

Intergenerationally tied relocation and care circulation: Motivations, struggles, and future arrangements

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Abstract

Objective: This study investigates the processes and experiences of intergenerationally tied relocation in which older parents from mainland China join their already migrated children in Hong Kong to provide domestic and childcare support.

Background: Studies on tied migration have mainly focused on couple-based moves within a human capital framework. With the increasing trend of grandparenting migrants, studies have expanded to address intergenerationally tied relocation.

Method: We conducted thematic analysis of in-depth interview data of 34 mainland Chinese respondents, including 15 parent–child pairs and four adult children.

Results: The decision to relocate is influenced by the established history of intergenerational supportive exchange relationships. The initial motivation for tied relocation is to benefit the adult children. Older parents' post-relocation experiences can affect their later decision to leave or remain, with key factors including financial dependence, emotional stress, and difficulty in balancing the duty of care between migrant children and distant family members. In planning for future eldercare, the goal is to meet the needs of both generations. Options include non-coresidential care, reliance on the parents' hometown sibling network, or living in nearby mainland cities closer to Hong Kong.

Conclusion: The study highlights the complex interplay of family relationships and responsibilities in the phenomenon of intergenerationally tied relocation. The findings unveil the dynamic roles and adaptive strategies families

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utilize to facilitate the transfer of care and support across generations and geographies.

Implications: Policy and services should be developed to assist aging immigrant families in their adaptation and integration, and formulate strategies for meeting future care needs.

KEYWORDS

care preparation, family, floating older adults, grandparenting, migration

Older people have increasingly been moving between or within countries for caregiving activities because of their adult children's migration, especially when these migrants face conflicts between family and child care and between work and study (Chiu & Ho, 2020; Horn, 2017; King et al., 2014; Yarris, 2017; Zhou, 2012). This pattern is observed worldwide, and it is especially prevalent in Chinese society, which traditionally places a strong emphasis on Confucian values and familial care. These values prioritize family loyalty and unity, encouraging intergenerational support and sharing of responsibilities within the family unit. In this context, there has emerged a substantial population of older Chinese migrants, often referred to as "drifting older adults" or "floating older adults." These individuals are defined as interprovincial migrants over the age of 50 who have followed their adult children (Ruan et al., 2019). Empirical evidence has shown that there are over 9 million interprovincial migrants aged over 50 years living in urban areas in China with their relocated children who are seeking employment (Ruan & Zhou, 2022). In 2015, the number of floating older adults aged 60 years or older who had resided locally for at least 1 month without local registration reached 13.04 million, indicating an annual increase of approximately 6.6% (Fu et al., 2021). Among all older Chinese migrants in 2015, 43% attributed their migration to caring for their next generations (National Health and Family Planning Commission, 2017).

The phenomenon of older migrants is also becoming increasingly prominent in Hong Kong. With the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government's intensification of talent recruitment activities, such as the Admission Scheme for Mainland Talents and Professionals, Immigration Arrangements for Non-local Graduates, and Technology Talent Admission Scheme, the number of highly skilled mainland migrants is anticipated to increase. As the new Top Talent Pass Scheme was launched by the Hong Kong SAR Government (2022), it is expected that the number of talent entrants will further increase, leading to a corresponding rise in older parents relocating to join their children. Moreover, the health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the social unrest following a 7-month upheaval triggered by the proposed 2019 amendment to the extradition bill, have introduced substantial uncertainty and complexity to the experiences of these cross-border aging families. This study employs a dyadic approach to examine (a) the processes and experiences of intergenerationally tied relocation of older parents from mainland China who join their already migrated children in Hong Kong to provide domestic and childcare support, and (b) future relocation and care planning of these families.

With the increasingly visible trend of intergenerationally tied relocation—defined as relocation in which migrants' parents follow the migration pathways and/or reproductive timing of their offspring—studies have been expanding their original focus on tied migration among couples to also address the relocation of older parents as tied movers or as grandparenting migrants (Chiu & Ho, 2020; Horn, 2017; Qi, 2018; Xie & Xia, 2011; Zhu et al., 2022). However, the decision-making process of older migrants' migration is understudied in the existing literature. It remains unclear which factors play a central role in individual relocation events and the subsequent arrangements, particularly regarding the eldercare arrangements that may be affected by

the migration. Furthermore, in light of the increasing emphasis on attracting and retaining talent in cities worldwide, it is crucial to provide support not only to migrant talents but also to their family. Talent migrants greatly benefit from the positive familial support provided by their floating parents, which helps them manage the various stresses of their careers and the challenges of young families. Our study aims to contribute to existing knowledge about the interaction between younger and older generations within the migrant family network, as well as to inform the development of relevant policies that target migrant talents and their families.

Theoretical perspectives guiding the study

Based on the human capital perspective (Becker, 1962; Harris & Todaro, 1970), tied migration theory (Mincer, 1978) takes married couples as the unit of analysis and incorporates family contexts into the family migration decision. According to this theory, migration is a result of a rational evaluation of the costs and benefits of relocation, with economic income being the primary consideration. Individuals will only choose to migrate if they find that the expected gains outweigh the expected costs. Although follow-on migration within a family has been addressed in the literature, studies have tended to focus more on couple relationships, even though possible forms of family migration—in the form of tied migration—encompass a broader set of family types given increased geographical mobility. In recent years, noneconomic motives for migration such as fulfilling care needs (Lamas-Abraira, 2021) or maintaining relationships (Clerge et al., 2017) have received increasing scholarly attention.

Emphasizing the interdependency of lives, the linked-lives perspective in life course research provides a framework for understanding tied migration. According to this perspective, human lives are shaped by social relationships with family and friends throughout their lifespan (Elder, 1994). As a result, changes in one person's life can impact the trajectory of others, especially considering the involvement of extended family members. Unlike typical transnational behavior that merely involves return trips between an origin and a destination (Fokkema et al., 2015), when older parents decide to relocate for providing support and care, their decision is influenced by their own life events as well as those of their adult children. These events and changes affect multiple generations and intergenerational relationships over the course of a lifetime. The intergenerational solidarity model (Bengtson et al., 1976; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991) further explains this connection through six dimensions of solidarity (e.g., affective, associational, consensual, functional, normative, and structural solidarity), highlighting the significant affective ties between generations that encourage support and caregiving interactions. Major life events such as the marriage of adult children, the birth of grandchildren, or the retirement of older parents can foster closer relationships between older parents and their adult immigrant children, leading to relocation and care support behavior (Chiu & Ho, 2020; Newendorp, 2020). These affective ties and support behaviors between generations are particularly pronounced in Chinese society, where familism, rooted in Confucianism, emphasizes the value of kinship and continuity of the family unit (Han, 2012).

