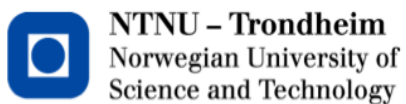


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**Differentiated Childhoods:
Left-behind Children in Rural China**

Thesis for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Childhood Studies

**Norwegian University of Science and Technology
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Abstract

Rural to urban migration is prominent in China. Since the middle of 1980s, China has been witnessing such a massive internal transfer of population. The migration of labor, particularly surplus rural labor moving to urban areas, has resulted in the emergence of the phenomenon of left-behind children. In the context of China, while there is a wealthy of literature which covers the subject of left-behind children, most of these studies focus on the various impacts of parental migration on the children. Only few have explored the children's agency and perspectives in the absence of their parents, and the coping strategies they adopt to respond to their parents' migration. This study seeks to explore both the impact of rural parents' migration on children left behind and children's agency to cope with their parents' absence. Furthermore this research aims to explore a robust way to supporting the left-behind children and their families, thus to improve such children's life conditions.

Social studies of children and childhood is the main theoretical perspectives guiding the study. With the tenets of the New Social Studies of childhood in mind, this research approached all informants in their own rights and viewed them as social actors rather than mere subjects of social structure. The theory assisted in the study to make a more realistic understanding of how the structural conditions in the study area affect the left-behind children's life and how they as actors to exercise their agency to cope with the parental absence.

The research has been designed as an exploratory qualitative study. The data from the fieldwork is based on eight cases studied through the research, using in-depth interviews, visual methods, participate observation conducted with the left-behind children, their parents, their guardians and their teachers. Data from the in-depth qualitative research conducted with the other four not left-behind children and the focus group discussion with forty children is also included.

The research reveals that parental migration has considerable social and emotional costs for the left-behind children. They are engaged in more housework in the household. Most of them have a bad school performance without parents' discipline. They seldom have in-depth communication with their parents, and become skeptical of parental love. They tend to choose stay alone always, which

makes them become more and more unsociable and autistic. On the contrary, parental migration also brought economic benefits to family members left behind by regularly sending remittances. It improves the quality of their lives and enables the left-behind children to receive better education. Meanwhile, their parents' migrant experience would have a deep influence on the aspirations of left-behind children in different ways.

The care arrangements of the migrant parents for their children are multi-faceted. They had weighed up all kinds of factors associated with the dangers and pitfalls of life in a city, the ability of the caregivers, the life quality, their children's school performance and discipline, and then make a suitable care arrangement for their children. However, the study also shows that children were seldom involved in the family decision-making process when they are left-behind. Parents made decisions on behalf of their children, such as the care arrangement, and their children's opinions were seldom sought for. There is an imbalance power relation between adults and children where children become recipients of adult instruction and decisions.

The study further indicates that left-behind children utilize their agency by adopting a variety of coping strategies to cope with parental migration. They assume the roles as caregivers in the household, and are constantly involved in giving care to their younger siblings as well as the elderly during their parents migrate. They make contribution to the care of the family by assuming certain duties and responsibilities in the family such as doing domestic chores, farm work. They do not only receive care but also give care to other people which signifies that their childhood is not idyllic, work-free and care-receiving phase of the life course. Their agency shows that how independent children can be without the intervention of adults.

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List of Acronyms

CYRC.....	China Youth Research Centre
CRC.....	Convention on the Right of the Child
FGDs.....	Focus Group Discussion
GDP.....	Gross Domestic Product
HDI.....	Human Development Index
NGO.....	Non-Governmental Organization
NOSEB.....	Norwegian Centre for Child Research
PRC.....	The People's Republic of China
RMB.....	Ren Min Bi (ChiNa Yuan)
UNCRC.....	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNDP.....	United Nations Development Program
UNICEF.....	United Nations Children's Fund

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Human migration is the movement of people from one place to another, depending on resource distribution and the opportunities that some areas present than other areas. Economic development is often associated with the migration of a large proportion of labor from the rural-based traditional agricultural sector to the urban industrial sector. As industries expand, new urban employment opportunities are created, while technological progress in agriculture reduces the demand for labor in rural areas. As a result, rural-urban migration is regarded as having been an unavoidable and indeed necessary element of rapid economic development (Gaude & Peek, 1976).

Rural migration is especially prominent in China. China has been witnessing such a massive internal (rural to urban) transfer of people since the mid-80s (Li, 2010). The combined forces of China's open-door economic reform in 1978 which aimed to develop and modernize urban coastal regions, the ensure relaxation of migration restrictions by Chinese government, and the sweeping trend of globalization have all led to an unprecedented growth of economically driven rural-to-urban migration. Most of the laborers move from rural areas to big or medium-sized cities, and from central and western China where income levels are low to relatively developed areas, particularly the coastal areas in the southeast. The latest official figures from the Sixth National Population Census released in April 2011 estimate the total number of rural migration workers at 261.4 million in 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011).

1.2 Statement of the problem

Following the rapid increase in the number of migrant workers, the number of the left-behind children is rising fast. A majority of migrant workers perform low-paying jobs and live in poor conditions in cities. In addition, China's place-based public resource distribution and management system poses formidable obstacles to accessing public goods like primary education and medical care for rural-to-urban migrants (Xiang, 2007). Thus a considerable number of migrant workers who are married with children cannot afford to bring their families to the destination cities. In spite of an increasing number of rural children accompanying their parents and entering the migration process (Lu, 2007), single-person migration remains the dominant pattern

in the internal migratory flow in China. This has led to a prevalence of family separation among migrant workers with millions of children left behind in their rural communities. Whether living in a single-parent family or a no-parent family and cared for by grandparents, relatives, nonrelatives, or even themselves (Liu, Li & Ge, 2009), these left-behind children have rapidly formed a special youth population in China that deserve serious attention. There are various discussions that highlight the problems they face in terms of lack of family love and cares, worrisome psychological health, physical injuries and harms, poor self-control and study performance, low self-esteem and superficial guardian responsibilities.

1.3 Aim and objectives of the study

Giving the rising number of left-behind children in recent years in China, and many cases of the plight of these left-behind children covered by media, which arouse my concern and great interest about the left-behind children. This research seeks to explore the deep impact of rural parents' migration on the children left behind from multiple perspectives, and to find a robust way to support those children and families.

Specifically the study will seek to:

- Explore the changes and continuities on the house-based care system, and children's roles and responsibilities within household after parental migration.
- Assess the care and care arrangements for children and children's participation in decision-making about their care arrangements.
- Examine the impact of parents' migration on the children and how they change over time from different people's perspectives.
- Explore the coping strategies adopted by left-behind children after parental migration.

1.4 Research questions

I approached the aim and objectives by the following research questions:

- How does parental migration change the role and responsibilities of left-behind children within the household?
- How do left-behind children experience life in the absence of parents owing to migration?

-
- What social and emotional challenges left-behind children face when they are without the guidance, love and nurturing of their parents?
 - How left-behind children respond to their parents' working away and how does this change over time?

1.5 Significance of the study

Previous studies about migration rarely recognize left-behind children. Children are not included in research subjects in such topics. This is further exacerbated by the lack of research on children's perspectives about parental migration. In recent years, there is a growing awareness that the left-behind children in the migrant families should be analyzed and researched in their own rights. Accordingly, the research focus in this regard also makes a shift from the stereotypes of researching children as the passive victims of their parents' migration to seeking their actual perspectives and lived experiences they went through in the process of their daily lives and activities. Children are viewed as subjects and social actors in the research process.

In the context of China, while there is a wealthy of literature that covers the subject of left-behind children, most of which focus on the various impacts of parental migration on the children. Only few have explored the children's agency in the absence of their parents, and the coping strategies they adopted to respond to their parents' migration. In this study, in addition to seeking the impact of rural parents' migration on children left behind, I also attempt to explore their agency of children to cope with their parents' absence. Qvortrup (1994) argues that, the new sociology of childhood seeks to understand children's agency through their interpretation of and responses to their environment. Children's perspectives are useful in identifying the most important issues that affect their lives. Therefore, in the study I listen to their voices, give them rights to make account of their views, and regard them as research subjects and experts who have rich experiences which I do not know and lack in. Although this study does not demonstrate a comprehensive picture of the left-behind children in China on the whole, it might uncover some interesting and meaningful aspects in this regard.

1.6 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter has provided the general introduction along with the rural-urban migration in China and the emergence of the left-behind children. Besides, it provided the information regarding the objectives and research questions, and the significance of the thesis is presented as well.

Chapter two presents the country profile of China, and also introduces the recent economic policies and the child-related policies and education in China. In addition, it gives an overview of recent migration situation in China. A description of the study area is presented at the end of this chapter.

Chapter three sets out the theoretical perspectives and frameworks, which provides the basis for underlying structure for analysis and discussion.

Chapter four is the methodological chapter outlining the ways in which the research was conducted, methods applied to data collection and the analysis of the data. My role as a researcher, some ethical guidelines on the field, challenges and possible limitations in the process of collecting data is equally highlighted.

An analysis of the data collected and a discussion of findings engage in chapter five and six. Chapter five focuses on the changes and continuities on the children's care when their parents migrate. This chapter also presents the coping strategies left-behind children adopted to respond to their parents' migration, and the roles and children play as young caregivers within household after parental migration, which shows children's agency as social actors. Chapter six discusses the impacts of parental migration on the left-behind children based on the research data.

At last, chapter seven provides a summary of the thesis and concluding remarks. It highlights the research objectives, theoretical perspectives, and the distinctive methodology used within the research first. Then, a summary of the research findings is given as follows. Finally, some recommendations are made for policy practice, and also for the migrant parents and schools from the welfare of left-behind children.

Chapter Two: Background of the Study Area

2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a brief introduction of the country profile and the context of the study. First, it gives a brief description of China and provides an overview of the economic, socio-cultural changes in recent years. It also briefly describes the child-related policies and education in China. Second, the chapter takes a look at the migration situation in China and identifies the factors associated with the migration and the emergence of left-behind children. Third, the Chinese family structure and kinship are discussed accordingly. Finally, the profile of the study area is presented.

2.2 Country profile

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a sovereign state located in East Asia. It is the world's most populous country, with a population of over 1.35 billion. It exercises jurisdiction over 23 provinces (Taiwan included), five autonomous regions, five direct-controlled municipalities, and two mostly self-governing special administrative regions. Covering approximately 9.6 million square kilometers, China is the world's second-largest country by land area, and the third of fourth largest by total area, depending on the definition of total area. (www.wikipedia.com, the free encyclopedia)

2.2.1 The recent economic policies in China

China has a long and fascinating civilization with more than five thousand years. She went through a series of radical transformations and reforms in history in terms of social and economic aspects. As the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the long-term history that China has long been subjected to civil strifes and foreign invasions ended. Meanwhile, from 1949 until 1976, China entered the Mao era. Before 1979, the Chinese economy was organized on a central planning system. Under this system, most resources, such as goods, services and information, were produced and allocated as collective goods (Oberschall, 1996). Although Chinese government achieved its equalization goals under the central planning system, the productivity and efficiency of whole society was very low due to the lack of incentives and responsibilities. In addition, the continuing political movements, natural disasters, and international isolation severely distorted the Chinese economic development. By the end of culture revolution in 1976, China was still one of the poorest countries in the world.

Since Deng Xiaoping took power in China in 1978, he launched the economic reforms, to transform the central planning economic system to a market oriented economic system and to modernize China in terms of its industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense system. China made considerable benefits from carrying out the opening-up policy to the outside and market-oriented economy strategy. On the one hand, in the last decades, China has become the world's fastest-growing major economy. As of 2013, China is the world's second-largest economy by both nominal total GDP and purchasing power parity, and is also the world's largest exporter and importer of goods (www.wikipedia.com, the free encyclopedia). On the other hand, a recent report released by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) placed China 101st in a ranking of 187 countries and regions based on the quality of life enjoyed by their populations. China measured 0.699 in the UNDP's "human development index" (HDI) in 2012, which represents a remarkable increase of 72 percent from the 0.407 it registered on this scale in 1980, or an average year-on-year growth of 1.7 percent (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-03/15/content_16312733.htm). The HDI of East Asia and the Pacific as a region increased from 0.432 in 1980 to 0.683 today, placing China above the regional average. HDI is adopted as a major measurement of life expectancy, education levels and income to paint a picture.

Human Development Index	Ranking 101
Health	Life expectancy at birth (years) 73.7
Education	Mean years of schooling (of adults) (years) 7.5
Income	GNI per capita in PPP terms (constant 2005 international \$) (Constant 2005 international \$) 7,945
Inequality	Inequality-adjusted HDI value 0.543
Poverty	MPI: Multidimensional poverty index (%) 0.056
Gender	GI: Gender Inequality Index, value 0.213
Sustainability	Carbon dioxide emissions per capita (tonnes) 5.3
Demography	Population, total both sexes (thousands) 1,353,600.7
Composite indices	Non-income HDI value 0.728
Innovation and technology	Fixed and mobile telephone subscribers per 100 people (per 100 people) 86.2
Trade, economy and income	Income index 0.646
Footnotes	

Table 1 Human Development Index of China in 2012
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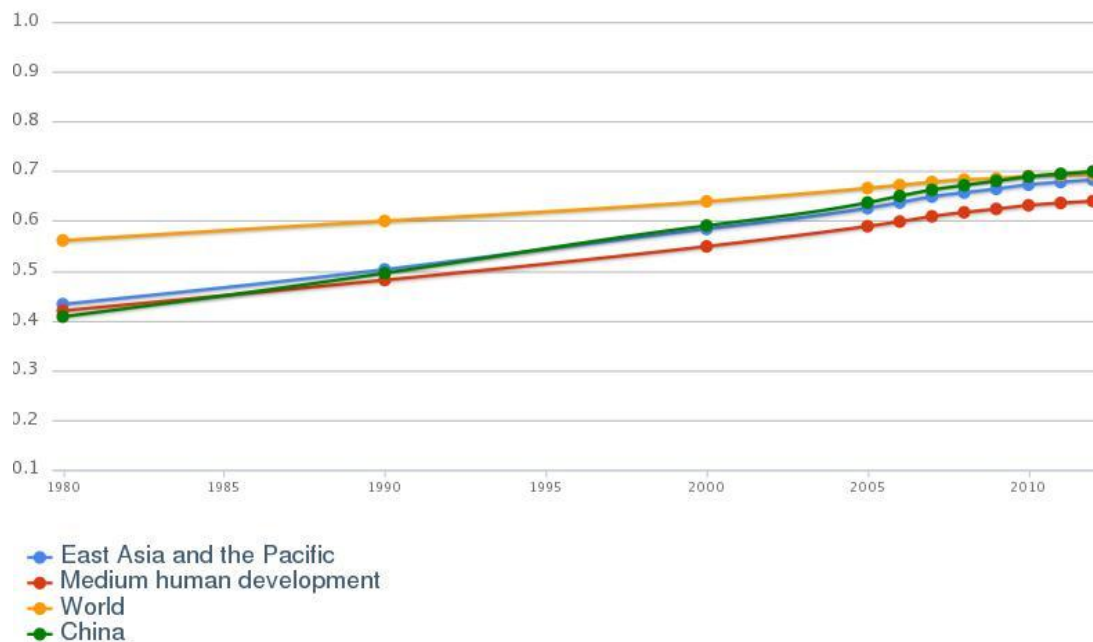


Figure 1 Human Development Index: Trends 1980 – present
<http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/CHN.html>

Although the policy “open and reform” contributes to the development of China, it also leads to serious and growing poverty gaps between the urban and rural areas because its aim of developing and modernizing urban coastal regions first. Some programs such as the “Go West” campaign – a program aimed at stimulating the development in China’s underdeveloped western regions, have reportedly invested a great deal of capital in the interior, but information available suggests that programs funded have primarily been hard infrastructure such as rail and roadways, linking provinces to Beijing (Human Rights in China, 2005). Inadequate and retreating investment in education and healthcare also contributes to the growing poverty gaps. Despite steady growth of China’s economy since economic reforms in 1978, the rural urban income gap reached its widest in more than three decades in 2009 (Malcolm, 2010). According to data from National Bureau of Statistics of China (2011), at its widest disparity, city dwellers were earning 3.33 times as much as farmers, with per capital disposable income of urban household standing at RMB 17175 Yuan while per capital net income of rural households at RMB 5153 Yuan. The income gap in China emerged after its economic reforms since 1978, when the GINI index was only at 16%, and had aggravated till present (Asia Development Bank Institute, 2003). Up to

recent years, growth of income has alleviated rural poverty, as rural poverty population in 2010 numbered 26.88 million, or 9.09 million lower than in 2009, however it is still unable to match the rapid urban growth since China's open door policy (www.wikipedia.com, the free encyclopedia).

2.2.2 Child-related Policies and Education in China

China declares that it protects a wide range of children's rights through domestic legislation and by ratifying and joining the relevant international treaties. China ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. At the same year, China passed the People's Republic of China Law on the Protection of Minors which is the primary law in the field of protection of children. This law which entered into force on January 1, 1992, embodies Chinese government's attitude about UNCRC, incorporates the basic objective of UNCRC and sets up responsibilities of the families, the schools, and the government with regard to the protection of children's rights, and judicial protection as well. Despite the remarkable progress made in law and policy in promoting child rights and protection, however in practice, enforcement of the treaty obligations and the legislative declarations remains a huge problem. This is particularly the case in accessing the right to education involving children from different vulnerable groups – ethnic minorities, migrants, girl children and rural inhabitants.

Since the ancient time, China has attached great importance to education that so many ideologists and educationists have appeared successively. In the past decades, China's economy has been developing rapidly. With the advent of knowledge-based economy, China's education also adjusts itself in order to meet the growing demands of economy. Since the 1950s, China has been providing a nine-year compulsory education to what amounts to a fifth of the world's population. All citizens must attend school for at least nine years, and the government provides primary education for six to nine years, starting at age six or seven, followed by six years of secondary education for age 12 to 18. As a result of the government's emphasis and encouragement, China has had a major expansion in education, increasing the number of undergraduates and people who hold doctoral degrees fivefold from 1995 to 2005 (China's Book in Higher Education, 2005). Chinese education has made splendid

achievements in recent years, however, the problems that the imbalance of development in education between urban and rural areas is not ignorable.

