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RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

'I am Here to *Peidu*': Children's Education as a Motive for Women's Return Migration

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between children's education and return migration patterns among Chinese migrant women through the practice of *peidu* (accompanying children during their studies). Drawing on in-depth interviews with 11 mothers aged 30–55 and participant observations in Qianshan, we examined how and why migrant women shape their return migration decisions around their children's education. Our research is contextualised within the existing literature on circular migration, structural constraints, upward social mobility, and the challenges faced by both transnational and internal *peidu* mothers. The findings reveal that mothers' primary motivation for returning is their aspiration to enhance their children's life opportunities through education. We observed an intergenerational shift in parenting approaches, with *peidu* evolving from accompanying children through senior high school to supporting younger children's education, reflecting changing childcare norms in China. The study also highlights how internal *peidu* mothers navigate emotional pressures while balancing full-time employment with childcare responsibilities and how their access to family support varies depending on their proximity to schools versus family networks. The post-*peidu* period frequently triggers thoughts of spousal reunion, which can occasionally lead to renewed outmigration, suggesting that educational accompaniment plays a significant role in shaping circular migration patterns.

1 | Introduction

During ethnographic fieldwork on return migration in Qianshan County, Anhui Province, Central China, the first author encountered four mothers who had previously migrated from rural Qianshan County to the industrial areas in East China. Rather than returning to their rural home villages, these women rented rooms in the regional town to live with their children aged 13–17 while maintaining full-time employment. When being asked, the mothers explained, '*I am here to peidu*'.

Peidu, as articulated by mothers, describes the act of accompanying and supporting one's children in their educational endeavours. The encounters with these mothers prompted an enquiry into their motivations for returning to personally accompany their children throughout high school, having initially left the children in the care of rural grandparents while migrating to Eastern China with their husbands. As the mothers self-identified as '*peidu mamas*', this paper uses the *peidu* concept as a key lens to examine the role of 'doing *peidu*' in shaping the return migration decisions of these out-migrated women.

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The concept of *peidu mama* (陪读妈妈), also known as ‘study mothers’, originally refers to the phenomenon of urban middle-class mothers in China who accompany their children to study abroad to obtain a high-quality education, while the fathers stay behind in China to provide economic support to the family unit (Huang and Yeoh 2011; Jacka 2018; Lan and Siriphon 2020; Qiu 2020). This phenomenon was first observed in the early 2000s. Since then, Chinese scholars have expanded the concept of *peidu mama* to encompass domestic rural-to-urban migration of mothers who accompany their children to urban schools in pursuit of higher-quality education (Feng 2017; Wang and Lu 2019). However, the phenomenon of out-migrated mothers returning to their home region for *peidu* remains understudied.

Despite an increase in nuclear family migration since the 2000s, internal circular migration patterns in China are characterised by couples migrating while leaving their children behind in their rural homes with their grandparents. This parent-child separation has resulted in challenges pertaining to the education and upbringing of these children, popularly known as ‘left-behind children’ (Xu et al. 2022). An increasing number rural migrant mothers are acknowledging these issues, opting to return to their home region to support their children’s education (Ye 2018). Notably, the four *peidu mamas* who had been introduced did not return to their family houses in the rural home villages; instead they relocated to the regional towns in their home region with their children. Furthermore, four *peidu mamas* did not terminate their employment to assume child-care responsibilities solely, as did the middle-class mothers who migrated abroad with their children. Instead, they maintained a paid occupation alongside their *peidu* responsibilities. This prompted us to enquire why these women made these decisions, how this played out in practice, and whether there were differences in the timing of return migration for the purpose of *peidu*.

This study examines the processes and motivations underlying women’s internal return migration behaviour in relation to *peidu*. Thus, the question arises as to why these women feel compelled to accompany their children throughout their education. At which stages of their own and their children’s lives do they return? Is this return migration for doing *peidu* one of the elements of circular migration, or a definite return to the home region? Does this differ among the generations of women? What are the different *peidu* experiences, practices, and challenges these women face?

Building on the theoretical framework of circular migration, structural constraints, the social mobility perspective, and a

comparison of transnational and internal *peidu* practices, this study aims to illustrate the experiences, practices, and challenges faced by internal *peidu mamas*. This study employs a biographical approach to migration, acknowledging that decisions regarding return migration are related to different life course events that occur within the context of family strategies and linked lives. Our findings were based on qualitative data from both in-depth interviews with 11 returned mothers (aged 30–55 years old) and participant observations in Qianshan County.

2 | Background and Theoretical Basis

2.1 | Circular Migration and the Hukou and Gaokao Systems

The structural constraints—*hukou* (户口, household registration) and *gaokao* (高考, the national college entrance examination, see Figure 1) systems—have significantly restricted students’ educational mobility within China. The *hukou* system restricts individuals’ mobility by linking access to education and other social services to a student’s place of registration. This system presents a significant challenge for migrant children seeking access to education outside their registered regions. The *gaokao* system reinforces these constraints by requiring students to take a college entrance exam in their *hukou*-registered region, necessitating that migrant children either stay in or return to their home regions for the examination (Chen and Liang 2012; Liang, Li, and Ma 2014; Ming 2013; Yuan 2017). If children attend school in other provinces, they must adapt to the different pedagogical approaches and intellectual content when they return to their home region to participate in the *gaokao*. Consequently, despite the relaxation of regulations governing the enrolment of migrant children in schools in destination areas or cities (Hou 2015; Li 2018; Ouyang and Du 2021), many migrant parents tend to leave their children in their *hukou*-registered regions for education and take *gaokao*, with their care entrusted to their grandparents. If children accompany their parents during their migration and pursue education in a destination city, it is customary to return them to their home region before the *gaokao*. This was done to facilitate their adaptation to the educational content in their home regions (Chen and Liang 2015). In summary, the prevailing structural constraints in China give rise to a migratory pattern typified by the circular migration of individuals between rural and urban areas (Chen and Fan 2018; Xu et al. 2022; Zhou 2018).