To examine care from a life course perspective, we also adopt the care circulation framework (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Care circulation refers to dynamic and complex exchange of care within family networks, which involves reciprocal, multidirectional, and asymmetrical flows of care that fluctuates over time. This exchange is influenced by various factors, including the sociocultural, economic, and political contexts of both the sending and receiving societies (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Chiu & Ho, 2020; Lamas-Abraira, 2021; Merla & Baldassar, 2016). This provides insights into caregiving exchanges in the broader political economy of migration (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). The different sociocultural environments and welfare systems in Hong Kong and mainland China play a significant role in influencing the decisions of older parents regarding the provision of child care and reception of eldercare. The care circulation

framework focuses on the movement and exchange of child care, eldercare, and domestic work across national borders within transnational families. Immigrant families explore various arrangements, such as long-distance caregiving and cross-border parenting, to ensure the well-being of their family members. Research highlights the role of care-related mobility in facilitating care exchanges, with both parties in the dyad actively involved in the process (Lamas-Abraira, 2021). In addition, some studies suggest that although care exchanges are assumed within the family, reciprocity may not always be present (Chiu & Ho, 2020; Horn, 2017).

In this study, we extended the application of tied migration theory to gain an understanding of parent–child tied relocation that occurs in cross-border aging families, focusing on older parents who cross borders to provide care and support for their migrant adult children in Hong Kong. Adopting the linked-lives perspective and notion of care circulation, we further examined whether and how attitudes regarding intergenerational relocation intersect with other subsystems and actors in the broader family networks. We also explored how care circulation operates across generations and space in tied relocation can be approached in a processual manner.

METHOD

Participants

Using a purposive sampling approach, we recruited participants from three districts in Hong Kong: Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories. To ensure sample diversity, we distributed recruitment advertisements through various research and service organizations, senior centers at public housing estates, and university campuses. We adopted two recruitment approaches. In the first approach, we recruited older participants who were (a) aged ≥ 55 years, (b) did not receive intensive care, (c) had a mainland-born adult child or child-in-law aged ≥ 18 years working in Hong Kong for 3 consecutive years, (d) had no permanent residency in Hong Kong, and (e) had spent at least 1 month during the year preceding the study in Hong Kong to help with childcare and other domestic duties. We subsequently invited their selected child or child-in-law as a coreporter. In our second approach, we recruited adult children who were (a) aged ≥ 18 years, (b) did not provide full-time care for their parents, (c) were born in mainland China, (d) had a mainland parent or parent-in-law aged ≥ 55 years who had spent at least 1 month with them in Hong Kong over the preceding year for providing child care and other domestic help, and (e) were a permanent or nonpermanent resident of Hong Kong and had worked there for at least 3 years or had a spouse who had worked there for this period. They then nominated a parent or parent-in-law as a coreporter. The recruitment stopped when the members of the research team agreed that the data saturation was reached. In total, 34 participants (15 parent–child pairs and four adult children) were recruited.

Data collection

In-depth interviews were conducted in Mandarin from September 2020 to February 2021. The parents and their adult children were interviewed separately to avoid potential intergenerational contradictions. Twenty-four interviews were conducted face-to-face in Hong Kong, and 10 were conducted online using WeChat, a widely used messaging and social media platform in the region. Each interview lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. Participant consent was obtained before each interview, in either written form (face-to-face interviews) or oral form (online interviews). All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission, and pseudonyms were used to ensure participant anonymity, with ethical approval from the first author's affiliated institution. Two native-trained Mandarin-speaking researchers conducted the interviews.

Interview questions were asked to explore the decision-making process behind relocation to Hong Kong in later life. Some questions included “What were your motivations for relocating to Hong Kong?” and “Who suggested you move to Hong Kong?” The interview also covered postrelocation experiences in Hong Kong. Examples of the questions asked included “What do you believe are the most challenging part of relocating to Hong Kong?” and “How did you adapt to or cope with these challenges?” Additionally, the participants were asked about any perceived changes in their relationships with their family since moving to Hong Kong, and what type of changes they experienced. Furthermore, the interview explored the impact of relocation experiences on future care arrangement and preparation. Questions such as “To what extent do you feel that your time in Hong Kong has influenced your perspective and plans for future care destinations?” were asked. The participants were also asked if they believed their filial expectations toward their children have changed after providing substantial support to their children (and grandchildren) in Hong Kong. If so, they were encouraged to elaborate on how their expectations had evolved.

Table 1 provides an overview of the respondents’ sociodemographic characteristics. Nine of the older parents lived with their adult children or grandchildren in Hong Kong, and six parents lived in the mainland. Some older parents had lived in Hong Kong for several months in the year before this study, some had lived in Hong Kong for years before this study. Older parents remained in situ on an informal basis for an extended duration by renewing their visa quarterly or annually with mainland authorities, whereas others only visited for weeks or months at a time. The older parents were mostly retired and aged ≥ 55 (mean = 61 years). The adult children (aged 26–41; mean 33 years) had diverse backgrounds, with all being born on the mainland and some having permanent residence in Hong Kong. The majority were married, five were single, and two were divorced. Seven of them did not have children, nine had one child, two had two children, and one had four children. Thirteen of the participants were their parents’ only child. The majority of them were full-time employees, whereas one was unemployed.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and NVivo 11 was used for data analyses. We applied a three-level thematic analysis strategy, which comprised (a) open coding to identify different concepts and categories in the transcripts as the initial themes for analysis, (b) axial coding to classify these themes and investigate their connections, and (c) selective coding to define, improve, and connect the subthemes to the main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The transcripts were examined at individual and dyadic levels. Five pairs of interview transcripts were independently coded and compared by the two interviewers. The remaining transcripts were analyzed using a standardized but modifiable coding framework developed by a group of five core researchers. The research team met frequently to confirm code validity, identify emerging themes, and guarantee interrater reliability. The results are summarized into four main themes and nine subthemes (Table 2). In the following participant quotations, OP stands for older parent and AC stands for adult child.

RESULTS

Parent–child tied relocation: Positive support exchange history linking parents and children

Floating parents and their children consistently exhibited mutual support throughout their life course; this long history of support exchange normalized and motivated older parents’ tied

TABLE 1 Sociodemographic backgrounds of the respondents (AC and OP).