Rural education in China

In China, the rural areas are characterized by relatively high educational costs, limited educational opportunities of lower quality, and a strong gender bias favoring boys (Hannum & Park, 2009). In many rural areas, the lack of local revenues leads to an increase in educational fees, because many schools have to cover costs by charging fees directly to students. Although the compulsory education law stipulates that nine years of public education must be tuition free, education in China has never been completely free and educational expenses such as books, uniforms and supplies shouldered by the parents have continued to rise (Tsang, 2000). This situation becomes more pronounced at the middle school level, where fees are often more than twice as high as at the primary level. The educational expenses are even higher at the high school level, where compulsory schooling ends.

Since 2000, the central Chinese government has ordered local governments to enforce the free nine years of compulsory education in rural areas. These recent initiatives have improved rural education, but this goal has yet to be fully achieved. Although urban children have nearly universal enrollment, the enrollment rates for rural children are 90% in primary schools and 85% in middle schools (Knight & Song, 2005). The rural-urban gap can also be observed in the quality of education. Due to the policy shift that decentralized the funding of compulsory education, the quality of education has been polarized along economic lines. Poor school quality in rural areas substantially reduces the likelihood that rural children advance to high school and college.

Another persistent feature of rural education is the preference for sons. Son preference is prevalent in China, especially in rural areas. Cultural norms value male children over female children (Goodkind, 1999). Son preference has resulted in inferior treatment to daughters before and after birth. In spite of some recent improvements, girls continue to have fewer educational opportunities than boys (Brown & Park, 2002).

2.3 Migration and Left-behind children in China

2.3.1 Recent Migration in China

China has been witnessing a massive internal transfer of population since the mid-80s (Li, 2010). Most of the laborers move from rural areas to big or medium-sized cities, and from central and western China where income levels are low to relatively developed areas, particularly the coastal areas in the southeast. There are about 3 million migrant agricultural workers working in Beijing and more than 3 million in Shanghai. In Shenzhen, an economically developed city in the south, the migrant population is 5 million, and most of these used to work in agriculture (Dang, 2006). There are many factors behind the flow of rural population to the city, but in essence it is economic interests that move agricultural workers to the cities (Dang, 2006; Li, 2003). According to Li (2003), 90.1% of migrant workers earn much more money after they go to work in the city, and the tremendous economic gap drives more and more agricultural workers into cities. The medical and health care systems in cities are much better than rural areas. In addition, booming commerce and colorful cultural and entertainment activities in big cities are also a big attraction for young people (Dang, 2006; Chan et. al., 2008).

2.3.2 Migrants in cities

As large numbers of rural workers migrate into the cities, an ample labor supply has resulted in very low wage, poor working conditions of migrant workers. A majority of migrant workers engage in physically demanding jobs, such as construction workers, sanitary workers, domestic servants and restaurant waiters. Their income is much lower than urban workers whereas their working hours are much longer than their urban counterparts. The huge gap between rural and urban workers is rooted in the Household Registration System (also known as the Hukou system).

Household Registered (hukou) System

In the 1950s, China gradually instituted a Household Registration (*hukou*) System, which classifies the whole population into two categories: urban residents and rural residents. Under such a system, farmers faced restrictions in getting a job, public service entitlements or residence in a city. This system was created in large measure to control and regulate rural to urban migration.

Before the economic reforms, “the hukou system became a welfare entitlement that defined the distribution of most daily necessities such as staple foods, as well as the arrangement of jobs” (Chan et al., 2008: pp.8). Rural people mostly worked in the agricultural sector, with a small number working in rural enterprises and services, which were started by farmers. Since the 1980s, the state has gradually loosened its restrictions on farmers in employment, under the tremendous pressures brought by the economic reforms, thus making it easier for rural workers to live and work in cities. However, the restrictions on employment and residence for rural workers have not been completely removed, and they are still not able to enjoy the same rights as the urban citizens. Most migrant workers are engaged in low-paid, dirty, highly physically demanding or dangerous jobs and are not entitled to accessing basic public services. With low wages and no public housing rights, migrant workers have no choice but to live in poor housing with limited basic facilities. The welfare system for rural residents is totally different from that for the urban residents.

2.3.3 Left-behind children

The movement of rural laborers to cities in China is distinctly different from what is happening in other countries. Most of the laborers coming to cities for work cannot become permanent urban residents, owing to the strict population registration system. China’s household registration system has prevented these migrants from enjoying the same welfare as locals in their newly adopted homes. They would, for instance, not be considered to be eligible for public housing, nor would their children be admitted to public schools in the city. Because of these difficulties and the high costs of arranging childcare and schooling in cities, many migrant parents leave their children behind in rural sending areas.

The term “left-behind children” has occurred in a variety of literature in China since the 1980s, which refers to children or young people who are left alone or live with their rural relatives or neighbors, because their parents have left the home to work in urban areas. Massive social mobility is the context in which the problem of left-behind children has arisen. Following the rapid increase in the number of migrant workers, the number of these “left-behind children” is also rising fast. Over 70% of children of migrants (approximately 58 million) are left behind while one or both of

their parents migrate for work; among them, nearly one third are separated from both parents (CYRC, 2006).

The Chinese government is trying to provide migrant children with appropriate schooling. In some cities the government has offered financial assistance to some migrant schools and a law has been enacted offering migrant children an equal right to access compulsory education in their host cities (Chan et al., 2008). However, there is still a gap between policy and actual implementation. Migrant children are still refused by many state schools because their parents cannot pay for the high registration fees or without a “Temporary Residential Permit” (Lv, 2007).

2.4 Family structure and kinship

A typical Chinese family consists of father, mother, sons, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. To have five generations living under one roof is not rare in China, especially in rural areas because of the custom of early marriage. The Chinese family is seldom an independent unit, but a member of the greater-family. In the Chinese village, families bearing the same surname live together. The traditional Chinese family has a hierarchical structure with the man as the head of the family tagged with the responsibility for supporting his family. The man also has the complete authority and the final say in the affairs of the family. Although the socialist revolution made some changes in marriage customs and intergenerational relations, it failed to realize the party-state’s promise of gender equality and family reforms because of the deep-rooted ideology and structure of the patriarchal family (Yan, 2003).

The economic reforms and social transformations made since opening-up policy in 1978, it brought great influence on the Chinese family ideology. With rapid urbanization and mushrooming housing market, more and more people choose to live separately between generations. In spite of the changes in family structure and family values, the traditional virtue of emphasizing extended kinship ties, collective interests and intergenerational support of the family still root in the family members. The entire family relatives constitute an extended support network for family members. Whenever any members within the family go through the difficult situations, the family support network plays an essential part in helping the children cope well with this. For example, when the parents migrate for work, the practice that grandparents

looking after their grandchildren are taken for granted. Although fewer uncles, aunts or other family members live under the same roof nowadays, they would provide supports as well.

China's one child policy implemented in 1979 in an effort to control the country's burgeoning population is so successful that the nation's population growth rate dropped significantly. According to Tseng et al. (1988), as early as 1985, about 80% to 90% of young couples in urban areas and 50% to 60 % in rural areas had only one child. However, the policy has also drastically altered the traditional Chinese family structure, which favored many children in a family. Now the typical Chinese family is structures in a 4:2:1 fashion. "421 Family", that is, after a pair of only child get married and give birth to a child, their family structure will consist of 4 parents, one child and themselves. "421 Family" means that now child is the only hope. Parents of only children usually have great expectations and encourage their children's studying for academic achievement because they believe that it is critical for their children's success in an increasingly competitive world. Grandparents are an important source of care giving in China, especially when their grandchildren are young and the parents are not available due to employment or migration. Co-residence and nearby residence may provide access for children's care. While grandparents as more dependable than domestic helpers, there are conflicts between the generations in caregiving approaches with grandparents having different preferences and sending double messages to children and grandparents being exhausted by the young child's needs.

2.5 The study area profile

The study area – Suqian City is located in the north of Jiangsu Province (Figure 2). It has a population of 5.56 million, and the physical lands area is 8,555 square kilometers (<http://baike.baidu.com/view/4769.htm>). Suqian includes five county-level divisions, of which two are districts, three are counties. The districts are the old urban areas of Suqian while the three counties are recently designated as county-level districts being considered as suburbs and governed by the Suqian city administration. The special industrial zones are specifically designated as new investment areas – Sucheng District. Suqian administers 110 towns and 1418 villages. The municipal government is stationed in the Suchen District.

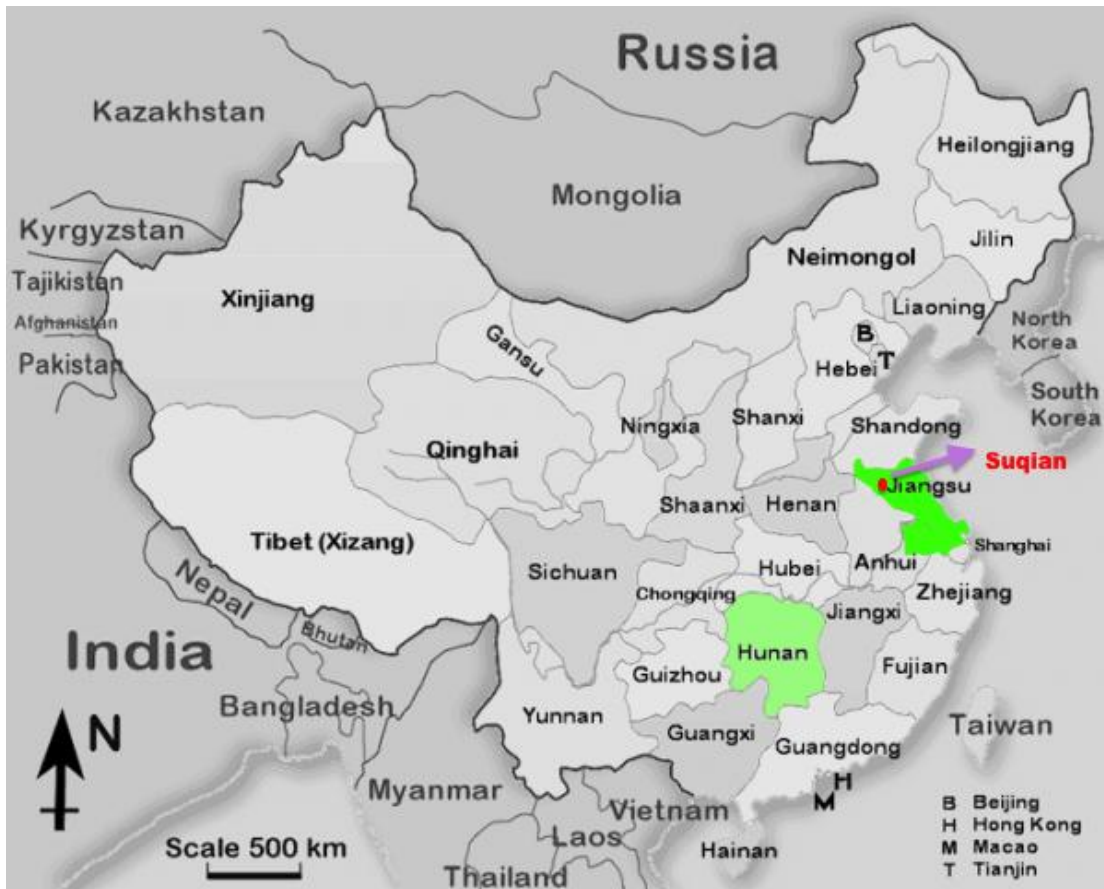


Figure 2 Location of Suqian City in Jiangsu Province (<http://www.sacu.org/>)

Suqian was traditionally considered as a farming land and its fertile soil and moderate rainfall make the city one of Jiangsu’s agricultural areas. The city is putting more efforts to boost its green agriculture and forest coverage. The agriculture income now occupies 25% of the city’s total GDP. The government also attaches great importance to education these years. As a result of the government’s emphasis and encouragement, Suqian has had a major expansion in education, and has made achievements in recent years. According to the Report of the National Bureau of Statistics on the 2010 Economic and Social Development of Suqian City, the enrollment rate of 3-5 years old children to the kindergarten is 93.5%; the proportion of junior school students entering senior school is 98.3% in 2010. The public health undertaking also makes progress in recent years. The birth rate of population in 2010 is 18.7‰, the mortality rate is 10.1‰, and the rate of natural population growth is 8.6‰. On the other hand, the maternal mortality rate is 7.47/10000, infant mortality rate is 4.31‰, and the mortality rate of child under five years old is 5.2‰

(National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). There are about 121 hospitals and clinics in Suqian, and the number of doctors and nurses has reached 13929 in 2010. The health care coverage is becoming more extensive, and the access to health care for the citizens is more easier (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011).

Although Jiangsu Province is very wealthy among the provinces of China, with the second highest total GDP, after Guangdong Province, but a wealthy gap between the prosperous south and poorer north has led to unequal economic growth. Situated in the north of Jiangsu Province, the development of Suqian's economy always lags behind other districts due to its geographic position. Compared with the outcome in agriculture, the industry in Suqian City is relatively weak. More and more people are seeking better opportunities in other places in recent years where they can earn higher wages. There are over one million migrate labors every year in Suqian city (Government Work Report of Suqian, 2006). Following the increase of migrate labors, the number of left-behind children in Suqian city rise sharply. About 200 thousand children in Suqian are left behind by their migrate parents in 2006, which has accounted for 30% of the total children in Suqian. Over one third primary schools in Suqian has more than 50% students who are left behind (Government Work Report of Suqian, 2006). As we have seen so far, living in the absence of one or both biological parent, left-behind children go through various experiences to survive and adopt all kinds of coping strategies in the local municipality. Therefore, it is important to look at in the experiences and the coping strategies adopted by these children when their parents have left them behind.

Chapter Three: Concepts, Theoretical Perspectives and Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

The chapter discusses key concepts and perspectives used in this research. The chapter begins by introducing the concept of children and childhood. Setting a parameter of a child is important, which helps to give a clear definition to “left-behind children” in my study and will give the readers the real understanding about this term. The discussion of “childhood” will give the readers a comparative understanding of the differentiated childhoods of the left-behind children. As children are the informants of my research, the social studies of children and childhood has been chosen to be the main theoretical perspectives to guide my study. Therefore, some essential dimensions of this theoretical perspective will be presented. Children’s rights, which are very important in child welfare and also for governments, will also be discussed. At last, some related literature within the area of my study that will be helpful to the later analysis of my research data will be reviewed.

3.2 Children and Childhood

What is a child? “To be a child” is related to the different culture contexts and state laws about the definition of a child. According to UNCRC (1989):

Definition of a child (Article1):

“For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”

UNCRC (1989), while giving a numerical age definition of a child sets the upper age limit of eighteen years for a child. For minimum age, it allows and accommodates the state laws and cultural contexts. The definition of a child mostly depends on the culture, society and the politics of that area. In the US for example, people who are 16 years old can obtain driving license, while in China the minimum age should be 18 years old. Meanwhile people of 16 years old who committed crimes shall be investigated the criminal responsibility as adults in China. Societies determine what a child is, and the definition varies across different contexts and cultures.

Childhood as a social category is constructed by a particular society and culture. The

French historian Ariès (1962) was the first to point out that childhood was a social construction not a mere biological phenomenon. He claimed that the idea of childhood did not exist in medieval Europe and that children during that period ‘did not count’. According to Ariès, childhood is a modern idea. Although there are some criticisms that his reliance on paintings to interpret childhood led to several criticisms, his thesis remains an important starting point in beginning to acknowledge childhood as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

The social studies of children and childhood see childhood as a social category or a social construct that children inhabit (Jenks, 1982). As James, Jenks and Prout (1998: pp.196) argued, “childhood has to be recognized and understood through routine and emergent collective perceptions that are grounded in changing politics, philosophy, economics, social policy or whatever”. As a result, the research on childhood should “take into consideration the construction of cultural politics governing institutions directed at children and to explore the specific cultural context in which perspectives of children and childhood are constructed and reconstructed (Nilsen, 2008)”. With the tenets of the New Social Studies of children and childhood in mind, my research approached all informants in their own rights and viewed them as social actors. As a result, I will look at some of core tenets of social studies of children and childhood in detail.

3.3 Left-behind children

The term of “left-behind” children has been used differently by different scholars in a variety of literature. There is not a universally accepted definition for this special group amongst these studies on them. According to Ye and Murry (2005: pp.18), left-behind children refer to “those children whose father and/ or mother have migrated for work and are taken care of by father or mother, someone from the older generation, and/ or others”. In other studies, left-behind children are defined as those children whose parents have migrated and are cared for by someone from older generation or others (Fan et al., 2010: pp.655-664). It seems that most of studies are vague in defining left-behind children’s age and how long they have been left behind. The variation in these factors might result in differences in the research design and the later data analysis. In my research, left-behind children refers to the children under 16 years old who are left alone or live with others (relatives, neighbors, teachers, etc.) for

at least half a year because of their parents' migration to work in other places.

3.4 Social Studies of Children and Childhood

Prior to the 1980s, there was a tendency to ignore children and childhood. Studies on children were dominated by two theoretical approaches, developmental psychology and socialization. Developmental psychology places focus on the children as individuals progressing into adulthood that can be achieved through specific stages in relation to cognitive subjectivity, physical development and ages (Woodhead & Montgomery, 2003). The paradigm of socialization finds its path in parallel to the developmental psychology. After this period, a number of scholars from sociology and anthropology begun to challenge these mainstream approaches. According to James, Jenks and Prout (1998), the dominance of socialization theory meant that, children were seen as human becomings rather than human beings, who through the process of socialization would be shaped into fully human adult beings. Brannen and O'Brien (1995) argued that, the sociological view of the child regarded children as "incompetent" and "incomplete", as "adults in the making rather than children in the state of being. This means 'the forces of socialization, child development, the family, the school, received greater attention with 'little or no time' being given to children themselves" (Brannen & O'Brien, 1995). As a result of these critical approaches to mainstream studies, the new paradigm of the Social Studies of Childhood emerged. The new paradigm tried to give a voice to children by regarding them as people to be studied in their own rights and not just receivers of adult teaching (Hardman, 1973). James and Prout (1990: pp.8-9) identified the key features of social studies of children and childhood as a rough outline of the potential which the 'emergent paradigm' may hold for the study of childhood. These are:

- Childhood is understood as a social construction;
- Childhood is a variable of social analysis;
- Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own rights, independent of the perspective and concern of adults;
- Children are actively involved in the construction of their social lives;
- Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood as it allows children's voices to be heard;
- The development of a new paradigm is contribution to the process of

reconstructing childhood in society.

