracts Japanese families for its pro-Japan stance, and Japanese children feel respected in Malaysia instead of facing racial discrimination in Western countries (Igarashi). I wonder if anti-Asian racism, heightened during the pandemic years and amidst Sino-US tensions, ever figures into Chinese and Korean parents' quests for a better future for their children.

Last but definitely not the least, although childhood is a key theme in this special issue, most articles centre on adults' perspectives, except for Tu's article that emphasizes adolescents' narratives and Choi et al., which features adults' retrospective narratives of childhood experience. As a scholar of child development, I am curious about young children's experiences. After all, children are the predominant focus of East Asian families' migration journey. To understand humans' meaning-making pursuits, we have a lot to learn from children (Xu 2024). How do children make sense of their families' migration decisions? What stories about their migration journeys do they have to tell? How does childhood migration experience affect their lives at later stages? Future work should investigate children's actions and voices in their own narrative quests.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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