Respondent (AC)	Respondent (OP)			Number of children			Marital status	Number of children	Occupation	Parent's length of stay in the past 36 months	Place of origin		
	Age	Sex	Marital status	Age	Sex	Marital status							
#10(o)	31	F	Married	1	Legal consultant	#10	56	F	Widowed	1	Retired	12 months	Northern China
#11 ^a (o)	35	F	Married	2	Education and public administration worker	—	—	—	—	1	—	18 months	Shandong
#12	37	F	Married	4	Financial sector staff	—	—	—	—	—	—	24 months	Fujian
#13 ^a (o)	30	F	Married	1	Financial sector staff	#13	62	M	Married	2	Retired	24 months	Shanghai
#21 ^a (o)	31	M	Married	1	Administrative and support staff	#21	60	F	Married	1	Retired	36 months (already stayed in Hong Kong for 4 years in total)	Shanghai
#26	33	M	Married	1	Financial sector staff	#26	66	F	Married	2	Retired	24 months	Henan
#37 ^a (o)	29	F	Never married	0	Education and public administration worker	#37	56	M	Married	1	Civil servant	3 months	Shandong
#38 (o)	30	F	Never married	0	Education and public administration worker	#38	57	M	Married	1	State enterprise worker	3 months	Guangdong
#42 ^b (o)	32	F	Married	1	Primary school teacher	#42	60	F	Married	2	Retired	3 months	Northern China
#44 ^b (o)	32	F	Married	0	Medicinal chemist	#44	62	F	Married	1	Retired	3 months	Guangzhou
#47 ^b (o)	34	M	Married	1	Financial sector staff	—	—	—	—	1	—	12 months	Shandong
#48(o)	30	F	Never married	0	Financial sector staff	#48	55	F	Divorced	1	Dentist	3 months	Liaoning

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Respondent (AC)	Age	Sex	Marital status	Number of children	Occupation	Respondent (OP)	Age	Sex	Marital status	Number of children	Occupation	Parent's length of stay in the past 36 months	Place of origin
#53(o)	26	F	Never married	0	Clinical sector staff	#53	55	F	Divorced	1	Financial planner	3 months	Fujian
#70 ^a	31	F	Never married	0	Journalist	#70	>55	M	Married	1	Businessman	3 months	Guangdong
#74(o)	30	M	Married	1	Research assistant	#74	55	F	Married	1	Retired	9 months	Chongqing
#80	38	F	Divorced	1	Part-time restaurant worker	#80	72	F	Widowed	1	Retired	36 months	Zhaoqing
#83	41	M	Divorced	2	Unemployed	#83(o)	71	M	Married	2	Retired	36 months (already stayed in Hong Kong for 5 years in total)	Hainan
#95 ^a	36	F	Married	1	Part-time hairdresser	—	—	—	—	—	—	9 months	Northern China
#99 ^b (o)	36	F	Married	0	Postdoctoral fellow	#99	66	F	Married	1	Retired	24 months	Chengdu

Note: (o) = only child; AC = adult child; OP = older parent/parent-in-law; — = information is missing because OP #11, #12, #47, and #95 did not participate in the interviews for personal reasons.

^aAlready obtained permanent residency.

TABLE 2 Primary themes and subthemes.

Primary themes	Subthemes
Parent–child tied relocation: Positive support exchange history linking parents and children	
Parent–child tied relocation: Motivations for cross-border moves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relocation for collective family interests: Family caregiving as the key driver • Being together is beneficial • Emotional support and family knowledge-sharing
Postrelocation experiences of floating parents: Mismatched expectations and family maintenance challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial dependence on children • Factors prompting emotional stress while living in Hong Kong temporarily • Conflicting demands between older parents' and adult children's families
Postdecision: Prospects of tied relocation and eldercare arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns for children to provide future filial care • Preparation for supportive networks in the older parents' hometown • Intermediate locations: Living between Hong Kong and mainland China

relocation. Most of the adult children reported that their parents had made substantial investments in their lives beginning at a young age and continuing into adulthood; examples included helping with property purchases and providing advice and emotional support, even after the respondents had married. Realizing that their adult children might have difficulty balancing multiple family commitments in Hong Kong and may become stressed as a result, these supportive older parents, who were well into their retirement years, chose to relocate and offer assistance as a form of continuing support and involvement. One older parent stated the following:

I knew they'd be exhausted if they had to take care of their kids on their own, so I offered to fly to Hong Kong to lend a hand before their child was born. We used to help them out financially when they purchased the apartment because they didn't have enough money. Now that they need childcare assistance, and we are still able to assist as grandparents, I came willingly. (OP21)

Long-term parental support may also create a sense of dependency on adult children, leading them to actively seek parental assistance when they face challenges such as raising children. AC11 said, "I was very dependent on my parents at that time. Because she raised me, I assumed my mother would be well-versed in child care and the many challenges it entails."

Most of the adult children also reported that they frequently helped their parents at home and provided financial and emotional assistance to them. The experience of receiving support from their children emotionally "linked" the older parents with their children, creating a sense of intimacy and togetherness and triggering a desire for the older parents to seek reunions. For instance, AC10's companionship with her mother after the death of her father encouraged her mother to relocate. OP10 said, "I only have this daughter now, and I enjoy her company and [we] regularly [share our] emotions and feelings. Given this, moving to Hong Kong is critical for me; otherwise, I will [just] stay at home and miss her."

In rare cases where adult children and floating parents had not previously reported regular support exchange experiences, adult children expressed some trepidation for their parents' long-term relocation because they had limited experience in coordinating with parents on family

issues and preferred an independent lifestyle. This hesitation was particularly salient in the context of in-law relationships.

[Right after] my child was born, I was exhausted, but they [my in-laws] did not help, it was all on me. Therefore, I did have mixed feelings towards my in-laws' relocation—while I anticipated they would lend a hand, I also knew that we did not need their assistance; furthermore, I prefer and am capable of handling family matters on my own. We [my in-laws and I] have different styles. (AC13)

The accounts provided by both the older parents and adult children regarding the support history and relocation decision were predominantly consistent. Both generations highlighted how their support exchange history influenced the decision to relocate, with a particular emphasis on the importance of emotional support exchange and a sense of interdependence between parents and their adult children.

Parent–child tied relocation: Motivations for cross-border moves

Intergenerationally tied relocation is often prompted by adult migrants' difficulty in balancing work and caring for their own families. This section focuses on the initial decision to relocate, in which family migration is motivated by the benefits for the younger generation or family reunion.

Relocation for collective family interests: Family caregiving as the key driver

Most of the interviewed floating parents (13 out of 15) joined their children to provide informal child care and to perform other domestic duties, perceiving the considerable benefits of such help for their children. They felt that upon relocating, their childcare support helped their children achieve work–family balance and reduce childcare-related expenditures.