This new paradigm of studying children views childhood as being socially constructed and hence giving prominence to the view of children as social actors, and not incomplete beings learning to become adults, but also drawing attention to the historical, geographical and social differences of childhood and the moral, cultural and political contexts of assumptions about children (Ansell, 2005). Within the new paradigm, there are three main branches of Social Studies of Childhood to theorize childhood and understand children, which are: (De) constructive sociology of childhood, sociologies of childhood (actor-oriented child research) and structural sociology of childhood. I will explore each of these approaches briefly below.

3.4.1 (De) constructive sociology of childhood

(De) constructive sociology of childhood emphasizes the ‘children’ and ‘childhood’ are socially constructed rather than facts of nature (Woodhead & Montgomery, 2003). The concepts of a ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ are socially constructed; they exist only because people have brought them into being as meaningful categories. Childhood is what a particular group or culture or society defines it as being. It is the life-space which our culture limits it to be, i.e. its definition through the courts, the school, the family and also through psychology and philosophy (Qvortrup, 1994). Social construction of childhood rejects naturalism, which saw the society gives more than biological characteristics of childhood that affects children. It emphasizes the power of knowledge and language on the beliefs and practice of the society on childhoods.

Construction sociology also rejects universalism. Childhoods are in plural, and there are diverse images of children and childhoods. Therefore, there exists no ‘one childhood’ that is universal for all children. “A good or bad childhood” is being produced and reproduced in ongoing cultural process at all levels of society.

James and Prout (1990) state that, “childhood, as a distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of society.” Therefore, childhood cannot be defined without considering the environment in which children live, it is influenced by several dynamics such as the social, economic, political contexts in

which the children live. This approach fit well with my exploration of left-behind children's experiences in connection to their parents' migration. In the context of my research, different social, economic, political and historical factors determine the childhood experiences differently. Children's experiences and perceptions in this respect might differ from individual, that is to say, socially and culturally constructed. Therefore, it is important to apply the perspective that childhood as socially constructed in my study.

3.4.2 Sociologies of childhood (Actor-oriented Research)

Sociologies of childhood focus children as active and competent human beings, and children should be viewed as social actors with agency. Before the 1970s, the social science predominant viewed children as human becomings. The ideologies carried by the developmental psychologists and socialization theorist of sociology held conceptions of what a child is supposed to become and childhood is understood and receives treatment as a stage, a structural process of becoming, but rarely as a course action or coherent social practice. The dominant theoretical perspectives were challenged by many scholars. Psychologist Vygotsky (1978) prompted discussions about children's active roles. He argued that, children's self-regulatory abilities originate in social interactions and only later become internalized and independently used by children. Hardman (1973) used participant observation in the study of children in a primary school to seek to discover whether there is in childhood a self-regulating autonomous world that does not necessarily reflect early development of adult culture. He suggested that children should be studied in their own right and should be treated as social actors with agency, not just as receptacles of adult teaching.

To recognize children as social actors, we need to recognize and appreciate their agency. James and Prout (1997: pp.106-118) describes children's agency as "the ability to be active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live." Children are seen as possess an innate capacity to learn, an innate ability to develop, and they are active agents in their own life course. As Mayall (2002) pointed out, children are now seen as people who, through their individual actions, can make a difference to a relationship, a decision, to the working of a set of social assumptions or constrains. In my study, left-behind children utilize their agency by adopting a variety of coping

strategies to cope with parental migration. They do not only receive care but also give care to other people. They play their roles as caregivers in the household, and are constantly involved in giving care to their younger siblings as well as the elderly during their parents migrate. They make contributions to the care of the family by assuming certain duties and responsibilities in the family such as doing domestic chores, farm work. This shows that children are social actors who have the agency to change circumstances for the better in their own life. Children can be very responsible by taking care of themselves and siblings without adult supervision. James, Jenks and Prout (1998: pp.138) argued that, to recognize children's agency, it is necessary for the researcher to "focus on their agency in social action, their life worlds of childhood, and their daily life experiences of children; their experiences and understandings, their interactions with each other and with adults of various kinds, their strategies and tactics of action." In this respect, children have a voice in anything that affects them and need to be treated as such. My study, in the line of sociology of childhood has attempted to include the voices of left-behind children, to study their daily habits and the reasons of being left behind by their migrant parents from their own perspectives.

3.4.3 Structural Sociology of Childhood

Qvortrup (1991) stated that a structural approach to childhood in which childhood constitutes a particular structural form; childhood is generally exposed to the same societal, cultural, economic and political forces as adulthood, and children are themselves co-constructors of childhood and society. James et al. (1998) also argued that, the social structural approach conceives childhood as a structural category, an enduring state that exists all the time in the social structure of any societies. This approach emphasizes childhood in itself to be regarded as permanence. Even though each individual child leaves childhood in a biographical sense, childhood still remains and continues as a social structure in society.

Within the social structure concept, sociology as a discipline, examines the influence of social structure in determining who we are and how we are. Just like adults, childhood also exists in a social space that is defined by law, politics, religion, economic conditions etc., and within this social space, the nature of childhood is further influenced by social class, generation, gender, ability, ethnicity and so on.

Thus, childhood is an integrated part of society, and it relates and interacts with other social structures at the same time. Children are seen as a constant feature of all social worlds. Therefore, we should investigate into children's lives from their own perspectives, taking into consideration how the various social structures affect their lives (Ansell, 2005). Left-behind children, who are the main informants of this study, live their everyday lives within the social structures. They are influenced by the structural conditions – parental migration. Also they are influenced by the conditions which exist at home or at school because they live and interact with these structural conditions when they are left behind. They are experiencing a unique childhood which is different from others. The structuration theory assists to make a more realistic understanding of how the structural conditions in the study area affect the life of left-behind children and how they as actors exercise their agency to cope with the condition in the structure. It is therefore important to apply the social structural approach to my study.

3.5 Children's rights

Because of the nature of childhood, children have long been identified as deserved of special consideration within the international framework of human rights. Children are relatively vulnerable and marginalized in adult-centered society. Being comparatively “voiceless” children generally do not have the political platforms available to adults to articulate and claim their rights. In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which was adopted unanimously by all of the world (except two countries) has achieved the highest level of acceptance of any human rights instrument in a very short time. An almost universal ratification – 194 countries (except US and Somalia) are stated parties to the UNCRC – provides a powerful endorsement to the significance of children's rights. The state as signatory to UNCRC is the ‘primary guarantor’ and is to ensure the rights and well-being of children in their state (Boyden & Hart, 2007). The Chinese government signed the UNCRC in 1990 and ratified it to enter into force in 1992. The People's Republic of China (PRC) declares that it protects a wide range of children's rights through domestic legislation and by ratifying and joining the UNCRC.

The UNCRC is undoubtedly the most significant policy intended to promote and protect children's rights, and has also made remarkable progress. However,

enforcement of the treaty obligations and the legislative declarations remains a huge problem in China. Children's rights are not always protected and promoted effectively in practice, with some individual children and groups of children experiencing extreme violations of their rights.

According to the right to life, survival and development (Article 6) of UNCRC, governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily. Children have the right to the maximum available resources that are necessary to support them achieve their maximum possible potential. China's policy "open and reform" in 1978 which aimed to develop and modernize urban coastal regions leads to serious and growing poverty gaps between the urban and rural areas. Even where available information shows that rural inhabitants have lower availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability of education, the national government continues to give preference to coastal urban development in the allocation of resources. It is these policies that lead the imbalance of children's development in China. The article 28 of UNCRC indicated that states parties should recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity. However, big challenges are facing China particular difficulty in accessing the right to education involving children from different vulnerable groups. Rural children who move with their families to cities for example, have few options to access city schools because they lack the requisite registered residence status. It is an important factor why many migrants choose to leave their children behind in their hometowns.

Despite legislative reform, programs and initiatives detailed in the PRC report, children remain an under-protected population in China, and their rights remain largely out of reach. According to Best interest of the child (Article 3) of UNCRC, all actions concerning the child shall take full account of his or her best interests. The State shall provide the child with adequate care when parents, or other charged with that responsibility, fail to do so. This means that the best interest of children must be the primary concern in making decision that may affect them. It places an obligation on decision makers, budget, and law and policy makers to always consider whether a decision will have an impact on children's lives, to assess what that impact will be, and to elevate children's interests to the level of a primary consideration in the final

decision. Take left-behind children as an example, they are not living with their nuclear family. Their parents cannot provide them with adequate care. They experience a different childhood. In this respect, the government must exercise political will to ensure that programs directed at protecting the most vulnerable populations (such as left-behind children) be implemented, and to improve the well-being of parentless children. Only with determination will the rights of China's most vulnerable children move towards a more comprehensive and effective implementation of the Convention.

3.6 Review of related literature of the study

This section is to review some studies about the impacts of parental migration on the left-behind children, which will be discussed from three aspects. At first, the studies about the impacts on family structures due to migration will be reviewed. Then, the relevant research about the harmful effects because of the long absence of parents upon children from children's daily life, their school performance and emotional development will be presented as follows. Meanwhile, some benefits such as remittance, which have been argued by some researchers, will be illustrated at last.

3.6.1 The impacts on the structures of families

Divided family or family separation is the basic feature that describes the structural transformation resulting from migration. Some researchers argue that migration does not dissolve family structures, but redefines and challenges the established codes that organize and give them meaning (Bernhard et al., 2008). Displacement and physical relocation also disrupt the material and discursive arrangements of the family as members find themselves embedded within different economic, social, political, and cultural contexts (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991). Similarly, Murray (1981) generalized the transformation of family relations in the context of rural labor migration into three concepts – dissolution, conversation, and contradiction. Kinship was dissolved and conserved simultaneously by the force of labor migration. The comparatively stable agnatic structure could coexist with high individual mobility, unstable marriage and family rupture (Murray, 1981).

Child-rearing arrangements are the most challenging among the many serious family issues resulting from increased migration and family separation, especially in the

absence of migrant mothers. Lots of child-rearing strategies have been developed in instances of parent-child separation. In South Africa, Bantustan children, when parents migrate and they have no adult at home to look after them, must be placed with others in a form of fostered relationship (Spiegel, 1987). Meanwhile, migration brought about differentiated but still unequal divisions of labor according to the sex of the migrant (Parrenas, 2005). In Philippines, women's migration does not initiate a complete shift in gender practices but instead results in a confluence of gender role retentions and contestations in family life (Parrenas, 2005). When husbands migrate, wives usually assume the role of father and mother. But when wives migrate, husbands tend to stand aside, leaving child rearing to female relatives. This phenomenon also exists in my study. The out-migration of men resulted in the expansion of non-migrant women's duties including traditionally male responsibilities such as farming. In addition, children's caregiver assignments differ according to the sex of the migrant. Children of male migrants are usually raised by their mothers, and children of female migrants are raised by their fathers, grandmothers, aunts, or others. Female relatives assume great child rearing responsibilities.

3.6.2 The harmful impacts of parental migration

The increased migration and family separation result in many serious family issues. As pointed out by Rossi (2008), leaving children behind is a source of potentially high "social cost of migration". Migration can affect children in various dimensions. Parental absence can be injurious to child development due to lessened family control and supervision, weakened parent-child bonding. Scholars studying the link between family structure and child development have consistently documented the academic, behavioral and emotional disadvantages of children from single-parent families relative to those from two parent families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wen, 2008).

Some researchers find that there is no apparent difference between left-behind children and their counterparts in terms of academic interest and self-reported academic achievement (Lv, 2006). However, there are differences in their academic supervision and environment. Parental migration not only has led to increased labor burdens on children, which squeezes their time spent on schoolwork, but also left vacant the role of family tutor (Ye & Murray, 2005; Cao, 2007). For these reasons, the academic performance of left-behind children lagged behind compared to

previous periods when their parents did not migrate. The left-behind children in my study also expressed that extra housework definitely limit their time and effort that they could be on study. Besides, lack of tutoring is also a problem that most of the left-behind children face during their parents' migration in the study.

Research also suggests that children who are left behind pay the emotional price of separation from parents over the long run (Levitt, 2001), which is hardly offset by economic benefits. Dreby (2007) found that children of different ages react in different ways to their parents' migration in her research on Mexican transnational families. Left-behind children in the preadolescence period expressed the emotional effects of separation by not acknowledging and feigning indifference about their biological parents. Adolescent left-behind children have displayed behavioral difficulties. They may act out due to the feeling that no one cares about what they are doing. Although children could reunite with their parents, family members may have a difficult time adjusting to one another after long periods of separation. The ensuing conflict is particularly distressing for adolescents who may have trouble adapting to their parents' authority or communicating with them (Smith et al., 2004). From the observation and interview in my research, the status of migrant parents in left-behind children's minds are becoming less important after their long-term migration. The ties of affection between the children and their migrant parents are not as strong as before.

The psychosocial condition of left-behind children has attracted increasing attention by some researchers. Psychological frailness and the anxiety of parental love are the general problems faced by many children (Wang et al., 2005). Estrangement between children and their migrant parent is frequent due to a lack of common experiences and communication (Ye & Murray, 2005). Peer groups are playing increasingly important roles in the lives of left-behind children, with parents fading out. However, peer group interaction has triggered children's aberrant behaviors as well as provided support (Wang, 2006).

3.6.3 The positive effects of parental migration

Parental migration not only brings some negative impacts on left-behind children, but also has some positive effects. Research suggests that children could be benefit from

their parents' migration in terms of parents' having a better-off livelihood in some cases. Children with migrant parents may have advantages over their non-migrant peers presumably owing to the overall economic returns of migration. In the Philippines, remittances from migrants enhance positive developmental outcomes for children in terms of education, nutrition, and physical health (Asis, 2006). Evidence shows that in Mexico, households with migrants are economically better than their non-migrant counterparts (Morooka & Liang, 2009). In the case of Mexico-US migration, it brings remitted US earnings into the household which allows parents to provide more education for their children and reduces the need for children's labor (Kandel & Kao, 2001).

In addition to economic gains, migration from rural to urban areas often leads to change world views, enhanced aspirations, and new life perspectives (Toyota et al., 2007), therefore substantially broadening one's horizons. It is likely that the left-behind children are influenced by new information and ideas their migrant parents convey through various channels of parent-child communication and interaction. Most of the left-behind children in my study expressed that their migrant parents' experiences may have a deep influence on their aspirations. They have a heightened awareness of the value of education, and are eager to be part of the city and have a better future.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Methods and methodology are sometimes used as though they were synonyms, but they are two different concepts. According to Silverman (2005), a methodology is a general approach to studying a research topic. It establishes how one will go about studying any phenomenon. It is the study of methods and deals with the philosophical assumptions underlying the research process, while a method is a specific technique for data collection under those philosophical assumptions. Kitchin & Tate (2000: pp.6) defined methods as a coherent set of rules and procedures which can be used to investigate a phenomenon or situation within a framework dictated by epistemological ideas. It provides a fundamental basis to a research as to how the research should be conducted by using appropriate techniques in order to achieve the intended goals.

This chapter describes the methods of the research. The choice of the most appropriate methods to some extent is determined by the research aims and informed by research questions. The aim of the research is to explore various aspects of the experiences of left-behind children in rural China. The major focus of my study is with children, and research with children is often associated with qualitative methods, so the qualitative research methods are chosen to the main methods in the study. This chapter begins with a discussion on the reasons why qualitative research methods were found to be the most suitable research methods to utilize in my research. Then the preliminary preparations before the actual data collection process, which includes access to informants, the research site and the participants selected will be introduced. The Following part involves the research process. During the research, I utilized participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, and visual methods (like drawing, writing, photographing, and craftwork) as my methods of data collection. This is followed by a discussion on the methods for the analysis and interpretation of the data. In addition, the various ethical issues and challenges and limitations of this study are taken into considerations.

4.2 Qualitative research methods

Qualitative methods are most useful and powerful when they are used to discover how respondent sees the world (McCracken, 1988). As the aims of this research is to study

the experiences, attitudes and expectations of the left-behind children in rural China, and to explore and obtain an in-depth understanding of their worlds, the research has been designed as an exploratory qualitative study. According to Campbell (2002, cited by Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005: pp.205), by using qualitative research methods, the researcher is able to get access to the respondents' life stories and gains rich and potentially complex data. In addition, this approach offers the researcher a chance to explore in detail precisely what goes on in the setting being researched and detailed information about the social world, in order to make sense of particular behaviors and subjects' responses to these (Bryman, 2004).

Moreover, as Liamputtong and Ezzy advocate, the flexibility and fluidity of qualitative research methods are appropriate for researching the 'vulnerable' (2005: pp.204). According to the informants' responses and the social settings, the researcher can vary the questions and strategies or even terminate the research. It must be ensured that the research process does not cause harm to the vulnerable groups when conducting research with them. Left behind children "may experience real or potential harm and require special safeguards to ensure that their welfare and rights are protected (Stone, 2003 cited by Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005: pp.204)." They are extreme sensitive. When researching with them which needs direct contact and deep understanding with them, especially where sensitive and difficult topics are raised, "the unstructured nature of qualitative research offers the prospect of flexibility (Bryman, 2004: pp.282)". Therefore, the qualitative methods are most suitable.

Boyden and Ennew (1997) argued that, all good social research requires the use of more than one method, which has been found to be very effective. Using more methods facilitates triangulation, or cross checking information on the same issue or topic obtained through different methods, perhaps from different sources. My research aims to get a rounded picture of the life of the left-behind children. Therefore, this research has involved the use of a range of different qualitative methods.

4.3 Access and recruitment of informants

When choosing the research site, I took the following factors into account. At first, the field should be geographically suitable. Parents there are a considerable distance from main areas of economic expansion, and the community is known to contain a

large number of left-behind children. Secondly, it should be easy to get access to the targeted groups. Thus, Yangbei primary school of Suqian city in Jiangsu Province, China, was selected for this research. This school is near my hometown where I knew some teachers in this school, which can promote the researcher's credibility and trust within the school and the community, and easily get access to the target groups. Besides, this school is located in the north of Jiangsu Province which is undeveloped and most of children's parents there go to urban areas to earn a living. Therefore, there are many left-behind children in the villages to be used.