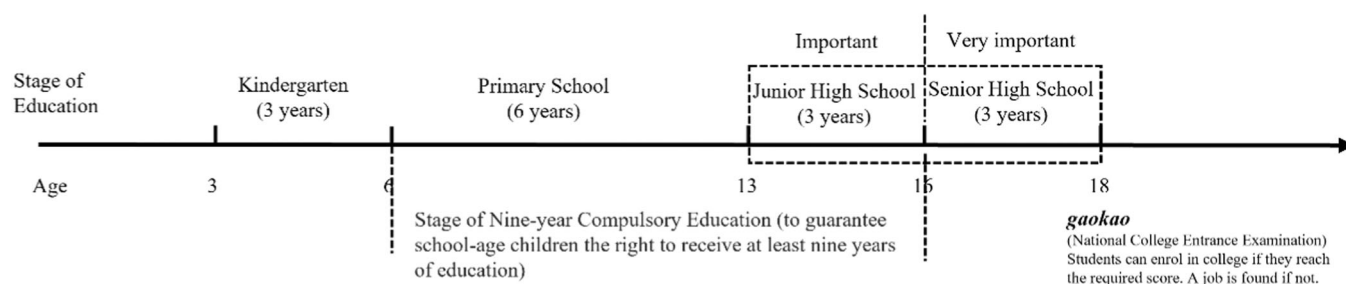


FIGURE 1 | Chinese education system.

Migrant parents would obtain updates on their children's performance from teachers via remote communication or during the Chinese New Year holidays. Research on left-behind children in China has revealed that they often suffer from learning, living, and psychological problems because of a lack of parental involvement in their studies and lives (Chan and Ren 2020; Pan and Ye 2009; Wu and Li 2015). An increasing number of migrant parents have come to recognise the negative impact that their absence from their children's lives has on their children's education and living standards. This has prompted a shift in parenting practices, with many returning to their home regions to provide supervision and support to their children as they prepare for the *gaokao* (Su 2020). Chen and Fan (2018) observed significant gender and generational disparities in returning to *peidu*, which they attributed to the strength of social and familial ties. Men typically continue to migrate to different destinations for longer periods, whereas women frequently return to rural areas for childbirth and caregiving.

Nevertheless, existing research on the interplay between children's needs and mothers' decisions to return to their home region is insufficient. Furthermore, the stages in their lives at which these returns occur and the unique challenges they face have yet to be fully explored.

2.2 | Social Upward Mobility and Peidu Practices

Extant research indicates that many Chinese families engage in transnational education migration as a strategy for acquiring cultural and social capital, which subsequently facilitates upward social mobility and enhances successful life outcomes for themselves and their children (Abelmann, Newendorp, and Lee-Chung 2014; Chee 2003; Huang and Yeoh 2011, 2005; Woronov 2007; Xiang and Shen 2009). Similarly, the phenomenon of rural-to-urban educational migration within China was undertaken to enhance children's social and cultural capital, thereby enhancing their prospects for social mobility. In contrast with the transnational *peidu* practices, the families involved in internal educational migration are typically characterised by a lower socioeconomic status in comparison to the middle-class or more affluent 'astronaut and geese families' who are more likely to undertake the transnational *peidu* endeavour. The socioeconomic circumstances of these rural families typically restrain their decision to enrol their children in schools situated within the county rather than in metropolitan areas or larger cities (Mei et al. 2015; Qi 2022; Wang and Teng 2022; Wang and Lu 2019; Xu 2018). This form of internal migration frequently involves the child relocating with a single accompanying family member, predominantly a parent, from rural areas to urban schools in county capitals or town centres.

Educational migration and household arrangements reflect a broader pattern of upward social mobility among China's rural families, who seek enhanced educational opportunities for their children within the confines of their limited financial resources. It is their conviction that the acquisition of knowledge (*zhishi gaibian mingyun*, 知识改变命运) is the key to achieving upward social and economic mobility (Barokas, Shavit, and Sherman 2022; Wei and Zhai 2016). The instability and hardships inherent in agricultural work lead rural parents to

view urban life as a more desirable option (Wang 2005). Consequently, most rural parents are strongly motivated to provide their children with enhanced educational opportunities to facilitate their escape from rural life and the pursuit of higher education, which they view as a route to social mobility (Chung and Mason 2012; Qi 2022; Wang and Teng 2022; Xie 2014). Accordingly, rural parents frequently alter their objectives for family development from economic to educational advancement as their children grow (Lei 2018). Passing the *gaokao* represents a pivotal threshold for college access and subsequent upward social mobility (Fan 2023; Lei 2018; Su 2020). To facilitate their children's successful completion of the *gaokao* and achievement of favourable outcomes, many mothers engage in *peidu* at the secondary school level.

Furthermore, the intensifying competition within the education system, in conjunction with the growing concentration of educational resources in urban areas, has contributed to an increase in the practice of *peidu*. The dearth of high-quality rural schools and the concomitant decline in their numbers have resulted in the need for rural families to send their children to urban areas for education (Wang and Zhang 2016). Since the implementation of the rural school consolidation policy in 2001, numerous small rural primary and junior high schools have been closed or relocated to local towns to enhance the quality of education. This has resulted in lengthy commutes for children or, in some cases, the necessity for them to attend boarding schools, both of which have a significant impact on children. As an alternative solution, a significant proportion of rural families opt to relocate to nearby urban areas to accompany their children during their primary and secondary school education (Wang and Lu 2019). Additionally, many migrant mothers choose to return to their home regions to accompany their children.