Older women typically exhibited a stronger willingness to relocate for their children's needs, partly because of their earlier retirement age (50/55 years for women and 60 years for men in China). Having already indicated her willingness to help with child care when her daughter wed, OP21 persuaded her husband to retire early to provide child care together after the birth of her granddaughter. OP10 also revealed that she periodically visited her daughter (AC10) since the beginning of her daughter's pregnancy and continued to help after her grandchild was born. She recounted what inspired her to travel a long distance from Northern China to Hong Kong, as follows:

It's not easy for her to take care of a newborn and work at the same time. She doesn't sleep well and has no previous parenting experience. Also, she doesn't have any helpers around, and I want to participate ... after all, she's my daughter. (OP10)

Nearly half of the older father participants were involved in daily chores, including cooking, laundry, cleaning, and childcare tasks such as feeding. This is noteworthy considering that traditionally, older men in Chinese families assumed more of a leadership role and were less likely to engage in house chores. According to the respondents, this shift occurred due to the older fathers' lack of local knowledge and connections in Hong Kong, coupled with their perception that their children were too occupied to fully undertake housekeeping and childcare responsibilities. Consequently, they spent most of their time at home and were always readily available to

assist their children with domestic chores. This finding highlights how traditional gender roles can be reshaped and challenged in the context of cross-border relocation.

Although relocating may involve personal sacrifice (e.g., job opportunities or travel plans), older parents emphasized the direct economic relief their care-related move would offer to their children's families. OP71 noted, "I'm old now and can't earn money. I have nothing left to offer. However, because I come to care for my grandchildren, they don't need to hire workers."

The benefits were also related to grandparental care being regarded as the most appropriate substitute for parental care, especially compared with options such as hiring domestic helpers. The interviewees regarded grandparental care as reliable and secure. Some families even had their older parents supervise and assist in child care despite having a helper. For AC26, the main justification for grandparental care was childcare safety and quality. He remarked, "First and foremost, there is assurance regarding the child's safety when she's taken care of by grandparents, who won't treat child care merely as a job. It's because my parents treat my child as a valued member of the family."

However, decisions to undertake cross-border relocation also involve coordination between maternal and paternal grandparents. Some interviewees disclosed that there are instances where one set of grandparents may become too frail to travel or may have other care responsibilities, resulting in the other set of grandparents assuming the primary role in providing care. For example, AC10 shared that her in-laws came to Hong Kong to assist her during her pregnancy. However, they were unable to extend their stay due to their obligations to care for their own parents. Notably, consistent with previous studies (Bai et al., 2023), the findings showed that maternal grandparents were more likely to assume a greater responsibility. OP21 stated that the primary childcare duties were typically handled by maternal grandparents, with the paternal grandparents stepping in only when the former needed a break. This was partly because mothers often led the childcare and housework duties and felt more comfortable having their own parents around. AC10 also expressed her preference for her own mother's presence during that time, stating, "The presence of my in-laws always made me feel uneasy and stressed, as I felt obligated to always respect them. However, I felt more relaxed in my mother's company. Sharing housework responsibilities with my mom has significantly eased my life." AC21 also mentioned that the presence of maternal grandparents in the family helped her avoid potential disputes with in-laws, particularly regarding childcare issues. This finding indicates the mutual interdependence of the extended family network—this is manifested through approaches such as "family relay" scheduling, where extended family members organize among themselves and consider the best interests of other family members to meet the childcare needs of the family (e.g., to avoid care gaps).

Being together is beneficial

The opportunity for older parents to reunite with their adult children is another factor contributing to intergenerationally tied relocation. This factor may be particularly salient in the present study because most of our adult children interviewees were from one-child families. OP13 observed that cross-border relocation allowed him to spend time with his daughter, thus reclaiming what he regarded as lost years during the time of separation. Reuniting with their children is crucial for older parents to obtain emotional support and foster a sense of interdependence from the next generations.

Living here with her, it's like compensating for all the years that we've lost. My daughter left after high school and came to Hong Kong for her university studies and work. She hasn't come back for a few years. It's like the "loss" can be reclaimed by being with her again. (OP13)

Even in a multiple-child family, one older parent (OP83) treasured the time he spent with his son and grandchildren. In this case, reuniting with his family members helped ease the loneliness of being “left behind” in their hometown for decades. OP83 remarked, “My son is in Hong Kong with my two grandsons. We want to be here with them because my wife and I were lonely back in our hometown.” OP48 also reported an increasing sense of loneliness and emotional reliance on their children as they aged. This was partly due to spending more time in solitude and placing greater emphasis on parent–child relationships. As OP48 stated,

As I aged and found myself with more solitary time, I began to long for the companionship of my children. I found myself emotionally dependent on them, with the expectation that they would provide closeness, or at the very least, be present during times of loneliness.

AC26 explained how family reunion can yield mutual benefits: While living with him and his family, his mother helped with child care, but he could also occasionally offer her some practical help and monitor the 63-year-old’s health.

Emotional support and family knowledge-sharing

Floating parents also provided companionship and emotional support following their relocation. The adult children highlighted how their older parents took care of their needs, especially in terms of companionship during difficult times. For example, AC99 stated, “My mom is currently staying with me. Otherwise, I’d be on my own.” Similarly, AC10 stated the following:

It’s good to reunite with my mom for a while as we’ve been separated. My mom helps me adapt and relieves some psychological burdens and will be a big support when I start my family and have my child to look after. Everything is new and my mom’s presence [and being able to chat with her] brightens my days.

Some of the older parents chose to relocate to Hong Kong to benefit and enrich the family experience of the third generation, especially the passing down of cultural and family traditions. This finding exemplifies their strong beliefs in fostering the cultural continuity of their grandchildren. OP83 observed, “My grandsons learn Cantonese in school, but I teach them the Hainan dialect and Mandarin ... if I don’t do this, they will never know about their hometown.”

Postrelocation experiences of floating parents: Mismatched expectations and family maintenance challenges

We observed dynamic changes in the parent–child tied relocations over different stages; for example, the factors prompting the floating older parents to consider cross-border relocation may change, the costs or lifestyle challenges accompanying the relocation may become onerous, and their expected life after relocation might be mismatched with the reality. Thus, the costs and benefits of relocation were reconsidered after the initial move. In addition, the floating older parents may have difficulty with numerous uncertainties and obligations related to far-away homes such as the political environment, cultural adaptation, welfare systems, and financial considerations caused by their relocation. This affects their decision-making on long-term relocation.

Financial dependence on children

Most of the floating parents we interviewed (11 out of 15) initially came to provide support for their children's families but found themselves receiving support instead. This included assistance such as accommodation, food, and help with daily expenses. As one father (OP13) reflected, the discrepancy between his income and the high cost of living in Hong Kong made it impossible for him to afford these expenses. He shared,

The difference between my income and the cost of living in Hong Kong is so great that I can't afford to pay. Everything in the market was incredibly expensive. ... My daughter covers all expenses for me, which makes me feel like I am adding to her financial burden. (OP13)

The relocation transformed the relationship between the two generations: The older parents wonder whether they should remain or leave.