With the help of my friends who are the teachers of this school, there were little difficulties for me to meet the headmaster. When I introduced myself and the purpose of why I was there to the school's headmaster and the relevant staff, they showed great curiosity and interest in my research, and gave me permission to conduct the research in their school.

An introduction of the research aims was given to every potential respondent at the very beginning. I informed the children about the nature of the research, including the main research topic, the research questions and the research methods. They were also told that data collection was anonymous and there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. Participation was completely voluntary. And participants have their rights to withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reasons. Following this, parents or guardians of the children were given to the letters detailing the research, which gave them opportunity to opt their child out of participation. Children chosen for the research were verbally given more details of the study, and were approached with a basic outline to confirm their interest and opt-in consent from their teachers and parents.

All the participants involved in the research were informed the research aims which were to explore how the left-behind children experience life in the absence of their parents owing to migration; their emotional challenges without the guidance, love and nurturing of their parents; their perspectives about their present situations. The research aimed to find a robust way to support those children and families, and also help parents, temporary guardians and teachers know more about the left-behind children and find a cooperative way to minimize the impact of parents' absence.

4.4 Sampling

The selections of informants were guided by the aim of the research, access to informants. Four groups of stakeholders: children, guardians, parents and teachers were involved in this research. Information collected from different groups contributes to the understanding of the different perspectives of left-behind children, as well as the impact of labor migration on others concerning the left-behind children.

With the organization of the headmaster, 136 students who were selected randomly from Grade Three to Grade Six were present at my introductory presentation in the school hall. When I introduced myself, most of students were interested in me when they knew my overseas experiences. Their curiosity continued when I introduced the research itself afterwards. I clearly talked about the research aims and the would-be employment of research methods to these children. Students who had any questions with regards to the research were given the answers. I tried to make everyone present really understand what the research about. The students were given one day to think about whether decided to take part in my research.

After a brief acquaintance with the demographic details of the children who had given consent to participate in my research from the headmaster, forty students aged from 8 to 13 years old were chosen for the participants of the focus group discussion, including twenty left-behind children and twenty not-left-behind children. Boys and girls were half to half. It is important to make comparisons concerning the various aspects of well-being between children from different family structures. In addition, the status of being left-behind children or not left-behind fluctuates over time. Therefore, it is necessary to involve not left-behind children.

For the following in-depth qualitative study, the participants were chosen purposively according to a further acquaintance with the children in the previous interaction with them. The number of the participants was reduced to 12, including 8 left-behind children (5 girls and 3 boys) and 4 not-left-behind children (2 girls and 2 boys). Children under 9 years old found it difficult to understand the research questions, even with my further explanation of these questions. Taking this into account, it seemed more sensible to get older children involved in the research. Therefore, the age of children involved in the in-depth interviews and visual strategies is from 9 to

13. **Table 2** shows the sample involved in each method in detail.

Methods	Left-behind children	Not left-behind children
Focus group discussion	20 children (at age of 8-13) <i>10 Female 10 Male</i>	20 children (at age of 8-13) <i>10 Female 10 Male</i>
In-depth interviews	8 children (at age of 9-13): 3 with grandparents 1 with grandmother and little brother 2 with other relatives 1 with elder brother 1 with teacher <i>5 Female and 3 Male</i>	4 children (at age of 9-13): 2 with both parents 1 with mother migrated 1 with father migrated <i>2 Female and 2 Male</i>
Visual Strategies	8 children (at age of 9-13): 3 with grandparents 1 with grandmother and little brother 2 with other relatives 1 with elder brother 1 with teacher <i>5 Female and 3 Male</i>	4 children (at age of 9-13): 2 with both parents 1 with mother migrated 1 with father migrated <i>2 Female and 2 Male</i>

Table 2 Sample in each method

Of Left-behind children	Of Not left-behind children
3 grandmothers 1 grandfather 3 left-behind children's relatives 1 retired teacher who provide surrogate care 6 parents who returned during the Chinese National Day Holiday 3 teachers	2 parents with another one migrated 2 parents with both of them stay with their children 2 teachers

Table 3 Other people recruited in the research

In order to explore different perspectives, 6 teachers, 7 guardians and 10 parents were recruited in this research (details see **Table 3**). An investigation into the adults' views would fill in the information gaps of the children's experiences in the family and school, and assist understanding their experiences of caring for and teaching the left-behind children.

4.5 Research process

The research data collection has involved the use of a range of different methods, employed from 3rd September 2012 to 19 October 2012. The time from 1st October 2012 to 7th October 2012 is Chinese National Day Holiday when some parents of left-behind children returned home to see their children, so these parents were interviewed as well.

4.5.1 The mosaic approach

Children are seen not as passive objects in the research process or in society in general but as social actors who are “beings not becoming” (Qvortrup et al., 1994). This places an emphasis on exploring children's perceptions of their lives, their interests, knowledge building priorities and concerns. The Mosaic approach places children in leading positions by bringing multiple methods to the field when doing research with children. “It is a strength-based framework for viewing young children as competent, active, meaning makers and explorers of their environment (Clark, 2005: pp.29).”

The Mosaic Approach is propounded by Peter Moss and Alison Clark in their work with young children in England since 1999. The aim of developing this approach was to include the “voice of the child”. This approach brings together a range of methods for listening to young children's perspectives about their lives and interpretations of the world. Multiple methods include traditional methods, such as interviews and observations, as well as participatory methods, such as drawings, photographs and diaries. These methods are found to be child-friendly (Punch, 2002). According to Clark (2005), the mosaic approach is an adaptable approach because it can be applied in a wide range of childhood institutions. Since my research aim is to explore the experiences of left-behind children and their perspectives about being left behind are sought as well. Children have many languages and different tools enable children to

express themselves in different ways. As Clark (2005) points out, if the researcher chooses to just do interviews, she might not hear the voices of children not as capable of expressing themselves verbally. By including more tools in the toolbox the researcher might give more children the opportunity to participate in the research. Therefore, I used a range of different methods in my fieldwork to “allow for different understanding to be compared and possible new themes arise, which is positive for the researcher who seeks a deeper understanding (Clark, 2005)”.

4.5.2 Participant observation

Observation as a method of data collection helps the researcher to understand her informants’ operating in their own natural setting (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Being with children and watching what they do can give much more vital information to the researcher. For example, I was able to get more information about the context in which the fieldwork was located by participant observation which was not available through other methods. Although I could get some information of the children’s school performance, their behaviors at home from the teachers and guardians, the details demand me to observe when the children at play in the school, in the village and around the community now and then. What’s more, participant observation helps to build a good rapport with the children. Children may get more familiar with me when my frequent involvement in their classes, break-time and after-school activities.

The first day I came to Yangbei primary school, when the headmaster introduced me to the children, I observed that most of children were so curious about me – a stranger who looks kind and easy-going and would spent about two months with them in the following days. Some girls even waved hands to show friendliness to me. It added my confidence of the following self-introduction and have a pessimistic attitude towards the research.

I observed the children at class and at break time every day to capture what the children’s daily routines were when they were at school. Sometimes I was actively engaged in their activities when they were at play, in which I can gain a close and intimate familiarity with them. Through participant observation, I can also know something about their peer relations, their attitudes towards friends during play. After

some days' consistent participant observation, I built a very good relationship with the children. They often invited me to join in their activities when they played badminton, Ping-Pong or some other activities. Some of the children would turn to me for help when they met some difficulties in their study. Even some girls would chat with me about their personal stories, their friends, their family and their life. A relationship of trust had been built up before I started the in-depth interviews with the children through my consistent observation, which made a great contribution to my research.

4.5.3 Semi-structured interview

The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations (Kvale, 1996). Moreover, according to Kvale (1996), the interview has the capacity to draw the researcher and the informant as co-producers of knowledge. Interview is a special form of conversation. The conversation with children can be organized with individuals, groups or friendship pairs. The semi-structured interviews were chosen as the main method to collect data in my research, as they allow for interaction and are less formal which help catch the point of view of people to get more information. The use of the semi-structured interviews assists in the understanding of the general types of experiences, common to many left-behind children, by the respondents' disclosure of their views of their lives, in their own terms.

Kvale (1996) argued that a rough interview guide is necessary to draw up concerning the research question before directing to the interview site and thus adheres to it. Prior to my fieldwork, I prepared an interview guide (see appendices) for the potential participants, which reflect the main themes from my research questions. Every interview schedule has their main topics which are followed up by several questions. These questions were open for change. Not all of the questions were raised in the interviews. However, every topic was discussed. The questions cover four main issues, including: a) the main information about children's (migrant) parents; b) children's everyday life (daily routine, activities and responsibility); c) children's schooling; d) children's social relationships. These questions were concerned about the children's family life, as well as life at school and in the community.

Focus group discussion

The first stage of the interview involved all forty students chosen before. As to avoid the participants' uncomfortable feeling in a one-to-one situation with an unfamiliar adult, and "to encourage a variety of views on the research subject from respondents (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009)", I chose the focus group discussion first. Besides, according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), the interaction and communication that arise in the focus discussion have been argued to be very efficient in displaying important discourses people use to make sense of social phenomena. The focus group discussion employed in the research not only provides a general idea of their life but also act as a warm-up exercise for both the researcher and informants.

To minimize the power inequalities between the students and me as a researcher, I also paid attention to the place where I interviewed them. The research setting needs to be considered with particular care, awareness and sensitivity in research with children. The students would feel free to share information with the researcher in a safe environment or they may feel comfortable if the research conducted in their own space. For instance it will make a difference to stay in the children's home versus the classroom, and how the researcher arranges the seating. I chose the school's video room as the interview place. This room was equipped with a big screen and the children were not allowed to enter this room without permission. But children were fond of this room as they can watch films there.

When conducting the focus group discussion, I divided these children into four groups, ten people for each group, and left-behind children and not left-behind children were divided separately. To avoid feeling intimidated or uncomfortable because of different experiences, I took this into consideration. However, the gender and age of the children were not taken into account when diving the groups, because these elements made little difference to the outcomings of the discussion. During the focus group discussion, children were expected to say whatever they want to say about the topics. I interviewed the four groups in turns. The reasons why I did not use teachers as my research assistants are that teachers were not so familiar with the research themes and questions so that they were not so clearly about what important information to capture. In addition, children may perceive the teacher as an authority figure, and consequently may give 'correct' answers to research questions in order to try to please

the teachers for fear of their reaction if they do not.

The problem of the conducting focus group discussion was that there were some of children more talkative during the whole process while some shy children talked less. Sometimes, when children were so interested in one topic they spent much time to talk about it, and even went to some other irrelevant issues. Here, I should play a role of a coordinator according to the situation. When the shy children talked on some their favorite topic, I would try to give them more time to express their perspectives. Meanwhile, always reminding the children to talk around the topics was necessary.

In-depth interview

After getting more information and establishing a good relationship of trust with the participants, 12 children (8 left-behind children and 4 not left-behind children) were involved in a further one-to-one in-depth interview. The way of multiple listening that the Mosaic approach enables conveys the multifaceted nature of listening: it is not limited to one exchange between individuals but is a complex web of interactions, continually moving from the micro to the macro level (Clark, 2005: pp.38). The Mosaic approach includes parents' and practitioners' views and acknowledges that not only children's voices are to be heard, but that also parents represent different ways of seeing and opinions. Therefore, other groups including guardians, parents and teachers were also involved in the semi-structured interviews at this stage to allow for the multiple listening. Three different interview schedules (see appendices) were used for the four groups. To make the interviewees feel relax to talk more with me, I let them choose a familiar venue they prefer as the place for the interviews. Questions concerning the children's experiences of being left behind were not put forward at first in order not to put pressure on them. Each interview begun with some simple questions, such as "What do you most like about in this year?" in this way, children felt it easier, safer and more comfortable to move to talking about more sensitive issues, like "what is the worst thing you have been through this year?"

In order to make a comparison between different groups, all the children interviewed using the same topic guide. The interviews were designed to gain each respondent's experiences and perspectives as detailed a picture as possible, not just about being left-behind. I took notes of every interview as accurately as possible for the further

data analysis.

4.5.4 Visual methods

The use of visual representations provides children with an opportunity to understand the information and give them more control over the research process (Johnson, 2008). Another advantage of using visual methods was that it can make children, especially the vulnerable participants feel much safer talking about their difficult and ambiguous feelings freely without fear of others' judgments. A variety of researchers have discussed the imbalance of power relationships between researchers and the researched, especially in research with children. Using methods which are more sensitive to children's particular competencies or interests can enable children to feel more at ease with an adult researcher (Punch, 2002).

What's more, children will get more fun and success from the visual images they produced, which provides an atmosphere of respect, trust and relaxation during the research process. As Clark (2005) exemplifies in the Mosaic approach, children that might not be as talented in verbal expression, might be able to participate in research when the idea of drawings is presented. Using not only interviews in the research, but also other tools, like drawings, photography, can allow children to express themselves on other languages than the verbal. Besides, children with limited language and speech abilities but with other special skills might benefit more from multiple methods. Therefore, the visual methods were chosen in addition to the interviews in my research.

After I conducted in-depth interviews with the children, they were asked to do the scrapbooks within which contained visual materials such as drawings, photographs, diaries, and craftworks. The scrapbooks making were conducted in 12 respondents (8 left-behind children and 4 not left-behind children) who took part in the in-depth interviews. I provided them with a package containing stickers, glues, scissors, and disposable cameras, etc. two days before the National Day Holiday. I would like to go through their scrapbooks with them when they were back to school. I explained how to make the scrapbooks, and stuck simple instruction on the first page of the scrapbook as well. The children could use the things I distributed to them to 'decorate their scrapbooks'. For the left-behind children, they could 'record' the life before their

parents' migration, after their parents' migration, and three years later. For not left-behind children, they could combine their life three years ago, now, and three years after. Anything they felt like to share with me can be put in this memory book. The scrapbooks would be kept by themselves, but I took pictures of each page with their permission. They could write diaries, stick in photos they took or from family albums, stick in cuttings from books, magazines or newspapers, draw what they want to do, and do craftwork such as making cards. They just need to choose one or some of the methods they were fond of to decorate their books, and not all of them. The in-depth interviews would be used again after they done with the scrapbooks. Each child was asked about the relevant issues reflecting in their scrapbooks. These visual and literal data provided me a deeper understanding of the life of left-behind children.

Drawings

The advantage of using drawing with children is that it can be creative, fun and can encourage children to be more actively involved in the research (Punch, 2002). The use of drawing gives children time to think about what they wish to portray. The image can be changed and added as well, which gave the respondents more control over their form of expression, unlike an interview situation where respondents tend to be quicker and more immediate (Shaver, T., Francis, V. & Barnett, L., 1993). In order to develop a relationship of trust with respondents, I employed drawing as a warm-up exercise at the beginning of the research, which can stimulate the expression of the events children are most eager to do with their parents. Meanwhile, it can indicate more feelings of emotion than what could be conveyed by mere words alone. I got to talk to them about the drawings individually when they did the drawings. One of the drawings depicted the children and his parents sat around the table having dinners together. Another drawing showed a happy time when the children enjoying with his parents in the amusement park for children. These images illustrate what the left-behind children and not left-behind children perceived as most interesting and important.

However, it should not be assumed that drawings are a simple, 'natural' method to use with children as it depends on children's actual and perceived ability to draw (Punch, 2002). The children I did research with live in rural area, so most of children had little opportunity to contact with comics, magazines, television and other common

visual images associated with the mass media. Such lack of contact with visual imagery influences the type and limited range of visual images that children produce (Bradley, 1995 cited in Punch, 2002). This leads to another problem that some drawings were similar in their scrapbooks, as the children had limited range of images they had learnt to draw. Another shortcoming of drawings was that some of the drawings were difficult for me to make sense, and it was even insulting to ask the children what they had drawn, when it was quite clear that they had drawn a house, a dog or a tree. Therefore, it is important to create opportunities for children to talk about their drawings. Punch (2002) suggested a useful technique when to ask the children in an open way to explain what their drawing meant to them and why they decided to draw those images rather than ask them ‘what have you drawn?’.

Photographs

Taking photos was one of methods the respondents can choose to make their scrapbooks. They could take anything that they felt was important or interesting about their lives with the disposable cameras I distributed to them. From the scrapbooks they turned in, photos were included in all the books, which showed that children enjoyed taking photos. It was a novel and fun way for the children to express themselves. Besides, taking photographs offered an alternative to children who were not good at drawing and some events were difficult to draw. A girl named Fan stuck many pictures of her grandmother in her scrapbook. The frequent presence in her visual record can show that she loves her grandmother very much. She explained that she was so happy to have a camera from me which she could take more pictures of her grandmother to keep. Her parents divorced when she was very young, and she lived with her grandmother after her father left for another city to earn a living five years ago. Her grandmother has taken place of her mother in her heart.

Photographs taken by children provide a platform of communication between adults and young people. Children took photographs of daily scenes at home, which the researcher had not observed directly (Punch, 2002). Explicit or vivid photographs reveal information about the activities of children and this will help in communicating whatever they have experienced to the researcher. Another additional benefit of photography was that asking children to make their photographs was to view children as co-researchers rather than simply participants in the research.

However, A particular ethical problem of employing the photographic technique was that the disposable cameras were misused unavoidably. Although I told the children not to destroy the disposable camera or for some other usages, it is difficult for children to control the cameras do a week. Some of their friends and relatives still got access to cameras and therefore wasted several pictures.

Diaries

Diaries provide information about children's everyday lives, and show a range of activities children did. Children's emotional upset, or their expectations on some particular issues were illustrated directly as well though diaries. It is a useful tool assisting the researcher to see the children's world. However, diaries are so personal and private that most of the children are unwilling to share their diaries with others. So I emphasized to the children again that there was not a necessary for every child to include their diaries in their scrapbooks. It was their choice that whether to stick their diaries or not. For the children who shared their diaries, I guaranteed to ensure the confidentiality of their diaries and would not disclose them to anyone else.

I was so glad when I found some of the children stuck their diaries in the scrapbooks which gave me a direct and deep understanding of their lives. Xu is a girl full of energy and optimistic attitudes all the time in spite of his parents working far away for many years. She made a detailed plan every day in her diary and was very sure about what she wanted to be in the further. There is no evidence showing she felt sad or unhappy because of his parents not accompany in her diary.