Su (2020) differentiates between two forms of *peidu*: parental *peidu* (in the home or rented accommodations) and inter-generational *peidu* (in the home or rented accommodations). The study indicates that these practices of *peidu* are a consequence of the strategic distribution of family labour within rural families. Rural families tend to prioritise economic accumulation by employing their younger and middle-aged members in work and business activities, while the elderly take responsibility for their families and grandchildren at home (Su 2020; Wang and Lu 2019). This requires a balance between economic and familial ethics and strategic adjustments. As such, women who migrate for employment opportunities often face the key challenge of organising their children's supervision and education.

2.3 | Transnational and Internal Practices of Doing Peidu

The *peidu* strategy initially emerged among the middle class as a means of navigating spatial inequalities within the education system. The term *peidu mama* refers to a specific transnational migration pattern in which mothers and their children relocate internationally to pursue educational opportunities, with the father remaining in their country of origin as the primary breadwinner. This family configuration is frequently known

as the 'geese family' in academic literature (Abelmann, Newendorp, and Lee-Chung 2014; Cha and Kim 2013; Huang and Yeoh 2011). The concept of the 'geese family', which originated in Korea, employs a metaphor based on the nurturing behaviours of geese (Cha and Kim 2013). This concept portrays out-migrated mothers as dedicated 'mother geese' who undertake long-distance journeys to provide optimal care and educational opportunities for their children. A related model, the 'astronaut family', involves an initial transnational family migration, with some of the family members, typically the father, taking up the role of 'astronaut' and returning to the country of origin to work while the mother and children continue to reside in the host country (Aye and Guerin 2001; Ho and Bedford 2008; Nora Chiang 2008).

Research on the transnational *peidu* migration has demonstrated that goose mothers suffer from specific challenges. These challenges include high levels of pressure and stress, difficulties in fulfilling maternal roles, lack of social support because of the absence of family members in close proximity, and perceived vulnerability resulting from spousal separation (Aye and Guerin 2001; Cha and Kim 2013). Aye and Guerin (2001) explored the psychological impact of the 'astronaut family' arrangement on each family member and their marital relationships. They concluded that members often experienced feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

As with transnational *peidu* practices, internal *peidu* practices are the result of the family's gendered division of labour and family tasks (Fan and Zheng 2020; Qiu 2020; Tang 2017). If adopted by parents, it is predominantly undertaken by mothers and often involves the separation of spouses. Notably, grandparents played a significant role in internal *peidu* practices. Wang and Teng (2022) found that in County G (Hubei Province), 53% of the accompanying adults were grandparents and 42% were mothers. Almost all fathers and 53% of mothers in China have migrated to work in major cities outside their home regions. Their earnings were used to support children and grandparents in the county capital and town centres. Internal *peidu* practices reinforce gender inequality in the division of labour within the family and create difficulties in balancing the mother's employment opportunities and *peidu* responsibilities (Tang 2017).

The unique challenges faced by *peidu* *mamas*, whether engaged in transnational journeys or navigating internal return migrations, are shaped by gendered household roles, family dynamics, and migration-related disruptions (Huang and Yeoh 2005; Qiu 2020). Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the migration experiences of internal-return *peidu* *mamas* and their practice of *peidu* in their home regions. This study contributes to the understanding of the strategies employed by mothers from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, who occupy a lower status in society, in navigating educational migration to secure a better future for their children. The findings of this study enriched the understanding of parental migration strategies and the socio-emotional costs of educational migration. Unlike transnational 'goose mother', returned *peidu* *mamas* may benefit from more robust family networks, potentially easing their burdens owing to the accessibility of these support systems in their home regions (Su 2020).

Understanding their experiences and challenges is crucial for advancing knowledge of Chinese family dynamics, enhancing individual well-being, and shaping policies to improve China's education system.

3 | Methods

3.1 | Research Area

This location of this study is Qianshan County, which serves as a striking example of a migrant-sending region in the inner parts of China. Qianshan, a county region in central China, comprises a city called Qianshan Shi, 16 sub-regional towns, and numerous villages (see Figure 2). The total population of the county is 441,224, with 117,700 inhabitants residing in the county capital, Qianshan Shi (Qianshan Statistics Bureau 2021). Since the late 1980s, Qianshan has been a migrant-sending county. Since the 1990s, it has also become a region that has begun to receive return migrants (Qianshan County Gazetteer Compilation Committee 2007). Additionally, the first author's previous fieldwork in the region and social networks in Qianshan facilitated the gathering of data.

3.2 | Data Collection

The first author conducted ethnographic fieldwork for data collection from March to August 2021, which included semi-structured, in-depth interviews and participant observations in Qianshan. The main research subjects were participants who had migrated out of Qianshan at least once and returned for more than 1 year. This article focused on mothers who returned to their home region of Qianshan to do *peidu*. They all had Qianshan *hukou*.

In-depth interviews were used to learn about the participants' life histories and biographies. Eleven returned migrant women were recruited not only from the county capital of Qianshan but also from adjoining sub-regional towns and villages. As a key informant, Honglan introduced the first author to several participants. Additionally, the first author contacted other participants through personal interactions, such as renting the same house or living together. Participant observations were used to learn about the daily lives and practices of some participants. The first author lived with three *peidu* *mamas* (Jingjing, Kexin, and Muyu; see Table 1) in the same house for 2 months. She also observed Tingqian's work at the village committee office and learned about her story. The first author established good relationships with them and kept in touch with these four *peidu* *mamas* after her fieldwork. This enabled her to follow their practices of doing *peidu* in 2022.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 1 to 3 h. Participants' narratives were employed to examine the underlying reasons or motivations for female migrants' decision to return and accompany their children through education. The husbands of three participants (Jiaolan, Yingyun, and Tingqian) also returned to Qianshan. The husbands of the other eight participants were migrants who returned to Qianshan County monthly or annually.