The majority of the older parents we interviewed (13 out of 15) expressed significant concerns regarding their health-care coverage in Hong Kong. Due to the fact that only Hong Kong residents are eligible for subsidized public health-care services, those without resident status face substantial out-of-pocket expenses for medical care. In order to avoid burdening their children, some older parents attempted to save costs by purchasing medicine from drugstores, seeking treatment in Shenzhen, or even returning to their hometowns for medical consultations. However, due to the strict border restrictions implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, many felt a heightened sense of vulnerability. For instance, OP99 shared her desire to travel to Shenzhen to receive medical care for her eye problems. Being a nonresident in Hong Kong, she cannot afford the exorbitant expenses associated with seeking treatment in the city. She stated, "My routine checkup at a private clinic cost my daughter a thousand Hong Kong dollars. That is far too expensive. A similar examination on the mainland does not cost as much."

A comparison of the narratives shared by the parents and their children reveals that the majority of adult children did not express serious concerns regarding older parents' financial dependence. Although many Hong Kong children were aware of their parents' reliance on them in Hong Kong, they did not exhibit significant worries about how parents would feel as a result of their dependence. Instead, they expressed their ability to cover all of their parents' expenses. In contrast, the older parents frequently cited this dependence as a major change in their parent-child relationship and one of the reasons for experiencing mixed emotions after relocating to Hong Kong.

Factors prompting emotional stress while living in Hong Kong temporarily

The older adult interviewees also mentioned the lack of a support network in Hong Kong. In many cases, the floating parents' social circles were restricted to their children's families. AC10 provided some insight into her mother's situation: "[Hong Kong is] far away from her hometown. My husband, my child, and I are the only relatives my mom has here." Notably, a few of the older parents we interviewed (three out of 15) disclosed that they did not experience a closer relationship with their adult children after relocating. This lack of closeness can be attributed to their adult children working long hours and having limited time to spend with them, as well as disagreements with their child's spouse. These factors further contributed to emotional stress among older parents who had relocated. For example, OP74 expressed her frustration with the lack of communication with her busy son and feeling of not being respected, as her son often sided with her daughter-in-law when their views clashed. This left her feeling voiceless within

the family. These aspects added to the emotional stress experienced by older parents who had moved.

A few of older adults we interviewed (four out of 15) who lived in a neighborhood with many other mainland immigrants attempted to address their limited social circle by forming mutual support networks. OP21 made friends with her neighbors, who had also relocated from the mainland to care for their grandchildren. However, this type of migrant community is typically casual, short-lived, and only provides temporary social support (Zhang, 2016). Such social interactions were also challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distance measures and fears of contracting COVID-19 prevented older persons from venturing outdoors and socializing with others. AC99 elaborated on this, stating, “The social distancing measures make it quite challenging, and my mom struggles to meet new people ... I’m the only person she spends time with. Previously, she was able to engage in small talk when she went to the market.” Furthermore, the social distancing policy, which discouraged gatherings, could lead to the gradual dissolution of local bonds. OP83 revealed that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he had temporarily halted regular gatherings with friends from the mainland. He stated, “I had friends here from the same village as me, and we used to meet and have tea once a week. However, we were unable to continue this tradition after COVID-19. It’s been a long time since our last gathering.”

The heightened sense of risk and insecurity stemming from social unrest prompted changes in some families’ reunion plans in Hong Kong. In some cases, adult children were discouraged from settling their parents in Hong Kong. Two interviewees, OP10 and AC11, shared their experiences:

Last year, the social movements were so frequent and severe ... I don’t feel safe staying here anymore and have decided to return to the mainland immediately. (OP10)

I had initially planned to convince my parents to apply for a one-way permit to come and live in Hong Kong. However, given the uncertainty and chaos in the city, I have changed my mind. I’m even uncertain about my own stay here. Consequently, I’m not determined to help them obtain the permit to relocate. (AC11)

Conflicting demands between older parents’ and adult children’s families

Some of the floating older parents (six out of 15) experienced acute challenges regarding how best to address their family’s needs after relocating. Depending on the family care cycle, some individuals may grapple with the “stay or leave” question, especially when they must consider the caregiving needs of other family members such as aging parents. OP13 reported an increase in pressure to care for his parents: “My parents can still be self-reliant now. They can go grocery shopping and cook for themselves. However, their bodies are becoming weaker and weaker day by day. [They will soon] need to be looked after.”

Some of the floating parents were fortunate to have siblings back home, who helped coordinate their caregiving responsibilities toward their parents. Other interviewees relied on communication technology to obtain updates on their aging parents’ conditions. However, physical visits for urgent care needs remained necessary.

Moreover, some of the older parents’ other grandchildren back home were also in need of care. Regarding family maintenance within multigenerational extended families, even with the mobilization of other family members for assistance, tensions tend to emerge between parental duty in Hong Kong and other obligations to faraway family.

Postdecision: Prospects of tied relocation and eldercare arrangements

In this section, a forward-looking perspective is adopted for tied relocation, with a specific focus on the intergenerational plan for older parents' future care. The older parents in this study can be regarded as transitioning from an active group of care providers to becoming care recipients, regardless of the absence of current acute care needs. The postdecision consideration for future relocation reveals how floating parents may need to prepare for such changes, and some intend to depend on personal and family networks and relationships, including sibling groups. Alternatively, others may consider settling in an intermediate location in order to be close to their children while balancing their lifestyle needs.

Concerns for children to provide future filial care

In terms of floating older adults' postdecision planning, their perceptions were not merely based on the number of benefits (e.g., familial network back home or cultural familiarity) and cost-risk factors (e.g., aging as an older migrant). Notably, many of the older parents (12 out of 15) were concerned that their choice to remain in Hong Kong would strain their adult children.

Medical cost is a major concern for many older parents to decide whether to extend their stay in Hong Kong. OP13 revealed that as a temporary visitor, he was excluded from Hong Kong's health and social security systems. He emphasized that he preferred that his daughter invest in her own children rather than spend money on her father's medical expenses. AC26 related to such parental feelings, being similarly aware of the high medical costs and the potential burden on his migrant family. This highlights the welfare vulnerability of the floating older adults: Despite residing locally, they are excluded from using local health and welfare services.