The visual methods were used to fulfill the wider aims of the research. It facilitate children to reveal aspects of their lives, and provide a concrete basis of discussion with the children of the complex feelings and emotions associated with being left behind. A deeper understanding of the context and background of these children served as a topic guide to the following in-depth interviews. Questions were not asked in isolation, but explores within the context and background the respondents had already shared. This contributes to build a good rapport with the respondents, and to situate the stories they offered.

4.6 Ethical consideration

Ethical consideration is important not only in the process of planning, conducting the

research, but also in evaluating and analyzing the data. I made sure I adhered to all the ethical issues during the whole research to safeguard the welfare and interests of the informants.

4.6.1 Informed consent

Informed consent means that the researcher should inform the participants of the research aims, methods used in the research, and the risks involved in the procedures, and the participants also have the rights to refuse or terminate participation in the research. Before the study in every circumstance I sought permission from the various respondents involved in the research. When I met the headmaster first time (although she was so kind to me because of the accompany of my friend who is a teacher in this school) I introduced myself, the research would to make, and an introductory letter from my university and my student card were showed to her as well. After I clearly told what the research was about and the research aims to her, she was very supportive and helpful in the following procedures of the research.

When I introduced the research to seek informed consent from the potential participants, I emphasized that participation was totally voluntary and they had the rights to refuse to be involved in. They also can withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reasons. When the children knew I am a master student studying abroad, they perceived me as a “star”. They showed high interest in my overseas experiences and the culture in the host country. They felt honored to be selected to the research.

However, children’s status in adult society means that researchers have to build rapport not with children but also with adult gatekeepers (Punch, 2002). Parents and teachers may refuse access to children (Ennew et al., 2009). For the children, I might be a role model, and my presence could be their future. But for the children’s parents or guardians, I am an absolute outsider. They did not share any particular similarities with me. As some of the children’s guardians such as children’s grandparents are illiterate, they were vague about my research and my researcher role. I was seen as a kind of a teacher by them. Because of their children’s welfare in school they thought both their children and themselves should take part in the study. The research participation was considered as a form of their children’s homework. Although the

informed consent from the guardians was sought, I should let these guardians know much more about the research in spite of great differences in terms of background, education level, and life style between us. Therefore, building a rapport to achieve mutual trust with the children's parents and guardians in the following days was necessary. Helping parents, guardians and teachers know much about the left-behind children contributes to find a cooperative way to minimize the impact of parents' absence.

4.6.2 Confidentiality

Research confidentiality usually entails taking considerable care not to pass information to those connected in any way with the respondent and disclosing information only in ways that protect the identity of those who provided it. The targeted group of the research is mainly left-behind children who may experience real or potential harm. They are more sensitive and require special safeguard. The confidentiality is really important to them. The protection of the participants in this research becomes more essential.

I guaranteed to the participants that all the data collected were anonymous and I would not disclose the information given by them to the public and any others. I also let them know that I chose them to be the respondents of my research simply because I wanted to explore their perspectives about being left behind. Although I was very careful to ensure the confidentiality of my respondents during the research process, some of children still had some doubts on me. To building a good rapport with these children and win their trust, I often sought opportunities to chat with them. I also shared some of my stories, my happy moment or some sad issues with them. My openness gave them more confidence and they became open to talk with me gradually.

4.6.3 Reciprocity

There are more debates regarding the ethics of reciprocating informants. Opinions are opposing about if the researchers should reciprocate participants, and if so, to what extent. Reciprocity can be monetary exchange, an exchange of goods and services and so on. In my view, giving gifts to the participants was in appreciation of a beneficial performance and to express thanks. After conducted the focus group discussion with forty children, I bought some candies to them in order to express my thanks to their

cooperation in my research. The 12 children who were involved in the in-depth exploratory research also received a pen and a thanks card with my wishes to them. During about two months, I had built a good friendship with these children. The gifts I sent to them not only showed my thanks to their support of my research, but also were as a souvenir to remember the days we spent together.

4.6.4 The researcher's role

Before going to interview the children, I was very aware of how my role as a researcher should be. According to Punch (2002), children are potentially more vulnerable to the unequal power relationships when meeting adult researchers. Therefore, I tried to minimize this inequality in power by choosing the appropriate methods. Using child-friendly methods, which build on children's competences and interests can empower the children and minimize the power differential. The use of visual methods played an important active and interactive role in the research process. Children got more fun and success when making the scrapbooks. It also provides children with an opportunity to understand the information and give them more control over the research process. Making the children do their own scrapbooks leads to "promoting children as co-researchers rather than simply participants in the research" (Johnson, 2008). It helps to build a relationship of trust and respect with children.

A researcher must have a vocabulary and conceptions that relate to the children's conception of their world (Fraser et al., 2004). When I stayed with the children and engaged in their activities, I always tried to act 'childish' to reduce the pressure on them. When I talked with them on some topics, I paid attention to "listen to children, constructing children as competent social actors with rights to be listened to and have a say in matters that affect their lives (Kjørholt et al., 2005)." Mandell (1988) suggested that minimizing the power differentials by taking least adult roles, in which she "endeavored to put aside ordinary forms of adult status and interaction – authority, verbal competency, cognitive and social mastery – in order to follow their (the children's) way closely". She said changing the researchers' appearance, speech and dress could minimize the power differentials. So I dressed sporty and informal to blend in with the children during the whole research process.

As Solberg (1996) indicated that, the research roles are negotiated. Negotiation may lead to particular types of ‘child-friendly’ data collection. My researcher’s role was never fixed for either children or the adults. Actually I benefitted a lot from the various roles I took on or was expected to take on. The children always asked me to tell them more about Norway and my life overseas. Some of the children turned to me when they encountered some problems in study. A few of them invited me to their houses for dinner. For the children, I was expected to be a storyteller, a tutor and a friend, rather than a researcher. While for the parents and guardians, I was expected to undertake roles as a teacher, a listener and a consultant. They expected me to encourage their children to study hard. A father of one children sought advice about his child’s education arrangements from me. Since a good relationship had been built up and confidentiality assured, some of the guardians saw me as a patient listener and told me a lot, such as the conflicts between generations, the negative stories about the children and so on. Building up a good rapport shortened the distance between the respondents and me to some extent, and removed the power inequality between us as well. The researcher’s trustworthiness was enhanced through the researcher’s role playing process.

4.6.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

As Bogdan and Biklen (1992: pp.153) indicated that the analysis of data is “a process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes and materials that you accumulate to increase your understanding of them and enable you to present what you have discovered to others.” The data analysis and interpretation, which make sense of respondents’ stories and life experiences, are given significant weight in qualitative research.

I input all the interview transcripts, field notes, research diary and school reports to the computer and printed them out. The scrapbooks made by children were scanned and ascribed to the relevant respondents. After reading the transcripts repeatedly, I sorted out and categorized the relevant data with coding. I created 12 categories for 12 children who involved in the in-depth interviews, one for each of them. The data collected which were relevant to this child (including the interviews to them, their teachers, guardians, the observation towards them, the scrapbooks made by themselves) were all put in his or her categories. Then eight left-behind children and

four not left-behind children were separately gathered into two units. This served the comparison of events, phenomena, and concepts between different cases, and contributed the case study of some of their stories in the analysis chapter.

During the process of analyzing the data, data translation is a challenging issue of concern. All the data collected is Chinese which is totally different from English. As a translator, my task is not merely converting the words from one language to another. The cultural, social and political meanings should be taken account into when translating. In addition, according to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: pp.159), “analysis is not just a matter of managing and manipulating data. Researchers must be prepared to go beyond the data to develop ideas that will illuminate them and link our ideas with those of others.” Thus, in understanding and accounting for the meanings from the respondents, the researcher should make full use of his thinking, creativity, personal experiences and knowledge to conceptualize the data in new and theoretical terms. Therefore, data analysis is largely more than categorizing and coding.

4.6.6 Challenges and Limitation of the Research

It has found clear advantages by using multiple methods which combined traditional methods, such as interviews, and participatory methods, such as drawings, photography when doing research with children. Children were put in the front seat, and encouraged to express themselves in different ways. It highlights the fact that all children are different and have their own voices. Meanwhile, adults were also invited to share their views. However, multiple methods and listening to children in many ways is time demanding in many phases (Clark, 2005). The use of a range of methods was time consuming. Every respondent was supposed to take part in more than one methods used in the study. Besides, many other actors including parents, guardians and teachers were involved in the research. It was necessary to include their perspectives. Furthermore, the scrapbooks made by children must be reviewed with the children to understand their meanings. Therefore, I must carefully consider the time these methods needed before starting the research, and be prepared that things might not turn out exactly as planned.

Since using multiple methods was time consuming, and my research time was limited. This leads to another limitation of the study that the sample size is small and based on

a convenience sample from one school. Using more than one school to do the fieldwork for a longer time would yield different types of left-behind children in terms of their guardianships and migration patterns. It will allow for a comparison of the understanding how different children cope with parental migration. In addition, being left-behind is a dynamic process. The children underwent a number of changes, such as shift in guardianship, transfer of schools, being held back and parents' divorce. However, I only had two months to take the fieldwork, besides the children were busy with their schoolwork and homework. Therefore, I had to reduce the target numbers involved in the in-depth exploratory study.

Another challenge was about the use of tape-recorders. When I asked whether they would mind I recorded what they talked in the interviews, most of them agreed to use the recorder. However, I noticed that some children feel nervous and uncomfortable with a recorder nearby when I interviewed them. In this way, I changed to the note-taking and kindly asked them to slow down in their talks as much as possible. As the interview time is limited, I had to reduce the questions planned, or took a second interview with some of them. But the flexible change on the use of tape-recorders made the following interviews go well.

Although most of children were cooperative when asked to do some activities according to my demands, there still were some of the respondents who could not follow what I would like them to do. Before I asked the children to make scrapbooks, I showed an example scrapbook to them and listed the instructions on the front page as well. However, there was one child who reported losing the scrapbook. Another child told me directly that he forgot to do, as he thought it was not like homework he must do. One of the children decorated the scrapbook unrelated to the themes I asked them to, which made the process of analysis more complicated.

As preferences and abilities vary from child to child and the difference background and circumstance of each child, I could not use all the methods I had planned before. For example, I would like the children involved in the in-depth exploratory research to take me on a tour around their environment where they play or work, through which I expected to get to understand their everyday lives more directly. The fact was that the children from Grade six who were boarders. They should take classes during daytime, and the school forbade them to leave school after school regarding their

safety. The other children were so young that it is necessary of seeking consent from the school, their teachers and guardians. Considering the process would take much time; besides, the visit to some children's family could also make me know their lives, so I abandoned this method. Another example was that the child who reported losing the scrapbook told me afterwards that she lied that she had no time to make this for she had so much work to do. She got up early to cook the breakfast, and then do some housework, and work on the farm later. As her grandparents lived with her are old, she is the main labor in his family. In this situation, I had to be flexible and use my judgment. This child confessed to me the reason why she actually did not turned in the scrapbook, which means that she has taken me as a believable person to him. So I chose to interview her only which also can get more information about her.

As the limited time, resources, and a small sample of children in the study area, this study does not demonstrate a comprehensive picture of the left-behind children in China on the whole. The conclusions of the study may not apply to all the left-behind children in China. Despite some limitations encountered, the research does uncover some interesting and meaningful aspects in this regard, and provide an important glimpse into some major social issues being faced within China and elsewhere.

Chapter Five: Changes and Continuities on the House-based Care System

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the changes and continuities on the children's care when their parents migrate. It is based on the eight cases studied through the research, using in-depth interviews, visual methods, participate observation conducted with the left-behind children, their parents, their guardians and their teachers. Data from the in-depth qualitative research conducted with the other four not left-behind children and the focus group discussion with forty children is also included.

At first, this chapter examines the reasons that make parents decide not to take their children when they migrate. Once the children are left behind, the key factors which appear important in parents' arrangements for the guardianship of their children will be discussed. In addition, parents' review after their decision about the care arrangement for their children will be illustrated as well. However, children do not only receive care but also give care to other people, so this chapter then presents how the parents' migration change the roles and responsibilities of left-behind within the household, and how the children utilize their agency by adopting a variety of coping strategies to cope with parental migration. At last, how the parents monitor their children's well-being from a distance will be discussed.

5.2 What makes parents leave their children behind?

There are few parents who do not want to live with their children. Most parents of left-behind children would take their children with them to the city rather than leave them behind at home. The deep feelings of missing and worrying about their children were increasing over time. However, they had to face the reality to make difficult decisions. This section will examine the factors which affected parents' decision-making. In doing so, a better understanding of why the children in this study were left behind can be gained.

5.2.1 The nature of the occupation of migrant parents

The nature of the work in the migrant cities was one of the most important factors which guided the parents' decision in my study. There were lots of practical issues for the migrant parents to consider. For example, would they have enough time to take care of their children; was proper and suitable accommodation available for their

children; could their income cover all the expenses living in the cities. The characteristics of their work determined the quality of their life in urban areas. Among the 20 left-behind children involved in my research, over 75% of their fathers were working as construction workers or decorators. About 80% of their mothers were working as house servants or shop assistants. Ninety percent of the migrant parents worked more than 12 hours every day to earn more money. The intensive and hard work made parents have little time to take care of their children.

“We get up at four in the morning to prepare the food and open our market stall at five. It is almost nine in the evening when we close up. We are extremely tired after every day’s busy work. We don’t have any more energy to take care of our children.”

(Xu’s parents who sold snack on the street food stall in Shanghai)

That the work of the migrant parents was not fixed was another issue they faced. Without the status of full urban citizenship, migrant worker often had to work in the informal sector where the jobs were normally temporary. The frequent changes in jobs resulted in the instability of their living places, and the poor environment. Most of the migrant parents lived in accommodation owned by their employers. The instability prevented them from taking their children with them.

“The place we live is provided by our boss, because we don’t have enough money to rent an apartment. It is less than 10 square meters with only a bedroom and a tiny kitchen. Xinxin will feel so uncomfortable where there is not any room for even a small desk for her to study if she lives with us.”

(Xinxin’s mother)

As migrants, Xinxin’s parents did not own urban citizenship, which means their work was not ensured. They were likely to change jobs frequently. The turbulence of their work resulted in the instability of their living arrangements. In addition, the poor environment also restricted them to bring Xinxin together.

5.2.2 The economic condition of the household

China's household registration system has prevented the migrants from enjoying the same welfare as locals in their newly adopted homes. As most of their income is lower, migrant parents do not have financial resources to support their children's schooling and life in the city. Because migrant children are usually registered as rural residents, the school fees would be considerably more than urban children. In addition, the living expenses (including room rent, food, clothing, travel costs) in the cities are also high. Even if migrant parents are able to afford their children's higher education fees, they would not save any money for the future and their children's higher education. When I interviewed the migrant parents, most of them described their financial situation as "not enough money to...", "can't afford...", "we make little money". These expressions indicated the migrant parents' low income and the high living expenses, which made most parents to give up the thoughts of taking their children to the city.

"We can live on porridge and potatoes but my son can't. He needs meat and vegetables which are much cheaper at our home. Besides, we don't need to pay high school fees if he attends the local school. Compared to living with us in the city, he can lead a better life at home."

(Yu's mother)

The above quotation indicates the wishes parents have their children and how that shapes their decision to leave their children behind. By leaving their children behind, parents are not only protecting their children from the difficult life in cities; but they are also creating better living conditions to their children's life chances as a result of being able to save some money by living economically.

5.2.3 The potential risks in cities

Children's safety was also an important element which migrant parents took account of before they decided whether to take their children with them or not in my study. According to most parents, the cities presented them with considerably more potential risks than their rural homes. They were always worried about their children walking alone on the road with busy traffic. Large numbers of immigrants meant that the city was full of people with various backgrounds, so it is necessary

to watch their children always to keep away from the strangers or not to make friends with wrong people. In addition, the culture diversity of the urban area made their children take a long time to get used to. They thought their children were potentially open to a lot more risks than advantages. Moreover parents thought that they had little time to look after their children due to their busy work schedules. Therefore, migrant parents chose to leave their children behind for the sake of their children's well-being.

“I often saw our neighbor who was a girl about 16 years bring different man back home, and the couple next door sold pirate discs. The neighbors were complicated. It would definitely have a negative impact on Jiawei if he was exposed to it.”

(Jiawei's father)

The words from Jiawei's father showed his worried if Jiawei lived with them in such a complicated neighborhood environment. There were most parents in the research expressing the same worry with Jiawei's father. They felt that that it was simpler and safer if they left their children at home compared to the more potential risks in cities.

5.2.4 Entitlement to schooling

Children's schooling in migrant cities is a big problem, which prevented lots of parents to bring their children to the cities. For a long time, China's education policies have been “city-oriented” in that the majority of high quality educational resources are concentrated in cities rather than in rural areas. This has already led to a tremendously uneven development in basic education and to a huge gap in the conditions in schools between cities and rural areas (Chan et al., 2008). Most migrant parents would like their children to receive better education in cities. However, not all children are entitled to enjoy the highly qualified teachers and teaching facilities in public schools. Migrant children could not be admitted to local public schools as a result of the household registration system. The only way for migrant children to get places in public schools is to pay for extra fees, often in the name of “education endorsement fees” (zanzhu fei). The amount of such fees

can be prohibitive compared with these migrant parents' low income. Thus, lots of migrant parents give up the idea of taking their children with them.

Hu's parents made small business in Suzhou, and earned more than other migrant parents. Because of stable accommodation and better income, when Hu reached the school age, they took her to Suzhou to enter the local public school to have a better education. But after she completed the primary school, she returned back to her original school in her hometown to repeat the last year's study of the primary school. When her mother talked about her daughter's experience to me, she was full of regret.

"We worked hard to earn more money to provide a better opportunity with our daughter to receive better education. We paid high registration fees to get a place for Hu in the local public school. However, she was not allowed to take examination to go to middle school. She had to return to her original school to pass the exams for entry to a higher level of education. The problem was that the textbooks were very different between schools in cities and in the countryside. Hu had no choice but to be held back a year to catch up with other students in the same year."

(Hu's mother)

There were some other migrant parents who could not earn as much money as Hu's parents but also want to take their children to the cities. They sent their children to some private schools established specifically for the migrant children which did not need extra fees. However, these schools are not well equipped and lack of qualified teachers and adequate access to financial aid. As a result, most of them chose to send their children back home at last.