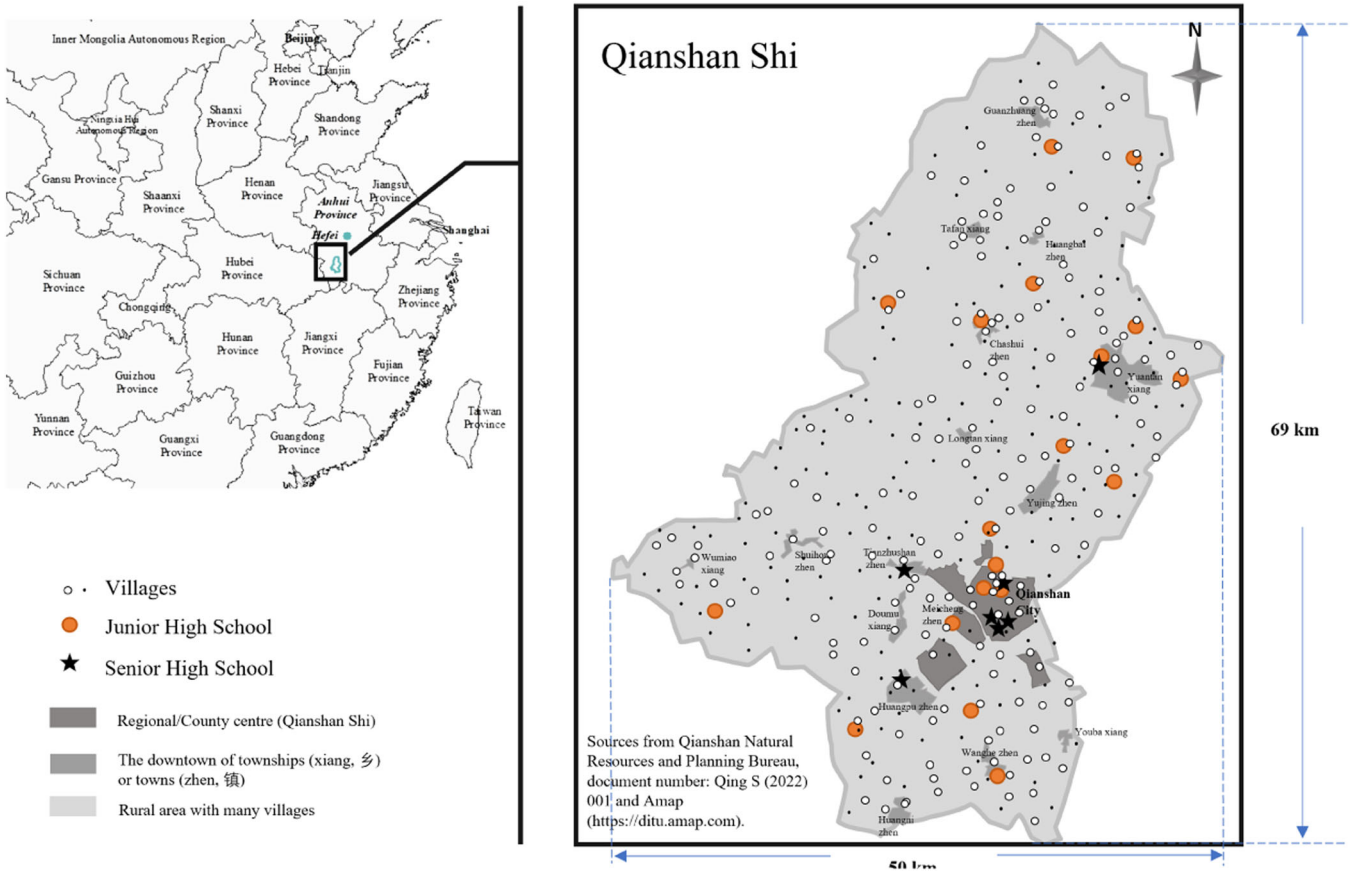


FIGURE 2 | Qianshan County and the distribution of its villages, towns, townships, city centre, and schools.

Before starting the interviews, we informed the participants of the research purpose and asked them for their consent to participate. Permission was obtained to record interviews and take notes. The personal information of all participants was treated with confidence. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants to guarantee anonymity. Table 1 provides basic information about the 11 participants.

3.3 | Positionality Statement

Acknowledging the insider status of the first author is important, as a Chinese researcher in Chinese society may have affected the dynamics of the interactions and interviews with the *peidu* *mamas*. Specifically, the first author's unmarried, highly educated, and young female identity may have induced a response bias during the in-depth interviews. Her personal experience with rural-to-urban educational migration as a child may have provided a nuanced understanding of the consequences of engaging in *peidu*. However, this personal experience may have simplified her comprehension of the return migration of *peidu* *mamas* and their emotional needs by taking the *peidu* phenomena for granted unconsciously. The author's unmarried status also contributes to this simplification. For instance, she discovered that many participants had experienced or were currently experiencing separation from their spouses. However, as an unmarried woman, she may not fully understand what it is like to live without a partner, like the *peidu* *mamas* do.

The first author's educational status, which served as an idealised representation of the successful future aspirations that *peidu* *mamas*' have for their children may have also influenced the research results. The participants may have felt pressured to align their narratives with their perceived expectations, potentially affecting the authenticity of their responses. For example, *peidu* *mamas* shared more about their thoughts on their children but less about themselves. Moreover, the first author lived with three *peidu* *mamas*, which provided more details on their everyday lives and their practice of *peidu*. Living with these *peidu* *mamas* resulted in friendly relationships that may have influenced our analysis. However, her gender advantage lies in building trust with female returnees and facilitating access to information that may have been less available to male researchers.