Medical costs must be considered, given that they [parents] are not locals. If they can't go to a public hospital, they must visit a private hospital, which is so expensive. ... That's why the medical costs are a big concern. Even if we're willing to pay the costs, parents don't necessarily accept this. That's what older people generally think about, because they want to save money for their children. (AC26)

The high cost of medical care and the disparity in health-care systems discouraged older parents from prolonging their stay in Hong Kong. They expressed concern that their families might struggle to meet the high expenses of long-term treatment in Hong Kong, particularly given the increased demand for medical care associated with aging. Typically, their medical expenses were covered by insurance in mainland China, leading them to prefer using medical services there. This preference significantly amplified their inclination to return to the mainland. As OP21 stated,

As we age, we will inevitably return to the mainland. While in Hong Kong, we relied on my daughter and son-in-law for medical treatment. However, our comprehensive health insurance back home cover most of our medical expenses, thereby alleviating any financial burden on our children.

OP99 shared a similar concern, deciding not to settle in Hong Kong to prioritize her daughter's future. Notably, the parents considered emotional support from adult children as sufficient fulfillment of their children's filial obligations. Many of them consider hiring a helper or moving to a retirement facility for eldercare to reduce the strain on their children.

Some of the floating parents may develop mixed feelings about their relocation and consider changing their plan to remain in Hong Kong long term, as a result of the tension that occur

when adult children and older parents lived together. For example, OP74 had a strained relationship with her daughter-in-law and son while living in Hong Kong, and she feared future abandonment and incompatibility with her children.

It's likely that my son prefers not living together, and I feel the same. When I become so old that I can't even cook anymore, my daughter-in-law and son will complain and think negatively about me. ... I feel I'll be deserted by them when I move slowly and cook terribly if I live here. (OP74)

AC83 mentioned that Hong Kong's housing conditions can also deter immigrant families from living together in the future, given that a typical home is tiny: "[In] my hometown's customs, the ties between generations [are highly valued] ... if it weren't for the small living space, we'd both want to live together." This exposes the housing needs of multigenerational extended families and how their fostering of a supportive intergenerational relationship can be thwarted in the long run because of poor housing.

The majority of adult children expressed empathy and understanding toward their parents' anxieties and concerns regarding their presence after the relocation. However, there was a divergence of opinions between the adult children and their parents regarding whether their parents' presence would be seen as a burden. Those who reported developing a closer relationship with their parents following their relocation generally believed that the rewards of fulfilling their duty as a child or enjoying the companionship of their parents outweighed any potential stress or challenges associated with caregiving.

Preparation for supportive networks in the older parents' hometown

With the intention of returning to their hometown in the future, some of the floating parents reported that they planned to rely on their sibling network, forming a type of mutual support group. They understood that their children had multiple responsibilities (e.g., work and child care) in addition to eldercare. Hence, some opted to pursue a self-help method, leveraging close-knit and geographically proximate family networks. AC12 described her parents' plan as follows:

My parents have several siblings back home who are eager to live together and look after one another when they get old. They already told us this and I respect their choice, even though I hope that they will live with us in Hong Kong. (AC12)

Older parents such as OP26 regarded such familial networks as being intrinsically favorable; they find comfort in familiar surroundings and routines such as being able to converse in their mother tongue and even being provided with meals when they are unable to cook for themselves.

Intermediate locations: Living between Hong Kong and mainland China

To maintain an ongoing care relationship within their family, some of the older parents had plans with their children to select an intermediate location, usually a neighboring mainland city near Hong Kong, where they can settle. This arrangement not only allows parents to remain in a familiar environment and access welfare benefits tied to their *hukou* (household registration) but equally benefits adult children, who are only a short distance away for visits. OP13 regarded this as a mutually beneficial situation for the different generations.

We plan to buy a property in Shenzhen or the Greater Bay Area. We'll still live in Shanghai when we're old, but we can easily arrange short stays in either place. That's a good idea. ... We can preserve our way of living while my daughter is free to have her own life. Given the close distance, it's also convenient for my grandchild to come to visit us on weekends. (OP13)

According to some of the interviewed adult children, this type of arrangement emerges when migrant children are unlikely to return to their hometown for eldercare. Such planning exemplifies both generations' striving to have the best of both worlds, and that they need not choose between their hometown and Hong Kong. AC42 explained this sentiment thus: "My parents previously insisted that they remained in their hometown. But given that I'm not returning and that they refuse to move to Hong Kong, we just found a compromise this way."

DISCUSSION

Focusing on a group of older temporary migrants who mainly serve as childcare providers for their families in Hong Kong, our study broadens the application of tied relocation involving floating older parents in a world where host society-oriented grandparenting is becoming increasingly common. This phenomenon is observed not only among mainland Chinese families but also among their Western counterparts (Hamilton et al., 2018; Horn, 2017), with cross-border grandparent care being essential for working-aged adults to manage demanding careers and life stress. Notably, the deference to Confucian values in the Chinese family system may shape a stronger sense of obligation for older Chinese adults to provide such cross-border caregiving than in cultures with greater emphasis on public childcare support. Influenced by traditional values of familism, older Chinese parents exhibit a strong attachment to family and descendants. This attachment serves as a motivating factor, compelling them to shoulder greater responsibility in supporting their adult children and grandchildren.

Relocation framework

Guided by theories of tied migration, linked lives, and care circulation, we examined floating older adults' relocation decision-making processes and observed that tied relocation, instead of being a one-time decision, is a process involving dynamic changes depending on the relocation stage. From the linked-lives perspective, our findings highlight how the relocation decision and experiences are intertwined with the broader family network's involvement, revealing both the cooperative and challenging aspects of intergenerational care. In addition, in terms of the notion of care circulation with a future perspective, our findings indicate that the roles of caregivers and care recipients are overlapping, and that sequential changes occur in these roles over time.

Figure 1 presents our framework of the major components involved in the four phases of the decision-making process in intergenerationally tied relocation: support history before relocation, motivation for the relocation decision, changes during postrelocation, and postdecision planning which intersects with the planning for future eldercare.