Although the experiences of migration with their parents can widen the children's vision, enriched their knowledge and deepen their understanding of their parents' life in the city, there are various reasons making them return back home or even not come out with their parents. Hu summed this up in her words:

“The days when I lived with my parents were very happy, even though life was tough there. My parents had tried their best to give me a better education...I had to go home to take exam for middle school...I was sad when I knew I could not live them in the future, but we had no choice. That was not the place for me. I believe I will be back there to find a good job when I grow up.”

(Hu, a girl of nine years old)

The population registration system, residency requirement and the regulations linked to where children must attend school thus pose a challenge on the wishes and aspirations of both children and parents in where the children go to school.

5.3 Care arrangement for left-behind children

In the absence of parents because of migration, practical issues that parents and children consider carefully include the persons who take care of the children, and the place where the children are supposed to stay to receive good nurturance and care. The care arrangements for the children are not only multi-faceted but are also interlaced with the parents' expectations and judgments. It should also be recognized that the arrangements the migrant parents first try to establish are not for all the ultimate solution. Some of the parents would re-arrange the care for the children after they had reviewed their decision. However, the arrangements are always agreed on and negotiated between parents and caregivers but seldom seek for children themselves' ideas.

5.3.1 Traditional ideas

Usually, left-behind children are found to be staying with some members of the extended family. According to Ansell and Van Blerk (2004), the relationships between children and the extended family members including family friends, in some ways serve both as a response and adaptation to parental migration. In the socio-cultural context, the kinship systems existing in extended families have emphasized the responsibility and obligation to protect the family lineage.

In my research, the extended family members as an important source to cope with parental absence, and grandparents were often the first candidates to resume the responsibility to take care of the children for most migrant parents. Seven parents

out of ten interviewed in the research expressed that they tended to ask their own parents for help when considering their children's living arrangement. It seemed the natural choice to leave the children with the older generation in their home village to many Chinese families. Grandparents have the most primary and natural kinship, and they are the closest people to the children apart from their parents. Because of the emotional bond, grandparents would devote themselves to taking good care of their grandchildren. They were the responsible persons that parents were more likely to trust. Only when the grandparents are incapable or unavailable would children live with other relatives such as an uncle or aunt during their parents' migration.

5.3.2 The ability of the caregivers

When considering a suitable placement for their children, another thing that migrant parents were concerned about was the guardians' capabilities, health, availability and willingness as well. They would like the guardians to be able to provide a clean living environment, enough food to their children and make sure of the children's safety. The physical health of the potential guardians was a necessary factor, as the migrant parents could assure they are able to deal with all the extra work involved. Besides, the guardians' ability to tutor the children's study and offer some help was also often taken into consideration. Therefore, having a basic level of education was considered a priority. Yu was taken care of by his aunt instead of his grandparents. Yu's grandparents were physically weak, and they even need other's help with their life. Compared with the elder people, Yu's aunt was more energetic, in addition to her college school background, she could assist Yu with his homework and give some help in his study.

The availability of the guardians was also an important aspect migrant parents would take account of. If the ideal guardians (grandparents on either side) lived far away, or they had some other grandchildren to look after, parents would have to choose an alternative. Some parents did not want to put too much burden on the old people who had their own farm work to do. However, despite their economic problems and lack of skill to support children's education, grandparents are good providers of socio-emotional support for children whose parents are not nearby to look after them (Abebe, 2010).

5.3.3 Different forms of surrogate care and supervision

As the proportion of left-behind children is increasing, some new opportunities for parents, which offer different forms of surrogate care and supervision for left-behind children in rural areas are beginning to emerge. Most of these “foster family” were run by retired teachers. They accommodated between 7 and 10 children, and gave the children supervision in study, and helped on their daily life as well. Parents seemed to trust their ability to look after their children, supervise their study and discipline their behavior. The cost of such places was much lower than urban schools, so an increasing number of parents with a relatively good income tend to send their children to these places.

Mrs. Wang was a retired teacher who ran a foster family with her husband who was also a teacher before. There are eight children accommodating in their home. They arranged the children’s time tables and supervised the children’s study every evening after school. Besides, she would call to children’s parents to report about various aspects of children’s life every week. The fees was about seven hundred Yuan every month (the average income of the migrant parents is about three thousand per month.), which include the three meals. Mrs. Wang said her place had become increasing popular nowadays because the children cared by them could follow a regular schedule and get a strict discipline, not only for migrant parents, but also among not-migrant parents who want to promote the educational advancement of their children. As their palce has been offered a new choice for lots of migrant parents, it were also regarded as positive institution and of high status. However, as Mrs. Wang’s limited time and energy, she had not considered accepting not left-behind children.

5.3.4 Parents’ review about their care arrangement

After taking all kinds of factors into consideration, migrant parents left their children with guardians they chose. However, this didn’t mean the children’s life with their guardians came up to their expectations in every respect. Although most parents seemed to show satisfied with the guardians of their children on the first sight when I interviewed them, on close inspection, “polite but neutral” statements of “satisfaction” may have been affected by trust not having yet been established between the parents and me. Expressions such as “fine” or “not bad” were the

words used most frequently. After more trust had been built between the parents and me, they were gradually becoming open to me. Quite a lot of migrant parents showed discontent with the guardians, and even some of them expressed they were thinking about changing a more appropriate arrangement about their children's guardians. Jiawei's mother pointed out she was unhappy about Jiawei's paternal grandparents' care to their child when they worked outside.

“He spent much time in front of TV. It is not good for his health and education. But his grandparents seldom stop him. They said sitting at home was better than running out and about, at least it was more safer. His clothing was dirty and they took him to the public shower room once a month. They seldom cared about his study and had no contact with the teacher.”

(Jiawei's mother)

Similarly, Shen's parents' were thinking of changing the guardianship of his younger sister and him due to the negative consequences:

“My mother didn't want to take care of them any more. She said she was so old that she was tired of looking after them, as she had so much housework to do. Her prestige made little difference to them when she disciplined them. So his mother and I would like to send them to the foster family. But the expense was high and we could not save much money. We were also thinking that his mother left behind to look after them.”

(Shen's father)

From the interviews with the migrant parents, left-behind children's academic achievements seemed to be an important issue that they concerned about. Chinese parents pay great attention to children's education. They placed greater emphasis on the children's school performance especially when they could not monitor their children's behavior themselves. Education is believed to instill a sense of good behavior, business as much as it improves children's future life chances. Besides, the other aspects of their children's daily life including their food, clothing, involvement in housework, access to pocket money, and use of leisure time were also cared by migrant parents. However, discipline was an important feature

emphasized by migrant parents. Parents viewed disciplining children as an essential part of playing the role of guardian properly. Some of the parents attributed their children's bad habits to the guardians' neglect of their behavior. For example, Jiawei's mother thought his grandparents spoiled his son and let Jiawei watch TV for a whole night, which resulted in him being undisciplined in his emotions and bad tempered. Therefore, discipline was considered as an important criterion for judging the effect of guardianship.

Based on the teachers' feedback and comments from guardians and other related people, migrant parents had their own observations of changes in their children's behavior. Parents had their own specific criteria, such as their children's school performance, their daily life and discipline, to evaluate how successful a particular guardianship provided to be, and then would make some necessary changes if necessary.

5.3.5 Children's own perspectives about care arrangement

Migrant parents tried to make an appropriate arrangement for their children's guardianship. However, discussion with the children indicated that their parents seldom seek their opinions about the care arrangements. Most of them even did not know their parents' care arrangements before leaving them behind.

“I was unhappy when my parents told me that they would turn to my aunt for help to look after me after they leaving for work. I did not mean my aunt was a mean person. I would feel uncomfortable and inferior if seeing my sister-in-law who could live with their parents every day. My uncle and aunt would pay more attention to their own child, after all I was an outside person. But my parents did not change their decision after I expressed my worries. They thought my uncle and aunt were young, energetic and knowledgeable compared with my grandparents, they would provide a better life to me.”

(Yu, a boy of eleven years old)

Zhu expressed she had tried to persuade her parents not to send her to the foster family several times, but failed every time. She said the teacher there was so strict

with her that she did not have any free time. She was so tired of spending so much time on the study, which made her have little time to do something she liked to do.

Some children expressed they had no dissatisfaction with their parents' arrangement about their guardians, but they preferred their opinions to be sought for before the arrangement. They were the main characters who were left behind. Despite the migrant parents would try to take everything carefully into consideration about the care arrangements, the perspectives of their own children should count as well. Listening to children helps the parents know more about their complex feelings and emotions associated with being left behind and seek a better care arrangement. Besides, children have the right to participate in household decision making, which will be further discussed in the following section.

5.4 Left-behind children as caregivers

Most studies about care giving had concentrated on the adults' contribution to taking care of the children, but the roles children played in the care giving have been always neglected. In looking at care for children in my study, it was observed that children were not only cared for by adults, they were also cared for by other children or themselves. Most of left-behind children played their roles as young carers in the household. They were constantly involved in giving care to their younger siblings as well as the elderly during parental migration. This shows that children are active subjects with agency who have the power to take action (James & Prout, 1997). Some children interviewed in my study stated that they enjoyed the various duties and responsibilities they performed in the household, which made them feel to be recognized as part of the families. Although left-behind children provided some care through various activities that they did to assist their caregivers in the family, they were seldom involved in the decision making process in the family towards their care. This denied children as social actors who have the right to participation. The children's roles and responsibilities after parental migration, and participation in household decision-making will be further discussed as followed.

5.4.1 Roles and responsibilities of left-behind children

It was found during observation and interviews in my research that some left-behind children bore many responsibilities in the families in catering for the people that they lived with, especially children whose parents had migrated leaving them behind in the care of nobody. Those who had younger siblings or lived with very older relatives were always taking the positions as “adults” to provide care. Most of these left-behind children were able to manage to do the housework, such as preparing food for younger siblings, washing clothes, and so on.

According to Abebe (2010), poverty and lack of support from parents as well as from the extended family as a social structure are important reasons why children become caregivers. Fan was such a girl who was only eleven years old. She had bore on the responsibilities to take care of her younger brother and elder grandmother after her father migrated.

“My parents divorced when I was very young. My father went to a distant city to work three years ago and seldom came back. My grandmother is so old and weak, so I am the only one who take care of my younger brother and her. The money my father sent home every year was so little that cover the living expenses and the school fees. I should plan and save to make a living. I always feel so tired to do homework after doing so much housework. The life was tough and hard, but I should take the responsibilities to take care of them. Because they are the closet people to me in the world.”

(Fan, a girl of eleven years old)

Seventy percent of the left-behind children involved in my research lived with their grandparents who are old to do much work. Children then took up the roles as caregivers to do some housework. The cases show that children who played the roles as caregivers are active subjects with agency, and can adopt different means to make life bearable. They took the responsibilities in the absence of their parents due to migration and made significant contributions to the family.

Most of the left-behind children interviewed during the focus group discussion stated that their responsibilities in the household were mainly household chores

such as cooking, washing dishes, sweeping, washing clothes. It was revealed that girls in the study participated more in performing household chores than the boys, which showed that the duties and responsibilities performed by children in the house normally have gender connotations, and the issues of gendered defined roles for boys and girls exist within most of families in rural China.

When asked if they enjoy the various responsibilities they perform in the family, most of the children said that they would like to make contributions to their families. Some of them told me that they had learned a lot and sharpen their skills from the roles they took on. On the other hand, the responsibilities the left-behind children took on are vital for the survival of families after their parental migration.

“My parents were so happy when my grandparents told them I had learned to cook for them, and wash my own clothes after they first migrated to work. Now I can help my grandparents do lots of housework. They are old to have less energy to take care of me. I think I have the responsibility of looking after myself and don't make my parents worried.”

(Xinxin, a girl of ten years old)

From the cases above, we can see that children left behind not only depend on the adults for care, they also provide care to others in the household. The relationships between children and their caregivers can be seen as a form of interdependency. Whereas migrant parents send remittance to their children's care in the guardian's home; the guardians agree to look after these left behind children by providing them shelter and place to live in and attend school. On the other hand the children themselves contribute actively in maintaining the daily life of the household they live in by contributing labor. This form of interdependence is crucial in sustaining the Chinese family collective.

5.4.2 Participation of Left-behind Children in Household Decision-making

Children provide some care to help their caregivers in the families which shows they are active and competent beings with agency in their own and others' life, but it does not mean their parents will engage them in the decision making. In order to find out if children are consulted in decisions that affect them, questions were

asked if they participate in household decision making which affect them in the families. It was found that if one parent was absent, the other would gain greater control over decisions affecting the child, which can be important when the preferences or views of the two parents differ. If both parents were absent, other relatives who acted the left-behind children's guardians may gain decision-making authority.

Most respondents stated that the caregivers inform them of decisions made, but not necessarily involving them in the process of making decisions. The caregivers mostly decided on the issues including the amount of the pocket money, the study time, time to watch TV, housework duties and responsibilities. These adult caregivers expressed that they made decisions on the behalf of children because they care and concern for them, and they know what was best for children.

Xu was a ten-year-old girl who lived with his elder brother after their parents went to Shanghai – a big city in China. As there were no appropriate guardians to take care of them, their parents only have to leave them alone. She told me her brother was older than her, so most of household decisions were made by her brother, but he would negotiate with her before making the decisions. She stated that her brother was able to plan the money their parents sent to them, and arrange their life well. He would help Xu in her homework sometimes. Xu thought her brother could manage to look after her and himself. Xu's case shows that the conditions that exist in the family affect the way a child will be involved in the decision making process. It also shows that children are active social agents with power and agency to make decisions.

Another area which is about if the left-behind children participate in the household decision-making is the choice of caregivers for them at the time of parental migration. When asked if children were involved in deciding who should be their guardians, most children indicated that they were seldom consulted about their caregivers. Some of the left-behind children stated that they were very young when their parents were leaving, so their parents did not ask for their advice about their caregivers. It was found that age was used by most migrate parents as an excuse to deny their children's participation in deciding on which caregivers that they would

live with after their parental migration. It was always the migrate parents who made the decision, and then told the children the result of their decision. According to Yeoh and Lam (2006), the choice of caregivers for children to a large extent influences their upbringing as well as their experiences. Thus, the migrate parents placed great emphasis on it. They said they knew their children best and knew what they need, it was their duties that arrange the caregivers for their children. However, if it was their duties, it was also their duties of taking care of their children not leave them behind. UNCRC (1989) state that children have rights to participation in decision made on their behalf. Children's perspectives should be taken account of by their parents, which will help them understand their children better about their complex feelings and emotions associated with being left behind, and seek a better care arrangement. Involving the children in decision-making process is a major way of recognizing their agency and power (James & Prout, 1997).

5.5 Migrant Parents' Care from a Distance

Migrant parents could not bring their children together to take care of them due to various reasons, but they still tried to monitor their children's welfare from a distance. To make sure their children could live a better life, they often gave more financial support to improve their well-being. They would contact the guardians, teachers to know their children's life.

According to the focus group discussion with 20 left-behind children, phone calls were the most frequently used methods for the migrant parents to collect information about their children's life, as it was convenient and widely available. Eighty-five percent of the left-behind children had more than one phone call with their parents every week. Parents used the call to know their children's life, and discipline, encourage and comfort their children to show their concern to them. They also called to the guardians and the school teachers to check their children's performance at school and at home. However, there were about 15% left-behind children interviewed in the research having little contact with their parents. One child said his parents were too busy to call him, so he was so excited every time he received his parents' call. He hoped there would be more call from his parents, as he felt that he always had much more to tell his parents to share his happiness and

sadness. Although migrant parents could not stay with their children, the frequent contact to show their concern with their children was so necessary.

Visiting was another effective way used by the migrant parents to make contacts with their children. About 80% of the left-behind children interviewed in the FGD reported that they were only able to see their parents once or twice a year. Most of the left-behind children would spend their summer vacation in the places where their migrant parents worked. They were very happy to stay with their parents. Usually, their parents would take them to visit the new cities where there were lots of fresh things they had never seen before. Xinxin drew the moment when her parents took her to play in the amusement park for children in her parents working city in her scrapbook, which showed it was an unforgettable time she would cherish forever. The left-behind children's visits to their parents' working places not only promote the emotional interaction with their parents, but also widen their vision, and understand their parents' life better.

During the holidays, most migrant parents would return home to spend a period of time with their children. All the children interviewed in the study showed they could receive their parents' gifts when they went back home. Clothes, toys and books were the most commonly mentioned. Parents brought their children gifts to make up for their absence. Some parents visited their children's school teachers when they were back home. They wanted to know more about their children's study, behavior by talking with the teachers, and seek for some advice from the teachers as well. Migrant parents used a variety of methods to show their concern for their children. They hoped their children could live a better life and that their well-being could be improved in a comprehensive way.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined the changes on house-based care system following the migration of parents to work in the cities. Most of migrant parents would consider carefully in making decisions about the care of their children to make sure that their children have a better life. However, the various impacts of parental migration on the left-behind children need careful analysis. This will be discussed in more details in next chapter.

Chapter Six: The Impact of Parental Migration on the Children's Well-being

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the empirical findings on effects of parental migration on the left-behind children. A consequence of parental migration is parental absence, which often has considerable social and emotional costs for the left-behind children. The chapter presents the harmful effects that result from the long absence of parents upon the children, which is accompanied by a discussion of children's daily life, their school performance and emotional development. Then, some benefits of migration such as remittance and a child's broadened horizons brought by parental migration will be explored. The migration of rural laborers not only has a great impact on their children, but also affects other people who are involved. The impacts of parental migration on other groups (such as left-behind wives, the guardians, the teachers and so on) will be discussed at last.

6.2 The negative effects of parental absence

Following the rapid increase in the number of migrant workers, the number of left-behind children is also rising fast. Considerable media coverage revealed the plight of these left-behind children in the past few years due to the increased migration and family separation. Recently, the BBC news reported the abuse of China's 'left-behind' children, which also indicated that a series of disturbing revelations in China's state media about the sexual abuse of school children has exposed the dark side of life in rural areas where parents leave their homes to earn money as migrant workers (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-23628090>). This has led to general discussions that highlight many problems they face in terms of lack of family love and cares, worrisome psychological health, physical injuries and harms, poor self-control and study performance, low self-esteem and superficial guardian responsibilities.

Drawing on the focus group discussion and qualitative interviews on the children (left-behind children, children with one parent migrate and children with both parents living at home), there was some clear evidence from the survey that migration having a negative effect on the well-being of children. Various indicators were used to evaluate this.