4 | Findings

4.1 | Return Migration Patterns and Life Events

Figure 3 maps and visually represents the life trajectories of the participants using bars to illustrate the migration and return events and how they relate to significant life events such as marriage, childbirth, and performing *peidu*. Figure 3 uses dashed lines to represent each participants' migration. The bars on the left represent the length of their stay in their home region, whereas those on the right show the duration of their stay in different destination regions. The schematic presentation of the

TABLE 1 | Basic information about the participants in 2021.

Name	Birth Year	Education	Number of child(ren)	Educational status of the children	Peidu	Who do they peidu	Residential situation
Honglan	1969	Junior high school dropout	2	Graduated	Many years ago	Elder daughter	In the county capital, renting a flat
Jiaolan	1974	Junior high school	1	Graduated	Many years ago	Son	In a town, renting a room
Ci	1976	Junior high school	2	Graduated and in senior high school	In progress	Younger son	In a town, renting a room
Yingyun	1978	Junior high school	1	In senior high school	Up to 7th and 8th June 2021	Son	In a town, living in own house
Tingqian	1978	Junior high school	2	In college and in senior high school	In progress	Younger daughter	In her village, living in own house
Jingjing	1980	Junior high school	1	In senior high school	In progress	Son	In a town, renting a room
Kexin	1984	Junior high school	1	In junior high school	In progress	Son	In a town, renting a room
Muyu	1988	Junior high school dropout	2	In junior high school and in pre-school	In progress	Elder son	In a town, renting a room
Huancai	1989	Three-year college	1	In preschool	To be decided in the future	Son	In her village, living in own house
Cairu	1989	Junior high school	1	In junior high school	To be decided in the future	Daughter	In the county capital, living in her own apartment
Guigui	1991	Three-year college	1	In junior high school	To be decided in the future	Daughter	In the county capital, living in her own apartment

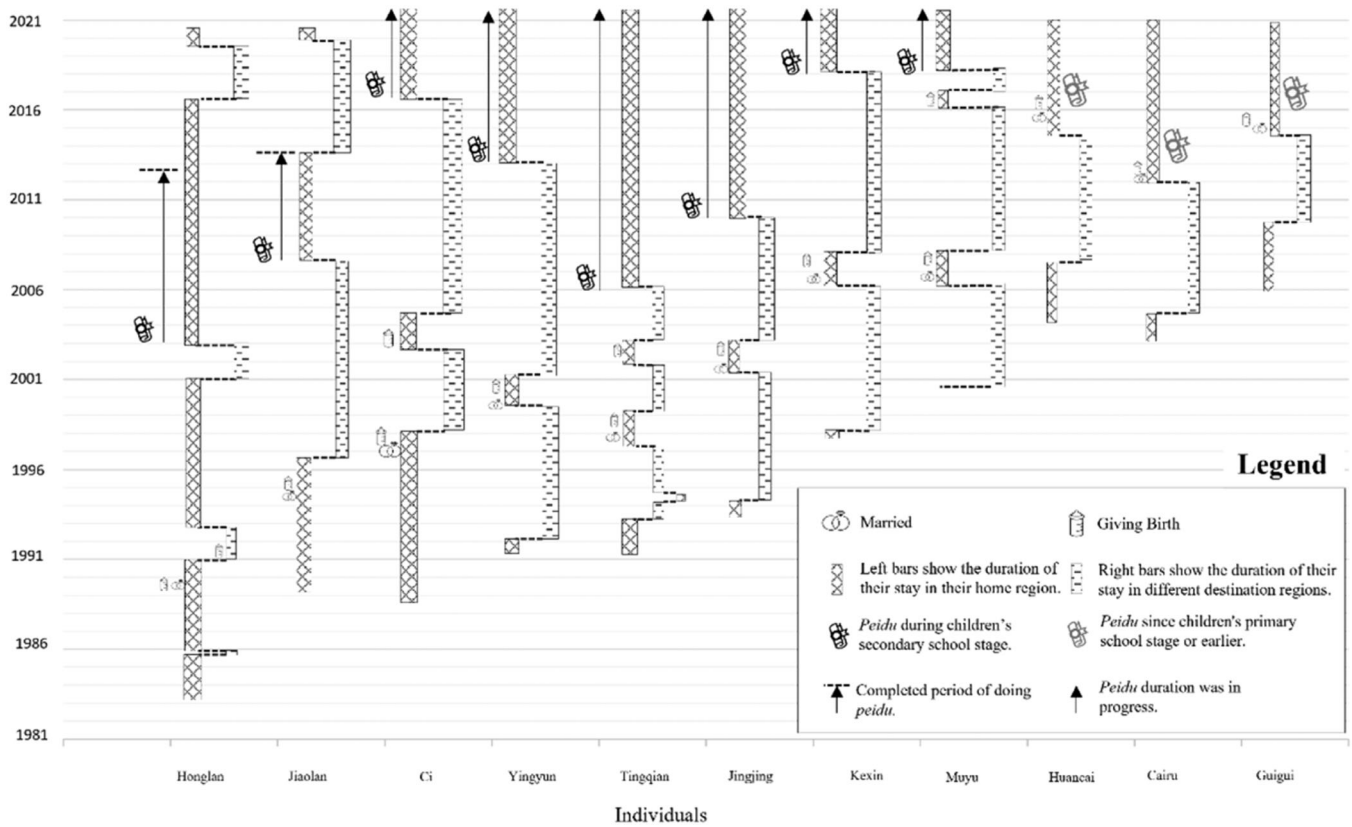


FIGURE 3 | Life paths of the participants.

migration biographies of our participants begins at age 15, which is the age at which most of them completed their junior high school studies and began to out-migrate. As is evident in Figure 3, most of them followed circular migration patterns, with intermittent returns linked to matrimonial and childbirth events and the latest return to their home region to *peidu*.