Phase 1 of the process is based on the history of positive and reliable support exchange that spans the adult children's lives, providing the foundation for older parents to support their children in new cities. Older parents are accustomed to supporting their children in diverse ways, including relocation for grandparenting. This also reflects the cultural custom and norm in Chinese society that parents usually prioritize their children's needs over their own needs. In the

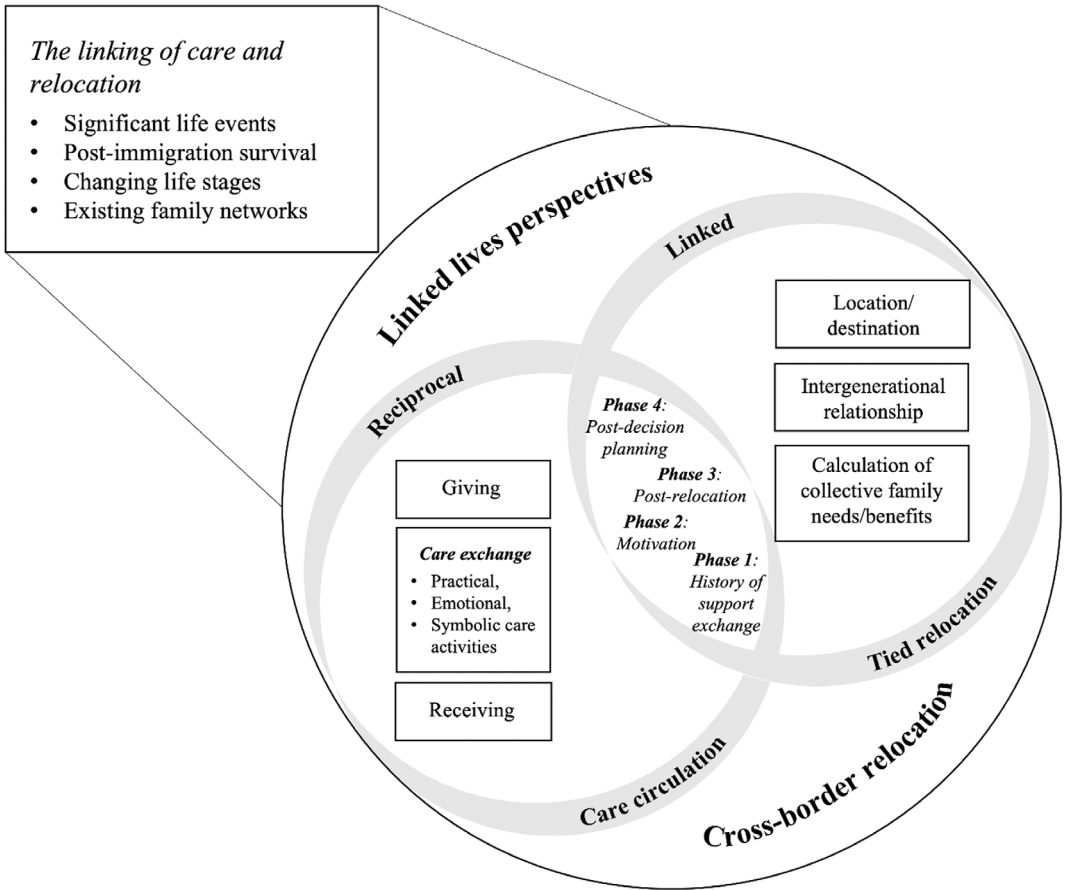


FIGURE 1 Analytical framework of older parent–adult child tied relocation.

migrant families that we interviewed, the support primarily flowed from the older generation to the younger generation.

In Phase 2, the motivations for older adults’ relocation are mainly driven by the care needs of their adult children. Although relocation often involves personal sacrifice, older adults’ care-giving is regarded as collectively being beneficial to the family, particularly in fostering intergenerational solidarity. Such care-led relocation is also influenced by nonmonetary factors, with the maintenance of family relationships being prioritized. Furthermore, the support, both financial and emotional, provided by adult children not only strengthens the intergenerational bonds and but also motivates older parents to consider relocating for the purpose of intergenerational reunions. This relocation enhances intergenerational solidarity across various domains and further strengthens the support-sharing ties between older parents and adult children. This relational dimension of tied relocation has been downplayed in key tied migration studies, but it is central to understanding cross-border immigrant family dynamics.

Phase 3 involves the dynamic changes in older adults’ perception of costs and benefits when intermittently visiting Hong Kong to provide care and support. We observed that perceptions may change during the different stages of relocation, which are subject to the floating older adults’ real-life experiences and their perception of these experiences. However, such changes were particularly noticeable in Phase 3. For some of the older parents, the factors determining whether to relocate with their adult children can change for better or worse after a proximate-

care experience. In some other cases, we noted additional or unexpected benefits (e.g., the welfare policy in Hong Kong) or costs (e.g., high living costs burdening the family, family conflict, or difficulty in balancing near and distant family care) that prompted the older adults to change their views about future relocation over time.

Phase 4 is directly linked to the floating older adults' future eldercare plans. Notably, the decision depends on the weight of certain factors; for many of the older adults, becoming a burden on their children if they were to remain with them long term was a major determining factor. Consequently, some of the parents had to compromise (e.g., return to mainland China) instead of doing what they truly desired (e.g., staying with their children). In other cases, maintaining intergenerational intimacy at a distance was valued the most, with the reciprocal nature of family caregiving preserved through proximate networks or by seeking a third location between the hometown and Hong Kong. In short, tied relocation-related decisions are not a linear process; some of the complexities affecting decisions are the continuing calculation of costs and benefits as well as how people weigh each relevant factor.

Positive feedback loop between linked lives and relocation

Our findings highlight how the tied relocation process is intricately linked to the underlying intergenerational dynamics of the family's wider network. For the older parent-adult children pairs in our study, major life events and changes were the main drivers for relocation. The pressures of postimmigration survival, such as marriage, child-rearing, and career advancement, were considerable for the adult children (He et al., 2022). The overlap between their working commitments and childcare demands triggered the need for grandparental support (Chiu & Ho, 2020). At the same time, the reality of the older parents was such that they were able to relocate to provide this support (He et al., 2022); for example, they were retired, in good physical health, and had minimal care responsibilities in their hometown (siblings could share the care of their parents).

The support exchange history between the two generations served as the foundation for the initial relocating decision; the older people were highly willing to move to Hong Kong to provide child-rearing and household assistance, knowing that they could lessen the burden on their adult children. However, the relocation process made the parents more dependent on their children because they required financial and emotional assistance to overcome the challenges of adjusting to life in a new city (He et al., 2022). On the one hand, this experience of companionship and support during the reunion potentially influenced postdecision planning and enhanced the older people's willingness to remain with their children for longer in addition to linking their lives more closely. On the other hand, the mismatched expectations and the family maintenance challenges made older parents reconsider about their relocation (Chiu & Ho, 2020; Ruan et al., 2019). The different sociocultural, economic, and political environments, along with the welfare and health-care systems in Hong Kong, may bring barriers and challenges for floating older parents intending to extend their stay in Hong Kong. Notably, the disastrous impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only restrict social interactions of older parents but also trigger health-related concerns and anxiety over potential medical costs, further complicate the situation.