6.2.1 The impacts on daily life

Basic daily care

Most left-behind children indicated that the quality of their life declined to some extent after their parents' migration. Food and clothing are the basic items of subsistence for children. However, most caregivers only made sure these minimum demands were met. Limited by economic conditions and traditional concepts of parenting, grandparents usually held an indifferent attitude to children's diets. Some children did not like their grandparents' cooking style and complained they did not cook as well as their parents. Their special dietary habits such as vegetarian food or no breakfast was also the reason that left-behind children expressed their discontent. When it was the busy season on the farm, most guardians would attach more importance to the intensified farm work. Thus, the left-behind children had to live on instant noodles or had nothing for one meal. As the old people always have insufficient knowledge about cleanliness and nutrition, left-behind children were most likely to have unhealthy food. Apart from the food, the cleanliness of left-behind children was another issue which arose because of parental migration. Compared to the children who lived with their parents, few left-behind children stated that they changed clothes often and took showers every week. There was generally no household shower-room in the rural area the place I did fieldwork. As the older guardians are also physically weak, and they did not take the left-behind children to the public bath very often. Some of them seemed to lack awareness of cleanliness or treat them seriously. The children who lived in foster families had a more regular schedule of changing clothes and taking showers, and their diet was better. However, these children only accounted for a small proportion of all the left-behind children in the research (see **Table 4**).

Left-behind children	Not left-behind children
20 children (at age of 8-13): 7 with grandparents 4 with grandmother/ grandfather 3 with other relatives 3 with siblings 3 with retired teacher who provide surrogate care <i>10 Female and 10 Male</i>	20 children (at age of 8-13): 13 with both parents 1 with mother migrated 6 with father migrated <i>10 Female and 10 Male</i>

Table 4 Profile of Children's Residence Arrangement Involved in the sample

Increased workload

According to the research data, there was increased participation of left-behind children in both housework and farm work after their parents left to become migrant workers. As a Chinese proverb says ‘the child of a poor family becomes independent early’. In addition to taking on domestic chores like cooking, washing clothes, washing dishes, left-behind children also went to field, weeding, ploughing, planting, and so on. They had become a substitute labor force in migrant households. Twelve out of twenty left-behind children interviewed in the research said they normally did housework after school, whereas only two among twelve children living with both parents did so. The increased workload reduced time and energy to devote to schoolwork. Although childhood for middle-class Chinese family is an age of innocence where children spend a lot of time playing, left-behind children had complaints and dissatisfaction about endless housework.

“I planned to spend my summer vacation in my parents’ working city last year. But my grandparents wanted me to stay at home to help them with the busy farm work. It was very hot and dry, I looked like a black cat after working a whole summer holiday on the farm in the sun.”

(Xiaolin, a girl of twelve years old)

This increased work burden is more pronounced for girls than for boys. The traditional pattern of gender division of labor in Chinese society has presumed men to be the breadwinners in a family while imposing the role of domestic worker on women. This ‘women are homemakers’ and ‘men are breadwinners’ type of the household division of labour has been reflected in children’s lives in rural families. Left-behind girls in the research shared more work for their guardians and family during the time when their parents migrated. The gendered labor division pattern presented a casting of biased gender expectations on left-behind children.

Managing pocket money

From the survey among the children, most children had pocket money to meet their own consumption needs. The difference was that left-behind children primarily get pocket money from their guardians, while it was their parents who offered them pocket money before migration. In some cases, caregivers would use part of

migrant parents' regular remittance as children's pocket money and in some other cases this pocket money came from caregivers' personal income. For those children who did not have any guardians, their parents would send them more money to sustain their daily lives. Some migrant parents would compensate for their physical absence by substituting overly material satisfaction such as more pocket money, which led to a kind of abuse of the pocket money.

Although most left-behind children acknowledged a guardian's hardship in making a living and knew they cannot afford to be wasteful, in fact, many would spend small amounts of pocket money on occasional needs such as school supplies. When asked how they spent their pocket money, quite a lot expressed that the extra pocket money were used on "snacks and toys".

Social activity

Left-behind children generally did not have much time to play with their friends when asked what they normally do after school. Most of them need to help their guardians do housework or take care of younger siblings after school. However, if time allows, some left-behind children tend to stay with their friends. Shen stuck lots of photos with his friends in his scrapbook. The photos showed they were playing happily together. It should be recognized that peers play an increasing important role in left-behind children's lives and had become major nonfamily relationship figures, with their parents fading out. Close peer relationships not only provide emotional support but also promote the growing child's confidence in social interactions. However, peer group interaction had triggered children's aberrant behavior as well as provided support (Wang, 2006). Shen's mother attributed his poor academic performance to the influence of his "bad friends":

"His study was good before. After we went away, he made friends with some bad boys. They hate studying and always hang out in the street and Internet bar. Shen is addicted to computer games under their influence, and he often goes to play computer games with those friends. His grandparents tried to persuade him to spend less time on it, but failed every time. They felt powerless to control him."

(Shen's mother)

Meanwhile, there were some left-behind children becoming eccentric and unsociable after their parents' migration.

"I feel lonely after my parents went to the city and this feeling continues even when I am among friends. I like watching TV or reading during my leisure time, which makes me feel more relax."

(Zhu, a girl of eleven years old)

From Zhu's words, we can see that left-behind children seem to lack the sense of security. They are eager to make more friends, but they are fear of losing friends at the same time. In this way, they tend to choose stay alone always, which makes them become more and more unsociable and autistic.

6.2.2 Impacts on school performance

There is not a uniform viewpoint on the impact of parental migration on children's academic performance. Opinions differ as to whether parental migration really has a negative impact. Some researchers find that there is no apparent difference between left-behind children and their counterparts in terms of academic interest and self-reported academic achievement (Lv, 2006). However, there are differences in their academic supervision and environment.

Lack of tutoring is a problem that most of the left-behind children face during their parents' absence. One girl told me that her father usually acted as the tutor before he left to work, not only because his educational level was higher but also because of his strictness in study supervision. Her tutoring became problematic when her parents migrated. Aged grandparents in rural area seldom have higher education than primary school and most are incapable of tutoring. In answer to the question: "what do you do when you have problems with your homework?" Nine out of eleven left-behind children living with grandparents turned to their teachers or solved by themselves. However, children living with both parents tended to get help from their parents who were better educated than the older generation. Although many left-behind children expressed they expected to have assistance

and tutoring in their study after school, it is difficult to fill the missing role of a tutor.

Lack of supervision and support was not only one disadvantage confronted by some left-behind children. Their school performance is also closely associated with their living environment and internal psychological condition. Some left-behind children expressed that extra housework definitely limit their time and effort that they could be spent on study. In addition, according to observation and children's statements, feelings of missing parents and depression easily distracted children from study and made them absent-minded in class. Hence the negative effects on left-behind children's school performance were explained.

6.2.3 Impact on emotional development

Emotional development is a significant factor in the children's socialization process. Childhood is the crucial stage where children invariably received some physical and psychological support from their guardians to form their psychological world and become socialized. Psychological research has found that parental support is a significant predictor of children's capacity to deal with stress, anxiety and loss of control. Through attachment to adults and emotional communication with adults, children can often achieve a sense of security and trust in society (Shaffer, 2002). In this study, over sixty percent of left-behind children had been separated from their parents for almost three years. Frequent face-to-face communication and parent-child interaction was rare. It is arguable that the lack of an effectively functioning family structure had a fundamental impact on the children's characteristics and emotions (Ye, 2008).

According to the survey, migrant parents had different means of maintaining their contact with children, which include temporary reunification, making phone calls, and sending gifts. Most of them were not able to return home frequently due to the distant workplace, inflexible working time, and considerable travel cost. The majority of the left-behind children stated their parents would choose to return home during Chinese New Year to reunite with their family to celebrate the traditional festival together. Some children would also visit their parents during winter or summer vacation. Sixty-five percent of left-behind children expressed

they had short-term living experiences in cities where their parents were working. However, the family reunification was always short and precious for children. They always felt sad and unwilling to part from their parents again. When I reviewed children's scrapbooks, I found that Yu stuck some tickets used by his parents when they took train or bus home in his scrapbook. He told to me afterwards that these tickets were symbol of his parents returning back. They were so meaningful that he would cherish them forever.

Phones were commonly used by migrant parents to keep contact with their children in this study. Parents calling home mainly wanted to check about the health and safety of family members and to ask about their school performance. The length of phone call was always short, and left-behind children seldom had in-depth communication with their parents. Although children endlessly missed their parents, they were not free to chat with parents and express such feelings via phone out of economic considerations. When experiencing a separation from their parents in their lives, children needed a stronger confirmation that they were still being valued and loved by their parents even though they might be thousands of miles away. They had an intense desire to share and exchange their life and emotion with parents as they did before. However children's emotion and feelings were almost an difficult issue in the telephone conversation. Ninety percent of the left-behind children in this study expressed that school performance places at the top among their parents' concerns about them. Migrant parents would also attend to their health and safety, but rarely ask about their children's feelings.

Sending gifts was another way that migrant parents keep or strengthen their connection with their children. Gifts cannot only satisfy children's material demands but can also be symbolized as a token of parental love. However, some left-behind children told me that they usually cherished the emotional value contained in the gifts more than their practical usage. The gifts could always remind them of their migrant parents. Research suggested that children who are left behind pay emotional price of separation from parents over the long run (Levitt, 2001), which was hardly offset by economic benefits.

Although left-behind children may have some complaints about their current guardians, they form deep feelings towards them during years of mutual company. The status of migrant parents in children's minds was becoming less important after their migration. Their parents were not the most important actors in left-behind children's lives due to long-term separation. The ties of affection between the children and their migrant parents were not as strong as before. Children themselves gave detailed accounts about this dimmed filial affection during the interviews:

My parents divorced when I was very little. My father left us to work three years ago. At first, I missed him very much, but we did not have much to talk in the phone. It is easy to get alien for us. Nowadays, I am used to live without him. I feel more intimate with my grandmother and my younger brother. They are the closest persons to me. I don't have strong feeling with my parents. I cannot see them for a long time, so how can I have affection towards my parents in this condition?"

(Fan, a girl of eleven years old)

Family transformation and a changed home environment also had the potential to affect children's personality and psychological development. In the case of left-behind children, their parents' migration resulted in emotional ignorance as well as role model absence, both of which might lead to abnormal development in children. According to observation in the research, compared with the not left-behind children, I found that left-behind children tended to be self-enclosed and reluctant to communicate, especially when facing a strange person. According to the interviews with their guardians and teachers, self-enclosure was an apparent change in some left-behind children. They did not want to share their ups and downs with other people or even wanted to speak. Some children explained this change as "the loneliness turned me introvert and silent", or "I had nobody to express my feelings since my parents have been away for years, thus I gradually got used to keeping my feelings at the bottom of my heart". "Loneliness" was the most common word that left-behind children chose to describe their feelings. Parental company was hardly replaced by other family members and friends.

“When my parents left I felt sad. I didn’t want to do anything else. Life suddenly held no attraction to me.”

“I am always wondering why the parents of my other classmates can stay home with their children. My parents have been working outside for 10 years and they seldom returned home. Sometimes I think my parents won’t want me anymore.”

The words above were found in left-behind children’s narrations in their scrapbooks. When parents returned home infrequently during their years of migration or just saw home as a short stop in their continuous rural-urban commuting, left-behind children gradually develop feelings of being abandoned and even question the meaning of their existence. We can see they became skeptical of parental love and lost their interest in life from their narrations.

6.3 The positive effects of parental migration

6.3.1 Economic benefits

Although parental migration which leads to parental absence has considerable social and emotional costs for the left-behind children, it also brings economic benefits to family members left behind by regularly sending remittances. These additional financial resources enhance the quality of the left-behind family members’ lives, facilitating their upward social mobility.

Remittances constitute the earnings made by migrant workers that are sent to their home. The impact of remittances on local livelihoods and poverty is of great significance to people who receive it (Kautzky, 2009). It increases the purchasing power of the family to afford various goods and services for their well-being, and allows left-behind children better access to basic needs in life. From the observations and various conversations with children and their guardians, children who received some form of economic support from their migrant parents clearly had better life conditions than the others who did not receive any form of economic support from their parents. The remittances were also used to seek good health care of children, and support them in their physical health. One boy expressed that their daily livelihood mainly relied on the money their migrant parents sent to them:

“My parents send money back home regularly. The money is used to buy food and clothes, pay health treatment, pay my school fees and pocket money...But there was a time when my parents did not send money back because of the delayed payment of their employers. Thus we went through some hardships making it difficult to buy food and clothing, or pay the school fees.”

The benefits of remittances not only improve the quality of life of the left-behind children, they also could enable them to receive better education. Generally Chinese parents pay more attention to children's education than to any other daily or developmental needs, which is particular true of migrant parents. Earning and saving more money for their children's future education is the dominant reason why many parents are willing to endure the misery of long-term separation. They hoped that their children could receive better education, and need not work as cheap labors as them in the future. Thus, some migrant parents were willing to pay extra fees for their children to enter in the public schools in their working cities. Some would choose to send their children to local private schools which were well equipped and have high qualified teachers but charged high school fees. The foster family was another choice for migrant parents who wanted their children have a regular schedule of their life and good supervision on their study, and the cost was lower than private schools. In short, the benefits of the economic welfare on the left-behind children brought by parental migration, was clear.

6.3.2 Aspiration and future planning

In addition to economic gains, migration from rural to urban areas often leads to changed worldviews, enhanced aspirations, and new life perspectives (Toyota et al., 2007), thereby substantially broadening one's horizons. Children's views of their lives are very much related to their family condition and parents' words and deeds. The left-behind children are likely influenced by new information and ideas their migrant parents may routinely convey through various channels of parent-child communication and interaction. The migrant experience of their parents may have a deep influence on their aspirations in different ways. The majority of left-behind children in the research wished they could go to university and go to the city. The information and gifts they got from their migrant parents strengthen their longing

to be part of this distant “outside world”. Meanwhile, their parents kept telling them about their difficulties in seeking employment and emphasized the importance of knowledge and skills. Parents did not want their children to be migrant workers as them again. Entering into a university was likely to provide the best route to allow their children to move from their rural hometown to urban cities. They hoped their children could change their ascribed “rural” status and find a stable job in the city. With various narrations about economic benefits and the future that arise with parents’ migration, most of the left-behind children held a positive attitude of the importance of education. They were eager to provide their migrant parents and themselves with a better future through their own educational achievement.

6.4 Impact on other groups

Most of the research has focused on the great impact of parental migration on the children, but it should be noticed that other people who are involved are influenced as well. If one parent migrates to work, the other left-behind one should take more responsibilities to take care of the whole family. If both parents migrate, it is the guardians who should be responsible for the left-behind children. Meanwhile, the teachers of left-behind children are also affected. The following sections explore some of the indirect impacts of migration on family members (other than children), as well as the implications of parental migration for daily and generational reproduction in the study area.

6.4.1 Left-behind wives

Although the proportion of female migrants is increasing, migration in China remains a male-dominated phenomenon. Both migrants and the left-behind children often cite the notion of “men in charge of external affairs, women in charge of internal affairs” to justify why wives are left-behind. The notion, which used to confine women to the household while men work outside, now confines women to the rural community and agricultural production while men seek urban-based or industrial work. Among the seven children with one parent migrate involved in the study, there was only one child living with his father. One left-behind mother explained to me the reason why she did not migrate:

“It is possible that I left home to cities to work before I got married. But now I am married. Besides, it is easier for my husband to find a job in the city and he could earn more money than me. I have to do the housework for the in-law parents and take care of my children, so I left behind.”

Through the observation, it was also found that migration brought about unequal divisions of labor according to the sex of the migrant. The out-migration of men led to the expansion of non-migrant women’s duties including traditionally male responsibilities such as farming. When husbands migrated, wives usually assumed the role of father and mother. However, when wives migrated, husbands tended to stand aside, leaving his child looked after by the female relatives in most cases. The unequal gender division of labor was obvious, especially in rural area.

6.4.2 Guardians

Although few of guardians of the left-behind children complained about the parental migration, according to their description of their life the increasing extra burdens they had taken on could be discerned as well as the way that this had a great impact upon them. In the family where left-behind children were taken care of by the grandparents, intergenerational relationships had been challenged in the process of migration. Jiawei’s grandmother complained that the conflict between the two generations in terms of how they perceived the role of being a “good guardian” made her upset and unhappy.

“My daughter-in-law always said we spoiled Jiawei. She thought we let Jiawei watch too much TV. But I am not able to keep an eye on him all the time for I have too much housework to do. She thought Jiawei’s dropped school performance was our fault. They did not look after their child themselves, depending on us to educate him. We did not have the ability, and our prestige couldn’t be as high as them in their children’s heart. She had words with me about this and was unsatisfied with us. I was unhappy too, with her attitude!”

In addition to the conflict about how to look after the child between two generations, the extra work also made some guardians very stressed. Shen had been living with his grandparents for four years. They were happy to take care of

their only grandson at the very beginning when Shen's parents migrated to work, but they gradually felt unable to do so as well as they had hoped. Shen's grandmother expressed her complicated feelings about the burdens:

“Before Shen's parents migrated, they could help us with the land and some housework. But now we had to take care of Shen in addition to doing farm work and housework. It is not easy to take care of Shen, cooking, washing, sometimes you have to think about his safety. So his grandfather picks up him from school nearly every day. We could do this easily if it was five years ago. But now we are almost 70 years old, and we need somebody to look after us. Nowadays, Shen made friends with some bad boys, and always hangs out in the street and Internet bar. We tires to persuade him to spend more time on study, but it makes no difference. We feel powerless to control him and we are more tired and stressed now.”

There are lots of left-behind children like Shen and Jiangwei who are in the care of their grandparents. As parents, they should consider more of the ability of the old people. Since most of the old people are physically weak, and placing the “burden of care” upon grandparents who themselves are incapable of providing care needs more consideration for the left-behind children's parents.

Some other relatives who accommodated the left-behind children and took care of them also had their difficulties. It was embarrassing for most of them to refuse the migrant parents' request to look after their left-behind children. They gave a reluctant promise to take care of the children. There seemed to be much unwillingness in Yu's aunt' words:

“When Yu's parents trust their child to my care, I felt honored that they can believe in me. They said I could help Yu's homework considering my college background. However, Yu is a very quiet boy, and he seldom talks with us. He spent most of his time in his room. Sometimes I thought if there was something wrong with me, which made him so speechless. After all, I am not his mother. I felt so stressed for fear that I could not look after him as his parents hoped. Maybe another environment will make both of us relaxed.”