Figure 3 presents clear generational differences in the migration, return patterns, and *peidu* practices of our participants, which may be related to the specific socioeconomic timeframe in which they grew up. China's social transformation and the changes brought about by the Reform and Opening up of the 1980s resulted in people born before and after the reforms growing up in different environments, leading to different life experiences. Traditionally, young rural women and girls in large families were treated as 'small adults' in the family. They were expected to support other family members before marriage (Jiang 2021). Typically, they migrate for the first time after marriage, often accompanying their spouses. This pattern was visible in our oldest participants, Jiaolan and Honglan. Their first opportunity to migrate for work was after they married and had children, except for Honglan's brief experience of tea picking.

The increased involvement of young adult rural women in China's industrialisation and modernisation since the 1980s has changed the migration patterns. Many women tend to seek factory jobs in various parts of China, leading to long-distance and long-term migration when they no longer receive formal education (usually after the age of 16) (Lee 1998; Lu and Pun 2014;

Pun 2005; Xu 2015). Generally, women return to their home region at a specific age, typically between 22 and 26 years, to get married. Subsequently, they migrate again, moving with their husbands and leaving their children behind to be cared for by their in-laws (see Figure 3). The younger participants in the study practiced this migration pattern, migrating before marriage and parenthood and subsequently re-migrating after these life events (except for Huancai, Cairu, and Guigui).

The migration and return patterns, along with the phase in the children's lives when mothers begin to 'do *peidu*', indicate generational differences. A gradual change is observed from returning at senior high school age to returning when the children are younger, with the youngest participants tending to stay after childbirth. While the oldest participants only returned to Qianshan to do *peidu* when their children went to senior high school, we see that Jiaolan, Yingyun, Tingqian, Kexin, and Muyu returned to their home region when their children were still in junior high school. The younger generation, consisting of Huancai, Cairu, and Guigui born in the 1980s, migrated only once before marriage. They decided against remigration after marriage and the subsequent birth of children, opting instead to support their children throughout their entire educational journey. This may have resulted from an increasing awareness in China of the negative impact of parental absence on their children's emotional well-being and educational performance (Su 2020).

Our *peidu* *mamas*' various residential locations are closely linked to the distribution of secondary schools in Qianshan (see

Figure 2). Most of them did not return to their family homes in villages or towns in Qianshan but rented a room close to the secondary schools that their children attended. For instance, Ci owns a house in her village and operates a restaurant in the county's capital city; however, she resides in the town with her son, where his school is located. Guigui and Cairu settled in the city to ensure their children could receive a better education during primary and junior high school.

Sometimes, the motivation for returning to perform *peidu* overlaps other childcare-related motives. An example is Jingjing, who perceived the process of returning home concerning intergenerational parenting and doing *peidu* as complicated.

Both his grandpa and grandma always indulged him. When I returned during his second grade, my child could not eat by himself. He refused to eat himself; it was always his grandma or grandpa following him to feed him. While he played, a spoon with food was sent to his mouth, and he kept playing. This was the way he had his meals. My son [sigh]...

(Jingjing)

Although Jingjing was not happy with the way her in-laws raised her son, her decision to return home was primarily prompted by her mother-in-law's passing and her father-in-law's inability to care for her son alone.

Overall, we found that *peidu* is part of the circular migration patterns of women and that the way mothers give meaning to *peidu* has changed over time. Performing *peidu* may result in more permanent returns to the home region. We observe that younger generation mothers return when their children are younger than senior high school age, and the youngest mothers even stay home after childbirth. This may be attributed to shifting norms and values that favour having at least one parent raise their children (Xu et al. 2019), coupled with increased financial opportunities to support this choice.

4.2 | Experiences, Practices and Challenges of Returned Peidu Mama's

This section explores the experiences, practices, and challenges of mothers who have returned to their home regions to perform *peidu* and are actively engaged in employment. We attempted to determine whether these mothers encountered challenges that were similar to those of the goose mothers. An important question is whether returning to their home region provides a unique advantage by allowing returnees to rely more heavily on family networks. They also experienced fewer negative effects of spousal separation.

4.2.1 | Practices of Doing Peidu

In their daily practice, our *peidu* mamas must balance their responsibilities of accompanying and supervising their children with their employment obligations. Although these mothers believe that they can better oversee their children's education

and provide emotional support by returning to their home regions, observations reveal that the reality is more complex. Their mornings began early, often before dawn, as they prepared for the day ahead. Despite their stated intentions, they did not always spend as much time as they claimed to engage directly with their children. These mothers' workdays were lengthy, with most of the day spent in the factory from 8 AM to approximately 9:30 PM (dependent on the workload of the day). Conversely, senior students were required to remain in school for most of the day from 6:20 AM to 10 PM. Kexin's and Muyu's children are still in junior high school. The children have two evenings off from school. However, as their mothers, Kexin and Muyu, are still at work during this time (usually until 9:30 PM), the children have no choice but to keep each other company and stay in the rental houses to study or have fun.

In the context of the daily demands of work and family life, it becomes evident that the pursuit of education takes a toll not only on the students but also on the mothers who support them. These *peidu* mamas have tight, busy, and stressful daily schedules; however, they rarely complain. Instead, they focus on optimising their time to educate their children. As Jingjing explains, they go quite far in doing so.

If I drop him off in the morning, he can start later and that lets him sleep for a while; even if he can sleep for 5 min, it will be better. From where I live to school, if he walks by himself, he should start at least 7 min earlier.