We observed the linked pattern in the larger family system as well. For example, support from one set of grandparents enabled the other set of grandparents to proceed with other activities while sustaining an ongoing caregiving relationship with the migrant adult children. Additionally, during the postrelocation period, the older adults' family members back home (e.g., siblings or spouse) could coordinate the caring duties for their aging parents and/or other adult children. Even in the postdecision considerations, the pre-existing social and extended family network influenced the decision to stay or return. This finding underscores that a

systematic view of linked lives in families can benefit the theorization pertaining to older adults' relocation with adult children as family caregivers.

Linked lives increase the complexity of care circulation between generations

We argue that the exchange of care within a multigenerational family is vital for its effective functioning. Older migrants play a crucial role as caregivers for the younger generations. However, it is often overlooked that as older adults themselves, they also become recipients of eldercare within the host society. This study contributes to the understanding of care circulation in cross-border caregiving through emphasizing older adults' dual and fluid roles as caregivers and care recipients along the life course. It further expands the examination to the eldercare arrangements of these older migrants that might be affected by the relocation and future care and residence plans. Dynamic care roles and complicated care exchanges over the life course and generations are determined by individual life paths, family cycles, and specific family events or crisis situations (Kilkey & Merla, 2014). This notion intersects with the care circulation approach in terms of challenging the normative idea of the family being nuclear (Lamas-Abraira, 2021). Our findings revealed that multidirectional care exchanges among different generations can occur simultaneously; for example, some older adults can serve as the main childcare providers in the households of their adult children while also receiving financial and housing support from them during the relocation. Furthermore, we considered older adults' roles as caregivers and recipients of care in an intertwined and somehow sequential manner and examined the key role of migration in the future-oriented care planning of older adults and their caregivers (Ho et al., 2022).

Our findings also shed light on the shifting attitudes toward traditional filial piety, which aligns with previous research. In general, the older parents in our study did not hold the expectation that their children should feel obligated to reciprocate their assistance by providing future eldercare (Chiu & Ho, 2020; Qi, 2018). Although some of the older parents devised various plans to ensure support from their wider social networks, this approach may result in considerable uncertainty and unmet future needs. Therefore, for the benefit of the whole family, floating older adults should be considered permanent members within the family care cycle who may one day require care. As these floating older parents transition from care providers to care recipients, their right to care as well as social welfare assistance from their family members for catering to their subsequent care and familial are key concerns (Chiu & Ho, 2020; Ruan et al., 2019).

Implications

The cross-border caring practices of aging immigrant families in Hong Kong have policy implications in terms of the support provided for older adults' migration and settlement processes, postrelocation living, and future care arrangements between generations. Such older adults who support migrant households generally do not receive government recognition for their valuable contributions to society. As temporary visitors without working rights, they have limited access to health and social care, which renders them vulnerable if their health deteriorates during relocation (Chiu & Ho, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial for policy and services to adequately support social integration of older caregivers, considering their significant contribution to social productivity. Hong Kong could explore the provision of local public health-care assistance to these older migrants, as well as optimizing cross-border medical reimbursements.

Our findings also highlight the importance of establishing a robust social support network. Given that older people tend to spend substantial time in their local communities (He et al., 2022), enhancing the resilience and well-being of older migrants can be achieved through

their integration into these communities and active participation in social groups. Therefore, it is essential to promote a community culture that encourages mutual support among neighbors, enabling older adults to build social networks and access social support beyond their immediate families. Communities and related service providers in Hong Kong should consider organizing tailored activities and programs for older migrants, creating opportunities for them to socialize with local peers, familiarize themselves with local culture, and become aware of available social services. Such efforts can facilitate their integration into the local society. In addition, internet communication and new media should be leveraged to promote local adaptation and transnational connectivity, and social media use can assist older parents in coping with the inconvenience, uncertainty, and vulnerability they experience following relocation (Ho & Chiu, 2020).

Regarding the care arrangements for older adults, our study provides insights into the aging experience in a translocal context, with key findings pertaining to public welfare, migration regimes, and traditional cultural views regarding intergenerational responsibility (Näre et al., 2017). We observed that cross-border caregiving can complicate older adults' own aging experiences. Some of the older adults we interviewed opted to return to their hometowns, leaving questions regarding long-distance caregiving. To address these challenges, it is suggested that proximate-care arrangements could be facilitated by giving priority to older adults in obtaining regular, extended visitor visas (Hamilton et al., 2018). For those older adults who choose to remain with their adult children in Hong Kong, specific services should be developed to help them navigate the potential constraints they may face over time. One critical and immediate concern is the housing needs of multigenerational extended families, given the dense housing conditions in Hong Kong. Possible solutions may include providing subsidized housing options and exploring innovative housing forms that can accommodate larger extended families, such as granny flats, mother-in-law suites, and echo-housing (MacLachlan & Gong, 2022), these measures can help alleviate intergenerational disharmony that may arise from living in an overcrowded home environment.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the available data did not allow for a longitudinal analysis to capture the evolving dynamics of familiar care over time. To gain a deeper understanding of how familiar care changes over time, future studies should adopt a longitudinal design that focuses on identifying the discrepancies between perceived and actual conditions resulting from changing practices over an extended period. In addition, comparative studies should explore the constraints faced by multigenerational families over time and examine how they navigate and manage current and future care of older parents. Second, the study only interviewed 34 mainland Chinese respondents. In order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the relocation experiences of older adults, it is necessary for future research, especially quantitative studies, to collect data from a larger and more representative sample. This would allow for an examination of additional factors that may influence the older adults' experiences, such as variations between distant locales and new cultural environments. Finally, it is crucial for future studies to consider the experiences of left-behind older parents with both internally and internationally migrant adult children, as recommended by Guo et al. (2018). Exploring the unique challenges and dynamics faced by these parents would provide valuable insights into the complexities of familiar care in migrant families.

CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights the complex interplay of family relationships and responsibilities in the phenomenon of intergenerationally tied relocation. The findings unveil the dynamic roles and

adaptive strategies families utilize to facilitate the transfer of care and support across generations and geographies. The initial decision of older parents to relocate is based on the supportive history between the two generations, with the primary aim of providing childcare and domestic support to benefit the adult children and their families. The postrelocation experiences of older parents include financial dependence on their children, emotional stress, and challenges in balancing the caregiving responsibilities between their migrant children and other family members back home, which subsequently influence their decision to stay or leave. Future eldercare arrangements are crucial in postdecision planning, as parents need to decide whether to return to their hometown, stay with their migrant children, or move to a city close to their children.

This study expands the empirical knowledge of family migration by examining the decision-making processes of floating older adults during intergenerationally tied relocation. Moreover, our study provides a unique sample consisting of cross-border families, contributing to a broader and global discussion about the impact of children's migration on intergenerational relationships and the well-being of older parents. It will also inform the development of related policies and practices that aid multigenerational families in managing the constraints and difficulties related to eldercare.

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