From the above case, we can see Yu's aunt felt reluctant to take care of Yu. Besides, Yu had expressed his uncomfortable feeling of living with his aunt family to his parents. As Yu's parents should value what Yu had complained to them and make some changes of care arrangements, so that Yu and his aunt will release from both of them.

6.4.3 School teachers

The left-behind children are a special group different other children in the class. Some of them are lonely or self-centered, and some are lack of discipline or declining educational performance. The teachers should pay more attention to them, noticing whether there were some marked changes on the left-behind children, which added more work to them.

Interviews with some teachers suggest that most of the left-behind children's school performance was worse than that of not left-behind children. In addition, teachers mentioned that, as their guardians had less time to discipline them, these children tend to exhibit bad behavior which had a negative influence on other children in the class. It was also hard to make contact with their parents to discuss what might be done to rectify this. Mrs. Liu is a head teacher who also fulfills the role of the guardians of some left-behind children. She said she could not ignore them when she find that some of the left-behind children dropping school performance because they spent more time in hanging around in the street with some bad boys. Most of the time, she would ask them to leave behind with her after school when she could gave them helps on their homework. They also had no time to meet with their bad friends to do some bad things at the same time. However, the extra work made Mrs. Liu feel exhausted. She said she had little time and energy to look after her daughter, which also led to more housework on her husband. The phenomenon of the extra work on the teachers due to more time spent on the left-behind children is very common. Most of them will pay more attention to the left-behind children, give them more concerns, and make them feel no difference with the not left-behind children.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the experiences of the left-behind children. It tries to triangulate the data from the different sources in order to produce a more nuanced interpretation of events. It is found out that the influence of parental migration on the life experiences of the left-behind children is cumulative, and the impact of being left behind upon their behavior, educational attainment and well-being is the result of complex factors. The adverse impacts of parents' absence affect left-behind children either directly or indirectly in their daily life, school performance and emotional development. Meanwhile, parental migration also brings some benefits to them. Furthermore, people such as left-behind children's guardians, school teachers and some other people who are involved are affected as well. The consequences of parental migration are likely to be a combination of factors which intensify and interact with each other in the long term.

Chapter Seven: Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the study. First of all, it highlights the research objectives, theoretical perspectives, and the distinctive methodology used within the research. A summary of the main findings of the research then given followed. At last, some recommendations from the basis of the future research are made for policy practice and also for the migrant parents and schools from the welfare of left-behind children.

7.2 Summary of objectives, theoretical perspective and methodology

This study has been exploring the deep impact of rural parents' migration on the left-behind children from multiple perspectives, and to find a robust way to support those children and families. Firstly, the study is to document why parents left their children behind, and then assess the care and care arrangements of migrant parents for their children, and children's participation in the family decision-making about their care arrangements has been identified as well. Furthermore, the study examines how left-behind children in the research cope with parental absence, and explores how children's roles and responsibilities change within household after parental migration. The impact of parents' migration on the children and how they change over time from different people's perspectives has been examined as followed. At last, this study is to explore how parental migration influences other groups (left-behind wives, guardians, teachers) other than themselves and their parents.

Social studies of children and childhood is the main theoretical perspectives guiding the study. The new social studies of childhood emphasizes on children's agency and competences as well as studying children's present conditions rather than their future conditions. Therefore, it seeks to understand children's agency through their interpretation of and responses to their environment (Qvortrup, 1994). With the tenets of the New Social Studies of children and childhood in mind, this research approached all informants in their own rights and viewed them as social actors rather than mere subjects of social structure. The theory assisted in the study to make a more realistic understanding of how the structural conditions in the study area affect the left-behind children's life and how they as actors to exercise their agency to cope with the parental absence.

The research has been designed as an exploratory qualitative study. Forty students aged from 8 to 13 years old in Yangbei primary school of Suqian city were chosen as the main participants of my study. Data was also collected from other groups: guardians, parents and teachers. In order to “allow for different understanding to be compared and possible new themes arise, which is positive for the researcher who seeks a deeper understanding (Clark, 2005)”, I used a range of different methods in the fieldwork. During the research, I utilized participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, and visual methods (like drawing, writing, photographing, and craftwork) as my methods of data collection.

7.3 Main findings of the research

7.3.1 Care and care arrangements for the left-behind children

The interview with the migrant parents about their decision to leave their children in their home villages suggests that parent-child separation was only resorted to after the parents had weighed up all the factors associated with the dangers and pitfalls of life in a city. The care arrangements for their children are combined with the parents’ expectations on the care of their children, judgments about the ability and availability of the caregivers, and understanding of their own particular circumstances.

However, the quality of care that left-behind children receive is varied. The migrant parents used a number of different ways to monitor and assess their children’s well-being as well as to review about their children’s care arrangement. Most parents called the guardians and their children on the telephone to get updated news. But sometimes the information they got might not always reflect the truth. Both left-behind children and their guardians might hide bad news and pretend that everything was fine. Short visits were also important and regarded as the most effective way to enhance a child’s welfare. It also offered the migrant parents an opportunity to try to discipline their children, but more often to offer an opportunity to allow them to show their children some symbols of recompense for their absence in the form of gifts and toys. These short visits home can enhance their relationship with their children at the same time. Yet, because it was only a short period of time, the visit could rarely compensate for their long absence.

The study also found that some children assume the role as caregivers in the household. Children care for their younger siblings as well as the elderly during parental migration. They do not only receive care but also give care to other people, which signifies that their childhood is not idyllic, work-free, and care-receiving phase of the life course. Their agency shows how independent children can be without the intervention of adults. Children can be very responsible by taking care of themselves and siblings without adult supervision.

Children make contribution to the care of the family when they are left behind by assuming certain duties and responsibilities in the family. Children in the study expressed that they feel integrated into the family which they live in by performing some activities such as the domestic chores. Some of the children said they had learned a lot and sharpen their skills from the roles they took on. However, the study also revealed that some of these activities might have negative impact on children because they often get tired and have little time for their school assignments.

The study further reveals important nuances with respect to children's participation in family decision-making. It shows that children were seldom involved in the family's decision-making process when they are left behind. It was found that if one parent was absent, the other parent would gain greater control over decisions affecting the child, which can be important when the preferences or views of the two parents differ. If both parents were absent, other relatives who acted the left-behind children's guardians may gain decision-making authority. Children's participation in choosing which caregivers they will live with was also explored by the study. Discussion with the children indicated that their parents seldom seek their opinions about the care arrangements. Most of them even did not know their parents' care arrangements before leaving them behind. They are mostly informed about the decisions made as to which caregivers they will live with. Parents made decisions on behalf of their children. They failed to recognize the fact that if given the needed support, children can make the better decision for themselves. There is an imbalance power relation between adults and children where children become recipients of adult instruction and decisions. This finding is contrary to the protecting the children's rights to participation in issues that affect them and decisions made on their behalf as expressed in the UNCRC. It is therefore

necessary to suggest that children should be allowed to exercise their agency and to participate in decision-making process. Involving the children in decision-making process is a major way of recognizing their agency and power in everyday life (James & Prout, 1997).

7.3.2 The impact of parental migration on the Children's well-being

Parental migration often has considerable social and emotional costs for the left-behind children. It was found in the study that the long absence of parents resulted in some of the harmful effects upon the left-behind children. Many left-behind children's standard of living was reported to be lower than when their parents were at home. Children who were looked after by grandparents experienced a drop in terms of the quality of food they receive, increase in domestic (house) work and deterioration in their cleanliness. The research indicated that there was increased participation of left-behind children in both housework and farm work when their parents migrated. The increased amount of work they had to do inevitably reduce the time and energy to devote to schoolwork. Lack of tutoring was another problem that most of the left-behind children faced during their parents' absence. Grandparents and other guardians seldom contacted with the child's school teachers, neither did they know how to assist the children with their studies nor how to cooperate with the school to improve the children's school performance.

The research findings indicates that left-behind children cared for by grandparents get more pocket money than children living in "foster family" and not left-behind children, and they are likely to spend the money mostly on snacks and toys. The unsupervised use of pocket money by those who looked after by grandparents was often combined with a lack of supervision of leisure time, such like watching TV, playing the computer games. When talking with grandparents why they were prone to satisfy the left-behind children; most of them expressed that they hoped their love could make up for the parents' absence. In addition, their prestige couldn't be as high as their parents, so disciplining the child's behavior always made no difference.

Impact of parental migration on children's emotional development was an obvious problem among them. Following a long absence of their parents, many left-behind

children chose more negative statements to describe themselves than their counterparts who live with their parents. Left-behind children were more likely to keep their emotional concerns and problems to themselves. A parent's absence on a special occasion, such as traditional family reunion days, on a child's birthday, and during a child's illness, also seemed to intensify the damage done to their emotional development.

Although parental migration that led to parental absence had considerable social and emotional costs for the left-behind children, it also brought economic benefits to family members left behind by regularly sending remittances. These additional financial resources enhanced the quality of the left-behind family members' lives, facilitating their upward social mobility. Besides, the benefits of remittances could enable the children to receive better education.

In addition to economic gains, parental migration opened a window to the outside world for the left-behind children. They were likely influenced by new information and ideas their migrant parents may routinely convey through various channels of parent-child communication and interaction. The migrant experience of their parents may have a deep influence on their aspirations in different ways.

7.3.3 Impact of adult labor migration on the older generation

The emergence of the parental migration has not only created a great impact on the left-behind children but also on their guardians. Grandparents who take care of them are most likely to suffer, both physically and psychologically, from the pressure of looking after their grandchildren. This research indicates that parental migration has increased the burdens on the grandparents and lowered their overall quality of life. Besides, the majority of grandparents in this study are physically weak to take care of their grandchildren's safety, health and school performance. If their grandchildren or the migrant parents showed dissatisfaction with the way in which they were fulfilling their guardianship, this also had an adverse impact on their relationship.

7.4 Conclusions

Based on the above findings on how parental migration influences the left-behind children, the following conclusions have been drawn: left-behind children go through a very different life from other children. It was found in the study that parental migration often has considerable social and emotional costs for the left-behind children. They are engaged in more housework in the household. Most of them have a bad school performance without parents' discipline. They seldom have in-depth communication with their parents, and they become skeptical of parental love. Most of the left-behind children tend to choose stay alone always, which makes them become more and more unsociable and autistic.

The coping strategies of the migrant parents about the care arrangement for their children are multi-faceted. They will judge their own particular circumstances, and the guardians' capabilities, health, availability and willingness are concerned about as well. Some of the parents would re-arrange the care for their children after they had reviewed their decision. Meanwhile, how left-behind children cope with parental migration is another important aspect that the study tried to explore. The study suggests that left-behind children assume the role as caregivers in the household. They also make contribution to the care of the family when they are left behind by assuming certain duties and responsibilities in the family. Children should therefore be seen as competent beings who are social actors. They utilize their agency to employ some coping mechanisms to make life more bearable.

7.5 Implications for policy and practice

- **Policy makers**

In this study, most migrant parents are not able to enjoy the same rights as their urban counterparts when they migrate in a new city. Their identity as rural residents disadvantages them in terms of employment, healthcare, housing and their children's education. To remove these constraints, migrant workers should be treated equally with urban residents. They should enjoy some preferential policies in terms of tax, social welfare and children's schooling, which plays an important role in children migrating with their parents.

A range of regulations and measures need to be instituted and implemented to

make sure migrant children receive good quality education, both in state schools and schools for migrant children. The local government, especially the education department, should intensify their supervision of the schools to eradicate the discriminatory treatment of migrant children and the higher fees that state schools charge them. In addition, the government should enhance state support through a variety of different means to improve the equipment and facilities of the schools for migrant children, and equip and train teachers to be competent in offering a higher quality of education for children.

- **Migrant parents**

The parents' absence does not mean the absence of their responsibilities to their children. Parents need to try and use all means to contact and communicate with their children, and get information about their children's daily life, education, social relationships and emotional development. This study suggests that face-to-face interaction is the best way for parents and children to communicate and understand with each other. When experiencing a separation from their parents in their lives, children needed a stronger confirmation that they were still being valued and loved by their parents. They had an intense desire to share and exchange their life and emotion with parents as they did before. Family reunions are highly necessary for both children and their grandparents, which not only show parents' concern and love to their children to develop their relationship, but also could reduce the aged guardians' stress and burden. As most of the guardians of left-behind children are their grandparents who are physically weak, it therefore be recommended that migrant parents need to evaluate the seniors' health, work burden, ability and skills of caring for children, before they leave their children with them. Since they migrated, they should show concern for their grandparents and provide them with material rewards, emotional encouragement and intellectual support.

- **Schools**

Schools are important places where left-behind children spend most of their time. Thus, it is necessary that the school should keep updating the left-behind children's portfolios including when and where their parents work, and their contact details; their guardians' situation and contact details; their school

performance; their social relationships and psychological status; and different teachers' comments about them. Schools would then obtain more information about students and consequently be able to make a better coping plan; conversely, parents and guardians could also act according to the feedback from the school to support their children and help them to improve their well-being in the family. The teachers also should communicate with the left-behind children regularly to understand their daily experience, their difficulties and their needs, to give extra concern and support to them.

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<http://www.sacu.org/>

<http://www.unicef.org/crc/> (The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child)

<http://www.wikipedia.com>

Appendices

Appendix I

Guide for Focus Group Discussion for the left-behind children

1. About their migrant parents

- Describe what do your father and mother do in recent year?
- Where are they working?
- Have you been to the city where your parents work?
- How long had you been there?
- How long have your parents working away from the village?
- Do you try to keep contact with your parents?
- Do your parents try to keep in contact with you?
- How do you try to keep in contact with your parents?
- How often do your parent(s) contact with you?
- When did you last see your parent(s) who work away?

2. Coping with their everyday life

- Who are you living with now?
- Have you ever lived with someone other than the people you are living with now?
- What is the age of your guardians?
- What do you do normally after school?
- What kind of housework do you do?
- How does the amount of housework you do now compare with before when your parent(s) were at home?
- Do you have any pocket money? How much is your pocket every week?
- What do you spend it on?
- How does the amount of pocket money you get now compare with what you received before your parent(s) worked away?
- Who do/did you turn to if you get some trouble now and is this different to before your parents work away?
- Who do you think has helps you most (now)?
- Who helped most before you parent(s) worked away?

3. Schooling

- How do you think of your school performance?
- Did your school performance change after your parents away to work?
- Have you ever experienced problems in completing your homework?
- What do you do when you get some difficulties about your homework?
- How do you arrange your study?
- Have you sometimes not done well in a test?
- If you did not do well in a test what do you think might be the reason?
- What's your parents' attitude to your school performance when they were at home?
- What's your guardians' attitude to your school performance now?

4. Social relationships and Autonomy

- After school what kind of activities do you take part in?
- Do you have many close friends at school?
- Did your classmates' attitude to you change after your parents left?
- What are your guardians and your parents' attitude to your meeting up with friends after school?
- Who decide on what you want in the family? Why do you think this is so?
- What do you do if you do not get what your basic need?

Appendix II

Guide for Focus Group Discussion for the not left-behind children

1. About their parents

- Describe what do your father and mother do in recent year?

2. Coping with their everyday life

- What do you do normally after school?
- What kind of housework do you do?
- Do you have any pocket money?
- How much is your pocket every week?
- What do you spend it on?
- Who do/did you turn to if you get some trouble?
- Who do you think has helped you most in recent years?

3. Schooling

- How do you think of your school performance?
- Have you ever experienced problems in completing your homework?
- What do you do when you get some difficulties about your homework?
- How do you arrange your study?
- Have you sometimes not done well in a test?
- If you did not do well in a test what do you think might be the reason?
- What's your parents' attitude to your school performance?

4. Social relationships and Autonomy

- After school what kind of activities do you take part in?
- Do you have many close friends at school?
- What are your guardians and your parents' attitude to your meeting up with friends after school?
- Who decide on what you want in the family? Why do you think this is so?
- What do you do if you do not get what your basic need?

Appendix III

In-depth Interview Guide for the left-behind/ not left-behind children

1. What do you like most and dislike most about?

- Life in the village
- Going to school
- Your friends
- Your family
- Time of the year

2. Could you tell me the happiest time you have been through?

- When
- Where
- Who got involved?
- How did that happen?
- The impact on you and other people
- The opinion of other people
- Did you tell others about your feeling?
- What did they say and what did they do?
- Did you try to make that happen again?
- If you did not, why not? Any consideration?
- If you did, what the results? Why?
- Your opinion of the results and others' opinions

3. Could you tell me the worst time you have been through?

- When
- Where
- Who got involved?
- How did that happen?
- The impact on you and other people
- The opinion of other people
- Did you tell others about your feeling?
- What did they say and what did they do?

-
- Did that happen again?
 - Did you try to avoid that kind of thing?
 - What were the results?

4. About your expectation

- What is your expectation or what do you want to do in the future?
- When did you have this expectation?
- Why do you have this expectation?
- Does anyone know your expectation?
- If not, why do not you tell them?
- If yes, who know your expectation? What did they say?
- If your parents know that, have they done something to help you?
- Have you done something to realize your expectation?
- How are they going on?

Appendix IV

In-depth Interview Guide for the Guardians

- How long have the child's parents being away?
- Has the child been staying with you since his/her parents' absence?
- If not, who were the child's guardians and why does the child stay with you now?
- Did the child change after his/her parents' migration? If yes, how?
- Did you talk about the changes with the child/parents?
- How well did you know the child before he/she came to live with them?
- What kinds of things do you do together and talk about it?
- What does a typical day look like?
- How do you handle conflict?
- How do you manage when the child is ill?
- What do you find stressful in looking after the child?
- What do you think the role of a guardian is?
- What is your expectation for the child and his/her parents?
- What help have you had from other people, and who?
- What do you think is helpful if the school and the government can do something to the child and your family?

Appendix V

In-depth Interview Guide for Teachers

- How long do you teach him/her?
- How is his/her school performances/ behavior/ relationship with others now?
- Did you notice anything change after his or her parents' absence?
- If yes, can you say some details?
- Did you ever contact with his/her parents/guardians?
- If yes, what did you talk about? If not, why?
- Is there anything different between left-behind children and not-left-behind children?
- If yes, can you point out the differences?