(Jingjing)

They could only switch from their *peidu* role to their work role, and back again, for a limited amount of time during the day. By having to combine work with care for their children, *peidu* mamas find it difficult to spend quality time with their children and be involved in their lives. They focus on providing their children with basic needs, such as food, laundry, and a nurturing environment. However, there is hardly any time left to pay attention to their children's socio-emotional well-being. They keep in touch with teachers to be updated on their children's school performance and to provide guidance based on it. Therefore, despite the increased awareness of the emotional problems that left-behind children develop because of separation from their parents at a young age (Su 2020), doing *peidu* does not seem to pay attention to this.

Peidu is primarily concerned with educational performance and does not address other personal development areas such as socio-emotional well-being or hobbies.

As rural parents, we were more concerned about our children's grades than their interests or hobbies. All we wanted was for our son to do well in school. We did not want him to struggle in the future without any skills. As [blue-collar] workers, we knew how tough it was to work day in and day out. If he could graduate from college and obtain a good job [unlike us], he could have weekends off and live the good life. (...). No more endless workdays, just 8 h and done!

(Muyu)

When students live in boarding situations, they often perform additional daily tasks that can affect their studies, such as doing their laundry. This could take a lot of time, especially when they are preparing for the *gaokao* and need to focus more on their studies. Mothers are happy that they can take over these practical tasks, especially when this results in positive educational performance for their children. For instance, Tingqian, a mother of two daughters, stated that her eldest daughter's school results had improved because she could personally supervise her.

I have paid serious attention to my daughters' studies. My eldest daughter had little initiative in her studies, and if I had not been home to supervise and urge her, she might not have been able to enter a second-tier college. Alternatively, she might have failed the gaokao and had to retake it the next year because she was a mediocre student and performed just so-so in her studies.

(Tingqian)

Muyu returned to look after her eldest son who was in his first year of junior high school.

Since I came back to peidu, my son's grades seem to have improved slightly, which makes me feel that it is worthwhile to return to peidu. Although I did not earn as much money as before, he did perform better.

(Muyu)

As noted earlier, *gaokao* is a crucial threshold for individuals accessing colleges. This means that families often prioritise the child who is preparing for the college entrance examination, with the expectation that the child will perform better on the *gaokao* within the care of the *peidu mamas* (Su 2020). For example, Muyu left her 3-year-old son with her in-laws in her home village and leased a room in a town close to her eldest son's school to perform *peidu*. She shares this house with the other *peidu mamas*. She believed that it was crucial to establish a good studying atmosphere and living environment for her son, as this may have affected his academic progress and school achievement. Muyu said:

We had two senior high school students living here; now you came and you are a PhD student. The learning atmosphere was very important, was it not? How rare this is, some parents do not have such opportunities. I did not want him to stay at home. He watched TV and played on the iPad and computer rather than reading and learning. However, there is no entertainment other than playing xiangqi (Chinese Chess) or reading books when he lives here. Regardless of the book he reads, as long as it is a book, it is better than playing on a computer or phone.

(Muyu)

Overall, the daily lives of *peidu mamas* reflect a strong commitment to their children's education, juggling intense schedules, and making strategic decisions to create optimal learning

environments. Cases such as Tingqian and Muyu illustrate the positive impact of their decision to return to *peidu* on educational outcomes and highlight the importance of parental involvement, especially during critical educational periods such as the *gaokao*.

4.2.2 | Intergenerational Family Support

In Section 2, we discussed how grandparents often play a significant role in educational migration for *peidu* purposes by moving to nearby urban schools with their grandchildren, while the parents remain out-migrated. However, in this section, we explore whether and how grandparents' support has returned *peidu mamas*. We found two types of intergenerational support during the interviews and participant observations. First, grandparents continue to take care of the younger grandchild (ren) in the rural home village, while the mother performs *peidu* for the older child in the locality where the child attends school. This was demonstrated in the case of Muyu in Section 4.2.1.

The second type of intergenerational support provided daily practical support. This is only possible if grandparents live close by or in the same household as the *peidu mamas*. For example, Cairu and Guigui mentioned that they lived with their in-laws and Huancai's house was located next to her in-laws' house. When mothers are not available, their in-laws can help them pick up their children from school. Additionally, the grandmothers assist Cairu and Huancai in taking care of their daily needs when they are unable to cook because of work-time constraints.

We sort of live together and are a bit more comfortable that way. I do not like and do not want to do any housework when I return from work anyway. I mean, I came home from work, right, and she had already cooked dinner. In the morning, she had already prepared breakfast by the time I woke up. I ate and went to work. [There are no] conflicts [between us] none. My mother-in-law was quite nice and helped me take care of my son, which was also quite difficult. Furthermore, she never judged me (for certain actions); she let me do what I wanted to do, and I followed what she said to me for respect. After all, everything she did and told us was good for us. (...) Sometimes she collected my clothes for laundry when I did not want to.

(Huancai)

4.2.3 | Spousal Separation

Spousal separation was a common household arrangement for returned *peidu mamas*, as most of their husbands had to continue out-migrating for economic reasons. This household arrangement among couples is a consequence of gendered task division within households in general, but also reconfirms it. The first author observed that the mothers with whom she shared a house frequently engaged in late-night WeChat video calls with their husband. This had become the primary mode of spousal communication for them. Some participants, such as

the Huancai, expressed frustration with their separation from their husbands. She is a village cadre who had out-migrated to work in Hefei (Anhui Province) with her (now) husband before marriage. After they married, they had a child. Huancai stayed in the village, while her husband continued to live and work in Hefei. During the interview, she expressed a desire for her husband to return earlier to start a small business rather than wait until retirement. Another example is Guigui, whose husband is currently working as a firefighter in Jiangxi Province. They rarely get together, and only contact each other through WeChat videos every day.

Separation is the only option; it is beyond my control. He also wanted to return, but that is only if he can come back. Being reallocated from Jiangxi Province to Qianshan as a firefighter can be very challenging, and the possibility is very low (unless he gives up being a firefighter).

(Guigui)

The separation between spouses can be re-negotiated. For example, Yingyun's husband returned to Qianshan in 2020, before their son's *gaokao* results were released in 2022.

My son will be taking the gaokao this year [and going to college]. In addition, my elderly parents-in-law are over 70 years. I wanted him to return and not migrate again [after the Chinese New Year]. I thought we could find entrepreneurial activities to pursue together.

(Yingyun)

This is also illustrated in the case of Cairu, whose husband returned to their home region after being persuaded by her in 2020.

After buying an apartment in the city centre, I wanted him to find employment in our home region. It was always just me at home, taking care of our child and our parents, which was quite tiring to do alone. After he came back, it was better for the two of us to share their responsibilities. We had been separated for a long time. I was concerned that external temptations might become overwhelming and that he might change his thoughts [breaking their commitment]. I am also concerned that, at some point, I might change my heart [to break our relationship]. Overall, we have been separated from each other for 8 years.

(Cairu)

Ci experienced a relatively short separation from her husband and returned earlier than him to do *peidu*. Her husband returned 1 year later. She explained the reasons for recalling her husband:

He [her husband] was lonely and worked outside the home region on his own. Moreover, there are things at home that cannot be done without him, so I called him back.

(Ci)

In short, terminating spousal separation remains a challenge. Although mothers who return often hope to end it, they accept it as an inevitable reality if it does not work out. However, the return migration of the women for performing *peidu* seems to set in motion a process of constant reconsideration and renegotiation of getting their husbands back.

4.3 | Life After Peidu

Although it was not the focus of the initial fieldwork, we do have some information about how the research participants' lives took shape after they finished doing *peidu*. As illustrated in Figure 3, for many participants, *peidu* was an event in their lives. After completing the *peidu*, *peidu* *mamas* have several future options, especially if their husbands have out-migrated. For instance, Jiaolan remigrated to Shanghai, where her husband was still conducting a small business after their son finished *gaokao*. During the interview, Jingjing expressed her desire to start a business in a town close to her home village after completing *peidu*. However, from the follow-up WeChat interviews with the *peidu* *mamas*, we learned that Jingjing ultimately decided to remigrate to her husband in Shandong Province and secured a job in a furniture factory after her son passed the *gaokao* and enrolled in college. Others still lived separately from their husbands due to *peidu*, except for Yingyun, Cairu, and Ci, whose husbands had returned to live and work in Qianshan, ending their spousal separation situation. When Tingqian's eldest daughter enrolled in college, she did not remigrate but stayed because her younger daughter was also in junior high school. She continued to do *peidu* for her younger daughters.

5 | Conclusion

It became evident that the decision to return to the home region to engage in *peidu* was motivated by the perceived importance of enhancing life opportunities for future generations through education. Bourdieu (2018) refers to this as a strategic investment in cultural capital. Our mothers are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and seek to facilitate their children's academic success, help them towards a more promising future, and avoid repeating the struggles they themselves have experienced. Improvement of their children's academic performance provides mothers with a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction. Furthermore, the mothers' experiences illustrate how the pressure for educational success drives them to adopt demanding and competitive work-life strategies with significant socio-emotional costs, reflecting the intensifying nature (*neijuan*) of educational investment in contemporary China. Their experiences not only shed light on how disadvantaged mothers navigate educational inequalities but also highlight the spiral of educational competition that shapes Chinese family dynamics.

This study found signs of differences in parenting styles across generations, particularly in terms of guiding children's education. While older generations often seek employment in the East during their children's early years because of financial

pressures, younger mothers seem to be more aware of the negative impacts of parental absence and prioritise early involvement in their children's education. This may be attributed to their personal experiences or the changed perceived importance of education in addition to the greater educational capital they have acquired themselves. It may also reflect evolving social and cultural norms regarding childcare, alongside increased socioeconomic opportunities for rural families to establish a future within their home region.

Similarly, international 'goose mothers' and internal returned *peidu* *mamas* both encounter emotional challenges and pressures. Nevertheless, the latter are better equipped to draw upon more robust family support networks. Furthermore, owing to the scarcity of educational resources, children frequently attend schools in nearby towns or county capitals. This frequently leads to mothers returning to these areas instead of their hometowns or villages. This shift resulted in complications related to the provision of intergenerational support. The ongoing migration of fathers has resulted in marital compromises, including the separation of spouses to prioritise their children's education. Notwithstanding the fact that these mothers regard their return and involvement in *peidu* practices as a default family strategy, this reinforces the gendered roles within the family. Nevertheless, it is possible to negotiate an end to spousal separation by deciding whether to remigrate with their husbands after completing *peidu* or 'calling' their husbands back. In short, after completing *peidu*, mothers continue to reconsider their circular migration decision-making in the multi-layered context of different life-course events, family dynamics, and linked lives.

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, the generational differences in the timing of return migration for doing *peidu* that we found need further investigation following a quantitative approach. Such research should investigate whether mothers tend to return to the home region during the earlier stages of their children's educational careers. Further research could also adopt a comparative approach to analyse the experiences of *peidu* *mamas* with and without migration experiences. Such research should also focus on the potential role of spatial hierarchies in the educational system, and the concentration of schools in larger towns in rural families' strategies to create upward social and economic mobility. Second, the gendered nature of *peidu* requires further investigation into the perspectives and roles of fathers, considering factors such as economic status, number of children, and availability of family support. Third, the predominant focus on educational performance, rather than general well-being, calls for research on the provision and impact of socio-emotional care. Longitudinal studies are valuable for assessing the long-term effects of *peidu* on children's academic and psychosocial outcomes. Finally, further research could examine the employment status and motivations of mothers in greater depth, given that all participants were engaged in different jobs rather than being full-time housewives.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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